

## Women's Work, "Bargaining" and Household Decision-Making among Tribes: A Case Study of the Reangs of Tripura

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### Abstract

*Given the changing socio-economic milieu in India's hinterlands, it is critical to understand the role of women's work as it influences her decision-making power within the household. This is especially so in the case of India's tribal community as their traditional socio-economic systems are being gradually replaced. While on the one hand, the culturally determined status of women among tribes is being gradually corroded due to social and economic changes, new sources of prestige and empowerment including salaried employment is somewhat beyond the reach of a large proportion of tribal women. This has resulted in women being pushed out or opting out of work in rural areas. This study takes a critical look at the relationship between tribal women's work and decision-making power within the family using primary data on the Reang tribe of Tripura. Findings suggest women's productive employment in relatively high paying jobs as solution to retaining high status that grants decision-making power in crucial areas. This necessitates a continuous focus on higher education and vocational training of tribal women that would enable them to enter high productivity sectors in the job market.*

### 1. Introduction

That women's empowerment is a catalyst for economic development is hardly debatable. In addition to the productive contribution through which it stimulates development, the part played by empowered women in shaping and strengthening the future generations is well documented (see for instance, Behrman and Duvisac, 2017; Brunson, Shell-Duncan and Steele, 2009; Desai, 2000; Desai and Johnson, 2005). A primary means through which women gain empowerment is through gainful work, which has been found to grant economic autonomy and elevate women's status within the household. This in turn has been found to enable decisions, which have a direct bearing on the welfare of women and her dependents, arguably independently of the other members of the household.

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Literature on the relationship between women's access to financial resources, through gainful employment, and decision-making power within the household is relatively recent in economics (see for instance Dema-Moreno, 2002; Lyngstad, et al, 2011), and studies in the context of India's tribes are virtually non-existent, even though one could hardly deny the importance of such studies, especially from a gender perspective.<sup>2</sup> Essentially, recognizing the role of gender in determining the consequences of work on women's household decision-making is an explicit recognition of the effect of specific gender ideology and cultural environment on the relationship between work and household decision-making (more on this in the next section). In fact, the expansion of the horizons of research that led to greater prominence of the role of gender, largely owes itself to assimilation of theoretical constructs of sociology though the influence of other disciplines, especially economics, can hardly be overlooked. Arguably, while sociology has improved collective understanding of the role of social and cultural context in determining the relationship between women's work and autonomy, economics has had a stronger influence at the way we approach the role of individual resources, endowments and entitlements on these processes.

Given the changing socio-economic milieu in India's hinterlands, it is especially critical to understand the role played by women's work outside home as it influences her decision-making power within the household. This is especially so in the case of India's tribal community as they undergo a period of sociocultural and economic transition, with the traditional systems being gradually replaced by new ones. While on the one hand, the culturally determined status of women among tribes is being gradually corroded due to social and economic changes, viz., Sanskritization, changing agricultural system and work opportunities for women (see for instance, Maharatna, 2005; Sinha, 2015) new sources of prestige and empowerment including salaried employment is somewhat beyond the reach of a large proportion of tribal women. This has resulted in many women being either pushed out or opting out of work in rural areas.

The social consequences of such trends in terms of a possible diminution in women's autonomy and status both in the private and the public sphere can hardly be ignored. That women's work and economic contribution to the family in tribal societies is (or rather has been till recently) indispensable to their survival is widely recognized. However, what also needs to be recognized is the profound connection between women's work and bargaining power within the household. In fact, the relatively higher status and autonomy of women in tribal societies is arguably rooted in their economic role in the family and society. Bardhan's thesis (Bardhan, 1974) regarding difference in

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<sup>2</sup> It is pertinent to mention here that gender, as understood here, refers to the social construction of identities and the relative position of men and women that bears upon and shapes interactions between them in various settings. It is a structuring element of all relationships in societies (Scott, 1988). Scholars working in the area of gender, largely define it as comprising of two distinct, albeit interrelated, components – one that largely resides in the attitudinal/ideological sphere about gender role and gender identity, and the other in the material sphere, determining the allocation of resources and entitlements between women and men. For instance, Barriteau (2001) defines it as, "comprising a network of power relations with two principal dimensions: one ideological and the other material. The material dimension exposes how women and men gain access to, or is allocated, the material and non-material resources within a state and society... The social expectations and the personal constructions of gender identities form the core of gender ideologies within a particular society" (Barriteau, 2001: 29-30, italics added).

