

Are Daughters Preferred in a Matrilineal Society? A Case Study of the Garos from Assam

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ABSTRACT Some studies have revealed that a son enjoys preferential treatment in upbringing and in later life in comparison to a daughter. This is the case in dominant patriarchal societies where a daughter is neglected on several occasions. The present paper attempts to look at whether the situation is different in a matrilineal society. It also attempts to see whether the matrilineal social set-up plays any role in a favourable treatment of the son or daughter. The paper draws its material from three aspects of child-rearing process of the Garos of Bakrapur, a village in Goalpara district, Assam, who are matrilineal. These three aspects include parental preference of a particular sex for an unborn child, issues regarding food and eating and work allotted to male and female children. This study revealed that in terms of food and eating, and tasks allotted, rather than sex, age plays a significant role. However a slight inclination towards boys is noticeable. In case of parental preference for a particular sex, a girl child was preferred, depending on certain situations. Again, depending on familial conditions, both sexes were favoured.

INTRODUCTION

Preferences and inclinations are natural among humans. This becomes more noticeable when one has to select or choose one object among many, be it animate or inanimate. Choosing one particular plaything from many may be a simplistic way of stating the obvious; however many times one expresses choice or liking over something more important, for instance, choice for a groom or bride on the basis of certain personalized likings.

This predilection of one and non-preference of the other is at times seen among parents and their relationship with children. A preference for sons over daughters has been found in a large number of countries. According to Williamson (1976) and Cleland et al. (1983), son-preference attitudes and behaviour appear to be most widespread in an arc of countries ranging from East Asia, through South Asia, to the Middle East and North Africa.

Studies on Child Preferences

As early as mid 1950s, Dinitz et al. (1954) studied the preference for children by parents, and put forward two hypotheses. First, they suggested that the more cohesive the group memberships a person had, the greater the desire

for a male child. In other words, those individuals who belonged to “traditional” groups, such as certain ethnic and religious groups, would exhibit a decided male preference. Second, the individual’s affectional relationships were suggested as influencing the desire for male or female children. Thus, it was hypothesized that a satisfying relationship with parents, siblings and peers of the same (or opposite) sex, would influence one’s sex preference for children. For example, a female who had a strong attachment to her father might prefer a male child. However, the authors concluded that the effect of interpersonal relationships is secondary to traditional cultural values.

In a traditionally patriarchal society like the Chinese, sons are preferred over daughters (Arnold and Zhaoxiang 1986). In India too, as studies have shown, there is an inclination towards sons. These studies (Bardhan 1988; Basu 1989) highlight three dimensions of the utility of having a son. The first is the economic utility, which is mainly based on assistance in agricultural production, wage earnings, and security in the case of illness and during old age. The social utility stems from the kinship and descent system, the status and strength provided to the family by sons, and the premium to be expected from having a son in the form of dowry payments (Karve 1965;

Kapadia 1966). Finally religious utility flows from the performance by sons of important religious functions. According to Hindu tradition, sons are needed for the cremation of deceased parents because only sons (or, in their absence, grandsons or other men in the family) can light the funeral pyre. Therefore, in many cases, sons are given a favourable treatment in their growing-up years in comparison to daughters. This is a reflection of the patriarchal social set-up prevalent in these societies.

If a boy receives preferential treatment due to the patriarchal set-up, does it mean a girl will receive the same in a non-patriarchal, matrilineal society? An attempt was made by Pakyntein (1999) to study female preference among Khasis, a matrilineal society which follows rules of ultimogeniture inheritance. Her study did reveal that among the Khasis there is a preference, though insignificant, for a daughter over a son. Major reasons for female preference were cited as old age security (since the youngest daughter looks after the aged parents) followed by continuation of lineage. Incidentally her study reveals that inheritance of property is not as important as it is normally made out to be.

