

## **Women, Ethnicity and Society in the Late Twentieth Century: The Chain Community of West Bengal**

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**Abstract:** *The Chain is a little-known ethnic community of India. They are also found in Bangladesh and Nepal. In India, they are mostly settled in West Bengal, Bihar, Jharkhand and Uttar Pradesh. In West Bengal, the Chain community lives in the districts of Malda, Murshidabad, Nadia, North and South Dinajpur, Birbhum, Burdwan and Midnapore. Malda has a higher Chain population than any other district in West Bengal, nay in the country. The total population of the community in West Bengal could be estimated at 25 lakhs. The Chains have traditionally lived on the bank of the River Ganges or some other rivers. They might also be found today settled in large number in some rural areas far away from rivers mainly because of the change in river courses. Popularly known as Chain-Mandal, the community belongs to the scheduled caste category now in the entire state of West Bengal through the same status was enjoyed by them only in four districts (Malda, Murshidabad, Nadia, and South Dinajpur) till 2016, the category of the depressed backward class being prevalent for them in other districts.*

**Keywords:** Ethnic community, Traditional, Chain-Mandal, Status

The Chain, according to H.H. Risley,<sup>1</sup> is a cultivating and fishing caste of Behar and Central Bengal as well as probably an offshoot from some non-Aryan tribe. Wherever be their habitation, they have lived in large numbers in particular areas, bringing some occupational groups such blacksmith, cobbler, priest, etc to cater to their necessities.

One of the best ways to understand the spirit of a community and to appreciate its excellence and to realise its limitations is to study the history of the position and status of its women.<sup>2</sup> The best thermometer to the progress of a nation is its treatment of its women, said Swami Vivekananda. Hence made is an attempt to look into the condition of the women of a backward community like the Chain to assess their advancement.

The light may be thrown on the discussion just from the moment of the birth of a female child in a Chain family. The birth of a girl as the first child or that of many of them in the family was always an unwelcome event in the Chain society. As in a patriarchal society, a male child has invariably valued a greater deal than the female ones by the Chain, the community surviving on a male-dominated occupation like agriculture and expecting success in occasional intra- and inter-community feuds over the property. Son was considered as a permanent economic asset of the family as he lived with his parents and did not go away like the daughter to another family after marriage. As he grew into adolescence and youth, he could assist him on the farm and offer valuable co-operation to his family. Moreover, it was he, who perpetuated the name of his father's family. Therefore, the Chain society hardly ever welcomed the birth of a daughter especially as the first baby and many. The girls, thus traditionally undervalued, were simply taken as such a member of the family as to be somehow brought up till their marriage at the earliest. Naturally, they were not given, in comparison to their brothers, proper care and attention, sufficient nutritious food and dresses, etc. Quite common was the scene in which most of the girls up to the age of seven or eight was found with just a short cloth or pant as their only dress. Worse was the condition of those

daughters who were born were undesirably one after another in many a number due to desperate wish of their parents for at least one male child. Birth of no girl-child or just one or two could be desirable but never so the birth of a single male child. What would happen if something fatal happened to him? Hence the proverb: *Ek Lyarkake Maa, Hatyay paa paa*<sup>3</sup>: (Mother of a single male child walks very slowly). That means, as the mother with only one son has no enormous man-power, she is inferior in society. Then what about the mother blessed with many a son? The answer derives from another proverb: *Dher lyarkake maa, Dhyarti nyai dei paa*<sup>4</sup> (The mother, who has many sons, is so proud that she does not care anything). Thus it appears that emphasis was given in Chain society on more and more sons in the family and the status of the woman was relatively dependent upon the number of sons she could give birth to. This reminds us of the Manu Smriti stressing upon “*putrarth kriyate bharya*”, which means a wife is taken to give to sons. The belief was that only a boy could provide for the spiritual salvation of a believing Hindu. For that, an infertile or sonless woman would lose her status in her family as well as in society. Such a woman was treated like a widow and barred from any social rituals. It was and is still believed that encountering an infertile woman in the morning is a bad sign for the whole day.