agricultural technology between North India and South India, with the former offering a relatively minor role to women in cultivation vis-à-vis the latter as a possible reason for the lower status of women in North India can possibly be extended to tribal and non-tribal societies. Specifically, since agricultural technology among tribes has been largely dominated by the slash-and-burn method (or shifting cultivation) in India (as well as elsewhere) till recently, which affords a significant role to women in the cultivation process, the economic value of women in such societies is considerable, which can account in large part for the culturally relatively high status of women among tribes. Given this, the critical importance of work and women's relative earnings as compared to men, in the social and economic lives of tribal women can hardly be overemphasized.<sup>3</sup>

It is in this context that the present study takes a critical look at the relationship between tribal women's work in the public sphere and her decision-making power within the family, particularly among the Reang tribe of Tripura. The present research could prove to be significant from the point of view of informing policy aimed at the empowerment of tribal women, especially as it relates to the provision of employment opportunities to women in rural areas.

## 2. Theoretical Perspectives: A Brief Review

Literature in household economics considers women's access to financial resources through employment and economic assets as a critical component of bargaining power in the individual allocation of household resources and responsibilities (see for instance, Bradshaw, 2013 and the literature cited therein). Recent developments in the field on intra-household decision-making have increasingly moved away from the neoclassical 'unitary' household model, most notable in the work of Becker (1981), which looks upon the decision-making process within the household as maximization of a single joint utility function by an "altruistic" household head (usually the male) and begun to incorporate the complexities in the intra-household decision-making process in terms of non-congruent preferences of members and the recognition of the relation between individual contributions (real and perceived) and entitlements.

The non-unitary or bargaining power models explicitly recognize the role of individual "bargaining" power in determining outcomes, in an atmosphere of non-congruence in preferences and separate utility functions of individual members within households, thus distinguishing command over household resources established by social norms and those through the bargaining process (Schneebaum and Mader, 2013). Even though these models, aside from emphasizing the role of access to economic resources (through employment and wealth), note the function of gender role ideology in shaping the final outcome of bargaining (i.e. recognize the female disadvantage due to existing gender stereotypes that place a negative premium to women's work and entitlements),

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<sup>3</sup> In this context, it is pertinent to mention that as compared to work, relative earnings of women as compared to that of their husbands is expected to be a stronger determinant of relative bargaining power within the household as a sizeable quantity of research suggests that women who participate in the labour force, justify it as arising from the economic necessities and obligations towards the family (see for instance, (Nawar et al., 1994; Rugh, 1984) and hence cannot be expected to influence bargaining power in household decision-making in any meaningful way due to the motive of the decision to work.

critiques have pointed out that the models fundamentally overlook the role of “gender” in determining what is essentially a “gendered” outcome in resource allocation within the household (Agarwal, 1997; Carter and Katz, 1997), thus calling for a more nuanced/qualitative approach towards understanding the determinants of household decision-making power.

Sen’s cooperative conflict model can be considered one of the first “feminist” models of intra-household decision-making in that it actually examines the role of gender in affecting both “endowments” and “entitlements” within the household. The importance of gendered social norms and opportunities inside and outside the home finds importance in women’s perceived contribution to the household as well as perceived individual well-being (Sen, 1990). The upshot of Sen’s argument is that while recognizing the role of economic contribution of women as enhancing bargaining power within the household, the role of perceptions of her own economic contribution has to be factored in, and that social norms that shape the “fallback” position of women (if cooperation within marriage ends including the possibility of divorce) including perceived economic opportunities as well as social stigma need to be analyzed to understand the outcome for women in the case of intra-household bargaining.

In this context, it is perhaps pertinent to mention that while gender stratification systems are universal and cut across cultures, its manifestations and ramifications cannot be assumed to be common across varied cultures and societies. Indeed, as pointed out by Keller (1989), the critical contribution of feminist theory to the discourse on gender has been the recognition of gender as a social or cultural construct. Indeed, “women’s place in social life is not in any direct sense a product of the things she does, but of the meaning her activities acquire through concrete social action” (Rosaldo, 1980, quoted in Riley, 1999). Even though the aforesaid characterization of gender is very strict in the sense that it leaves very little room for individual characteristics in determining outcomes, it nevertheless drives home the critical importance of social context in the analysis of gender and its impact on other outcomes. This is especially important in the case of research on the role of gender as it affects household decision-making of women as the trend has been to arrive at conclusions on the usefulness of increasing women’s autonomy based on research in culturally distinct populations (see for instance, Das and Tarai, 2011; Mason, 1998). Though cross-cultural comparisons are unavoidable and even necessary in the sense of advancement of understanding of the way gender affects women’s choices, the crucial point is to move beyond an inflexible understanding of gender (and an imposed uniformity of measures of gender) to a more nuanced understanding of the pathways through which it affects women’s choices.

