
**THE CHANGING TREND IN MATRILINEAL FAMILY AS A THREAT TO WOMEN
EMPOWERMENT: A SOCIOLOGICAL STUDY OF BILLAWA COMMUNITY OF KARNATAKA**

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Abstract: In contemporary world, the issue of women had become one of the important themes of sociological study. The international concern with gender relations in development has strengthened the affirmation that equality in the status of men and women, and empowerment of women is fundamental to every society. Nowadays no developing country or society can afford to ignore the role of women, if they are to progress. Women have played important role in the construction of society and building up of nations. No sane person can deny the role, the women have played in the progress and prosperity of a society. Independent India had identified the role of women in development and adopted welfare oriented approach towards women's empowerment. Matrilineal family is very much supportive to women empowerment. In present society trend towards matrilineal family has undergone change. It is disintegrating and **Patrilineal family** is becoming common type of family all over the world. In India, many caste-communities have unique matrilineal family system. But nowadays it has undergone a lot of changes. The present study has made an effort to understand the level of existence of **matrilineal system** and tried to trace whether it has given threat to modern concept of 'empowerment'. The research question posed in this article is that, whether modern changes in the traditional matrilineal family system is going against Women Empowerment? This study has undertaken with special reference to one of the important communities of Karnataka, that is, **Billawa** Community, which has the unique matrilineal family. .

Keywords: Caste-community, Empowerment, Family, Matrilineal family.

Introduction: The attitude of a community towards the woman has a great social significance in any society. No society is content with the natural difference of sex, but each insists on adding to it a cultural difference of gender. In contemporary world, the issue of women had become one of the important themes of sociological study. In 1995, the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing expanded the focus and included in its action plan, various issues related to woman like human rights and women, women and health, education and training of women, women and economy, women in power and decision making, institutional mechanism for empowerment, the concern of the girl child etc.

The international concern with gender relations in development has strengthened the affirmation that equality in the status of men and women, and empowerment of women is fundamental to every society. Generally it is believed that modern society has given prominence for the empowerment of women. But the traditional society in one way has identified the power of women through matrilineal family. In present society trend towards matrilineal family has undergone change. It is disintegrating and **Patrilineal family** is becoming common type of family all over the world. In India, many caste-communities have unique matrilineal family system. But nowadays it has undergone a lot of changes. The present study has made an effort to understand the level of existence of **Matrilineal system** and tried to trace whether it has given threat to modern concept of 'empowerment'. The research question posed in this article is that, whether modern changes in the matrilineal family system is going against Women Empowerment? This study has undertaken with special reference to one of the important communities of Karnataka, that is, **Billawa** Community, which is the

best example for matrilineal family.

Empowerment of Women: The term "empowerment" has been used to represent a wide range of concepts and to describe a proliferation of outcomes. It is also viewed as social inclusion and participative development. Kabeer (2001) defines empowerment as "the expansion in people's ability to make strategic life choices in a context where this ability was previously denied to them" (quoted in Mishra and Tripath, 2010). In the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, 189 countries unanimously adopted the Beijing Declaration and the Platform for Action, which is described as an agenda for women's empowerment. It has recognized that Women's empowerment can be understood as a process whereby women, individually and collectively, develop awareness of the existing discrimination and inequality between women and men, and how it affects their lives; understand how power structures, processes and relationships produce and reinforce this discrimination and inequality; and gain the self confidence, capacities and resources required to challenge gender inequalities. Empowerment involves awareness raising, building of self-confidence, expansion of choices, involvement in decision-making and increased access to and control over resources. There are many indicators of women empowerment like headship of the family, property rights, decision-making, freedom of movement and gender role attitude etc.