### **Marriage:**

The Chain has had a long-cherished tradition of early marriage, especially of the girls. A popular Chain proverb goes: “*Saat mya sona, aat mya rung, lyau mya dulaahaa dharike aan*” (As a bride, the girl at seven is as good as gold and at eight, copper. But if she is as old as nine years, the groom has to be searched and brought for her). Usually, a girl had to get married before she attained puberty<sup>5</sup> else the family faced scorn from all sections of the society.

During the third quarter of the last century, girls used to be given in marriage in Chain society within the age of 12-13, which was generally regarded as the perfect, marriageable age for them. The contemporary economy of the Chain community revolved around agriculture. In a peasant family, lots of things were there to do by the female members in addition to husking paddy with the pedal (*Dhenki*), grinding grains such as wheat, barley, etc as well as preparing lentils with grindstone and cooking for quite several members of the joint family and sometimes for the daily-wage labourers.

Tasks such as the husking of paddy were performed entirely by women. Naturally, when a male member associated with agriculture reached the age-range of 16-18, the initiative was taken to get him married. Interestingly, the physical look, excessive age-gap or intellectual capability of the boy as a groom was not of considerable importance in the Chain society. This becomes manifest in the following proverb: *Kothi kothiyal, Chikkyan Roti; Chokh munike dihyan beti*<sup>6</sup> (Get your daughter married unhesitatingly in the house which has earthen grain containers in large numbers, lots of furniture and enormous, good food). In other words, more importance was given, while settling a girl's marriage, on the economic prosperity of the bridegroom's family than the bridegroom himself.

Interestingly, the marriage of daughters was not so great a problem as today for their parents. Firstly, there was no dowry system at all. On the contrary, a bride-price was in vogue however symbolic it might be. Secondly, the expense of marriage was not also high as most of the items of food served to close members and invitees in connection with the marriage used to be home-made and local productions. Thirdly, the joint-family system or the extensive cooperation from the close relations would immensely help the bride's parents/guardians in settling the marriage of the girls without much worry and delays. In the settlement of their marriages or in the management of their

households women were not given any voice. In many cases, girls were married to men who were ten or more years older and the factors responsible were solvency of the groom's family, poor condition of the bride's family, an unpleasant look of the bride, etc. And this phenomenon is poetically expressed in a marriage song, which goes thus:

*Kaisan byara he, kaisan ghara he*  
*Syabhye suni, syabhye jani –*  
*Saasu bidhuyabyay he.*  
*Pyakkyal mochya he, pyakkal dyadhiya he*  
*Pyakkyal chokhyakera bhaunya he.*  
*Seho dekhi, Saasu bidhuyabyay he.*  
*Kohi nyahi gaabyay he gitya – he -.*  
*Pyakkyal mochya he, pyakkal dyadhiya he*  
*Pyakkyal maathaakera keshya he.*  
*Seho dekhi, Saasu bidhuyabyay he.*  
*Kohi nyahi gaabyay he gitya – he.<sup>7</sup>*

(O What a groom, and what the family too! Aware of all these unexpectations, the mother of the bride has burst into tears. The mustache and beard of the groom are grey, so are his eye-brows even. Taking notice of all these, the mother-in-law (of the groom) has started weeping (under the circumstances) no one is singing any marriage song. Grey is not only the groom's mustache and beards but also his hair on the head. The very sight of all these has led the mother-in-law into repenting incessantly. Because of this, no one feels at all like singing any song).

Marriage of love was not unknown in the Chain society. Polygamy was practiced but not that widely and monogamy was the general rule. However, there was a widespread social sanction for remarriage. Interestingly, the practice was permitted for Indian Hindus before 1955. However, this very year witnessed the enactment of the Hindu Marriage Act by the Indian Parliament, which made polygamy in any form illegal in India. Still, there has been some incidence of polygamy among the Chains, particularly among the head (*Modol*) and influential persons of the village, who were capable of taking care of more than one wife. The factors that contributed to the continuity of polygamy, though very limited, were (i) the death of the first wife; (ii) the Problem of infertility of the first wife. If there occurred no sign of pregnancy of the newly-married bride within a traditionally calculated, short period of consummation of the marriage, members of the extended family used to start getting worried, and in the event of prolonged unmotherhood, encourage the man to explore elsewhere by taking another wife; (iii) Inability of the first wife to give birth to a male child; (iv) Another reason outside the problem of infertility was personal wish or satisfaction. It was when a man was not happy with the marriage or with the wife he was married to or he had fallen in extra-marital with some woman. The custom of marrying the brother's widow was prevalent. The Standard of female morality was generally of a high order. However, questions were sometimes raised on the good character of some widows, the fact which finds support in the proverb that goes: *Raand ke beta shaand, chhenoria chyandi byar,*<sup>8</sup> which means – The son of an unchaste widow is as good as a bull and can never have good character.