Overall, while most models of household decision-making have emphasized the key role of economic resources equated with income and assets, other less tangible factors have also come forth as crucial determinants of the outcome of bargaining within households such as social capital and kinship ties and the overall gender ideology of particular societies. In fact, many consider gender ideology to be more important in relation to economic resources in this regard (see for instance, Grasmuck and Espinal, 2000; Kanbur, 2002).

At the level of empirical testing of the relationships, and in line with research in this field (Doss, 2012; Dito, 2011; Sen, 1990) we incorporate factors found to influence the bargaining power of women including income, educational attainment, assets owned (land and/or house), age, assets brought to marriage (dowry payments) and gender role attitude. Specifically, we test the hypotheses that, first, in relatively gender egalitarian tribal societies, such as those of the Reangs of Tripura, women's relative earnings and economic resources in general, are crucial determinants of women's bargaining power and her status within the household. And second, even after controlling for a host of other factors including income, gender ideology and social/kinship norms plays a crucial role in shaping favourable outcomes for women in the bargaining process.

### 3. Data and Methods of Analysis

This study is based on primary data gathered over a period of one year (June, 2017 – August, 2018) from fieldwork in villages inhabited by the Reang tribe residing in the Gomati and South Tripura districts in the Indian state of Tripura. The latest Reang census conducted during the year 2015 constituted the sampling frame for the study. Detailed information has been collected from 240 Reang women using semi structured interview schedule (that included both open ended and pre-coded responses). The schedule and interviews with individual respondents lasted on average for 90 minutes (few extending to 120 minutes), and were mostly conducted at the residences of the respondents. The interviews were conducted with the assistance of an interpreter, who speaks both the Reang dialect Kau-Bru and Bengali, even though many Reang respondents have a basic knowledge of the local (Bengali) vernacular. Data has been collected on all relevant aspects e.g. kind of work performed by women, percentage of total household income and various indicators that show the domestic decision making voice of women. The schedules have included questions such as primacy of male breadwinner role, as well as data on consanguinity in marriage as indicators for measures of gender role attitudes. We have also collected data on contextual factors including facilities available during childhood for the women, occupation of the parents of the women, age of woman and her spouse, educational attainment of woman and husband, occupation of husband, women's ownership of land and/or house, age at marriage, and the socioeconomic status of the household, that are found to independently influence women's decision-making power within the household.

#### 3.1 Basic Description of the Sample

Table 1 presents basic descriptive statistics relating to the variables in the analysis. The average age of the women in the sample is around 30 years and that of the men is slightly higher at around 34 years, and the maximum age of women is 48 years and that of men is nearly 52 years in the sample (Table 1A). The average years of schooling are higher for Reang men (around 8 years) as compared to that of Reang women (around 6 years). However, it is quite distressing to note that even Reangs who reside in relatively developed areas of the State are yet to embark on the journey to education. In fact, less than 10 per cent of women and men have been educated beyond the secondary level among Reangs. It is not surprising that given this situation, the minimum age of marriage among the Reangs has actually decreased overtime, and is around 13 years

in the sample, as against 17 years reported in earlier studies (for instance, Acharyya, 1995). This may also be an influence from the assimilation of non-tribal social norms among them (Table 1A).