Matrilineal family: The family as a universal institution is most pervasive of all institutions. The family as a system is part of larger system (society) contributes to the functioning of society. On the basis of ancestry or descent, family was classified into two main types, namely matrilineal family and patrilineal family. In **matrilineal family**, the descent is traced through the

mother and daughters inherit the property of the mother. Matrilineality is a system in which one belongs to one's mother's lineage. In a matrilineal descent system, an individual is considered to belong to the same descent group as his or her mother. This is in contrast to the more currently common pattern of patrilineal descent. As opined by Jayaram, N. (1987, p. 80) in the case of matrilineal groupings descent group membership is acquired through female line; it consist of generations of brothers and sisters along with children of sisters. In the traditional matrilineal family authority, property rights, and descent vested in the hands of women. At the global level the existence of matrilineal family is found among the tribes of African countries, and in some parts of South-East Asia. In Indian context it is found only among small pockets of South and north-east India. The Nairs and Mappilles in Kerala, the tribal groups of Minicoy Island and the Khasis and Garoas of Meghalaya are largely the followers of matrilineal system. South West Indian society was matrilineal for greater part of the history. Thus in India there is matrilineal family system among some castes and sub-castes.

Caste is the most unique form of social stratification of Indian society. As opined by G. S. Ghurye, foreign visitor to India may not understand the full working of the caste system but he/she is aware of the fact that Hindu society is divided into groups, known as castes with varying degrees of respectability and circles of social intercourse. There are a number of sizable castes and sub – castes in India, fixing the limits and consisting specific cultural traditions. The present sociological study is about one such castes of undivided Dakshina Kannada district of Karnataka state namely “Billawa”.

Billawa Community: The undivided Dakshina Kannada District, the western coastal strip region of Karnataka is popularly known as Tulu Nadu, that is, land of people speaking ‘Tulu’ language or Tulu Nadu state. It is a land of various castes and communities. As a caste, Billawas are spread across different parts of Karnataka. Mainly they found in the districts of Tumkur, Hassan and Chikmagalur Districts besides the coastal districts of Udupi, Dakshina Kannada and Uttara Kannada. But they are known by different names in different parts of Karnataka like Idiga, Devaru, Illiga, Izahava, Halipaiks, Namadhari, Tiya, Guttedar, Shindye etc. It is one of the important communities of Indian society, which follows Law of inheritance through the females, which is known as ‘*aliya- Santana kattu*’. As this community has a unique matrilineal family system, this Sociological study has carry out with reference to same community.

Statement of the Problem: This study tried to focus that empowerment of women was identified in the traditional Indian society itself through matrilineal families among some caste-communities. Empowerment does not necessarily take place when incomes are generated or when livelihoods are enhanced or for that matter when groups are formed. There is necessity of their empowerment in the family. Therefore the present

study has made an effort to find out that the disintegrating trend of matrilineal system has become obstacle to achieve women empowerment with reference to Billawa community of Karnataka.

Objectives of the study: Matrilineal family of Billawa community is unique in itself. But there is no such in-depth scientific study on it so far. Therefore the proposed study on such a community has taken up with following objectives-

1. To portray the structure of matrilineal family and status of women, and explore the changes which are taking place in it over the period of time,
2. To unveil and grasp the attitudes of Billawa community towards empowerment of woman,
3. To trace out the level of continuity of matrilineal system in present society,
4. To examine the link between matrilineal family and empowerment of women.

Methodology:

Universe of the study: Billawas as a caste community is dispersed throughout the Karnataka state. But the major concentration of Billawas is found in undivided Dakshina Kannada district of Karnataka State of India. Therefore the universe chosen for the present study is undivided Dakshina Kannada district, the western coastal strip region of Karnataka which is popularly known as *Tulunadu*. In this universe historically and culturally significant places of Billawas, highly populated and least populated areas are selected for the study. To examine the impact of associational activities and migration, some units from some important cities of Karnataka and from Bombay are chosen as per requirement of the study.

Sample Scheme: Adequate and representative samples are selected for the proposed Sociological study of the matrilineal family of Billawa community and empowerment of Billawa women. The researcher of the study, selected ‘250’ households. The selection of the samples is done on the basis of ‘**purposive multi-stage sampling**’ in order to obtain a representative sample. The areas of study were classified into two -‘developed area’ and ‘backward area’. Here ‘developed area’ means- an area where Billawas are educationally and economically advanced, and also active in political and associational activities; On the other hand ‘Backward’ area is meant for such areas where Billawas are economically and educationally backward, and least participation in political and associational activities is found. The distribution of the sample from the universe of the study is as below...

