

**CHANGING PERCEPTIONS OF STATUS AND ROLE:  
FINDINGS FROM A STUDY ON BENGALI WOMEN IN  
SHILLONG**

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**ABSTRACT**

Indian society has been described as a tradition-bound society. In other words, traditions are deeply rooted in the socio-cultural history of the country. The impact of tradition becomes most visible when one analyses the status and role of women in different periods of history. For long Indian society has remained in the control of deep rooted customs, practices, and traditions like the low level of education, rigidity in marriage practices, restrictions on moving alone....etc. However, in recent times, with the growth of education, there has been a change in the way of thinking and attitude of women as well as the society as a whole. . Every status has its role connotations. While status indicates the individual's location in a given framework of hierarchy, the concept of role indicates how the individual is expected to actualize his status in the form of behaviour. Role has been defined as a set of expectations applied to an individual who occupies a particular position in the structure of the social system. A woman occupies various statuses and plays a number of roles such as those in the kinship system, family and the wider social system. Her status in the society is not determined by any one particular status position held by her, but results from merging of her various statuses. Hence, best way to assess the status of women is to analyse the roles, women are being called upon to play and the manner of their performance. The present paper is an attempt to study the changing status and role of Bengali women in the family and society. For the purpose of the study, a sample of 200 respondents has been selected through stratified random sampling method. The findings of the study reflect that there has been a change in the traditional outlook with regard to parental aspirations for daughters, pattern of mate selection, granting freedom of movement to women etc. The pattern that has emerged from the study shows that there has been a progressive change in the status of women.

**Key words:** status; Bengali women; tradition; family; education;

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**Introduction:**

Women constitute an important part of society and their status determines the level of progress attained by society in real terms. In the last few years, there has been discussion on issues related to status of women at national and international levels. The various studies, surveys as well as statistics that are available, clearly show that educated women are now more keen and desirous to acquire and utilise their education and training for overall development of the country (Reddy, 1986).

Every status has its role connotations. While status indicates the individual's location in a given framework of hierarchy, the concept of role indicates how the individual is expected to actualize his status in the form of behaviour. Role has been defined as a set of expectations applied to an individual who occupies a particular position in the structure of the social system. A woman occupies various statuses and plays a number of roles such as those in the kinship system, family and the wider social system. Her status in the society is not determined by any one particular status position held by her, but results from merging of her various statuses. Hence, best way to assess the status of women is to analyse the roles, women are being called upon to play and the manner of their performance. Thus, status of women is the combination of positions a woman occupies, as a woman, mother, wife, as a worker etc, the power and prestige attached to these positions and the rights and duties she is expected to exercise.

Not long back, as history tells us, Bengali women had a world of their own—a world that was very much secluded and confined within the frame of four walls of their house (Jain, 1988). They were seen as only a member in a family or a group in the role of a woman, wife or mother and largely denied the role as an individual with an identity, aspiration or right of their own (Gupta, 1988). At the beginning of the nineteenth century, there was in orthodox Indian society a fairly common prejudice that education is sinful for women. This persistent superstition was, however, disregarded by some enlightened members of the upper classes, who tried to educate their womenfolk even before 1819 when the first regular girl's school in Bengal was set up at Gouri Bari (Ultadanga), a suburb of Calcutta. (Chakraborty, 1963:38).

During the period 1807-1847 the Christian missionaries were the only people who ran formal schools for the Bengali girls. It was only in 1847 that some enlightened Bengalis took

the initiative to set up schools. In 1849 Bethune started a school for girls of Bengal on a secular basis. This marked the beginning of the modern system of women's education in Bengal. Here, it may be noted that although significant efforts were made to provide formal education to women, it could not achieve much success as many girls left school on account of early marriage and were confined within the four walls of the household. No systematic effort has been made to educate them at home until 1863 when Keshabchandra Sen, an enlightened Brahmo started the Antahpur Stri Siksha, an organisation for women's education at home. The aim was to encourage Hindu girls who were shut up in their houses to continue their studies at home on a wider scale. This movement for providing home education for secluded women was the first of its kind undertaken by the Bengalis. (Chakraborty, 1963). In the same year, another organisation was formed known as Bamabodhini Sabha to spread education amongst women at home. Later, Bamabodhini Patrika was launched providing opportunity to Bengali women for the first time to publish their own writings which included short stories, poems and articles on ideals of womanhood, women's education and even critical essays. It was only after half a century of sincere efforts that female education brought a considerable change in the roles and status of women as well as in their self-perception. Meredith Borthwick (1984) in her work '*The Changing Role of Women in Bengal (1849 – 1905)*' focus on Bhadra Mahila usually referred to women of English educated professional Bengali middle class as they were the first to be influenced by the new ideas of change. She begins her discussion by first examining the traditional women's role in Bengal, and thereafter explaining the contribution of British in the growth of educated women in Bengal.