Family planning was not known. There was no facility easily available of Tubectomy or female sterilization, which is now the most popular permanent method of contraception performed surgically on the female partner when the couples do not want to have any more children. People also lacked education. Moreover, no necessity was felt of family planning as they would want quite

several children, preferably male, to assist them in the farming work and to provide physical strength to the family during intra- of inter-communal dispute, which was not an uncommon phenomenon in a peasant socio-economic structure. Naturally, women went on giving birth to children in the shortest possible gap as long as they could. However, the pregnancy did not bring them any respite from their routine household job or qualitative change in their food. All the deliveries of the pregnant women took place outside any health institution and were conducted at home by untrained, illiterate but married *dais* (traditional birth attendants), who customarily hailed from a cobbler family as well as from relatives'. On average, the *Dais* would receive Rs.11.00 and 5 kgs of grain per delivery. However, unsafe deliveries conducted at home by untrained ladies led to high maternal mortality and morbidity.

**Widow:** Along with Child marriage, widow remarriage was also in vogue, but not so wide. G.E. Lambourn wrote in 1918, "They (i.e. the Chain) are agriculturists and labourers and practice widow remarriage."<sup>9</sup> However, in many cases such marriage took place within the same family and age-incompatibility between the two to get married was not considered as a bar. As a result, the wife might be senior to the husband. There was no prohibition in the marriage of the widowed sister-in-law with her younger brother-in-law. Interestingly, levirate marriage was regarded as highly appropriate in the Chain society. A. Mitra wrote in 1951 of the Chain that "Widow Marriage (was) allowed, that to husband's younger brother being proper."<sup>10</sup> It may be mentioned that widow remarriage was not performed in compliance with Shastric rituals or mantra-recital. In presence of the village-head, the marriage would take place in a very simple manner without any priest in the form of *Nikah* or *Sanga/Sagai*. Making a promise to support the widow forever, the groom duly applied vermilion powder to her forehead, the mark of traditional Hindu married women and brought her to his house.

Generally, the life of the Chain widows was not as miserable as in the Bengali society. Though forbidden from using *sindoor* (vermillion) on the forehead and at the parting of the hair (*sithi*), cosmetics and much jewelry, they were not prohibited from eating *non-vegetarian food* like fish. It is interesting to note that in a traditional Hindu society, eating non-vegetarian food like fish and meat by a widow was regarded as an insult to her late husband and even her eating heartily as dishonoring his memory. Forsaking all good food, wearing a simple white sari and living a very humble life were held to be the way the widow could express her grief at his death.<sup>11</sup> The deviation by a Chain widow could be attributed to the fact that in addition to being a cultivating and fishing caste, the Chains probably originated from some non-Aryan tribe and therefore restriction was not so rigorously applicable on them. She could even wear *sarees* with artistically designed borders and ordinary ornaments. However, many of the widows had to stay in the house of her deceased husband, enduring lots of censure and humiliation as she could not have shelter in the parents' house because it was not socially desirable or practicable for a married woman to stay back in the parents' house. Besides, there was no right of the daughters to parents' property or the knowledge of the same or the confidence to establish the right.

### **Employment:**

Traditionally, the Chain girls and women used to be engaged in household works. Bleaching and washing cloth were other activities in which women were involved. Sometimes a few were seen as working in one's kitchen garden. Still, a few could be seen clearing of weeds and harvesting in the

field together with men. Many women, especially those who were widowed or had no one in the family to earn, used to go to the market for the selling of green vegetables and other items and even they dared to visit distant places for commercial purposes. Goat-rearing has always been an exclusive area of the women in the Chain society though the income generated therefrom was not always possessed and enjoyed by them. Many young unmarried girls used to graze the family cattle, especially goats, a practice which is reflected in a marriage song such as *Byakhri Chyarouni Kyaniyage*<sup>2</sup>, *Mere Bhaiya lele bhula, Byakhri Chyarouni Kyaniyage* ( O goat-grazing bride, you did manage to allure my brother, O goat-grazing bride).<sup>12</sup>