The table 1 exhibits that '66' households (26.40%) from so called 'backward area' and 184 households (73.60%) from 'developed area' were selected as samples for the present study. These 250 households consisted 85.2 percent of male respondents and 14.8 percent of female

respondents. The age of majority respondents is between 36 to 55 years. This age distribution of the respondents indicates that the proposed study had maximum data and views of young and middle- aged respondents and also some data from older persons.

Table: -1 Sample of the study (Age-wise Classification of Respondents)

Sl.No	Age	Backward				Developed				Total	%
		M	%	F	%	M	%	F	%		
1	25-35	8	14.81	6	50	16	10.06	6	24	36	14.40
2	36-45	18	33.33	3	25	33	20.75	11	44	65	26.00
3	46-55	16	29.63	0	0	56	35.22	4	16	76	30.40
4	56-65	10	18.52	2	16.67	35	22.01	2	8	49	19.60
5	66-75	2	3.7	1	8.33	13	8.18	2	8	18	7.20
6	76-85	0	0	0	0	6	3.77	0	0	6	2.40
Total		54	100	12	100	159	100	25	100	250	100

Tools of data collection: For the present study established sociological methods were used. The major techniques used for data collection are- participant and non- participant observation, structured interview schedule, unstructured interview and questionnaire. Detailed description of the activities, attitudes and opinions of the respondents was collected through duly pre- tested 'structured interview schedule' which is comprised of both pre-coded and open ended questions targeted to the problem of the research. Secondary data regarding the Billawa community was gathered from various sources such as reports of various backward class commissions, Gazetteers, souvenirs of various Billawa associations, magazines and news papers published by Billawa associations, community web sites etc.

General Demographic Aspects of the area of the study: Undivided Dakshina Kannada is the universe of the present study. Before 1860, Dakshina Kannada was part of a greater district called Canara, which was under a single administration in the Madras Presidency. In 1860, the British split the area into South Canara and North Canara, the former being retained in the Madras Presidency, while the later was made a part of Bombay Province in 1862. Before 1997 Dakshina Kannada was vast district with eight Taluks. On August 1997, it was bifurcated into Dakshina Kannada (D.K.) and Udupi districts. At present D.K consists of five Taluks, whereas Udupi district consists of three Taluks. These two districts together are called as Tulunadu, since the most popular language of this region is 'Tulu'. As a socio-cultural region, undivided Dakshina Kannada district is inhabited by diverse castes and communities, speaking a variety of languages and observing a variety of customs and traditions. The 'paaddanas' or folk songs of Tulunadu are a valuable source of information for a study of the life which the Tuluvas led in early and mediaeval times. (Saletore, 1963, p.460). The Billawas were considered as old ethnic people of the region. As per Havanoor commission (1975) percentage of

population of Billawas was 15.56, as per Venkataswamy Commission -17.56. (Sources:- Havanur Report, Vol. II, Govt. of Karnataka, Bangalore 1975, Venkataswamy Report, Vol. III, Govt. of Karnataka, Bangalore, 1986) Thus as Thurston (1909) mentioned Billawa community is numerically largest in the district and form close upon one fifth of the total population. In present Dakshina Kannada / Udupi districts lion's share of population is of Billawas.

Importance of the study: The present investigation is justifiable from the theoretical as well as practical point of view. At the present situation there is a necessity of sociological study of status of women and its matrilineal family system in Billawa community. There is no such in-depth and scientific study of the community so far. Therefore the proposed study helps to fulfill this gap. In near future as there is a fear of extinction of unique features of matrilineal family of Billawa community, the present study would focus on them and made efforts to record it permanently. The study would also examine the cumulative impact of a number of dependent and independent variables such as new social identity, education, occupation, income, migration, associational activity etc., on changing trends of matrilineal families among Billawas. Thus at the theoretical level the investigation would help to get conceptual clarification of various things such as empowerment of women, matrilineal family, social changes and also social mobility etc. At the practical level the present research-study would help in understanding the Billawas' expectations, aspirations, and ambitions about modern life. Moreover this study enables one to understand the Billawa community and its unique matrilineal structure of family, which is one of the important and interesting communities of Karnataka in a better-way.