*Voices from within: Early Personal Narratives of Bengali Women* by Malavika Karlekar (1991) traces the broad pattern of women's lives in Bengal from about 1850 to 1915. It traces the modernisation of gender roles for Bengali women. The author demonstrates how in the process of transition from the older cultural patterns to the newer, lay changes in literature, religion, education, and gender roles at large. By bringing to light these narratives and biographies, the author manages to paint a thoughtful and well-rounded picture of the various dimensions involved in the construction of the new modern upper class Bengali woman of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and to draw out the issues and motivations in her life. Her work not only provides a profile of the traditional way of life of Bengali women but also sets the stage for

a proper understanding of the social context that later generations of urban Hindu Bengali women would grow up in. ”.

Thus, this research work tries to find whether there has been a change in the traditional outlook with regard to parental aspirations for daughters, pattern of mate selection, granting freedom of movement etc.

### Methodology

The field of present study is Shillong, the capital of Meghalaya, It is the headquarter of the East Khasi Hills district. According to Meghalaya Census Report on population by language, in 1981 there were 1, 19,571 Bengali residents constituting 8.95per cent of the states population. In 1991 the population of Bengalis was 1,44,261 constituting 8.13per cent of the total population while in 2001,the population of Bengalis was found to be 1,85,692 constituting 8 per cent of the states total population(Statistical Handbook Meghalaya,2008-09:10) .

Though many studies have been made on the status of women in different parts of India very few studies have been undertaken on the status of women in North Eastern part of India. Therefore, the area of study in itself may be a source of variance that restricts the generality of the findings. Thus, realising the need for a focused study on the emerging status of women in Bengali society such a study is felt necessary and meaningful not only to understand the broad pattern and process of mobility but also to understand the emerging pattern of status among Bengali Women in this particular part of the country.

Although the universe of the study is Bengali society at large, the study mainly focuses on Bengali women in this particular part of the country. The sample comprises of 200 respondents selected through stratified random sampling method. Both married and unmarried women were selected for the study.

The relevant data for the study has been collected both from primary and secondary sources. The bulk of the primary data is the empirical finding mainly collected through semi-structured interview schedule. The interview schedule was divided into following sections:

The first section elicited information on the social background of the respondents. In the second section questions were aimed at exploring the status of Bengali women with reference to the various roles played by her in the family

Pre-testing the tools of data collection before they are used in the field helps the researcher to find out the flaws, handicaps and inappropriate questions that might have crept into the schedule. Thus, a pre-testing or pilot study of the interview schedule was conducted. Both open ended and close questions were included. After pre-testing some of the questions, which were found inappropriate, were dropped and some questions were revised on the basis of suggestions provided by the respondents.

### Results and discussion:

**Table 1: Distribution of age-group of respondents**

Age Group	Frequency	Percent
21-30	65	32.5
31-40	55	27.5
41-50	42	21
51-60	38	19
Total	200	100

Source: Field Data

The data reflects that out of the total sample, 32.5 per cent of the respondents belong to age group of 21-30 years; 27.5 per cent belong to age group of 31-40 years; 21 per cent belong to age group of 41-50 years; and 19 per cent belong to the age group of 51-60 years. The analysis of the age distribution of the present sample shows that the age group of respondents ranges from 21 - 60 years. It is also evident from the table that a large section of the respondents belong to age group of 21-30 years.

### Educational Qualification:

Education is very important for all round development of an individual. Education enables the members of a society to perform gainful social roles, develop basic skills, abilities, and performance.

Rashundari Debi, a Bengali Woman, wrote a story of her life, Amar Jiban ("My Life") that was published in 1876. This is the first autobiography written in Bengali. In her autobiography, she wrote ". These days parents of a single girl take so much care to educate her. But we had to struggle so much just for that". Formal education was mainly given to boys while girls were given training in cooking, knitting and other household activities She narrated how with her face hidden under a long veil, she was supposed to remain absolutely silent and to do housework from early morning to midnight. Various studies have shown that educated women are becoming increasingly aware of the equality created by social change. Education has a deep impact on women's attitudes and values leading to their mobility in all aspects which is at odds with the traditional concept of woman restricted to the hearth and home.

