

Revisiting Indian Family- A Study On Emerging Daughter-Centric Families Among Middle-Class Bengalis In Siliguri, West Bengal

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Abstract

The Indian family which is characterised by patriarchal hegemony have always practiced daughter aversion and son preference which cuts across class, caste and communities. However, forces like globalisation, the market economy and consumerism have led to structural and functional changes within the Indian family in order to accommodate the needs of the society and individuals. The urban educated middle-class parents are rationalising their family size and imbibing hedonism. Demographers have asserted that rationalisation of family size culminates to masculinisation of family, thereby reinforcing unwantedness of daughters. A counter-reality to this phenomenon of unwantedness of daughters is that alongside rationalization of family size by restricting reproduction to one child or two children, the educated urban middleclass, who are regarded as the intellectual class and harbinger of social change, seem to be freeing themselves, at least partially, of male-child bias and appear to be content with one daughter or even two daughters. The study argues that rationalization of family does not necessarily leads to masculinization of family. Urban educated middle-class parents are defying the patriarchal ideals of daughter aversion. They do not regret of not having a son and are content with having only daughter/daughters in the family. They wished to have a son but are not necessarily obsessed with the practice of son-preference. The focal point of this study is therefore to reconstruct the understanding of the changing position of daughter/ daughters in the family. The paper focuses on reconstructing the praxis of 'acceptance' of and 'preference' for the daughters and the socially shared perceptions behind such practices. The study is qualitative in nature and has been conducted on the middle-class Bengali community in Siliguri.

Keywords: *Daughter aversion, Gender stereotypes, Middle-class, Patriarchy, Rationalisation of family size, Son preference.*

Introduction

The issue of discrimination against girl child has always been a matter of concern and speculation in social science discourses. The perceptions and social traditions which are rooted in patriarchal social order determine the way boys and girls would be treated in their birth, in socialisation and in everyday life. The elements of patriarchy which are ingrained in the social order often shape the character traits of the men and women and

the children and which find expression in their attitudes, social relations and behaviours. The result is that both masculinity and femininity are the constructions of the society (Simone de Beauvoir 1953). The matter of social concern is that the elements of gender discrimination and neglect of girl child are reproduced in the social space and have long-range implications in the formation of self of girls and their future.

The continued preference for boy-child, the unwantedness of girl child, neglect of education of girls, the greater incidence of malnourishment among girls, sexual assault of different kinds of the growing girls in their everyday life while turning them into sex objects and exploitation of their labour, both manual and mental, have become the matters of grave social concern. There are evidences of thousands of girl child going missing after birth and in many cases even before they see the light of the day. Earlier there was the practice of female infanticide (it is still reported occasionally) but now with the advancement of modern technology there is the wide-scale practice of female foeticide, largely in urban centres. Amartya Sen's 'missing women' (Sen 1990, 2005) has now become the phenomenon of 'missing daughters' (Kabeer et.al. 2013). Demographers and social scientists argue that a mix of patriarchal outlook and calculative rationalism contributes to this 'missing daughter' syndrome which is manifested in the dramatic drop in child sex ratio in certain parts of the country, particularly in the north and western parts. Another site of foeticide and resulting drop in child sex ratio is the urban, affluent, educated class who seem to sustain both feudal outlook and new form of calculative (materialist) rationalism in their approach to girl child, careerism, and a new 'hedonism'. A definition of good life in terms of consumerism seems to have shaped their perceptions and social actions (which includes reproductive behaviour as well). Preference for boy child seems to be universal across the classes and caste-groups, irrespective of their rural or urban living. Investment on the development of their human resources is considered a 'waste' since their in-laws would draw the benefits. The demographers and social scientists have been arguing that the preference for boy child and discrimination against girl child is found in its crudest form in the urban educated middleclass and not in the tribal and village communities. This is because the urban educated middleclass has access to the technology of sex detection (amniocentesis) and has the money power to manipulate the laws to destroy the female foetus, which the rural poor do not have. The shared perception that guides peoples' life is more important to decide the familial and societal approaches to girl child.