Most of the Chain women were very much skilled in some forms of handicrafts useful for daily domestic necessities. They could stitch beautiful *kanthas*<sup>13</sup> in different artistic designs and make *mouni* (basket), *dhama* (basket), *petari* (basket with a cover), *kattha* (bowl), *Bena* (hand-fan) etc. with *muja* (cover of *Kash* flower) and *Kash* grass as well as *Shikka* and *aasan* with jute fibre. They could also weave beautiful mats with date and palm leaves. They excelled in building *kuthis* (food-grain container) of different shapes and sizes with clay. Artistic *Alpana* (white paint with liquid rice-paste) designs drawn by the Chain womenfolk for religious and ceremonial purposes are used to arouse wonder in the mind of the viewers.

Roughly, before the mid-seventies of the last century rarely were the Chain women found as wage-laborers in any form. Interestingly, however bad their financial conditions might be in previous days (or even today), they would never think of earning their livelihood by working as domestic bits of help. However, the picture began to change slowly with West Bengal emerging as a new epicenter of bidi-rolling because of cheap labour since the seventies of the last century.<sup>14</sup> Day by day, more and more women went on emerging as beedi-rollers. The circumstances leading to such an unprecedented phenomenon require to be mentioned briefly. The Chain in West Bengal has been a land-owning community, with individual proprietorship of land. Agriculture had remained as primary occupation of almost all the Chain families for since long. However, a great number of families started losing much of their arable land due to river erosion as well as sale arising out of the enormous expenditure on traditional community feast on marriages and *Sraddha* ceremonies, newly-introduced bridegroom price, law-suits, medical treatment, etc. Needless to say that there was almost no other source of monetary flow in the family such as cottage industry, business, or service. The land that finally would remain in their possession came to be divided and subdivided among the ever-increasing population to the extent of it not being sufficient for survival. As a result, people were forced to find some other source of income for their subsistence. At this juncture, the Beedi industry emerged as a great savior. To begin with, the girls and women used to help the male members of the family in different stages of beedi-rolling such as wetting of the *tendu* leaves, hand cutting of these with scissors and a metal stencil guide, or folding the open sides of both the top and bottom of a *beedi*. In the long run, they came to be full-fledged *beedi*-rollers when *beedi*-rolling was allowed at the home of the labourers of the contractors appointed by different beedi-manufacturing companies.

### **Education:**

In earlier days, attending schools by the girls was reprehensible in the Chain-society. The social barriers that stood in the way of girls attending schools included compulsions of older girls in families having to look after the home and siblings, the conception or misconception that girls do

not need education and/or that what is taught in schools is irrelevant to them, parents seeing almost no economic benefits in educating daughters, Parents probably thought that education would undermine her ability to be an ideal traditional wife and mother. Moreover, the lack of sufficient schools, primary or secondary, was another serious hindrance to girls' education. However, from the seventies of the last century, we could notice a slow but favourable change towards women's education among the microscopic enlightened section of the Chain society. The Left Front that came to power in West Bengal in 1977, promised in its election manifesto to implement "concrete and effective programmes, including legislative and administrative measures backed by popular efforts, for the eradication of illiteracy". The state government made significant progress in terms of reducing illiteracy, increasing student enrolment, establishing new primary and secondary schools and appointing teachers. The non-plan expenditure on education in the state budget increased from 12.9 percent in 1976-77 to 21.1 percent in 1992-93.<sup>15</sup> The Left Front government also implemented several schemes, making school education free, supplying dry rations of food and free textbooks at the primary level, supplying free uniforms to a substantial number of girl students and so on.<sup>16</sup> The advantage of these governmental steps did not remain untouched for the Chain women. Meanwhile, the Beedi-industry also began to infuse a sense of self-reliance into a large number of girls through small-earnings. The gradual spread of education among the male members of the Chain society made them somewhat conscious of the need for women's education. As a result, in the last quarter of the twentieth century, quite many Chain girls could be seen attending high schools and even colleges and universities, though in microscopic number. Needless to say, as in other cases, women of Chain society have also lagged much, much behind their male counterparts in the field of education.