**Table 2 : Educational qualification of respondents**

Qualification	Frequency	Percent
Graduate	77	38.5
Post Graduate	106	52.5
Under Graduate	17	8.5
Total	200	100

Source: Field Data

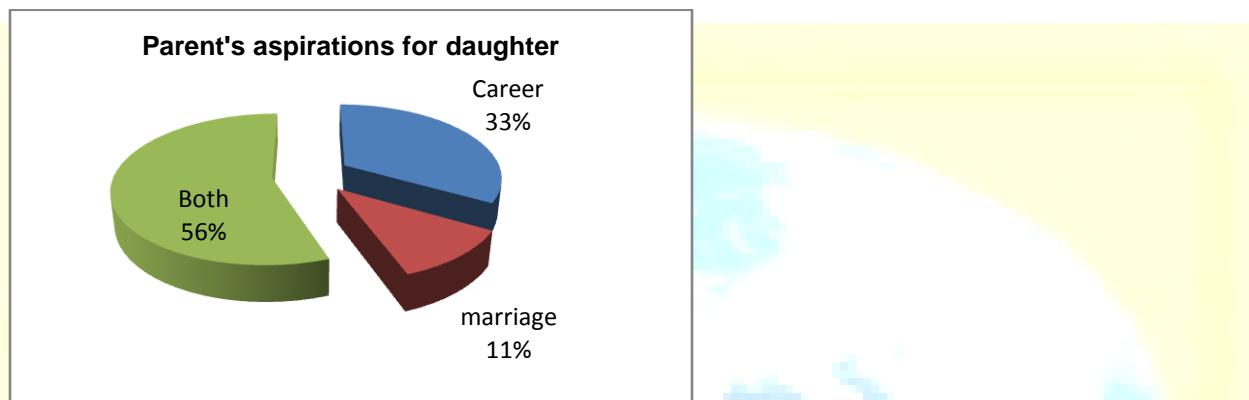
It can be seen from the table that 38.5per cent of the respondents are graduate, 52.5per cent are Post-graduates and 8.5per cent are undergraduates Thus, the table shows that majority of the respondents are highly educated which is indicative of a broader outlook and progressive society. .

#### **Parental aspirations for daughter: Marriage vs career**

Traditionally, in a Bengali family, girls were married early at the age of 10 or 12. Marriages were arranged by parents and there was no communication between bride and the groom. (Chakraborty, 1963). R.C. Majumdar (1965) writes the main reason to not educate a girl was that she would pass the crucial age of marriage which was between eight to eleven years. If she is sent for graduation her age would be 21-22 years and would lose her charm and looks and then it will be difficult to get her married. Even in recent times, it is often observed that the parents are in a hurry to get their womens married as soon as she completes her education. Thus, in the

present study an effort has been made to find what aspirations parents have for their daughters and accordingly, respondents were asked to provide information on the priorities set by their parents for them- marriage, career or both.

**Fig 1: Graph showing Respondents parental aspiration for the daughter**

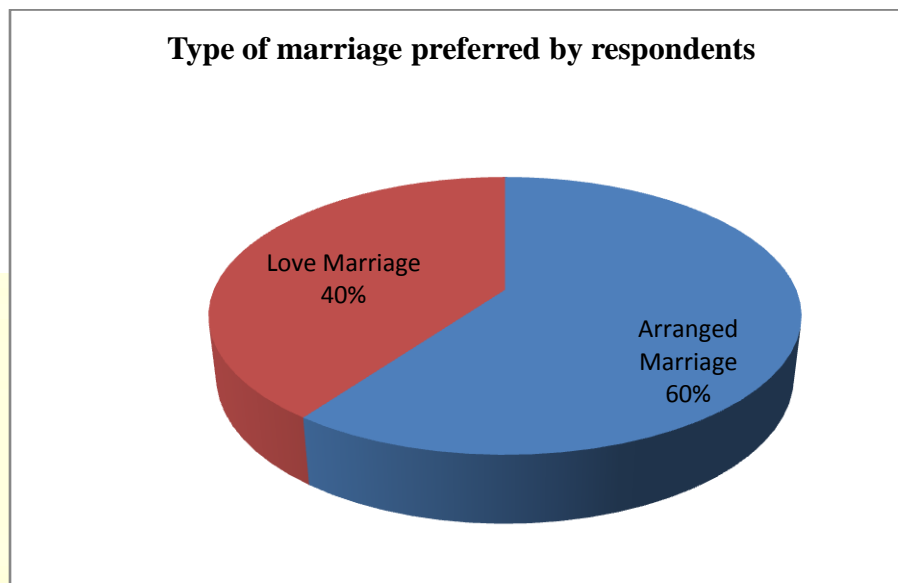


In response, 11 per cent respondents stated that parents wanted them to get married and then think about career, while according to 33 per cent of the respondents their parents gave more importance to career and 56 per cent of the respondents said that their parents give equal importance to both career and marriage.

From the above analysis, It can be seen that daughters are encouraged to receive education. at par with that of a son in the family making them socially empowered.

#### **Pattern of mate selection:**

Traditionally, marriages were fixed by parents, sometimes the girl's consent was not asked for. Marriages were mostly arranged among the relations and at a very early age. Horoscopes were matched before a marriage and practice of dowry was prevalent. The girl and the boy did not have any say nor did they have the liberty to meet each other before marriage. It was a custom for the girls to simply nod their heads as it was a sign of showing respect and putting the faith in their parents and elders, brushing aside their own desires and likings. K.L.Sharma (2007) in his studies states that today the situation has undergone a change and girls also have a say on the selection of mates. In this context a question was put to respondents regarding the type of marriage preferred by them.