Keeping the dramatic drop in child sex ratio the government has swung into action. The earlier family planning slogan was *choto paribar sukhi paribar* and the idea was to put a check on population growth but the new slogan like 'girl child, if taken care of can be *sampad* or asset'. There have been stringent laws banning amniocentesis and abortion to stop killing of female foetus. Several schemes have been launched by both the central and state government agencies to give scholarships to girls at different levels of education. There have been provisions for reservation of at least one-third of seats in local bodies for the women. There have been programmes to improve the nutrition and health status of the girls and campaign for gender sensitization. There has been a growing realization among the policy makers that enhancing the economic value of the girls would help fight gender discrimination.

Even accepting the fact that patriarchy is the dominant discourse that defines societal approach to the girl child one can notice a counter trend as well, where alongside rationalization of family size by restricting reproduction to one child or two children (and this is reflected in the fact that the total fertility rate in India in 2021 has dropped to 2, which is below the replacement level of 2.1) the educated urban middleclass seem to be freeing themselves, at least partially, of male-child bias and appear to be content with one daughter or even two daughters. However, the drop in child sex ratio is not applicable or equal in all parts of the country. The shared image

of 'good life' does deter urban educated middleclass people to restrict the number of children but they do not mind when the child is or children are daughters. It is not that they did not want a boy but they accept the fact (and do not regret) that their child is daughter gracefully. They take all possible care of their daughter/daughters and perhaps draw pride in their daughter's success. Some even justify having daughter by saying that she will take care of them if and when the situation demands, particularly in their old-age. All this indicate to a major social and cultural change so far as the position of girls is concerned. Both the parents and their daughters, especially in urban middleclass locale, are making serious efforts to revise at least some elements of patriarchal order by applying their autonomy or agency.

A close examination of the conditions of daughters in India thus brings out two possible realities. One is that of apathetic and negligent attitudes towards girl child leading to elimination of daughters where they are treated as unwanted and therefore subjected to all forms of discrimination in a social ambience and where dowry system is prevalent in its ugly form and the grown-up women are there to serve the other members of the family and produce male children. In such a social situation it is an enigma to be born as a girl child. However, the other reality is that there is an effort on the part of the parents and children to free themselves from the elements of patriarchy and not to discriminate against the girl child. They are treated at par with the boys and parents do not regret having one and even two daughters. The parents bring up their daughters with all love and care and the daughters too reciprocate the gestures of their parents by taking all possible care. The middleclass parents have all the willingness and material resources to provide best possible education which in turn help the daughters to be economically self-reliant and have a professional career of their own. The middleclass parents have rationalised the size of their families restricting the number of children to two at the most. In many cases both the parents are employed or economically active and do not have time to have more children. The dowry does not trouble anybody (since the groom's party knows that they will get enough without asking) and the daughters grow up to take care of themselves as well as their parents. Most of the urban middleclass families that we see around us are families with a single daughter, families with two daughters and families with a son and a daughter. The daughters in the family are pampered and often over-cared. The life of the parents remains daughter-centric. One can notice these two conflicting trends in familial/societal approaches towards daughters. The focal point of this study therefore is to reconstruct the understanding of the changing position of daughter/daughters in the family and its implications for the girl child/children and for the gender relation at the larger societal level. The study focuses on reconstructing the praxis of 'acceptance' of and 'preference' for the daughters and the socially shared perceptions behind such practices.

Methodology

This paper focuses on emergence of daughter-centric families in urban context among the Bengali middle class families in a class I city Siliguri. The rationale of selecting this class as a sample of the study is because they are intellectual class and considered vanguard of the modernisation process and is accorded with the responsibility of bringing change for good in the society. The class manifests elements of modernisation and rationalisation in changing family relations, acceptance of modern education, individualism and careerism. Daughter-centric families comprise of single girl child or two daughter family. In such families, parents do not practice of conceiving until getting a male child and are content having single daughter or two daughters in the family. The structural change in family due to recent phenomena like westernisation, modernisation and urbanisation has resulted in significant transformation in the relation pattern between parents and children. Socialisation of children has also taken up new form which is more gender sensitive.

