

Original article

Women in a Mountainous Society: A Case from Limbu Community

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ABSTRACT

The role and status of women has become a matter of great concern in the wake of the importance of gender studies or women studies in India. But the issues of Himalayan women attracted less attention in the academic intelligentsias throughout the times. Darjeeling and Sikkim Himalayan region is a place for diverse cultures and cultural groups and the role and status of womenfolk in their societies are varies from culture to culture. Limbu is considered as an indigenous community where women have a great role in their society. Despite having a prominent role, women still search for their identity. Therefore, the present paper will attempt to examine and analyzes the role and status of Limbu women in Darjeeling and Sikkim Himalayas.

Key words: Limbu, Women, Role, Status, Himalaya

INTRODUCTION

The identity and status of women has become a matter of great concern in the wake of the importance of 'Women Studies' in developing countries like India. Women are supposed to be gradually obliged to be marginalized and deprived in their societies. Although men and women share the same space, yet they are not treated equally in the world. In reality, there exists inequality in education, health care, physical and financial resources and opportunities in the political, economic, social and cultural field (Mandal, 1997 & 2009). Status of women is generally measured using three indicators: education, employment status and intra household decision making power (Mandal, 1999). In Darjeeling-Sikkim Himalayan regions women

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occupy different positions in the social structure of their society. Their conditions can be characterized by some few facts which include education, politics, economy, existence of caste, gender and social exclusion which aggravate a deplorable condition of these women.

The women of Eastern Himalayas have woven a colourful pattern of cultures and life styles under this economically marginalized and geographically isolated region. Himalayan women share a relatively egalitarian relationship with their male counterparts (Mandal, 1999a; Chatterjee, 2015a & 2017). Several anthropological accounts have demonstrated the ease with which mountain men and women interchange their role, and even when roles are defined as per gender, they are not necessarily of an unequal nature (Mandal, 1999a). Hence, unlike upper caste Hindu women who face discrimination on the basis of patriarchy and sexual purity, there are examples of several mountain groups that practice polyandry and mountain women have a good influential role in the social and economic activities of the family (Mandal, 1999b). Himalayan women certainly do suffer from many forms of deprivation or exploitation. First, they work relatively long hours. Women are primarily responsible for the collection of fire wood, water and fodder, and thus face great difficulty in the mountain slopes, with harsh climatic conditions (Chatterjee, 2015b). As a result, the economic conditions of these women are further degraded, resulting in a much heavier workload.

The Himalayan region particularly the Eastern Himalayas, present the unique mosaic of different communities living in an undulating terrain of hills exhibiting vibrant and diverse cultural set up. Each community has different social norms where the position of the male and female is remarkably different from one another. The Limbus are residing in Darjeeling and Sikkim since history past. They are considered an offshoot of the Kiranti group or Kirat confederation whose earliest reference is found in the Hindu Purans (Singh, 1993). Historical documents reveal that the term Limbu was used by king Prithvi Narayan Shah (1721-1774 AD) in 1774 AD. Limbu means archer. They call themselves Yakthumba, meaning yak harder (Singh, 1993). The Lepchas call themselves Lum and the Bhutias call them Tsong (Kotturan, 1983). Their physical features and yellowish skin colour denote that they are the early Tibetan settlers of Nepal (Dash, 1947; Bista, 1980 and Biswas, 2008). Their original homeland was supposed to be Tsong province in Tibet from where they had immigrated to Eastern Nepal and adjoining present day Western Sikkim (Singh, 1993). Regarding their origin, they believed that they are the decedents of 10 brothers settled permanently in Kashi and due to the onslaught of

the Aryan invaders 5 brothers settled down directly to eastern Himalaya, and another five went to Lasha and came round to the same place where their brothers had already settled. They have their own Tibeto-Burman dialect which is called Yakthungpan (Campbell, 1840).

The data for this paper was collected from Soreng, West Sikkim as it was a Post-Doctoral research project of the author, funded by the Asiatic Society, Kolkata. Later data was also collected from Bijanbari, Darjeeling Sadar sub division and Kalimpong as these places have traditionally Limbu habitation since history. Mainly data from case studies were taken in consideration to formulate this paper.