Analysis of Data: Attitudes about the superiority of men and inferiority of women at the household and family level are very common. Rather than being equal partners, men are still widely considered the 'head of the household' with superior status and decision-making

authority and often greater rights and freedoms. Women's empowerment at the household and family level is crucial to their full participation in and contribution to all other spheres of society. Equalizing power relations at this most basic unit of society will benefit everyone, from families and communities to entire nations.

Among many castes, Billawa caste is vastly known for following matrilineal family system. Billawa, who constituted numerically largest caste in undivided Dakshina Kannada district of Karnataka, follow matrilineal system which is called as '*aliyakattu santana paddati*'.

Traditional Structure of Matrilineal Family or the Aliya Santana System :

Matrilineal Family of **Billawa** community pertains to a unique law of inheritance, similar to the one followed in Kerala, called '*Marumakkathayam law* or matrilineal inheritance law of Nayers. This system of inheritance evolved through a traditional base was even recognized by Courts of Law and continued to remain in practice till mid-20th century. It was said that the '*Aliya Santana Kattu*,' was established in about A.D.77 (Gururaj Bhat P.1975 and Saletore, 1963). In the district of South Kanara it is the Talangere inscription of Jayasimha which gives a clue to the possibility of the prevalence of this system in the society by about the 10th century A.D. Further Saletore (1963, p.360) wrote that it was only in 1444 A.D. the '*aliya Santana kattu*' received royal sanction at the hands of the Alupa king Kulashchekara Alupendradeva IV. '*Aliya Santana*' system is the most important feature of the traditional social system of Billawa community. It regulated the lives of the

community for generations. In this system mother is the basis for all authority of the family, all rights and privileges were decided on the basis of one's relationship with mother. The right of inheritance was decided in the line of the mother and descent is reckoned through the mother, not the father. Mother was the head of the family and the property, 'Bali', and family deity etc. were transferred through the mother. The worshipping of 'bhutas' or spirits, and place of serpent worship are also passed on from mother. As per traditional rules of its '*aliya kattu*' all members of a 'kutumba' or family has to participate in the worship of their 'kutumbada bhuta' or spirits of the family. Another feature of this '*aliya kattu system*' in the traditional Billawa community is that it is matrilineal in residence, that is, after marriage the daughters stay in their mother's house and their husbands, who normally stays in their sister's house, visit occasionally the wife's house. Thus women were more empowered in traditional Billawa matrilineal families.

Changes and the level of existence of Matrilineal family system: The traditional matrilineal family of Billawa community has been undergoing change. The matrilineal family patterns in India itself are on the way to disappearance. Attitude of bilateralism, recognizing both husband and wife lines became standard in modern times and the system has become patrilocal in behaviour. The father became an accepted element in the matrilineal kinship. Therefore this study tried to find out the continuity and the level of existence of Matrilineal family among Billawas, the data about which has shown in Tables-2 and 3

Category	Yes	No	Total
Backward	50	16	66
Developed	140	44	184
Total	190	60	250

In the above table out of total sample of the study 76.00% said that even at present Billawas are practicing matrilineal family system which is known as '*aliya kattu santana*' system, and agreed that it is only for some purposes. But about 24.00% said that nowadays they do not follow it, as they are following '*Makkala kattu*' system.

Sl. No.	Reasons	Backward	Developed	Total
1	Restricted to property right	8	15	23
2	Headship of the family	3	4	7
3	Transferring of <i>Bali</i>	27	44	70
4	Religious purpose	35	83	118
5	All the above features	10	29	39

Thus, this table reveals that in the Billawa community there is continuity of practice of matrilineal family system. But as opined by majority respondents of the present study, it has undergone changes in modernized society and it is in practice with only some of its traditional features. Most of them said that its practice among Billawas is limited only to trace descent and inherit family spirits from mother’s side. Only negligible families follow its features related to transferring of property rights from mother to daughters and mother as the head of the family. However the study observed that traditional ‘*aliya kattupaddathi*’ is not at all followed in the community and it is widely in practice only for inheriting family deity and ‘bali’.