The study deals with the Bengali community exclusively as it is the predominant community in Siliguri. Since all the middle-class families in Siliguri constituted my universe of study I needed to draw a manageable sample of the sampling of the study which comprised of 120 Bengali urban middle-class families of Siliguri having a single daughter and urban middle-class families having two children which can be either two daughters or two sons or a one daughter and one son family. The sample is drawn applying the method of stratified judgements sampling as there is need to divide the families into the following categories:

- i) Single daughter families
- ii) Two daughter families
- iii) Families with one son and one daughter
- iv) Families with more than one sons and (or) daughters

Since it would be difficult to have a complete list of families in these categories I have used the method called snow-ball sampling i.e., move from one sample (informant) to another using the known social networks of the informants. The study is essentially qualitative in nature where the perceptions and views on well-worked out issues relating to gender relation are ascertained. As the study is qualitative in nature and not a survey type research, the qualitative data collected through case studies is translated into text following the principles of descriptive phenomenology. The descriptive texts representing the views of the informants (covering the parents and daughters) is finally subjected to interpretation (following the principles of Weber's interpretative sociology) to try generalisation or theorization in the light of the existing discourses on the subject.

Patriarchal Society and Indian Family

Patriarchy denotes the control of men over women and is regarded as the prime impediment of women's development and progress in any society. It acts as a tool for men to maintain their supremacy in the society by controlling women both physically and psychologically. Feminists use the term patriarchy to describe domination of male both in public and private spheres. This hegemonic patriarchal system derives its legitimation from the various social institutions and relations which reinforces patriarchal domination making the practice of prioritising male over female perpetual. Patriarchy is primarily referred as the absolute rule of father or the eldest male member of the family. It usually refers to a large household, dominated by the 'patriarch' along with women, children and domestic servants. In recent times it is used more generally to refer to male domination, to the power relationships by which men dominate women. It further characterises a system whereby women are kept subordinate in a number of ways (Bhasin 2000:3). The very difficulties that are faced by women in earliest times and even in contemporary times are the resultant factor of patriarchal ideology. Patriarchy stands out as a system of power relations which are strictly hierarchical in nature and therefore unequal in its treatment. This inequality allows men to not only control women's sexuality but also reproduction and production. However, it is worth mentioning that nature of control and subjugation of women are subjected to spatial and temporal context. Different socio-economic and cultural factors like class, race, caste, religion, ethnicity are responsible for controlling of women by men and their subordination. This controlling attitude of men has developed over history and has been legitimised and institutionalised by ideologies, social practices and social institutions. Patriarchy leads to institutionalisation and manifestation of male dominance not only over women and children in the family but also over women in society in larger context. It implies that 'men hold power in all the important institutions of society' and that 'women are deprived of access to such power'. However, it also does not imply women are either totally powerless or totally deprived of rights, influence, and resources (Learner 1986:239).

The Indian family is considered to be a fundamental, cohesive, strong and integral unit for the strong foundation of the Indian social structure. The Indian family which is synonymously referred as the joint family is patriarchal in nature. The Indian joint family is structurally characterized by the coexistence of three-four generation, who live under one roof, who eat food cooked at one hearth and the members of which are related to one another by property, income, mutual rights and obligations (Karve 1953, Desai 1964). The unquestionable authority of the eldest male member or the 'patriarch' of the family has been institutionalised in Indian society resulting in complete subordination of Indian women before their father (before marriage) and husband (after marriage). In this context it has always been either the father or the husband who has been taking all life decisions of the woman. As the Indian joint family has been patrilineal in descent and patri-local in residence (*ibid*) there has always been a pressure on wives to bear a son for the continuation of the patrilineage. Though Indian joint family has witnessed significant structural transformation from joint to nuclear family structure in recent times, Indian parents continue to hold the patriarchal mindset resulting in preference of boy child over girl child. The prevalent notion among Indian parents is that they will get a place in heaven if their pyres are lit by their son and that the sons are the 'lighting lamp of the family' or, in colloquial phrase, called the *kul dipak*. The girls, on the other hand, are considered a liability since they grow up with insecurities and the parents have to arrange huge amount of dowry in their marriage. Such practice of gender biasness and discrimination is witnessed not only among the rural and illiterate couples but is very prevalent among the educated families of the urban locale. The social mechanisms of gender discrimination are reproduced in the family, in the peer groups, in community, in language, at work place and other social institutions. There has been a continuous preference for boy-child for several determinism making the unwantedness and neglect of girl child perpetual in Indian patriarchal context. There are extensive practices of deprivation in terms of education and nourishment; sexual assaults of different kinds of the growing girls have become matters of grave social concerns. There evidences of thousands of girl child going missing after birth and in many cases even before the see the light of the day. Demographers and social scientists argue that a mix of patriarchal outlook and calculative rationalism contribute to 'the missing girl' syndrome which is manifested in the dramatic drop in child sex ratio in certain parts of the country, particularly in the north and western parts.

