

Women in Eastern Himalaya

With Special Reference to Sikkim

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the socio-political and economic conditions of women in Sikkim state, specially in the contemporary era. The study is based on secondary data. It was observed that the traditions and culture of society, ritualism and customs created gender gap in this Himalayan state but now a days due to modern education system, social awareness and support of state and central government, glimpses of progress in the context of status of women is now visible.

KEYWORDS

Ethnic community, Health and Education, Employment, Gender.

The mountainous landscape between northern India and western China is breath takingly beautiful. The Eastern Himalayas are one of the most biologically rich area on Earth. The Eastern Himalaya realm may be divided into three geographical regions: (a) Darjeeling and Sikkim (b) Bhutan Himalayas and (c) Assam Himalaya.

Sikkim, the 22nd state of Indian union joined it effect from 26th April 1975 and is bound by Tibet in the North, Tibet and Bhutan in the east, West Bengal in the south and Nepal in the west. In Tibet, it was called "Denzong" meaning the "Valley of Rice". According to some sources, the name of state was 'Su' meaning New and 'Khim' meaning House – New House. According to some others the word Sikkim is derived from the Sanskrit word 'Sikhim', which means 'crested or mountainous country'.

Population of this multi-ethnic state comprises of Lepchas, Limbus, Bhutias, Nepalese and the plain

peoples (which include Marwaris, Biharis, Bengalis, South Indians and Punjabis). It has total population of 6,10,577 of which male and female are 3,23,070 and 2,87,507 respectively.

Table 1 : Sikkim A Profile

Description	2011	2001
Approximate Population	6.11 Lakhs	5.41 Lakhs
Actual Population	610,577	540,851
Male	323,070	288,484
Female	287,507	252,367
Population Growth	12.89%	32.98%
Percentage of Total Population	0.05%	0.05%
Sex Ratio	890	875
Child Sex Ratio	957	963
Density/km ²	86	76
Density/ml ²	223	197
Area (Km ²)	7,096	7,096
Total Child Population (0-6 Age)	64,111	78,195
Male Population (0-6 Age)	32,761	39,842
Female Population (0-6 Age)	31,350	38,353
Literacy	81.42%	68.81%
Male Literacy	86.55%	76.04%
Female Literacy	75.61%	60.40
Total Literate	4,44,952	3,18,335
Male Literate	2,51,269	1,89,060
Female Literate	1,93,683	1,29,275

Source: Census Report of India 2011, Sikkim

Sikkim is divided into 4 districts North (Mangan), South (Namchi), West (Gyashing) and East (Gangtok).

Table 2 : Sikkim: Socio-Demographic Profile

Description	Rural	Urban
Population (%)	74.85%	25.15%
Total Population	4,56,999	1,53,578
Male Population	2,42,797	80,273
Female Population	2,14,202	73,305
Population Growth	-4.99%	156.52%
Sex Ratio	882	913
Child Sex Ratio (0-6)	964	934
Child Population (0-6)	49,218	14,893
Child Percentage (0-6)	10.77%	9.70%
Literates	3,21,930	1,23,022
Average Literacy	78.95%	88.71%
Male Literacy	84.62%	92.35%
Female Literacy	62.97%	76.63%

Source: Census Report of India 2011, Sikkim

The total figure of population living in urban areas in 1,53,578 of which 80,273 are male and 73,305 are female. In rural areas total population is 4,56,999 in which 2,42,797 are male and 2,14,202 are female. Sex ratio in urban regions of Sikkim was 913 females per 1000 males while in rural area 882 females per 1000 males. For child (0-6) sex ratio the figure for urban region stood at 934 girls per 1000 boys and in rural area 964 girls per 1000 boys. Average literacy rate in Sikkim for urban regions was 88.71% in which males were 92.35% while female literacy stood at 76.63%. In rural area average literacy was 78.95% in which males were 84.62% and female literacy was 62.97%.

The position of women in Sikkim is apparently better as compared with other states of India. But in Socio-cultural, Economic and Political spheres, their status remains very low as cultural factors like customs and traditions of patriarchal societies serve as great deterrent to women empowerment.