**Table 1A: Basic Demographic Statistics of Respondents**

Variable	Minimum	Maximum	Mean
Age of Woman	17	48	30.0
Woman's Education (years)	0	17	6.2
Husband's Age	19	52	33.6
Husband's Education (years)	0	17	7.7
Age at First Marriage	13	35	19.1

*Source: Field survey*

**Table 1B: Socio-Economic Characteristics of Reang Women Respondents**

Sl. No.	Variable	Percentage of Respondents
1.	Parents Occupation	
	Settled Cultivation	56.3
	Shifting Cultivation	12.6
	Salaried	10.1
	Daily labourer	20.2
2.	Developed neighbourhood during childhood	38.7
3.	Dowry payment	18.1
4.	Owens house/land	18.6
5.	Consanguineous marriage	32.5
6.	Economic condition of household	
	Easy financial condition	42.4
	Difficult financial condition	57.6
7.	Relative earnings as compared to husband	
	Equal to husband	20.3
	Less than husband	40.9
	More than husband	11.8
8.	Younger than husband	74.4
9.	Educational difference with husband	
	More or equally educated	55.0
	Less educated	45.0
10.	High autonomy in household decision-making	
	Large purchases	57.8
	Daily purchases	68.8
	Total income of household	59.9

*Source: Authors' calculation from primary survey data*

Table 1B presents the socio-economic characteristics of the respondents in the study.

The findings for survey showed that majority (around 41 per cent) of the women earn less than their husbands while half that proportion (20 percent) earned at least as much as their husbands. A considerably smaller proportion (around 12 per cent), who are mainly employed in the services sector and earn a salary, are found to earn more than their husbands, the remaining 27 percent women in the sample remain unemployed.<sup>4</sup> It is also interesting to note that more than half of the women in the sample have fairly high household decision – making autonomy in the three selected domains viz. decisions regarding (a) large/expensive purchases (b) daily/regular purchases and (c) total monthly expenditure.

It needs to be mentioned that among the Reangs, women were found to either leave decisions to their husbands or make decisions jointly with their husbands, with almost none reporting taking decisions alone. Nearly three-quarters of the Reang women are found to make decisions jointly with their husbands in the purchase of regular items. Similarly, we find that almost 60 per cent jointly decide on the total monthly expenditure of the household. However, a slightly lower proportion of women are found to have high autonomy where expensive purchases are concerned. Overall, Reang women have a considerable role to play in decision-making within the household, they have a voice and enjoy certain amount of power in voicing their choice.

In fact, in nearly every account of tribes of India [see for instance, Elwin 1961(Nagas); Furer-Haimendorf, 1933 (Nagas); Hutton, 1921(*Sema Nagas*), the authors have remarked on the high position enjoyed by women in these societies in terms of autonomy in choosing husbands, personal freedom, mobility and lack of gendered division of labour between men and women. However, more recently, scholars working on tribes in India, have found that there are evidences on the erosion of certain facets of tribal culture, especially those pertaining to the social and cultural status of women among tribes, in the course of economic development and inevitable exposure to mainstream/non-tribal culture and ideology, through its influence on the fundamental institutions of marriage, family, religion, kinship and socio-political organization, often referred to in the literature as the Sanskritization/Hinduisation of tribes (Mann, 1987; Maharatna, 2005; Roy Burman, 1988; Sachchidananda, 1988); the tribes of Northeast India being no exception (see for instance, Maharatna and Sinha, 2011; Nongbri, 2000; Ray and Athparia, 2006; Sinha, 2015a, 2015b)<sup>5</sup>. It is remarkable that probably by virtue of their relative isolation from the mainstream (in terms of sociocultural assimilation and

<sup>4</sup> It should be mentioned here that instead of relative access to material resources, we measure relative earnings in the present study. It is possible that the husband or wife has greater access to material resources in kind. While this can be considered as one of the drawbacks of the study, the selection of money income as a measure of relative earnings can be justified on at least two grounds – (i) It is difficult to collect information on access to resources in kind as their valuation is difficult and subject to frequent fluctuations and (ii) it has been found during the course of fieldwork that access to liquidity (cash income) is a crucial factor that confers autonomy in household decision-making to both women and men, since most of the Reangs, like other particularly vulnerable tribal communities, lack access to cash income.

<sup>5</sup> These terms denote the process of acculturation of tribes, first employed in the context of India's tribes by M.N. Srinivas in '*Religion and Society among the Coorgs of South India*', published in 1952. A discussion/debate on the appropriateness of the particular vocabulary to describe and explain the ongoing socio-cultural changes among Indian tribes and its implications can be found, for instance, in Munshi (1979), Srinivas (1952, 1966), Xaxa (2008) and the literature cited therein.

economic organization) Reang women still enjoy considerable decision-making power within the household.