The Garos, the focus of the present study, are a matrilineal group of people. Will the preference for daughters that is seen among matrilineal Khasis (Pakyntein 1999) be seen among Garos too? How much of a role does the social set-up play in the upbringing of a child? These are questions that the present paper attempts to look at, and while doing so it studies the generalized perceptions of parents and their relationship with the children of both sexes.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Garos are one of the few tribes that follow matriliney. In physical features they show affinity to the Mongoloids. Rich oral traditions abound with tales of migration from Tibet to the Garo Hills region of Meghalaya and its adjoining states of Assam, Tripura, Nagaland and North Bengal in the Indian Union and Mymensingh in Bangladesh. Linguistically, they show affinity to the Tibeto-Burman tongue. Their main source of livelihood is shifting cultivation still practiced in some pockets of Garo Hills. In the plains areas wet paddy cultivation is practiced. Garos are traditionally animists with beliefs in a number of malevolent and benevolent spirits (*mite*). Christianity

introduced among them in the early part of the twentieth century by European and American missionaries has spread rapidly with only a few pockets remaining in Garo Hills where animists (*songsarek*) are still to be seen. In the plains area Christianity persists. These villages have been acculturated to some extent due to contact with other tribal and non-tribal groups.

The data presented herein has been incorporated from Garos of the village of Bakrapur — in the plains area of Goalpara District of the state of Assam. Bakrapur is a revenue village under block Kustua, Damra mouza, Goalpara district, Assam and is divided into four groups — A, B, C and D. These four villages have four separate village headmen called *gaonbura*. There are altogether 149 households (in December 2009) with a population of 897, out of which males constitute 455 and females 442. Literacy rate of Bakrapur is quite high (87.32%). Majority of the people are engaged in agriculture.

The present paper deals with three different aspects of the child-rearing process. The first relates to the preference for a particular sex of the child by parents. This particular problem was attempted by asking expectant parents and unmarried men and women which sex they would prefer. Married men and women (except the expectant ones) were not asked since their answers were related to many other issues such as the number of children in the family, number of sons and daughter, interpersonal relationship with their children etc. In all, a total of 18 women and 17 men were interviewed, out of which 7 were married couples. At the time of this particular study, these 7 married couples were at various stages of expectancy. In order to gauge the situation better, the married couples were also classified as first-time parents, that is, those expecting a child for the first time; second-time parents, those expecting a child for the second time; and parents of two or more children. In order to understand the preferences in the society, 11 unmarried women and 10 unmarried men were also asked certain specific questions relating to their preferences. These unmarried women and men belonged to the age group 17 to 26 years and 19 to 31 years respectively.

The second aspect studied is linked to food and eating and which child (boy or girl) was first fed in the family. The purpose of the study of this particular issue was to find out if there were any preferential treatments shown towards a son or a

daughter, all things remaining same. This preferential treatment could very well be gauged by trying to find out whether a son or a daughter was first fed by the mother, and whether any of the “choicest” parts of food were kept aside for a specific child. For this query, 33 children were studied which included 16 boys and 17 girls ranging from age 2 to 13 years. However, rather than the children the respondents were 19 mothers whose children were studied vis-à-vis the mother’s responses. The method of observation was also widely used.

For the third aspect on task allocation, the same group of children was studied as above. Here, the questions were put to the children themselves as to which were the tasks that they were allotted. For this purpose, a total of 17 tasks were listed after observing the children in the village during the initial days of fieldwork. Here, the respondents were divided into 4 age-groups, 2 to 4 years, 5 to 7 years, 8 to 10 years and 11 to 13 years.

FINDINGS

Sex Preference of Parents

When the question of preference of the sex of the child was put to married and expecting respondents, it was rather ambiguous. 7 couples, that is, 7 men and 7 women were asked which child they would prefer, and were expecting: a son or a daughter. Table 1 shows their responses:

Table 1: Parental preference for boy or girl

<i>Preferred sex of unborn child</i>	<i>Expectant mother</i>	<i>Percentage</i>	<i>Expectant father</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Girl	3	42.86	2	28.57
Boy	2	28.57	2	28.57
Any gender	2	28.57	3	42.86
Total	7	100.00	7	100.00

Source: Fieldwork

The responses in Table 1 reveal that there is no overwhelming preference for either a son or a daughter among the Garos of Bakrapur. There is only a minuscule preference for daughters by expectant mothers (3 mothers who preferred a daughter versus 4 who preferred a boy or any gender). In fact, 2 women and 3 men had no preference over the sex of the child. Again there is no significant connection between the gender of the parents and the gender of the child. This indirectly indicates that there could

be other reasons for preference for one gender vis-à-vis another, rather than societal norms or the question of matriliney.