#### **Women's Right to Property:**

There was no right for women to property in India before 1937. The Hindu Women's Right to Property Act, 1937 entitled only a widow to a limited interest over the property of her husband. However, something great like revolution took nineteen years later when the Hindu Succession Act, 1956 was enacted granting equal inheritance rights to women with men. Still, the daughters were not given the birthright in an ancestral property under the *Mitakshara* coparcenaries. Coparcenaries refer to an equal inheritance that was restricted only to male members of the Hindu Undivided Family. No female was a member of the coparcenary in *Mitakshara* law before the Hindu Succession (Amendment) Act, 2005. Under the 2005 Act, daughters can now claim equal rights in the self-acquired/separate property and also coparcenary property left by their father.

Whatever might have been the legal right of the women over the property, the Chain women did not usually think of putting their claim over the parental property. Their traditional belief was that with her departing the parents' house in consequence of marriage, all her rights in the parents' family had come to an end and all the parental property is to be enjoyed only by her brothers and nephews. Sisters found pleasure in often visiting the parents' house for a few days and being gifted sometimes with a piece of cloth and other small items. Since the seventies of the twentieth century, there comes into notice a few incidences of sister demanding her share in the parental property and from the next decade, it gains momentum. Due to various reasons such as river erosion leading to loss of land, population increase, etc individual land-holding began to reduce. With the Left Front coming to power in West Bengal in 1977 and maintaining the power for long, politics crept into every nook and corner of the social life, throwing a serious blow at the traditional and emotional

bond in the village and family life. The leftist rule, education acquired and political empowerment of women went on making people conscious of their rights in all the fields. Modernity and Globalization multiply the necessities of the people to an extent unpredictable, infusing a sense of procuring additional resources for the newer necessities somehow or other. All these had a combined effect in the form of the increased interest of the son-in-law in his in-laws' and the daughters in her parents' property.

**Domestic Violence:**

Domestic violence (also named domestic abuse or family violence) involves violence or other abuse by one person against another in a *domestic* setting, such as in marriage. The abuser uses fear and intimidation to gain power and control over the other person. *Domestic violence* is of many types including social, physical, sexual and emotional.

Chain girls are given in child marriage experience more domestic violence as opposed to older women. In previous days, most of the Chain girls were married in their childhood and the situation is not much better even now. Moreover, there was an utter lack of education and scope of independent earning among them as well as the traditional concept of women being free all-time labour in the family. Thus even a little bit of deviation in expected behaviour or discharging duty was taken as defiance of the elders or husband, subjecting the wife to domestic violence in some or others. There was a strong time-honoured tendency among the mothers-in-law to keep the daughters-in-law under total control and also advise their sons to do so. In case of slight deviation or reaction from the daughter-in-law, the mother-in-law used to revile her. She would also poison the ear of the son against his wife and instigate him to beat her blue and black. Any instance of the wife's defying the husband's order or not serving him as and when demanded would make him furious and physically assault her. To be beaten with hands or sticks or even to be kicked by the husband was something common for the Chain wives. In a rare instance, a husband had brutally pushed an unsmoothed bamboo stick into the vagina of his wife, who almost reached the point of death. It was almost common for every husband – farmer or wage labourer – to call his wife by name on the slightest excuse. Surprisingly, the slang the husbands used towards their wives mostly included sex *one*; perhaps they would find more satisfaction in doing so. In apprehension of more violence, being sent back to parents' house or break of marriage, as well as no assurance of support from their parents' family based on the belief of heavenliness of the husband's house only to be left for ever on death, the wives, would endure all the physical and mental abuses quietly. However, the violence being spoken of proved to be fatal in no cases. A little but positive change began to be notified when the women became the wage-earner in Beedi Industry, education percolated slowly among them, child-marriage began to decline slowly and the Joint-family system began to break down.

