INTRODUCTION

Gender studies are becoming a global phenomenon as a result of sensitization about issues relating to women. Though the concern for studying women and organizing action for improving their lot is not new, what is strikingly different is the new perspective both in research and action. Now there is a growing feeling for a need to develop a third world focus to understand the process of gendering. Micro studies on women are also in vogue to evolve locally relevant concepts and frameworks taking into consideration the specificities of different regions.

Gender goes beyond women alone. It refers to women vis-a-vis men in a patriarchal society. Gender studies aim to distinguish between what is biological and which cannot be changed, and a person's sex which is socially and culturally constructed and can be changed in terms of gender. Gender is the process by which males and females become men and women through the acquisition of culturally defined attributes of masculinity and feminity. This gives rise to the prevalence of sexual stereotypes like men are strong, women are weak, men are not suited for household work, and women are domestic beings and so on. Gender as the basis of social inequality is structured into female and male spheres. Likewise, differentiation within a family is structured and complex. There is no equitable sharing of status among members of a family; status inequality between man and woman is acquired through patriarchy and the institutions such as division of labour, marriage, dowry, inheritance and subordination are gendered. The notion of the status of family being patriarchally rooted undermines the role of women in social mobility. Hence, control over women's labour and mobility increases, family gains but women suffer. The patriarchal canopy had
always denied women's autonomy and freedom. Even education is more for the status of family rather than for women themselves. In this way, women re-strengthen patriarchy and welfare of the family undermines recognition of their personal status.

Despite the above situation, today there is a significant difference in the status of women especially at the grassroots level. Women have started voicing their grievances and even question the age old patriarchal notions and actions. The status of urban women has changed especially due to improved health and nutrition, availability of education, participation in community activities, social legislation, employment and movements.

There are no universal determinants of status. Status is determined by a set of criteria and it is also a contextual phenomena. Therefore, dichotomies such as nature and culture, public and personal, pure and impure have often obscured the complexities underlying the role of individual and his place within community. An individual woman may oppose or support a given dominant ideology depending upon her own life experiences.

Women do not constitute a conscious collectivity with shared interests and needs like men. Men are enormously differentiated in terms of material resources and status-appropriation linked with their respective caste and class background. Women are considered as an incorporated entity in the men-centered social order. But all the women are not equally unequal in their families and communities. Women are doubly stratified, that is in relation to men on the one hand and in relation to other women on the other.

Against this background a need to understand the status of tribal women in an urban setting Ranchi was realised. The study would focus on the various dimensions of stratification among tribal women relating to
social bonding, economic dependence, social subjugation and cultural backwardness. The aim of the present study is to look at the position of tribal women from a sociological perspective with regard to the tribal culture, empowerment of women in terms of education, employment and conversion. We would also elucidate the consequences of industrialization, urbanization and cultural contact on the status of tribal women.

The main question of our study was formulated in the form of null hypothesis that gender stratification has no association with the egalitarian tribal society, especially in a modern urban setting.

The popular image and perception of the tribal women are that of being better off than their non-tribal counterparts. The freedom of movement from one place to another is perceived as social freedom among the tribal women. But the fact remains that the tribal society in Jharkhand is patrilineal, patriarchal and patrilocal like non-tribal society anywhere else in India.

The status of tribal women in Jharkhand presents a unique picture. The traditional tribal norms for women are somewhat liberal and they certainly have more freedom than their Hindu counterpart. They can roam around in the forests, fields and markets, can talk and joke with men without reproach. Institution of youth dormitory also gives considerable amount of freedom to girls. Hence, not only they enjoy mingling with opposite sex but also learn the various skills like dance and music. Tribal women are free to select their own life-partners. They are generally not subjected to early child-bearing. They are free to divorce their husbands. In the tribal society, widowhood does not carry any stigma, as it does in the non-tribal society. The custom of bride-price itself is considered to be a mark of respect and positive value for tribal women. It is a fact that women work shoulder to
shoulder with men and contribute substantially in economic activities, but they are deprived of inheriting landed property. This is because the tribals have patrilineal system and the land is generally owned by the whole clan. Women are excluded from the traditional political organisations of tribes and they cannot hold the office of priest. Decision-making and imparting of justice were not considered as important aspects of their life. They lead a very hard life because they are being treated as an economic asset, a valuable property, which can be acquired by proper payment of bride-price. A custom of Dark Age, that's branding a woman as a witch, and then to kill her, still exists in Jharkhand.