Another interesting feature was noticed when the above respondents were classified into three sets of parents: first time parents, second time parents and parents of 2 or more children.

Table 2: Preference of different stages of parents

<i>Preferred sex of unborn child</i>	<i>First timers</i>		<i>Second timers</i>		<i>Parents of two or more children</i>	
	<i>Expectant mother</i>	<i>Expectant father</i>	<i>Expectant mother</i>	<i>Expectant father</i>	<i>Expectant mother</i>	<i>Expectant father</i>
Boy	-	-	1	2	1	1
Girl	1	1	1	1	1	-
Any	2	2	-	-	-	-
Total	3	3	2	3	2	1

Source: Fieldwork

Table 2 very clearly indicates that if it is the first-born, then both the mother and the father would prefer a daughter. If there already are daughters, then a son is preferred and vice versa. That indicates that if there are no children at all, then preference is for a daughter. Here, the underlying reasons would be the matrilineal set-up. On the other hand, a son is preferred in those cases where daughters are already born into the family for it is the son who as a brother and later as an uncle will hold the reigns of his sister’s family. He would be responsible for making major decisions like transmission of property, selection of grooms for marriageable nieces etc. On the other hand, in those families where both sons and daughter are already present, then parents show no preference to any gender.

This finding was more conclusive when unmarried men and women were asked two things: (1) If there is only one child, which sex would they prefer it to be, and (2) if there were more children which sex would they prefer it to be. Tables 3 and 4 show the outcome of the responses.

As mentioned, Table 3 illustrates that in the case of a single child, the preference is overwhelmingly tilted towards a daughter, that is, the respondents in case of a single child would prefer a daughter. However, when the question of more than one child arises, then the respondents overwhelmingly preferred an equal number of children of both sexes (Table 4). The reason for

Table 3: Sex preference of only child

Respon- dents	Preferred sex of child					
	Girl	Per- cen- tage (%)	Boy	Per- cen- tage (%)	Any	Per- cen- tage (%)
Unmarried women	7	63.63	3	27.27	1	09.09
Unmarried men	7	70.00	2	20.00	1	10.00

Source: Fieldwork

this may lie in the necessity and importance attached to both men and women for the proper functioning of the matrilineal system among Garos. However, it also indicates that both sons and daughters are equally desired.

Table 4: Sex preference of children more than one

Respon- dents	Preferred sex of children					
	More girls	Per- cen- tage (%)	More boys	Per- cen- tage (%)	Equal num- ber	Per- cen- tage (%)
Unmarried women	2	18.18	1	09.09	8	72.72
Unmarried men	2	20.20	2	20.20	7	70.70

Source: Fieldwork

Mother's Preference over Feeding Children

In many studies of non-Garo societies (Bardhan 1988; Basu 1989; Karve 1965; Kapadia 1966), it has been suggested that sons are given preferential treatment in food and eating by

mothers while daughters are neglected. This issue was studied among Garos with the help of an interview schedule, by questioning 19 mothers. The questions pertained to which child in the family was fed first and whether any choice parts of food was kept aside for any child. The responses are shown in the following table (Table 5). "Choicest" portions related to the following items: Cooked chicken liver, cooked chicken legs, bigger piece of cake, bigger fruit, extra cooked gram, eggs and meat.

Table 5 shows that there exists a preference in feeding 19 children (57.57%), which is more than half the number of children studied. On the other hand, a comparable number (that is, 14 constituting 42.42%) are fed second or any time. Again, among those fed first, there exists a little difference between sons and daughters. Out of 33 children, only 7 daughters were fed first in comparison to 12 sons. This indicates that there exists a slight preferential treatment shown towards sons than daughters. On a closer scrutiny of the table it is seen that though gender preference is not distinctly visible in terms of feeding, there is an age preference. Irrespective of the sex of the child, it is noticed that younger children are fed first, while older children are fed later. All the six children (both sons and daughters) who fall in the age group of 2-4 years are fed first, while as the age of the child increases, the preference in feeding first disappears.