Changing fertility pattern among urban middle class couples

The Indian middle class observes particular occupational structure that is mostly white collared jobs - administrative, professional, managerial etc. - which are distinctively non-manual. The heterogeneity of the middle class comes from the pursuance of these different job types which vary in terms of authority, prestige and income. There have been recent changes in the reproductive behaviour among urban middle class couples where couples are adhering to the practice of small size family norm. this practice has resulted in dropping of fertility rate that India has been witnessing in past few decades. Rationalization of family size is the need of the hour. The reproductive behaviour of educated urban middle class couples in the context of rationalising their family size has been influenced by factors like education, profession of couples especially women, high cost of living and hedonism.

Indian middle class gives extreme importance to formal education as the new educational system has been instrumental in the rise and shaping of the middle class. Coming to fertility trends among the middle class, the fertility differential in India has been strongly affected by educational attainments of couples. The position of couples in terms of authority, income and prestige plays a decisive role in case of fertility goals. The discrepancies of life chances play a pivotal role in shaping the family size and composition among middle class.

The educational status of women has played a very progressive role in lowering fertility and practicing small size family norm. Higher level of education also provides sufficient awareness and information about keeping birth under control with an objective of keeping the size of family small for achieving a better living standard. Demographers have always attributed rationalisation of family with masculinisation of family. With dropping fertility, parents tend to manipulate the gender of children through sex-selective abortion and consciously and unconsciously neglecting daughters (Clark 2000; Guilimoto 2009; Basu and De Jong 2010). Despite such manipulations, there are families that have children with only one gender, including those with only daughters. This shows that middle class families have adopted to rationalisation of family but not necessarily masculinisation of family.

Middle class parents' adherence to small- size family norm is strongly due to the correlation of socio-economic factors. The exorbitant cost of living in the contemporary situation affects the bearing of large size families. Couples have thus decided to limit the size of the family. In consequence to this circumstance, middle class couples have reduced their choice of the sex of the child. Since its difficult to have large families now, families are even satisfied with a single-daughter or two-daughter family. The tendency to procure until having a male child is no longer a custom among the educated urban middle-class families. The declining fertility leads to shift from emphasising on the quantity of children to 'quality' of children and invest more in human capital formation of each child (Becker 1960; Joshi et.al. 2007). The perception of fertility among the urban middle class has undergone transformation. Women who are well educated and employed are aware of the repercussions of large-size family. They are never in favour of having than two children and mostly prefer single child. They are conscious of the factors that will lead to family wellbeing and hence they prefer to have small size family. Further, repeated child-birth may have an adverse effect on their health.

Emergence of daughter-centric families among urban middle class couples

The increasing cost of living because of rising inflation and privatization of the basic services such as education, health, housing, etc. and the urge for better standard of living are the factors that make middle class families opt for small size family. Besides financial factor, there are several emotional, social and psychological determinants to fertility choices for couples. The entire idea of bringing in life by couples and the size of family largely depends on these determinants. The reproductive phase is crucial for couples as they are hovered with numerous inhibitions centring the child bearing and child rearing. Urban middle-class parents have developed a propensity to limit the size of family and go for a single child. Under this circumstance couples are left with very little choice regarding the gender of the child. The urban middle class has been accused of taking recourse to practices of amniocentesis and ultrasonography to know the gender of the child by means of money and power unlike their rural counterparts. This practice led to major setback to sex ratio and child sex ratio of the country. It contributed to the practice of masculinisation of family where parents prefer having a male child over a female child. The hedonistic attitude of urban middle class along with the compliance to patriarchal ethos spearheaded the practice of masculinisation of family in urban areas.

But on the other hand, there is still a growing instance of urban families having a single daughter. Middle class families, in particular the 'service class' families make conscious efforts to keep the size of the family small to have a 'well-balanced' and 'good life' and place less importance to the sex of the child. The common reason cited by these families is that if the family expenses are in coherence with the family income there is no ground to undermine the value of the daughter in the family. A daughter brings equal happiness in the family and is closer to parents than son. There are some families which strongly desire for a daughter in the family. On the