Though a new middle class is emerging, among the tribes of Jharkhand, due to education, reservation and contacts with the wider society, this process is slow and the intensity of success is also very low. These measures have not reached to the majority of tribal women. The process of gender discrimination is quite subtle in the tribal society. Gender is an important component in the system of stratification in the tribal society. The present study aims to understand the gender stratification among the tribal women of different strata and categories.

The Ranchi city, the main urban centre of the region, and also the capital of Jharkhand, has been chosen as the field of the present study. Ranchi city is sometimes identified synonym with the tribal women, as the saying goes – “Peeth mein bachcha, maath mein khanchi, dekho to samjho, aa gai Ranchi” (If you see women with a child tied in their backs and basket on their heads, that means you have arrived at Ranchi).

The position of tribal women in Ranchi is quite paradoxical. On the one hand, the tribal women of the upper strata are economically better off; they have access to education, and enjoy good, respectable and responsible
positions. The children of the upper stratum families enjoy high elite status and have amenities and access to lucrative opportunities, however on the other; the tribal women of lower stratum still suffer from the traditional bondage, illiteracy, ignorance, poverty, unemployment and dehumanization.

A tribal woman occupies an important place in the socio-economic structure of her society. The tribal women have always played a dominant role in agricultural, handicraft and forest-based economy. However, this is not uniformly found among different tribes. It varies from tribe to tribe and within a given tribe. Factors such as descent and residence, inheritance, marriage and divorce, conversion, acculturation, urbanisation and education have contributed to the differentiation among the tribes of Jharkhand. A tribal woman's spheres of activities and control, the expected norms of behaviour, the taboos, the rights and duties are quite different from that of a tribal man. And yet there is no clear-cut dichotomy of roles of man and woman. The status of a woman varies based on socio-economic development in a given context.

Though, the Constitution grants equality of opportunity and status to tribal women, but they lag behind in every sphere, including education, employment, health etc. There is a clear disparity in the literacy rate between men and women. The female literacy is 14.50%, which is much lower than the male literacy rate 32.50%. The general female literacy rate in 1991 census (39.29%) is much higher than the overall literacy among the tribes of Jharkhand.

The tribal women are also exploited in many ways. With the introduction of the Rural Land Ceiling Act, Tribal Land Transfer Act etc, the non-tribal men often marry the tribal women with a view to purchase land from the poor tribals to avoid legal complications or to derive financial
benefits like bank loans. However, these non-tribals deny the tribal women the status of wives as reported in the media.

In the tribal society, no doubt there is no strict social segregation based on sex, and there is free mixing of boys and girls. But such a freedom is misconceived as license by the non-tribals/outsiders. They believe that taking liberty with tribal women would not raise much opposition by the tribal people. However, such a perception is misconstrued.

A comprehensive review of the health status of the tribal women shows that there is higher mortality rate among them compared to the national average. The tribal women have a very low nutritional status, as there is high fertility and greater incidence of malnutrition among them.

Among the tribes of Jharkhand the laws of inheritance and succession favour male members. As a result of this, a number of women are forced to migrate in order to earn their livelihood. The family land remains under the ownership and control of the male members, despite the fact that even though these women do the bulk of agricultural work. Most of the urban tribal women work in the informal sector, especially as construction labourers known as rejas. They are exploited socially, economically, and also sexually. Most of them are unmarried as parents don’t get them married fearing loss of substantial income. The tribal men also label them as “loose women”, and prefer to marry the non rejas. They are paid much lower than men for the same type of work.

The tribes in Jharkhand have come under the impact of both Hinduism and Christianity, and the recent years also under the general process of modernization. Due to Sanskritisation, freedom of women has declined. Hinduism as affected the pre-marital sex life, choice of partner, right to divorce and to re-marry. Now a boy is given preference over to a girl child.
In some cases, there is a tendency to replace the custom of bride-price with dowry.

Gender stratification in the tribal society is related to an overall exploitation by the non-tribals, backwardness, adverse impact of development processes, etc. There is a clear nexus between gender discrimination and other dimensions of stratification like ethnicity, class and power.