Within Lepcha community inhabiting the higher altitudes, women are considered as the most important economic asset. 80% of the women are involved in agricultural activities as labourer and support to men in the field. Another important part of the Lepcha's economy is pastoral. Women collect the yak dung which is used as fuel and fertiliser. Women make carpets, blankets, scrolls, with painting of Lord Buddha and eight religious symbol of Buddhism, but the decision making power always remains with men in Lachen village. Village panchayat Jhumsa is very powerful but women have no right to elect or to become a pipon (The panchayat head) or board member of Jhumsa. Polyandry (a woman having more than one husband) was prevalent among the Lepchas in the past.

Second, Limboos are one of the indigenous communities of Sikkim. This community, divided into three gotras (clan): (i) Bhiphuta (the Animists) (ii) Kashi gotra (Under Hindu fold) and (iii) Lhasa gotra of Tshongs (the Buddhists). Agriculture is their main source of livelihood. Men plough the field, women plant seeds. At the harvesting period both sexes join in. There are three types of marriages in Limbus community. First, adultery in which a bride-price is not required. second, arrangement and third, "theft"; all three are considered legal. The women in these marriages are considered as weak subject. For Limboos these undesirable marriages, especially theft of married woman are usually initiated at dances.

The Bhutia people of Sikkim follow the patriarchal family system. Though the Bhutia women has no legal right in the property, usually the daughters, sisters, aunts and near cousins are given gift of immovable assets in the form of livestock, utensils, ornaments and other useful materials etc. The laws which govern, Bhutias and Lepchas, do not allow the daughter the right to inherit the properties of their father even when there are no sons.

Therefore, we can say women still face unequal opportunities in Sikkimese society. Specifically:

1. A woman is considered to be an asset in the household and commands a bride price but she has no right of inheritance.
2. A Sikkimese woman married to a person who is not a Sikkim subject title holder shall have no right to acquire any immovable property (or any interest therein) in the territory of Sikkim subsequent to her marriage.
3. Women still remain largely involved in traditional and unpaid or meagrely paid economic activities mostly as agricultural labour.
4. Socio-cultural and family considerations often deny women the opportunity to pursue employment outside the state.
5. Women always face violence and discrimination both in house and in their workplace and it not only affects women's health and wellbeing but it can hamper women's access to employment, thereby affecting their women's economic independence and economy as well.
6. Women continue to suffer mobility. They are deprived to move freely like men, they are not allowed to work outside in night. It affects women's independence and opportunity to work, and also affecting their income.
7. As per the data available, the median age at first marriage is 21.1 years among women aged 25-49 years. Fifteen percent of women aged 20-24 years got married before the legal minimum age of 18. Among young woman aged 15-19 in Sikkim, three percent begin child bearing, that is, they have already had a live birth or are pregnant with their first child. One percent of women aged 16 years has started childbearing, but this proportion increased sharply to 3% among

women who are 18 years old and to 7% among women who are 29 years old. (National Family Health Survey, Sikkim, 2015-16)

Women and Health

Women in Sikkim enjoy better condition of health and nutrition than women in other North-Eastern state.

The Total Fertility Rate (TFR) in Sikkim is 1.17 children per woman. Fertility at 1.17 children per woman in urban areas and at 1.27 children in rural areas. The greatest differentials in fertility are influenced by religion, caste/tribe, residence and education. For instance, at current fertility rates, woman with no education will have 0.68 children more than women who had 12 or more years of schooling. Similarly, Christian women are likely to have more children than others as are women in rural areas.

Knowledge of contraceptive among women is almost universal (98%) in Sikkim. Contraceptive use is lower in urban areas (37%) than in rural areas (51%). The most common modern spacing method used by currently married women in Sikkim is pills (12%) followed by IUD (6%) and condoms (5%). Among the districts, current use of any contraceptive method is the highest in West District (66%) followed by South District (59%) and North District (50%) and it is lowest in East District (32%). Among mothers who gave birth in the five years, 94% received antenatal care for their last birth from a health professional. 76% women received antenatal care during the first trimester of pregnancy.

One-third of women (33%) and 37 % of men are either too thin or overweight or obese. In Sikkim, 475 persons per 1,00,000 are estimated to have medically treated tuberculosis and 1580 women age 15-49 and 1249 men age 15-49 per 1,00,000 have diabetes. 18% of women age 15-49 in Sikkim have hypertension. Over 40% of men and 7% of women age 15-49 use some form of tobacco.