In so far as the background characteristics of the Reang women are concerned, it was found that parents of more than half of the women are cultivators, and among them approximately 13 percent either practice (or practiced) shifting cultivation. Almost 10 per cent of the women have parents who work for a salary, which indicate that the process of economic transition from shifting to settled agriculture and further to services sectors has started among this particularly vulnerable tribal group. This is perhaps also supported by the observation that a substantial proportion of women (around 39 per cent) grew up in neighborhoods that were relatively developed in terms of availability of basic public goods.<sup>6</sup> It has been observed by many research findings, that societies that practiced shifting cultivation evinced high labour force participation of women, which resulted in high autonomy of women in these societies (see for instance, Debi, 1994). Thus, it can be expected that, to the extent that there is intergenerational transmission of gender ideology, Reang women whose parents practiced shifting cultivation would exhibit less adherence to gender ideologies favouring male dominance.

Social changes taking place among the Reangs are perhaps also revealed by the fact that nearly 18 per cent of the women (mostly from the present generation) report having made dowry payments. However, around 33 per cent of the women also report consanguineous marriage reflecting the continuity of cultural tradition among them even though socio-cultural changes are seeping into their society. Also a sizeable proportion of women (around 19 per cent) reported single or joint ownership of property.. Majority of the households were found to be in financial constraints and difficulties. This is largely due to the fact that as members of tribal communities still lag behind in terms of economic development and are employed in sectors with low productivity and low remuneration.<sup>7</sup> In so far as the age between husband and wife among the Reangs it was found that like many other societies majority (more than 70 per cent) married women were younger than their husbands, and a quarter reported being either of the same age or slightly older than their husbands a feature which is unlikely to be found in other mainstream Indian culture). This reflects the fact that tribal societies have elements of gender egalitarianism vis-à-vis non-tribal ones. This is also corroborated by the observation that more than half of the women in the sample are found to have at least as much or more schooling as compared to their husbands.

### **3.2 Method of Analysis**

In order to understand the women and her voice/power in household decision making a binary logistic regression has been attempted. The dependent variable in the analyses

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<sup>6</sup> We have included the availability of 10 public goods to gauge the development of the neighbourhood – electricity, water supply, school, newspaper, health centre, bus service, bank, cooperative, market place and police station. Neighbourhoods with at least 6 or more of the facilities have been classified as developed in this table, even though it is treated as a continuous variable in the regression analyses.

<sup>7</sup> The relative financial position of the household has been calculated from data collected on items to calculate per capita monthly consumption expenditure for a mixed reference period following the methodology of the NSSO. Households whose income falls below the sample average have been classified as being in a difficult financial condition and easy financial condition otherwise.

is a dichotomous variable that assumes the value of 1 if the woman has high autonomy or bargaining power (i.e. makes decisions jointly with husband) in a particular aspect of household decision-making and 0 otherwise. Three binary logistic regressions were estimated, for three separate cases defined by the type of decision—(a) large/expensive purchases (b) daily/regular purchases and (c) total monthly expenditure. However, the set of explanatory (independent) variables were same in all the regressions. The explanatory variables used in the regressions, except for age of woman, facilities during childhood (neighbourhood development) and age at marriage are categorical in nature. In most cases, the categories of the independent variables have been collapsed into fewer ones (mostly limited to two or three) for ease of analysis and exposition.

Women’s “bargaining” power that is hypothesized to influence household decision-making is captured through both economic and “socio-cultural” resources. Specifically the indicators included are relative earnings compared to husband (which is our variable of primary interest), age difference with husband, difference in educational attainment between wife and husband, single or joint ownership of house/land, dowry payment and consanguineous marriage. It should be mentioned here that strictly speaking the latter three indicators, viz., single or joint ownership of house/land, dowry payment and consanguineous marriage do not represent “relative” bargaining power in comparison with husband along the particular dimension, but overall augments “resources” available to women during negotiation over household decision-making, which has been considered important in models of household bargaining such as Sen’s cooperative conflict model, as indicated earlier.

Also, based on the theoretical perspective presented earlier, we include an index that captures attitude of women to male breadwinner role norm. The index is based on two questions that measure attitude towards the aforesaid norm—Regarding the relation between you and your husband, who do you think should (a) Be the breadwinner (b) Buy provisions for the household. The index has been constructed through factor analysis on the two items in the questionnaire. It is pertinent to mention here that the items to be included or excluded from the index was decided on the basis of theory, and validated by exploratory factor analysis (EFA). Regression scores from factor analysis are used for the construction of the index. After obtaining the factor scores for each woman, we recode using it in *binary* form, with positive values representing higher scores and indicating higher autonomy, coded as 1 and, negative values depicting lower scores and therefore lower autonomy, coded as 0.