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Himalayan society of Darjeeling and Sikkim region is predominantly rural in its character (Kotturan, 1983). And Limbus mostly concentrated in rural areas. Traditional Limbu women wore *sim* (which is 7 yards long material wrapped in a skirt), a *cholo*, (blouse made of locally hand-woven material of dhaka), *Phae* (a long cloth wrapped around the waist to tie the *sim*). They always covered their heads with *thakhumya* (a large scarf) as an accessory. They loved big gold ornaments and silver ornaments. Traditionally Limbu woman looked very elegant and has created her own identity in the world. Traditional Limbu women like to dance *Ya-Lang* (paddy dance) and *Ke-Lang* (traditional Limbudrum dance) on formal occasions such as weddings and religious ceremonies. There is also a dance called *Mang Lang* to celebrate religious holidays which is also participated by the women. However, modernization and westernization has brought many changes in role and status of Limbu women. Their responsibilities usually include housekeeping, cooking, and parenting but presently it includes wide range of work outside home. Now most of them are educated holding good position even helping to educate their children and building their career outside the home. Limbu women today, whose mothers and grandmothers may be illiterate or barely literate, can go to college or get specialized training for skilled jobs. In Limbu society women signifies an honour and respect to her family. The family structure is well knitted by her compassion and tolerant quality. Being in the subordinate position she maintains herself to cope with every change which is beneficial for her family. The rigid social fabric of village is always attached with certain rudiments of orthodox norms which have restricted her to freely exercise her power and

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judgment in the daily affairs of village life. The status of a Limbu woman always be examined from different perspectives of social and cultural life.

Religious Position of Limbu women:

The *Mundhum* refers to the *Kirant* Limbu ritual narrative texts, both in oral and written form, consisting of legends, folktales, prehistoric accounts, and sermons, moral or philosophical exhortations in a poetic language (Bista, 1980). It consists of various sacred narratives on *Kirant* mythology and folklore of varying date and origin. *Mundhum* always placed the position of woman as the creator (Subba, 1988). Limbu woman holds a significant place in religious affairs of daily life. The supreme Goddess *Yuma* is a female character who is regarded as the initiator of whole human being (Subba: 1988). *Yuma* meaning grandmother is regarded as mother of whole universe. Every Limbus worships her for the peace and prosperity of the family. It is believed that Goddess *Tagera Ningwaphuma* is another image of *Yuma* with countless supernatural power and divinity (Subba, 1988). So, in all religious ceremonies the Limbus worships *Yuma* first of all to get power and permission to celebrate rituals. They believe that lineage is not transmitted paternally. Rather, a woman inherits her mother's gods.

Economic Life:

The Himalayan womenfolk are involved in much income generating works like petty business and small-scale trade. Women, Natural Resource and the Rural – domestic economy are closely interlinked in the Himalayan communities (Mandal, 1999). Natural resource management is central to the livelihoods of Limbu community in Darjeeling Himalaya. Women are the primary gatherers and managers of domestic economy and household chores. Their roles and responsibilities are pivotal not only in domestic work but also to the management of rural economy. Limbu woman plays a significant role in the economic upbringing of the family. Apart from doing regular household works she also brings cash to her family. In the plantation area of Tea Garden large section of Limbu womenfolk are working. In the tea garden area two types of women labourers is prominent one is line or main worker and another one is *biga* or temporary workers. *Biga* workers are mainly employed for the tenure of six months mainly for plucking. In other areas village women are involved in farming activities and in tourists' places women are engaged in home stay tourism. Many of the senior Limbu women are retired employee from plantation area and rest are employed in the different sectors of work place

which includes teaching, government and private jobs along with the petty business carried by some rural Limbu womenfolk.

Limbu women folk are keenly interested in Kitchen gardening. At the backyard of their house they grow leafy vegetables, corns and local variety of chilly and fruits. It is mainly done for pleasing subsistence needs and for many housewives it is one of the best methods of recreation. Sometimes they also sell their produce like vegetables, local eggs, butter and fowls to local market. Animals like cow, goat, pigs and fowls are reared which provide them with manure, flesh and regarded as a sustainable asset of livelihood by selling them in times of financial crisis or earning extra income for buying necessary commodities required for domestic chores and supporting their children education

Work Pattern of Limbu Women:

In Darjeeling hills, mostly in the village the nature of a women's daily work also depends on her status in the family, whether she is an unmarried girl, a daughter in-law or a mother in-law. For instance, when a new bride enters a family, "she must prove herself by her good works", thus increasing her workload and decreasing that of her elders. The work pattern performed by Limbu women of the study areas are divided into the following categories. These categories include-

- Household activities: cooking, childcare, washing and cleaning.
- Natural Resource Management: livestock rearing, fuel and fodder collections from forests, water collection from nearby streams.
- Livelihood Activities: farming, petty business, tea garden workers.
- Non-agricultural works: Jobs outside the home, professional or labours.
- Personal Interests: Most the women spend their time in personal leisure after completion of their domestic chores which includes watching TV, chatting and gardening.
- Other Works: Participation in village and development programmes.