Transferring of Property rights:Control over land defines power. Politically, land is used as a tool for securing and exercising political patronage; economically, wealth generated from the land and land-based resources confer on the person who controls that land the ability to secure unchallenged control over other resources; and socially, the controllers of land and

natural resources head family and social structures and take a lead in decision-making. Women and girls are discriminated against when it comes to access to, ownership of and/or control over land and property. This not only disadvantages them economically, but also reduces their dignity and compromises their rights to food, physical security, access to credit and extension services, while also constricting their space to participate in decision-making (ActionAid Report, Feb. 2013, p.3).Agarwal (1994), has come out strongly for property rights especially land rights qualified by effective control as crucial for women’s empowerment and quest for equality in gender relations. Therefore this study tried to trace the link between matrilineal family and empowerment of women. In traditional matrilineal families of Billawa community, the property rights passed from mother’s side. Daughters and granddaughters inherit the property of the mother. This feature of matrilineal system of Billawa community experienced a radical change which can be revealed in the table 4

TABLE: 4 -Way of on transferring of property right in the respondents’ family

Sl. No.	Line of transfer	Backward	Developed	Total
1	Mother to Daughter	13 (19.70%)	45 (24.46%)	58 (23.20%)
2	Mother to Son-in-law	0	0	0
3	Father to Son	19 (28.79)	50 (27.18)	69 (27.60)
4	Cross uncle to Son-in-law	6 (9.09)	11 (5.98)	17 (6.80)
5	Equal share	27 (40.91)	75 (40.76)	102 (40.80)
6	Not Responded	1(1.52)	3 (1.63)	4 (1.60)
Total		66	184	250

This table reveals that in spite of its matrilineal family system, nowadays, most of them adhere to equal share between the children as per law and modern ways of transferring the property from father to children. Thus, more or less traditional property right has lost its importance completely in the modern Billawa community. At present as per law equal share of the property between children is widely recognized. The property rights, which is crucial for women’s empowerment and quest for equality in gender relations, was given to women in traditional Matrilineal family of Billawas; but nowadays this feature is disintegrating. On the basis of this it can be understood

that decay of matrilineal family in one way challenged modern notion of Empowerment of women.

Tracing of descent: It is said that when identity with certain family gives an individual membership in a wider group, the process is called descent. With matrilineal descent individuals belong to their mother's descent group, which is called as ‘*Bali*’. One of the important features of matrilineal family is that descent is recognized through the female line. As Billawa community had a matrilineal family, the present study attempted to find out whether at present it is tracing descent through the mother. The table- 5 analyses this aspect.

TABLE: 5-Opinion about tracing of descent through mother

Category	Yes (%)	No(%)	Total
Backward	66 (100)	0 (0.00)	66
Developed	134 (72.83)	50 (27.17)	184
Total	200 (80.00)	50 (20.00)	250

The **Bali** system, as a system of social life of Billawas has some unique features. It is mentioned in the "Karnataka State Gazetteer-South Kanara District' (1973) that the castes in the district are divided into septs called 'balis'; traditionally members of the same 'bali' cannot intermarry. However, as theirs is a matrilineal system more importance is given to mother's '**Bali**.' One has to use his mother's 'bali' as his surname. Nevertheless, some of the unique features of 'Bali' system are declining nowadays. Most of the Billawas are using their father's 'Bali' as their surnames. Thus trend of identifying descent through mother's side is changing. In the

traditional society, women were very powerful as far as recognition of descent. But Billawa women are gradually losing it. This also shows that changing trend of matrilineal descent is affecting Women empowerment.

Head- ship of the family: Billawa community had matrilineal structure of family. In the matrilineal family, descent and inheritance is traced through the mother and she exercises authority over the family. On this basis, the present study tried to verify the continuity of this trait in the modern Billawa family and the status of Billawa women on the basis of their position as a head of the family. The table-6 analyses this aspect-

Sl. No.	Head	Backward	Developed	Total
1	Mother	8 (12.12%)	20(10.87%)	28 (11.20%)
2	Father	6 (9.09)	22 (11.96)	28 (11.20)
3	Maternal uncle	5 (7.58)	4 (2.17)	9 (3.60)
4	Respondent itself	38 (57.58)	121(65.76)	159 (63.60)
5	Husband	4 (6.06)	12 (6.52)	16(6.40)
6	Wife	0 (0.00)	0 (0.00)	0 (0.00)
7	Elder Brother	5 (7.58)	5 (2.72)	10 (4.00)
Total		66	184	250

In this way, as far as the head of the Billawa family is concerned the position of women is very low. Billawa community is also now incorporating patriarchal family. Nowadays, even though in some Billawa families, mother is the head of the family (as the data of the table indicates) it is the eldest son or son-in-law who exercises the authority. Thus Billawa woman lost her traditional control over the family as she mislaid her headship of the family.