Assignment of Tasks to Children

Table 6 shows the responses of 33 children (16 boys and 17 girls) regarding the nature of tasks that they perform on a regular basis.

Table 5: Mother's preference in feeding age group wise

Age group (in years)	Child first fed and choicest portions given				No preference shown in feeding child				Total	Percen- tage (%)
	Girl	Percen- tage (%)	Boy	Percen- tage (%)	Girl	Percen- tage (%)	Boy	Percen- tage (%)		
2-4	4	66.66	2	33.33	-	-	-	-	6	100.00
5-7	2	20.00	6	60.00	2	20.00	-	-	10	100.00
8-10	1	16.67	1	16.67	3	50.00	1	16.67	6	100.00
11-13	-	-	3	27.27	5	45.45	3	27.27	11	100.00
Total	7	21.21	12	36.36	10	30.30	4	12.12	33	100.00

Source: Fieldwork

Table 6 shows that very young children (2-4 years) are very often left to tend to younger siblings by playing with them for some time, and not made fully responsible for younger siblings. Many times they are asked to fetch things like a wooden stool for a guest or to fetch the bowl of betel nut and leaf for a guest. They are seen to be sent to the neighbours' houses with small errands, either carrying an unimportant message or a letter. A large number of them are also involved in looking after pets and occasionally feeding chicken and goats.

The next age groups (5-7 years) and (8-10 years) are allocated more tasks than before. Even though they are still asked to fetch items of use (such as a wooden stool, a glass of water or firewood), they are also sent to shops on errands and asked to look after pets. They are also given slightly more jobs in the household and agricultural activities. Babysitting or looking after younger siblings are commonly undertaken. They are also seen to be serving tea and water to guests, and laying plates and serving salt etc during lunch and dinner. Many of the girls also start undertaking cleaning of the house and washing of clothes while boys start accompanying parents to the agricultural fields and helping them out.

In the last age group (11-13 years), some of the children would have already attained puberty, and this is when boys begin to be referred to as *pante* (bachelors) and girls as *metra* (damsels). This is the stage when children are allotted more "responsible tasks" like looking after younger siblings, whether babysitting or helping them with their toilet/bathing/dressing. This is also the stage when girls are given more tasks connected with the home, such as helping in cooking and washing clothes while boys are asked to accompany parents to the agricultural fields.

DISCUSSION

Garos are a matrilineal group of people where lineage, property and residence pass from mothers to daughters, preferably the eldest daughter or the most favoured one. Descent among Garos is in the female line. At birth, a child, whether a boy or girl, becomes a member of the mother's clan (*mahari*) and cluster of clans (*machong*); and gets affiliated to one of the five conglomeration of *machong*, called *chatchi*, viz., Sangma, Marak, Momin, Areng and Shira. In case, a couple fail to beget a daughter, adoption from one's *mahari* or *machong* take place. If there is more than one

Table 6: Tasks assigned to children

Tasks assigned to children	Number of girls doing tasks				Number of boys doing tasks			
	Age group (in years)				Age group (in years)			
	2-4	5-7	8-10	11-13	2-4	5-7	8-10	11-13
Babysitting younger siblings	1	1	2	-	-	1	-	-
Playing with younger siblings	1	1	2	-	1	1	-	-
Helping a younger sibling in toilet/bathing/dressing	-	1	2	-	-	1	-	-
Fetching water from well	-	1	4	5	-	-	-	-
Fetching stool/glass of water/ betel nut/firewood	2	-	2	-	1	4	2	-
Serving tea/ betel nut	-	1	2	4	-	-	-	-
Small errands from shops/ neighbours	1	1	1	1	1	2	2	3
Feeding chicken/goats	-	-	-	-	-	2	2	5
Feeding cows/grazing	-	-	-	-	-	2	2	4
Feeding pigs	-	-	-	3	-	-	-	3
Laying plates and serving salt/chilies	1	-	2	1	-	-	-	-
Washing clothes	-	-	2	5	-	-	-	3
Cleaning house	-	-	2	5	-	-	-	-
Help in cultivation	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	4
Helping in fetching produce from field	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	4
Fetching firewood from jungle	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	4
Cooking	-	-	-	5	-	-	-	-