Social and Cultural Status:

The historical social role and socio-cultural status of women is changed gradually and thus, the contemporary Limbu women's social role and socio-cultural status is different from the previous one. However, this can be observed more in the urban areas and town only. The

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Limbus at rural village and traditional homeland are still following their traditional social roles. As division of labor is concerned in relation to the study area of this research, only men plough the field, while fetching water is generally considered as women's work. Women confined to household work. They cook, take care of children, wash cloths and collect firewood and fodder. Men perform the heavier agricultural tasks. They often engage in trade, politics, social work and other laborious work both in - and outside the village. This shows that both men and women perform physically demanding labour. However, women tend to work longer hours (get up early and go to bed late), have less free time and take sole responsibility to look after their children.

Limbu women generally bear high religious and socio-cultural status than the women of most of the other community in the eastern hill. The study shows that they generally marry within their own community but no restriction of inter-caste marriage is observed. Cross-cousin marriage is not allowed but marriage between a man and the widow of his elder brother can take place if they mutually agree for that. The widow is free to marry outside the clan either by arrangement or by mutual consent. Culturally, the marriage is mostly arranged by the parents. But the boys and girls are free to marry after eloped to each other. 'Asking for women's hand' is an important ceremony. In this system, women can ask for anything including cash and amount of gold, silver etc. (which they called *sunauli/rupauli*) to make consent of their marriage. This confirms to the women's family that the man is financially secure enough to keep their daughter happy. Limbu women generally marry twice with the same boys, culturally. The second marriage (called *saimundri* in their culture) is conducted after giving birth of the child. The family of women gives what they want to give to their daughter/sister in this second marriage thinking that this couple is permanent and long lasting as having the child. This also shows that women's socio-cultural status is high in Limbu community.

Gender Activity Profile

Activities	Male/Female	Remarks
Productive Activities:		
a) Fetching water	F	Only young girl child assists her mother in household activities
b) Cooking foods	F	
	F	

c) Cleaning of room & utensils d) Washing clothes e) Child care f) Caring of sick g) Marketing	F F F M/F	
Social and Ceremonial Activities a) Arranging b) Organizing c) Attending d) Kinship obligation	F/M M/F F/M F/M	Predominately females
Economic Activities a) Earning b) Saving and management	M F/M	Predominately males
Political & Organizational Activities: a) Informal community meetings b) Formal political meetings	M M	Females only assists
Religious Activities: a) At home b) Out side	M/F M	Females only assists

(M = Male and F = Female)

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Health Status:

The health conditions of the women depend on the nature of the work performed by them and the level of economic standard. The main health problem associated with them is joint pain and heart. The rural Limbu woman spends most of their time in cooking food in the fire place which has caused breathing problem. They still consult shamans for remedial recovery from diseases and make visits to Government hospitals. The strenuous workloads have worsened their health and hazards.

Role in Indigenous Practices:

Indigenous Traditional knowledge system has been influencing resource management practices of traditional communities like the tribal people for securing their sustainable livelihood since time immemorial. Even today these communities possess traditional knowledge which has been recognized useful in eco-restoration. Limbus has excellent traditional knowledge base and extraordinary innovativeness. Their relationship with ecology, biodiversity and ethno-botany merits special mention because this is what has enabled them to survive the odds of the hostile environment and sustain the fragile ecosystem. The revival of Indigenous Traditional Knowledge systems is a contemporary global phenomenon. This revival is emerging in response to a number of issues playing out in social, political and legal institutions around the world.