other hand, there are families which have accepted daughter in the family and are happy with a single child. The need to have a second child is curtailed due to two factors. First, the couple strongly supports a single child family and are ready to accept whatever they are blessed with; the gender of the child is less significant. Secondly, the couples are constrained with factors like career risks, financial constraints and health constraints which influence the couples not to try for a second child. One such informant who strongly desired to have a daughter was Mrs. Monalisa Chakraborty who is a mother of a 11-year girl. She said "My husband who is a doctor by profession, lost his mother at a very young age. He and his other two brothers have been raised in hostel and so have been deprived of family affection. We always wanted to have a daughter. My husband was very excited when we were blessed with a daughter. The motherly love and affection that he was deprived of at his childhood and for which he longed earnestly, is now being fulfilled by our daughter. We do not wish to have a second child as we want to give complete attention to our daughter's upbringing and raise her as a financially independent lady". Similar views have been expressed by Mrs. Runa Bhattacharya who is a mother of a 13-year-old girl and a teacher by profession. Her husband is a businessman and is the eldest sibling. She mentions that her husband earnestly prayed for a daughter when she was pregnant. Her mother-in-law, who chose to stay with them and not her younger son, also wished to have grand-daughter over a grand-son. though Mrs. Bhattacharya expressed her desire to have a second child so that her daughter could have a sibling her husband refused to fulfil her desire. Instead, he cites his life's example where his younger brother refused to take care of their mother despite him taking all the trouble to make his younger brother established in his life. Her husband was deeply grieved by this incident and had no faith on siblings and also did not want his daughter to have similar experience. He loves his daughter very much and do not wish to share his love with another child.

Middle class parents have resorted to small size family norm and prefer having a single child. But there is also a tendency of middle-class parents to have two children due to several factors. Rationally middle-class parents prefer having a single child family so as to maintain consistency between living standard and income. But emotionally they still desire for two children family. It is true that Indian parents are obsessed with male heir and they prefer having a son in the family who will bear the patrilineage for future. When the first child is daughter, they accept it. But parents go for a second child with expectation of having a son. The desire for a male heir in the family drives middle class parents to try for a second time to have a son if the first child is a daughter. In case the second child is also a daughter parents are disappointed. They worry about dowry in addition to the growing atrocities towards girl child which are rampant in a country like India. However, they do not plan for a third child as it is incoherent with everyday growing expenses. Urban educated parents raise both their daughters with love and affection and encourages them to pursue a career. Indian middle-class parents do have an obsession for a male child and this obsession is more materialistic than psychological. The urge for a male child is profound among middle class business families. Family business is not a tenured job like service. It continues for generation and also gives an identity to the family. Business families require male heir to carry forward the family business so it becomes obligatory for such couples to bear a son.

In the era of growing expenses, middle class families ideally prefer a two-child family, a son and a daughter. Educated parents prefer calling it a 'balanced family'. They idealise one son and one daughter family as complete family. Parents wish to experience the joy of upbringing a son and daughter. Indian families do hold a strong desire and preference for a male child which contributes to masculinisation of family and this has been practiced in every epoch. This practice has rendered daughters to be unwanted in several communities and regions in India, especially in Northern India. Indian couples keep trying for a male heir with lot of apprehen-

sions and anxieties and do not stop procreation until having a male heir. This results families being large. The other side of social reality presents another trend which shows that middle class couples go for a second child even when the first child is already a son. In such situation couples are driven by a desire to be blessed with a daughter. Parents already with a boy as first child are more at ease when they plan for the second child. A girl child is not always neglected once she is born. The educated middle class has refuted the practice of having an apathetic attitude towards daughter. They have welcomed daughters in their family. Preference for a male child is certainly present in every stratum of the society irrespective of caste and class, religion, education and profession but girl child is also accepted by families in recent times. Informants covered in the study who tried for a second child in order to be blessed with a daughter have strongly asserted the fact that it is the affection and care that a daughter has towards her parents, serves as a driving factor for parents to have a daughter in their family. They also refute the age-old idea and practice of getting financial help from their son at their old age which makes the practice of son preference so strongly ingrained in Indian psyche. To their opinion, middle class being a rational and intellectual class are aware of savings and they have been saving for their old age for a consecutively long period. What they desire in their old age is care and affection of their children and not always financial help. Informants covered in the study strongly advocate that a daughter is more sensitive towards her parents in comparison to a boy.