The Bhutia-Lepcha women living in rural areas are still not very much aware of their health care. Shortage of time, family problems and communication difficulties are the main reason of avoiding modern treatment in the health centres. Moreover, the Bhutia-Lepcha people are used to follow the "Amji" system that is the type of Ayurvedic system of treatment done by the Lamas by herbal medicines. But the attitudes are changing, no doubt, and they are responding to modern treatment and coming the hospital or health centers in general for medicine and child birth etc. the Bhutia-Lepcha women are found to be less fertile as compared to their Nepalese counter parts in Sikkim. The Lamba in the village do some special puja for the pregnant woman.

Even at present, some of the Limboos believe in black magic for health related matters. During colonial period and postcolonial period, the Limboos of Sikkim were politically marginalized, and the consequences is that they are facing identity and endogeneity crisis. Climate, geographical location, and wide and easy availability of alcohol in Sikkim make the state vulnerable to alcohol abuse. Limboo tribe uses homemade alcohol during social events and they offer it instead of tea to their guests as a mark of honour.

Health Infrastructure

Sikkim is one of the few states in India where Clinical Establishment Act, 1995 has been implemented throughout the state. As per the records, there are 72 private clinical establishments registered with the office of The Registrar and Licensing Authority of the state Clinical Establishments. At present, there are one state referral hospital, 4 district hospitals, 2 community health centres, 24 primary health centres, 146 primary health sub-centres, one district tuberculosis centre, Namachi, one centre referral hospital Manipal Tadong (PUT) in Sikkim.

Sikkim is the first organic state, that is free of chemical fertilizers, in the world.

Low health status of women needs to be seriously analyzed with bottom-up approach. There is a need to understand the role of and linkages between women health education and employment status for overall development of women power in Sikkim.

Womens' Education

Modern education began in Sikkim in 1830s, with the entry of missionaries. Scandiavian Mission Alliance established school at Khamdong, Sang, Demtam, Wachen, Chakung and Mangan. The Scottish missionaries also established a number of schools. Later on two schools were established for Bhutia and Nepali named Bhutia Boarding School at Burtak and Nepali Boarding School in the Lall Bazar area of Gangtok. But after 18 years, both the boarding schools were amalgamated, into one high school under the name the King Chogyal, Tashi Namgyal of Sikkim. During this period, a primary school for girls was also started by a Scottish Missionaries named after the then prince as paljor Namgyal girls senior secondary school in Gangtok.

Tashi Namgyal Academy was the first public school established in 1964 financed completed by the Government of Sikkim especially for the children of ruling Elite. Similarly, Enchey school was established to impart the knowledge of Buddhist scriptures and for higher education, a Nymgoma College was established in 1963.

After the merger of Sikkim with India in 1975, the department of education took a number of steps for the improvement of education.

According to 2012 census, the overall literacy rate in Sikkim is 82.20%. The literacy rate for male is 87.29% and that for female it is 76.43%. Till 2011, there were 4,49,294 literates of over 7 years of age. While according to 2001 census Sikkim had total population 5,40,851 among them 3,18,335 were literate therefore overall literacy rate of Sikkim was 68%.

Table 3 : Literacy in Sikkim (1981-2011)

Year	Overall (%)	Male (%)	Female (%)
1981	41.6	53.0	27.4
1991	54.39	63.44	44.06
2001	68.8	76	60.4
2011	82.20	87.29	76.43

Source : Human Resource Development Department, Govt. of Sikkim.

It clearly shows that the literacy rates in respect of both male and female have increased since last couples of decades with the help of good governance of the state. Even though the rural-urban differences persist, the overall gender gap in literacy has gradually narrowed down in Sikkim from 22% points in 1981 to 11% points in 2011.

Table 4 : Gender Gap in Literacy (in percent)

	1981	1991	2001	2011
Rural	22	17	16	12
Urban	16	11	8	8
Sikkim	22	10	15	11

Source : Human Resource Development Department, Govt. of Sikkim.

At present, total about 4.4 lakh people in the state are literate, among them about 2.5 lakh are male and about 1.9 lakh are female. Literacy rate (under age 6) of Sikkim is 81%. 87% of male and 76% of people population are literate here. Overall literacy rate in the state has increased by 30%, male literacy has gone up by 32% and female literacy rate has gone up by 31%.