Finally, we also control for the age of the woman, age at first marriage, parents occupation, and economic condition of household and neighbourhood development during childhood – factors which have been suggested in literature to have an independent influence of the probability of women possessing autonomy in household decision-making.

Binary logistic regressions are carried out to assess the impact of women’s bargaining power, with a focus on the role of women’s work as it affects the relative earnings as

compared to the husband, on the power to make household decisions, after carefully controlling for various socio-demographic, socio-economic status and socio-cultural factors. The basic form of the logistic regression used is:

$$\log\left(\frac{p}{1-p}\right) = b_0 + b_1x_1 + b_2x_2 + \dots + b_kx_k$$

Where  $b_0$  is constant,  $b_1, b_2, \dots, b_k$  are the coefficients of  $x_1, x_2, \dots, x_k$

$p$  is the estimated probability of joint decision-making in the instance of large purchases, regular purchases or total monthly expenditure, as the case may be.

**4. Results and Discussions**

The results from the binary logistic regression analyses are presented in Table 2. Column I presents the determinants of decision-making by Reang women in the case of large purchases. As can be seen from the table, relative earnings have a significant effect on the probability that women will make decisions jointly with the husband. Hence, we find that as compared to women who do not work and hence have no earning, women who earn have a higher probability of decision making. Women who earn less than their husbands are nearly three times more likely to make a decision regarding an expensive item as compared to women who do not work. Likewise, women who earn almost as much as their husbands are around thrice as likely to make a decision vis-à-vis those who do not earn. Not surprisingly perhaps, women who report earning more than their husbands have the highest probability of making such decisions and are nearly 5 times likely to decide on a costly purchase as compared to their non-working counterparts.

However, in the case of the Reang women, we find that neither age difference with husband, nor difference in educational attainment have any significant effect on the probability of decision-making on large purchases. It is perhaps interesting to note that as pointed out by Kishor (1995) age can impact decision-making autonomy within the household, since it places the young bride at the lowest rung of the power ladder, especially in joint families. Thus, newly married women in such families have the least capacity to express individual freedom, even in matters of personal choice. The fact that age has not been found to have a significant association with decision-making autonomy could be essentially due to the fact that virtually most of the Reang women surveyed live in nuclear families and therefore the question of suppression of individual will by elder relatives in the family does not arise. Also, it has been found that a considerable proportion of women (nearly a quarter) report being of the same age or older than their husbands. Also, as observed earlier there is hardly any significant difference between men and women in educational attainment. Thus, it does not come as a surprise that we do not find any significant association between differences in either educational attainment or age and decision-making autonomy in this sphere.

**Table2: Binary Logistic Model Estimating the Probability of Various Dimensions of Household Decision-Making among Reang Women**

Variable	Large Purchases I.		Regular Purchases II.		Monthly Expenditure III.	
	Exp (β)	Sig.	Exp (β)	Sig.	Exp (β)	Sig.
Age	1.05	0.107	1.061	0.113	1.04	0.200
Age at marriage	0.87**	0.018	0.88**	0.033	0.86***	0.006
Facilities childhood	1.24	0.125	1.04	0.774	1.17	0.254
Owns house/land (Ref category: No ownership)	1.36	0.591	1.83	0.359	2.98*	0.081
Dowry payment (Ref Category: No Dowry)	3.24**	0.040	2.44	0.142	3.03*	0.059
Kinship by marriage (Ref Category: Consanguineous marriage)	0.43**	0.041	0.41*	0.051	0.44*	0.052
Husband older in age (Ref Category: not older)	0.69	0.477	0.934	0.907	0.66	0.434
Easy financial condition (Ref Category: Difficult fin. condition)	1.48	0.354	0.918	0.850	1.54	0.332
Non-conservative gender role attitude (Ref Category:- Conservative)	2.24**	0.045	3.66***	0.003	2.33**	0.040
Difference in years of schooling (Ref Category: Equal years of education)						
Wife more educated	0.85	0.757	0.84	0.775	1.11	0.839
Husband more educated	0.66	0.479	0.91	0.898	1.07	0.899
Relative earnings as compared to husband (Ref Category: No earnings/No Working)						
Lower earnings	2.67**	0.039	4.21***	0.004	4.11***	0.004
Equal earnings	3.004**	0.043	4.04**	0.014	3.79**	0.017
Higher earnings	4.697**	0.031	23.8***	0.007	6.13**	0.012
Parents occupation (Ref Category: Daily labourer)						
Shifting cultivation	2.19	0.332	2.80	0.303	1.07	0.926
Settled cultivation	0.62	0.361	0.49	0.214	0.63	0.393
Salaried/Service sector	0.35	0.228	0.49	0.432	0.54	0.502
Nagelkerke R Square (Cox & Snell R Square)	0.30 (0.23)		0.40 (0.29)		0.36 (0.25)	