Indigenous folklore from Himalayan people is abundant which narrates the role of women, especially elderly woman in preserving and conserving her cultural traits for maintaining the traditions and cultural identity. In several mountain communities' women holds respectable positions as Shamans, and considered as the keepers of indigenous knowledge and spiritual wisdom. In Limbu society female shaman 'yema' also performs certain religious rituals and often cures her patients through divination. Fermentation is one of the oldest and most economical methods for producing and preserving foods done by Limbus and other ethnic groups of Darjeeling Himalaya from time immemorial. In addition to preservation, fermented foods also added the benefits of enhancing flavor, increased digestibility and pharmacological values. Each fermented food is associated with unique group of micro flora which increases the level of protein, vitamins, essential amino acids and fatty acids. *Khinema* is one of the important components of the diverse food culture of the ethnic communities in the Eastern

Himalayan region of Nepal, the Darjeeling and Sikkim in India. The common word *Khinema* is derived from “*Kinambaa*” of the Limbu dialect. Regarding socio- economic factor *Khinema* production is an income generator for some Limbu families. It is sold in all local periodical markets called “*Haats*” by woman and the money earned from selling it is used for domestic purposes. *Khinema* is the cheapest source of plant protein and cheaper than dairy products.

Educational Status:

Education is milestone of women empowerment because it enables them to responds to the challenges, to confront their traditional role and change their life; so that we cannot neglect the importance of education in reference to women empowerment. But in rural Darjeeling Himalaya, it is still experienced that Limbu women did not have enough access towards education. Limbu women understudy have low level of educational attainment. Most of them have not crossed the school cycle. Further, a huge portion of them were illiterate and same was the condition of just literate women too.

The main reasons for their educational backwardness in the old days were the predominant patriarchal system not providing enough chances for women to have higher education even if they wish. Spending on education and especially for a girl child is still perceived as a waste of money and resources to some orthodox people in Himalayan villages. Moreover, the lack of schools in the region is the main drawback because students have to walk a distance kilometer to reach school. The security issue of a girl child is also a reason for which many of them left the schools and inclined towards domestic chores of the household and results in the high rate of girls’ dropout.

Political participation:

Political status of women can be defined as the degree of equality and freedom enjoyed by women in shaping and sharing of political power and in the value given by the society to this role of women. One of the indicators that measure the political status of women is the political attitude such as awareness, commitment and involvement in political action and their impact in political process. Limbu male members were very active in the political affairs. Womenfolk are so busy among their household activities so they hardly give any interest towards it. But they were actively participated in present *Gorkhaland* movement in Darjeeling hill regions of West Bengal state under the political banner of *Gorkha Janamukti Nari Morcha*. Some of them

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are aware of recent political development in the hills. Women were the active participants in the political activities and demonstrations. Their mode of participation includes participation in rallies both (day and night), hunger strikes, *ghereos*, picketing etc. Some of the audacious action taken by *Nari Morcha* activists was their huge participation like delegation to Delhi, *Dooars Chalo Andolan*, and demonstration in *Jantar Mantar* in Delhi. Their enthusiastic way of involvement in such demonstration and protest was impressive. Nevertheless, given the opportunity, women cannot only participate as par with the men in political sphere but also have the will power to overcome the consequences and fight for their rights.

OBSERVATION

Women's plays an important role in upliftment of every society. They are regarded as torch bearer, but indeed of their enormous contribution and sacrifice towards family. They often remain obscure and subordinate to male authority. Due to the existing gender structure and deeply entrenched socio-cultural ideologies that marginalize women's work contributions relative to men, women are more vulnerable and at risk as compared to men. Limbu women, who have great resilience and knowledge to adapt to various stresses, are often left out from the key decision processes and are marginalized further even though they are likely to suffer more.

One of the most important indicators that ensure women's empowerment is the decision-making processes takes place in different areas of public life- economic, social and political field. Looking at the socio- economic status of Limbu women, they are mostly engaged in agriculture as cultivators or labourers or are employed as housewives. There is little improvement in the economic status of women and that there is a reinforcement of traditional gender roles- indeed an increasing subordination of women which is an alarming situation. The subject of women authority is regarded as a controversial issue in most of the society where the physical weakness and fragile attitudes embarked their incompetent to exercise their power. "*Pothibasnuhudaina*" a Nepali proverb saying over exercising of power is not good for woman because they are vulnerable. The above proverb clearly signifies even though Limbu woman enjoys freedom but certain limitation is drawn where they have to hold themselves.

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