To achieve the goal of elementary education, various interventions like Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan have been launched in the state of Sikkim in the year 2001. The educational structure in Sikkim is not much different from that in other states of India. Sikkim has four distinct stages in school education. These are Primary (I-V), Upper Primary or Middle, known as Junior

High (VI – VIII), Secondary (IX-X) and Senior Secondary (XI-XII) stages. The medium of instruction in these schools is English and many state languages namely, Bhutia, Nepali, Limboo, Gurung, Rai and Niwari are taught as a second language.

In last few year, there has been a phenomenal growth of education in Sikkim. Higher education in Sikkim has been enriched by the rapid growth of various colleges and institutions in Sikkim.

Sikkim with 11 colleges has a share of 0.03% of all colleges in India. In term of average enrolment per college, Sikkim (814) is higher than all India average of 700. Total enrolment of students in regular mode in higher education institutes in the state is around 0.12 lack. Out of the total colleges in the state, 62% are affiliated to universities and the remaining 38% are constituent/university colleges. In 2011, 3210 students were enrolled in four government colleges in Sikkim. Off these 59% were female students. In the humanities and social sciences stream, more than 70 percent of students are female. On the other hand, female students account for only 8% total enrolment in Science and 11% in the commerce stream. The Entry of females in non-traditional courses and higher degrees is indicative of the new trend against gender stereotypes and of the fact that women are marking their presence in all streams.

The state government has taken the following steps for the development of education in Sikkim:

1. Education has been made free up to college level.
2. Fellowship for students who opt for higher education and professional training.
3. Monastic schools and Sanskrit University (2001) have been established.
4. Teachers training institutes have been established in Gangtok (1979), Namchi (2010) and Gyalshing (2010).

Political Participation

Under the monarchy, women were utilized for pleasure by the landlords. Socially they were exploited and legally they did not have any rights.

The old law of Sikkim also did not give any property inheritance rights to the women and clearly showed the gender biasness.

However, in 1960 women were given chance with the support of Chogyal King Thondup Namgyal who started to promote the National Identity of Sikkim in international level in 1967, two Sikkimese women, Gayatri Devi Gurung and Chum Dorji Wangmo travelled to Manila to attend a conference on women's leadership where they displayed items like Sikkimese national flag, thangka (religious painting), booklets about Sikkimese history and society.

In the latter half of 1990, series of women empowerment policies and scheme was initiated by the government to improve the status of women from the grass root level. Sikkim government started to provide fixed deposit and some incentive to girls to prevent early marriage.

One of the major sight to behold was in 2009 Sikkim election, where female voter turnout (82.77%) was higher than men (81.46%) in a staggering 23 constituencies. It shows more political awareness among women. For the first time in the history of Sikkim women were appointed as the Chief Secretary, Cabinet Ministers etc. In 2011, Sikkim became the first North-east state to raise the women reservation from 40% to 50%. Sikkim Succession Bill, 2008 is another such initiative by the state to empower women socially. The Bill promised to give right to women to acquire or inherit property, though with some conditions. The formation of Nayung Women's Cooperative Society (NWCS) was one of the major milestones in the empowerment of women in Sikkim which aims to benefit the women by employing

educated and uneducated women of urban and rural areas.

For freedom of women, educational, economic and political independence of the women is of central importance. The economic empowerment automatically results, in the political empowerment. So, it is quite clear that the socio-economic condition of women will improve only if they became a part of a governing process. Therefore, government of India and women organization should search for a remedial measure to improve the political status of the women.

Employment Status

Women empowerment refers to the ability of women to take control of their lives, pursue their own goals and live according to their own values. Financial decision making power for women has larger societal implications. It gives them the power to participate together with men, in the shaping of society and to make decisions that promote their families and their own wellbeing.

Women in the Primary Sector

Agriculture is the most important part of the socio-economic life in Sikkim and is also the primary occupation of the people in the state.

Organic farming in the state has been a traditional way of farming adopted by farmers since ages. Due to unavailability of assured irrigation, farmer practice rain-fed farming system with an integrated approach and therefore, integrated farming system is predominant in the state with agriculture, horticulture and animal husbandry in an impeccable coordination.

The nature and extent of women's participation in agriculture vary greatly from region to region. The involvement within a region depends mostly upon the type of farming system, other local earning opportunities, domination of caste, socio-economic and cultural specification of the residual families.