Note: \*\*\* 1 % < p \*\* 5 % < p \* 10% < p

Nevertheless, we find that higher age at marriage actually reduces the probability of household decision-making among the Reangs. This is perhaps unexpected since higher age at marriage has been found to be associated with greater autonomy in literature by virtue of its association with higher educational attainment and/or economic independence (see for instance, (Cochrane, 1983; Mason, 1987; Safilios-Rothschild,

1985; Standing, 1983). Therefore, the reason for this finding is not entirely clear and the possibility of misreporting cannot be ruled out.

Interestingly, dowry payment was found to be an important factor that increases the probability of decision-making regarding large purchases among the sample households. Nonetheless, it needs to be noted that payment of dowry is till date not obligatory as revealed during interaction with Reang men and women. Families that are relatively better-off have adopted the custom of providing dowry to their daughters during marriage. This in a way indicates that women whose natal families are relatively rich have a greater power in decision-making in the affinal family too.

Among other indicators hypothesized to increase the bargaining power of women, it was found that women in non-consanguineous marriage are around two times *less* likely to make a joint decision with husband. It is interesting to note here that in fact, there are opposing views on the effect of consanguinity on women's autonomy. While some researchers have argued that consanguinity, due to its correlation with being married very young, with low education and being married to a person not selected by the woman, results in lower autonomy (Moghadam, 1992; Nawar et. al., 1994), others argue that familiar environment and greater retention of family ties in the case of such marriages means greater autonomy for women (Dyson and Moore, 1983; Karve, 1965; Sopher, 1980). In this context, the findings support the latter argument in the case of the Reangs.

Also, women who expressed a less conservative gender role attitude and rejected the idea of male as the primary breadwinner and provider for the family, are found to be twice as likely to engage in joint decision-making regarding large purchases as compared to those who expressed a more conservative attitude. However, background characteristics of respondents in terms of parents' occupation or neighbourhood development during childhood do not seem to have a significant effect on decision-making power within marriage. We also do not find support for difference in decision-making by financial condition of household.

Column II presents the results for household decision-making on regular/daily purchases. While the results broadly reflect those for the large purchases, we find a stronger effect of non-conservative gender role attitude as well as relatively higher earnings as compared to husband, but do not find any association with dowry payment. In fact, among all the variables considered, relative earnings of women, and specifically higher earnings as compared to husband has the largest significant effect on the probability of joint decision-making regarding daily purchases.

Column III provides estimates for decision-making regarding total monthly expenditure. Interestingly, we find that relative earnings have a significant effect again and as compared to women who do not work, women who earn and report relatively higher income as compared to husband have the highest probability and are around 6 times as likely to make a joint decision regarding total monthly expenditure. Similarly, we

find that dowry payment increases the odds of making a joint decision and so does a non-conservative gender role attitude among women. Age difference and difference in educational attainment again turn out to be insignificant. Interestingly, ownership of house/land is found to be significant and women who own either a house or land singly or jointly are two times as likely to jointly decide on monthly expenditure along with their husbands. Finally, age at marriage and consanguinity also turn out to have a significant effect on the power to make household decisions reflecting the importance of cultural “resources” in increasing the bargaining power of women within tribal societies.

Overall, our results support the hypothesis that women’s employment and hence women’s income is a decisive factor in determining bargaining power among the Reangs. As compared to non-working women, women employed in any form of work have much greater autonomy in household decision-making. Also, it is important to note that even decisions in the traditionally “female sphere” viz., decisions regarding regular purchases are determined in large part by the economic contribution of women. Needless to say, our findings suggest that women who earn more than their husbands and work for a salary in our sample have the highest bargaining power within the household. The findings also point towards the protective role of egalitarian gender role ideology in strengthening the relative bargaining position of women vis-à-vis their husbands as shown by the significance of the consanguinity and gender role index variables.