Source: Fieldwork

daughter, the parents' favorite is selected as the inheritress, known as *nokna-dongipa-mechik* (daughter for the house) or *nokna*. She inherits not only the movable and immovable property, but also the responsibility towards elderly parents, younger siblings and other needy *mahari* members. The husband of the inheritress is called *nokrom* and he should preferably be the real or classificatory nephew of the bride's father. For the daughters, matrilineal residence is the norm - it is only after a few years that the married daughters, other than the inheritress, move out and set up neolocal residences not far away from the mother's homestead. Succession of the chieftain, *nokma*, whose office is still seen in Garo Hills, is from males to males through females. While in the plains of Assam, the village headman (*gaonburha*) is present, who is elected from among eligible men.

Even though Garos are matrilineal, it is on the shoulders of males that the responsibility of running the family and society rests. In his family of procreation, a man is called *nokgipa* (*nok* meaning house, *gipa* meaning owner). Therefore, he plays an important role in the matters of the family as the owner, but he has no say in the matters of his wife's *mahari*. In the matters of his own and mother's *mahari* he plays the all-important role. As the maternal uncle, he enjoys the most respectable position and has command over his sister's family. He mediates in the sister's household in difficulties and regulates the conduct of the children. Therefore, in a Garo society both men and women have important roles to play.

Since a daughter is the inheritress and the one through whom lineage will continue, her birth is welcomed with great joy and merrymaking. As Table 3 reveals, a majority of women (63.63%) and men (70%) want an only child to be a daughter. This is because a girl-child is a necessity for the longevity of the family name and lineage. In fact, if no girl-child is born in the family then steps are taken to adopt one from consanguineal relatives. The adopted girl-child has to be from the same *mahari* as the foster mother, preferably a child born to her sisters or cousins. This is of utmost necessity because the girl-child is the one through whom lineage, inheritance of property and ownership of household will pass on.

This, however, does not mean that the boy-child is unwanted in a Garo society. As has been clearly revealed through Tables 1, 2, 3 and 4, sons are also equally wanted and preferred for a male

has many necessary functions in the society in connection to the family and clan. What is interesting, however, is the desire for a female child on two conditions: (1) if there is only one child, it should preferably be a girl, and (2) if there are more children, at least one of them has to be a daughter. Many first time parents (66.66%) had no specific preference for the sex of an unborn child. They seem to be happy with either a son or a daughter. Similarly, second time parents preferred a child whose sex was different from the first born. Also, interestingly a majority of Garo men and women would prefer an equal number of sons and daughters (Table 4).

When it comes to food allocation, Karlekar (1995) states that in India discrimination is highly prevalent and the factors at play are those other than food scarcity. Das Gupta (1987) also indicated a definite bias in feeding boys milk and milk products and eggs while both boys and girls have equal access to cereal and vegetables. In Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh, it is usual for girls and women to eat less than men and boys and to have their meal after the men and boys had finished eating (Ranjana 1990). Among Garos, such an overt discrimination in food and eating is rare. At the stage of a new-born baby, the main sustenance up to about a year is mother's milk. However, the baby is also fed other food like mashed rice, egg-yolk etc. from around seven months or so. The complete switch to solid food takes place from around two and a half years to three years. In this period of nurturance no distinction is seen between the treatment given to the son and the daughter. As revealed in Table 5, there is no gender discrimination in terms of food and eating among Garos. What exists is, however, a slight preferential treatment shown towards boys in terms of who eats first and who eats the "choicest" portions. Rather than sex differentiation, age differentiation exists, that is, a younger child irrespective of sex is fed first than an older child. What it indicates is that a Garo society is structured in terms of age, where the young irrespective of sex are taken as a vulnerable group who are to be looked after. This statement finds expression too when we look at the tasks that are assigned to children, where older children are made to look after younger siblings.

In the later years too, no discrimination to the point of neglect is made by the mother on the basis of sex. Both the son and daughter are equally treated and given equal amounts of food and types of food. If the mother has cooked snacks

she gives equal portions to the son and the daughter. At times, however, a mother may have a special liking for a son or a daughter, especially, the youngest child and may make extra tidbits for the child. Such cases are rare though, and on occasion that the father of the child witnesses such a preference being shown, is apt to comment and instruct his wife to offer the same to the other children.