About 30% population of west, 37% of south, 64% each of east and north districts depend upon agriculture. 76% women workers are directly or indirectly engaged in agriculture and allied activities. Among the main workers 77.74% are cultivators, 7.37% are agricultural labourers, 1.58% are engaged in livestock, fishing, forestry, hunting, plantation, orchard and allied activities. The women workers of Sikkim are participating in other works relating to primary sector such as forestry, fishing, hunting and plantation activities etc as well. So women are the main participants in agricultural field.

Table 5 : Sikkim Working Population Census 2011

	Total	Male	Female
Main Workers	2,30,397	1,60,513	69,884
Cultivators	82,707	50,586	32,121
Agriculture Labourer	11,582	7,145	4,437
Household Industries	2,888	2,056	832
Other Workers	1,33,220	1,00,726	32,494
Marginal Workers	77,741	33,845	43,896
Non Working	3,02,439	1,28,712	1,73,727

Source : Sikkim Urban/Rural Population-Census 2011

Women in Secondary Sector

Employment in secondary sector has made women come out of the confines of the household, which earlier 'made' their world. The secondary sector has been the fastest growing sector in the last decade. The Sikkim Industrial Development and Investment Corporation Limited (SIDICO) is the state-level institution engaged in promoting, financing and developing the tiny and small scale industries (SSI) sector in the state. Eco-tourism, handicrafts and handlooms silk reeling and processing, precision, engineering, electronics, IT, medicinal plants, floricultures, tea, spices, honey and

biotechnology are thrust area identified by the state.

Women in Tertiary and other Sectors

According to a report by the associated chambers of Commerce and Industry of India (Assocham) there has been a strong growth in Sikkim's industrial sector over the last decade (2005-2013-14). Sikkim's industrial contribution to the state's economy has shown an "exceptional increase" from 28.7% to 60.4% during this 10 year period.

Sikkim state government data show that (2004-05) women are represented in the highest level of bureaucracy in Sikkim. With the preferential policy of the state government for the locals and conspicuously with no social bar for Sikkimese woman to work, the women might have a better share in state Civil Service Cadre, reflecting the changing gender roles and status of women in Sikkimese Society.

Table 6 : Women Head of the Departments (IAS) as Secretary

Sr. No.	Total	Male	Female
1	37	34	3
2 (%)	100	91.89	8.1

Source: Sikkim A Statistical Profile, 2004-05; Directorate of Economics, Statistics, Monitoring & Evaluation, Government of Sikkim.

Empowerment of women through the tourism industry is an important field today. In Sikkim, tourism industry is contributing much in the women's empowerment. Women in Sikkim, both skilled and unskilled are actively involved in the tourism sector and its decision making. The economic empowerment of women through tourism can be well judged by the percentage share of women workforce in tourism in Sikkim. The total percentage of women employee in tourism sector of Sikkim (34.1) is more than that of India's total women participation i.e. 30%.

There are different types of industries in which

women are involved. Pharmaceutical is an emerging industry in Sikkim due to tax incentives offered by the state government as well as low manufacturing and labour costs. Carpet weaving, blanket making, handloom, can and bamboo, thangka painting are the various handlooms & handicraft activities in Sikkim. Sikkim IT policy aims to increase the use of IT in the industrial and government sectors. In 2015-16 the secondary sector contributed 67.73% to the state (GSDP- Gross State Domestic Product). It was followed by the tertiary sector at 23.65% and primary sectors at 8.62%. In all these above sectors women are engaged and contributing for our society and nation.

Summery

This multiethnic Himalayan State, full of natural beauty and resources has been the witness to gender discrimination and inequalities due to socio-cultural rites and traditional customs. A few decades ago, the position of women was weak in terms of fundamental rights, law and equality within a society. In a patriarchal system of Lepchas, Limboos, Bhutias and Nepalese, a woman was a weak subject within family who did not get equal opportunities in comparison to their male counterparts. However, after assimilation of Sikkim into the Indian Union, women started getting socio-political, economical and other opportunities which improved their condition tremendously. Gradually women got conscious of their health and education. Knowledge of contraceptives and other health related matters became almost universal among women. Different types of clinical establishments and hospitals made life easier for women. Modern education system created awareness among people and literacy rate improved for both males as well as females. Females got alert to their rights and they became a part of governing process. Now women of Sikkim are involved in primary, secondary and tertiary sectors in various capacities.

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