**Conclusion:**

Change is a natural as well as a social process. Therefore, the life of the Chain women cannot be an exception too. During the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there was no noticeable change in their condition. The steps of the colonial Government, however small, for the Indian women or the breeze of the Bengal Renaissance did not touch them at all. They lived far, far away from the centres of Bengali culture and education. They even could not speak Bengali. Truly speaking, Indian independence in 1947 initiated the process of change in their life. The establishment of new

educational institutions and up-gradation of the existing ones led to a slow but steady spread of education among their male counterparts, which acted for infiltration of education among them in the long run. The Hindu Succession Act, 1956 gradually paved the way for their being taken by the male members with some importance. The declining economy of the Chain in general since the 70s of the 20<sup>th</sup> century proved to be a boon in disguise for the woman to some extent, when the Beedi industry forced its entry into the traditionally agricultural Chain family and when the Chain women also joined hands in that industry. Earning the capability of a large number of women through the Beedi industry brought about a noticeable change in their mentality and thereby in their socio-economic life too. Along with this, different steps of the Left Front Government since 1977 to increase literacy, especially the setting up of more and more school-colleges and free school education, brought comparatively a large number of them into the arena of education. And finally, the seat reservation for women in the three-tier panchayat gave at least a number of them the position (member, Prodhan, Sabhapati, etc.), which their predecessors could not have thought of even in their wildest dream a few decades back. It is true that the change in the position and status of the Chain women has not been a satisfactory one in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and very much negligible in comparison to that of the so-called higher castes and progressive classes. However, it can reasonably be said that the twentieth century has ushered in a new dawn in the life of the Chain women initiating the transition from “nothing” to “something,” from the darkest midnight to the cloudless early morning.

### Notes and References

1. H.H. Risley, *The Tribes and Castes of Bengal*, Vol. I (Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Press. Reprint, Calcutta, 1891), p. 166
2. A. S. Altekar, *The Position of Women in Hindu Civilization from Prehistoric Times to the Present Day*, Delhi, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, 1959, p.1
3. Sunil Chandra Mandal, *Paschim Banger Chain Samajer Bhasa-Sahitya o Sanskriti* (in Bengali), Kolkata: Swadesh Charcha Kendra, 2001, p.280
4. *Ibid*, p. 282.
5. On average, girls start puberty between the ages of 9 and 14. The first sign of puberty in a girl is usually the development of her breasts, which start as small mounds beneath the nipple area But some will start to develop breasts or pubic hair by age 8 – [http://www.babycenter.com/0\\_precocious-early-puberty-in-girls\\_68661.bc](http://www.babycenter.com/0_precocious-early-puberty-in-girls_68661.bc)



6. Sunil Chandra Mandal, *op. cit.*, p.280
7. *Ibid.*, p. 161
8. *Ibid.*, p. 282
9. G. E. Lambourn, *Bengal District Gazetteers: Malda*, Calcutta: The Bengal Secretariat Book Depot, 1918, p. 31
10. A. Mitra, *Census, 1951/ The Tribes and Castes of West Bengal*, 1953, p.7
11. The life of the Hindu widows has always been the dark side of eating in India, and nowhere was it darker than in Bengal, Not only was the Bengali widow forbidden to remarry as were the widows from other regions, she was expected to give up a large number of common food permanently. In a fish-loving culture, she was forced to become a vegetarian, giving up fish, meat, eggs, and even lentils, onion and garlic for her entire lifetime, which was also punctuated by frequent, rigorous fasts. Her husband's death was traditionally attributed to her misdeeds and unnatural appetites; a common word of abuse in rural Bengal translates as "husband-eater.' Guilty of the sin of survival, she was considered a personification of disaster and bad luck, and as such, her presence was forbidden at any happy ceremony, particularly weddings." – quoted from Chitrita Banerji, *Eating India: Exploring the Food and Culture of the Land of Spices*, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2010.
12. Sunil Chandra Mandal, *op. cit.*, p.206
13. Kantha is a type of embroidery typical of the Indian states of West Bengal and Odisha, and in Bangladesh. Women in Bengal typically use old saris and cloth and layer them with *Kantha* stitching to make a light blanket, quilt, throw, or bedspread, especially for children.
14. B. Desai, *India Today*, New Delhi, 6 October 1997, <http://indiatodaygroup.com/itoday/06101997/business.htm>.
15. Go WB 1992
16. GoWB 1992, 2001, 2001-02; Rana, Rafique, Sengupta 2002] [http://www.eledu.net/rrcusrn\\_data/State West Bengal.pdf](http://www.eledu.net/rrcusrn_data/State West Bengal.pdf)).