Changing pattern of upbringing of daughters

The binary structures of sex/gender, male/female have always been reinforced into the society through the socialisation process resulting in gender stereotyping. Parents try to shape their children according to the normative structure of the patriarchal society and this impacts the framing of character traits of sons and daughters. Gender socialisation often leads to gender stereotyping in the upbringing of individuals (Kite and Whitely 2016; Stangor 2009). Gender stereotyping plays a vital role in shaping one's identity and position in the society. In this view, behaviour, identity and expectations placed on boys and girls reflect socially constructed ideas about masculinity and femininity. This often leads to the practice of gender preference and gender discrimination. A counter reality to this practice is observed where the parents value their daughters highly and are completely focused on the well-being of their daughters. The growing tendency of single-daughter or two-daughter families among educated middle-class families in urban locale reflects the above-mentioned practice. The upbringing of daughters, in contemporary times, shows a major departure from the patriarchal ethos of demeaning women or treating women as 'other' or 'secondary'. Rather daughters are taught to perform all the primary tasks and act as significantly as their male counterpart.

Significant behavioural changes can be witnessed where parents focus on the quality of education of their daughter/daughters. They want their daughters to have a career and are eager to enrol them in technical courses. Informants covered in the study shows a growing tendency to educate their daughters in English medium schools. The number of child/children being one or two, the middleclass parents invest all their money and efforts to make sure that their daughters do well in education and build a successful career, which will not only make them economically self-reliant but also bring affluence and pride in the family. Perhaps, the parents do both (1) rationalization of family size and (2) providing best possible education to daughters since they are aware of the growing risks in the neo-liberal market-based economy. Siliguri being one of the significant class I cities of West Bengal is gradually booming economically and in terms of educational facilities. People are aware of the economic changes that are happening in the country. They do not want to lag behind. There has been rapid increase in number of ICSE and CBSE English medium schools in the city. Parents are eager to

send their children (and daughters) to the reputed English medium schools. They feel that daughters need better care and support for their empowerment since they are likely to face greater odds for a decent life, which the patriarchal society tends to deny. The parents believe that sending daughters to good schools is the only means to gain cultural capital and effect social mobility. The parents of single girl child are all the more eager to make her eligible so that she becomes financially independent. This is absolutely important in the perception of parents since they no longer believe that marriage is the surest way to give daughters a happy life. Education of parents plays a pivotal role in determining the course of education of daughters in the family since there are a few cases where the parents still do not do their best in supporting their daughter's education. Not all the economically affluent families treat their daughters well enough since they carry the patriarchal legacy. Parents who understand the significance of education are all the keener in giving the best of education to their children.

Parents are also showing a departure in their attitude towards marriage and choice of spouse of their children. As daughters in middleclass families are prioritizing education and career over marriage, the age at marriage for both boys and girls is on the rise. The parents too support this paradigm shift wholeheartedly. They consider marriage as important but do not insist on it before the daughters are settled with good jobs. The parents are also ready to grant freedom to their daughters to select their life partners and decide when to marry. The conventional social restrictions on marriage are also easing out. "I do not pressurise my daughters to get married" said 60-year-old Mr. Chanda who is a father of two daughters. "Not that I am reluctant about my daughters' marriage but I feel that destiny has its role to play in case of marriages. My daughters are doing extremely well with their career. Whenever we will come across a suitable groom we will go for our daughters' marriage after taking our daughters' consent." The educated middleclass parents and their educated daughters give priority to education and career over marriage. Although they do not rule out marriage, they are not too anxious about marriage as well. This could be termed as a paradigm shift driven by factors like (1) a growing perception of economic risk, (2) risk of uncertainty in marriage and (3) the fear of male domination in marital relation.

The present generation young men and women demand a more say regarding their choice of life partners. Further, with the development of opportunities in the present era of globalization and privatisation, there has been a massive change in the cultural and economic orientation and thinking of the people in society. The present economic order demands empowerment of women and wants women to be equal contributors to the process of social and economic changes. Giddens (2006) mentions that in recent time, there is more of free selection of spouses, arranged marriages becoming less common and rights of women are being recognised more than before. The new trend that has emerged is self-arranged marriage where spouses have found their partners on their own and seek the concurrence of the concerned families, ending up in arranged marriage. There has also been an increasing trend towards inter-caste marriages. Children are sent to cities and towns for pursuing education and jobs, where they learn to live all by themselves and also learn to take decisions regarding their lives. They often develop a tendency to fall for their batch mates, friends or office colleagues from other castes or communities and decide to get married. Under such circumstances the parents become helpless and accept their children's choice. This trend can be witnessed in case of daughters too and parents had to give their approval (although reluctantly, at times) to their daughter's decision.