However, at times, a minuscule difference is seen, as observed during this study. In a couple of cases, the son was given a better piece of meat or a slightly bigger piece of fruit than that offered to his sister. On such occasions, daughters rarely complained. The conviction behind such a move on the part of the mother, as case studies revealed, is due to the "temporary" stay of the boy-child (her son) in the family, and the mother's love and fear for his future. Inherent here is the fear and anxiety of the mother for the son in later life when he would marry and move out from her house. This happens since Garos are matrilineal as well as matrilocal, and sons move out of the maternal home and set up house in the bride's mother's house after marriage.

The practice of task assignment is taken to be a method of disciplining and socializing children. However the tasks that are allocated to children could also be studied to find out the preferential treatment of children based on sex, if any. Among Garos, tasks for children are seen to range from baby-sitting younger siblings to helping out in the fields, kitchen and home. Garo children as young as three to four years irrespective of sex are at times asked to babysit younger siblings or cousins. Children of about eight to ten years are often seen playing with friends carrying their younger siblings on their back. Generally till about the age of five, children of both sexes are given the same tasks to perform. Normally these include fetching a stool to sit, fetching a glass of water, playing with younger siblings etc.

However, after six years or so a slight differentiation in task assignment is seen. Boys are sent to the agricultural fields to assist their parents either to help carry agricultural tools like small hoes or to chase birds away with a catapult. On the other hand, girls are taught to assist in cooking, in sweeping the courtyard and in fetching water. At times, a child of either sex is sent to the maternal uncle's home to assist in household or field activities for a short period. School going children are also given multiple tasks like looking

after pets, weeding the garden, babysitting siblings after school hours etc. Thus sex differentiation is seen in children's tasks too which seem to be a ground for socializing children for future roles in the family and society.

White et al. (1981) in their study conducted on Nebraskan children concluded that since most of the chores to be done around the average household are traditionally women's work, the sex-typed division of labour meant that girls put in more hours on their chores than do boys. However, among the Garo children it is difficult to make such a conclusion since both boys and girls, especially in early adolescence are given either equal tasks or totally wide-ranging tasks to perform. Boy-children are mostly allocated tasks outside their homes, for instance in the fields, or if at home then to look after pets like goats and cows; On the other hand, girl-children are given tasks in and around their homes: sweeping house, fetching water, cooking, serving salt and chili etc. Therefore, it is rather difficult to conclude whether a son or a daughter performs more duties when they are children.

CONCLUSION

Undoubtedly, cultures influence, to a great extent, the different ways in which parents rear children. The focal points being patterns of family life, shared conceptions of ways to bring up children and oral tradition handed down through generations. Among Garos, it is seen that their matrilineal setup plays a significant role in the parents' attitude towards their children.

A matrilineal society places a great deal of importance on a daughter for she is the one through whom all succession, inheritance and lineage will carry on. Therefore, depending on certain circumstances, a daughter is preferred. These circumstances include one where there is only one child in the family, and if there are only sons and no daughters in the family. Interestingly however, the same situation prevails for a son too. In case there are daughters in the family, a son is most awaited and preferred. In terms of the position enjoyed by the boy and girl-child, it is seen that the latter is received with much joy and expectation in a family irrespective of her being the first or the third child. On the other hand, the joys of the birth of a boy-child grow manifold only when his arrival is long-awaited and he is the only boy-child in the family. The logic behind such a reaction in the family is again

due to the importance laid on the clan, its membership and the notion of strength in numbers.

In terms of food, eating and task allocation, it is seen that there exists only a slight preferential treatment towards boys. Sons are generally served first, some receive the best shares of food and when very young are generally let off to play with friends while daughters stay at home and look after younger siblings. Issues related to food and eating are again connected to the Garo marriage system and the resultant matrilineal residence after marriage, in which a Garo boy moves out of his parental home and sets up house in the bride's home. However, rather than sex differentiation, age differentiation emerges as the defining parameter for parents' attitudes towards children.

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