## 5. Discussion and Conclusion

Development efforts in India have in the recent past been greatly concerned with women’s work and their role in the economy in the face of persisting challenges in absorbing women in high productivity sectors, with the worrisome trend being a decline in female labour force participation. The social consequences of such trends in terms of a possible diminution in women’s autonomy and status both in the private and the public sphere can hardly be ignored. That women’s work and economic contribution to the family in tribal societies is (or rather has been till recently) indispensable to their survival is widely recognized. However, what also needs to be recognized is the profound connection between women’s work and bargaining power within the household. In fact, the relatively higher status and autonomy of women in tribal societies is arguably rooted in their economic role in the family and society.

Agricultural technology among tribes had been traditionally dominated by the slash-and-burn method or shifting cultivation, which affords a much more significant role to women in the cultivation process as against settled cultivation. Hence, the economic value of women in such societies is considerable, which accounts in large part for the culturally high status of women among tribes. Given this, the critical importance of work in the social and economic lives of tribal women can hardly be overemphasized.

Remarkably, received wisdom from research on the topic suggests that women’s earnings cannot be presumed to bring about an increase in bargaining power within the household straight away, as it depends critically on gender ideology. In highly gender inequalitarian societies that uphold male domination very severely, the importance of

woman's economic contribution is significantly diluted, and thus one may not expect any significant effect of woman's work and economic contribution on her decision-making autonomy. In other words, gender inequalitarian ideologies that are biased against women can alter the perception of men *and* women about women's economic contribution. Thus, in gender inequalitarian societies, unless the economic contribution reaches a certain '*gender threshold*', earnings would not influence autonomy (Grasmuck and Espinal, 2000).

Our study corroborates the results from earlier research that finds a positive relationship between women's work and autonomy (Acharya and Bennet, 1983; Hashemi et. Al., 1996; Malhotra and Mather, 1997; Mason, 1998). Thus, we find that employment *matters* for women's autonomy and that women's work and earnings are indeed crucial determinants of bargaining power and status within the household among the Reangs. As hypothesized, among the Reangs, whose society can be considered relatively gender egalitarian, earnings of women have been found to considerably improve their bargaining power in intra-household decision-making. However, unemployed Reang women have been placed at an insecure position with little say in decision-making in matters of consequence. Thus, it is important to note that the key to continuing high status of women both within the family and in the public sphere lies in providing gainful employment to the Reang women.

Apropos the issue, it should be remembered that in this study we found that empowered women make household decisions jointly with their husbands and in substantial number of cases the husbands alone are the sole decision-makers. Discussions with the Reang couples during the course of fieldwork, and also the data collected suggests that joint decision-making is largely the sociocultural norm among the tribe. This is arguably rooted in the practice of shifting cultivation, among other possible influences. Even though joint decision-making reveals substantial autonomy among Reang women, it cannot be forgotten that, as noted by several scholars (see for instance, Grasmuck and Espinal, 2000), it largely upholds the traditional gender ideology among them and therefore does not necessarily imply an increase in autonomy by virtue of their work. However, what it does imply is that if women choose not to work due to the factors mentioned in the preceding paragraphs, there is the distinct possibility of losing decision-making autonomy and bargaining power within the household. In this regard, it is not difficult to see that *empowerment* of Reang women, in terms of sole decision-making in areas such as own health care and those of their dependents cannot be expected to come until there is substantial improvement in their education and skills from the prevailing levels.

While cultural factors such as consanguinity still offer protection to the autonomy of Reang women, and along with earnings remain a crucial determinant of bargaining power, it is impossible to imagine that sweeping cultural changes that would make tribal societies akin to non-tribal ones in terms of social norms could be arrested. It is also perhaps not out of place to mention here that the non-conservative gender role ideology (i.e. the belief among Reang women that both men and women are supposed to be

breadwinners for the family) has its historical roots in the tribal way of life that grants an almost equally central economic role to women within the family.

Therefore, women's productive employment in relatively high paying jobs holds the solution to not just retaining the relatively high status that grants decision-making power in crucial areas of their lives, but also to provide voice in areas that have been traditionally under men's purview. This of course entails a continuing focus on education of tribal women, and not just primary but higher education and vocational training that would make it possible for them to enter the high productivity sectors of the job market.

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