Parents, especially fathers are playing a very positive role towards daughters in the family. Educated middle-class fathers are constantly challenging the traditional patriarchal ideologies and strongly opine that daughters too can bring happiness in the family. Raising daughters in a conservative society like India is not without short-comings. Patriarchal society has always superimposed the authoritarian rule of the father who is the axis

of decision making in the family. But as the dynamics of Indian household are changing, educated parents are welcoming a positive change. In traditional Indian society fathers were moulded by the dictates of patriarchy. Fathers were conditioned to see daughters as a liability and incapable of contributing anything of substance to the family. Though mothers were more sensitive towards their daughters they too became helpless before the patriarchal dictates of the society. The contemporary times shows a departure in such attitude of parents towards daughters. Parents having one daughter or two daughters generally consider upbringing of daughters easier than upbringing sons. Fathers are eager to provide the best of education and everything so that they can make daughters financially independent because they don't have son. They want to break the stereotype that daughter cannot take care of aged parents and cannot contribute anything of substance. They do this in order to overcome the fact that they do not have a son. They no longer treat daughters as liability. Urban middle-class parents have the financial capability to give a good life to their daughters. They also make sufficient savings for their old age so that they can lead a satisfactory life even in their old age. The urban middle-class parents are introducing change in the perception towards daughters. The perception of treating daughter as liability and as someone not capable of taking care of aged parents is being deconstructed.

Daughters are concerned about parents and parents too express their concern in all possible ways. The only thing they regret is that the daughters cannot bear their family name. The Bengali middle-class parents of Siliguri take immense pride in their daughters' achievements and that an air of superiority exists when they put across their daughter's accomplishment before their peer, relatives and colleagues who have sons. The media too glorify daughters' achievements. The accomplishments of women are considered as pride of nation; more the women's accomplishments more is the pride for the nation. Informants covered in the study having single daughter or two daughters have over and over again mentioned that they wish to make their daughter self-reliant so that she can live a life of dignity and do not have to be depended on anyone and it is basically the fathers who are keener in making their daughters financially independent. The daughters too are welcoming this attitudinal change of their parents although they accept that this change is still in its incipient stage and a lot more needs to be done in order to bring about a complete change in the perception of society towards daughters.

Conclusion

The focal point of the study was whether there have been changes in the outlook and upbringing of the daughters in the otherwise patriarchal social order in the locale of the urban middleclass families. It has been an empirical account of the position of daughters in the burgeoning Bengali middleclass in a fast growing commercial city of Siliguri. The problem studied has been posed against the backdrop of the dropping sex ratio, the prevalence of female foeticide, overwhelming son preference, dropping fertility in the patriarchal social order called India. The middle-class population of urban locale comprises of the educated section of the population who has gone for the course of rationalisation of family size. Educated middle-class parents strongly support the small size family norm of having a single-child or two-child family. Perhaps the recent trend of single-child family has been welcomed by middle class parents. This trend has become normative as it reflects 'social facts' in Durkheimian sense which structures and constraints individual according to the social order. This brings to a point of conceptual contestation whether daughters are accepted by urban middle-class parents since the changing family relations are heading towards calculative rationalisation (in Weberian sense) which tends to dehumanize girl child and have a preferential treatment towards son. The research explored that despite the overarching prevalence of son preference, urban middle-class parents of Siliguri having single daughter or two daughters and no son/sons have overwhelmingly accepted daughters in their families. The son preference may

not have completely withered but there was not much evidence of daughter aversion among the respondents. Parents generally offer same level of affection and care to their daughter/daughters and son/sons, sometime even more to daughter/daughters than son/sons. The general focus of the middle-class is on educating their daughter and making them self-reliant before getting them married. They take pride in their daughter/daughters' achievements. They do this in their quest for a better life for their daughters, keeping in mind the growing risks in marriages and to free their daughters from the conventional role of 'home-makers'. They generally perceive that if the daughters are self-reliant, they can live an independent life, even if the marriage fails. The educated urban middle-class parents are reluctant to keep trying for a son as it would increase the possibility of big size family which would perhaps be cumbersome to lead a 'good life'. They, therefore have accepted the gender of the child (even in case of only daughter) following the single-child family or two-child family norm and are living a life of contentment.

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