Participation of women in Decision- making: As opined by Suruchi Tiwari (2004) the extent of women's participation in decision making on various matters is an important indicator of the status of women in the household and in society. It is also an indicator of women's control over household resources, health,

education etc. 'Inequality in the public arena can often start with discriminatory attitudes and practices and unequal power relations between women and men within the family ... The unequal division of labour and responsibilities within households based on unequal power relations also limits women's potential to find the time and develop the skills required for participation in decision-making in wider public forums.' (Beijing Platform for Action, para. 185). So, as Decision-making of women at all levels of society is a measure of empowerment, the present study tried to trace the participation of Billawa women in decision making and tried to measure their status. The data about this is revealed in the table 7-

Category	Yes	No	Total
Backward	55 (83.84)	11 (16.67)	66
Developed	167 (90.76)	17(9.24)	184
Total	222 (88.80)	28 (11.20)	250

The above table exhibits that in overwhelming majority sample households (88.80%), more importance is given to women's decision on family matters. Especially about education of their children and selling or purchasing of personal property, women is consulted. But as per the

data of the table, there are also some respondents, that is -11.20%, who said that in their respective households, no much importance is given to women in decision making on any family matters. It is because according to them there is no necessity of taking consent from the

women members of their family, as men can take decision. Some of them even said that women do not have good decision-making power.

Findings: The major findings of this study can be pointed out as-

1. A detailed examination of social structure of the community under study exhibits that Billawa community presents a special pattern of kinship system and matrilineal family system which is called as '*Aliya kattu santana paddathi*', in which women were more empowered,
2. in the Billawa community at present **Matrilineal family** is giving up its various special traditional features. It is continued to exist only to the level of tracing descent and for religious purpose. More number of them is following "*makkalakattu santana*" (**Patrilineal**) system like the other communities of Dakshina Kannada.
3. The property rights, which is crucial for women's empowerment and quest for equality in gender relations, was given to Billawa women in traditional Matrilineal family, but nowadays this feature is disintegrating, which has challenged the modern notion of Empowerment of women.
4. Trend of identifying descent through mother's side is changing. In the traditional society, women were very powerful as far recognition of descent. But Billawa women are gradually losing it. This also shows that changing trend of matrilineal descent is affecting Women empowerment.
5. Billawa woman lost her traditional control over the family as she mislaid her headship of the family
6. Billawa women access to decision making in household matters remains limited. They are now under-represented in decision-making at the household or social level, they were only consulted,

but final decision has generally taken by the male members of the family

7. The study concluded on general status of Billawa women in contemporary society that, community as a whole is not suppressing the freedom of their women; special encouragement is given to their education, to their active participation in politics and to establish women's associations.
8. This study establishes that under the matrilineal kinship system, Billawa women are traditionally more empowered than in the modern period,
9. It can be justified through this study that decay of matrilineal family in one way challenged modern notion of Empowerment of women. The new trend has changed the attitudes of Billawa community towards matrilineal family. It has transformed into patrilineal family and in turn this change has deprived the women from all traditional powers and authority.
10. The study confirms the intrinsic relationship between women's access to and control over land and their process of empowerment. As Billawa women started to lose their dominance over family property, they lost their family headship and their decision making power.

Conclusion: Thus the present study confirms that there is a close link between matrilineal family and women empowerment. In present globalized society, to ensure gender equality and empower the women- socially, economically and politically, there is a necessity of revitalize matrilineal family system with traditional structure. There is a necessity of enforcing the Matrilineal family system with all its traditional features for empower the women The link between matrilineal family and women empowerment should be widely recognized.

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