**Fig 2: Graph showing pattern of mate selection**

Source: Field Data

In response, more than half of the respondents (60per cent) said that they would prefer arrange marriage because they think that parents are more experienced and having better knowledge on this matter and are therefore, less likely to take faulty decisions. While few respondents ( 40 per cent) said that they would choose their mates themselves. One of the respondent said “One has to change with the changing times, after all a girl has to lead her life with her partner so she should be given freedom to make her choice”. It becomes from the data collected that there has been a change in the traditional pattern of mate selection.

#### **Views on traditional customs and beliefs practiced in the society:**

Indian society has been described as a tradition-bound society. These traditions are deeply rooted in the socio-cultural history of the country. The impact of tradition becomes most visible when one analyses the status and role of Indian women. History shows that the Indian society has remained in the control of deep rooted customs, practices, and traditions like the low level of education, rigidity in marriage practices, restrictions on moving alone....etc. The women in traditional Indian society grow up within strongly maintained family relationships and customs. Dube (1988) in her work pointed out that the traditional conception regarding the place



and role of women are slowly changing in contemporary Indian society due to the changing socio-cultural environment. Women have realised that their status depends mainly upon the spread of education and the acquisition of economic rights and independence and not by following the traditional religious notions and the activities attached to it. Thus, with the growth of education, there has been a change in the way of thinking and attitude of women as well as the society as a whole. Thus, the respondents were asked: whether traditional customs and beliefs have been relaxed

**Table 3: Opinion of respondents on whether traditional customs and beliefs have been relaxed**

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	96	48.0
Yes	104	52.0
Total	200	100.0

Source : Field data

In response, 52 per cent respondents agreed that traditional customs and beliefs have been relaxed to some extent due to education and employment, while according to 48 per cent respondents there has not been significant change in traditional norms and principles. Thus, in recent times, the traditional concept about role and duties of a woman is undergoing a change and household restrictions are gradually losing their hold over them.

#### **Attitude towards freedom of movement for unmarried girls.**

According to Altekar (1956), in traditional families, it was considered below the dignity of the family to allow women to come out of home. There was hardly any area of social life in which a woman could independently venture. Following the epic literature, the code of Manu (religious scholar) in the early Christian era, prescribed three dependencies for women — first on father while young, then on husband in adulthood and lastly on son in the old age. She had to be constantly under the supervision of a male throughout her entire life- the father in childhood, the husband in adult life and the son in her old age. It was considered undesirable for the unmarried girls to mix up with others or to move in social circle without escort. If they had to move, it was with the consent of parents and that too was restricted (Jain, 1988).

In this context, an attempt has been made to know whether there has been a change in the attitude of the family regarding the extent of freedom given to girls. The respondents were asked to inform whether they could go out of their homes alone. In the present study it is seen that 15.5 per cent of the respondents are never allowed to go out alone, if they need to go somewhere they went with some family member while 84.5 per cent respondents said that they are allowed to travel alone for academic or professional reasons. Few respondents said that their family members feel that girls should be made courageous to face the present day circumstances and they should be allowed to move alone. The above findings point out that significant changes are gradually taking and Bengali women are enjoying greater independence and freedom unlike the past.

### **Conclusion:**

Traditionally, in Bengali family, boys were given education and encouraged to pursue a career of their choice while girls were confined to learning activities required to perform the domestic chores such as cooking, cleaning, stitching etc. However, in recent times, there has been a change in the traditional way of which becomes evident in the present study as the data on parent's aspirations for daughters clearly points out that majority of the parents want them to be educated. Thus, it can be said that the data that emerges clearly depict equal opportunity of education to both girls and boys are being provided which is a significant change. Traditionally, marriages were fixed by parents and it was expected of the girls to simply nod their heads in approval as there was no scope of expressing their own desires and likings. However, findings of the present study show signs of change taking place in the traditional pattern of mate selection and girls are expressing their choice and preference in the selection of mates.

It was considered undesirable for the unmarried girls to mix up with others or to move in social circle without escort. If they had to move, it was with the consent of parents and that too was restricted. Today, they are allowed to travel alone for academic or professional reasons. The study points out that a significant change is gradually taking place in the attitude of family and society regarding the extent of freedom given to women. Traditional restrictions and rigid customs have seemed to loosen to a certain extent and women are enjoying greater independence and freedom. Keeping in view the traditional context of a Bengali household, the findings of the study reflects that there has been a change in the traditional outlook. On the basis of above findings, it can be

said that slow and gradual change is taking place in the way of thinking and attitude towards women in the family as well as the society as a whole.

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Image showing Map of Shillong city

