

Women “Quest” for Empowerment in Sikkim’s Society

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Abstract- The study analyses how over the years the status of women are changing where state as well as non state actors are playing significant role in empowering the role of women. Recent changes like *The Sikkim Panchayat (Amendment) Bill, 2011* giving 50% reservation for women in Panchayat (grass root level) and initiating schemes like *Chief Minister Rural Housing Mission (CMRHM)* where house had been named after the women of the family. Success stories of non state actors in the form of *Self Help Group* like *Nayuma Women Cooperative Society* gives a positive trend in women empowerment. It critically examines the changes and challenges experienced by women community. An attempt has been made for suggestion and recommendation in empowering women of rural and urban areas giving them a platform of political and economical self reliance and their major say in decision making process bringing change in traditional ideas and strengthening the *social capital* (building trust and cooperation).

Index Terms- Gender Studies, Self Help Groups, Sikkim and Women Empowerment.

I. INTRODUCTION

The Himalayan state of Sikkim¹ became part of Indian Union in 1975 as a 22nd state. It has a total area of 7096 square kilometers which is the smallest compare to the other adjoining states of the Himalayas its has a total population of 6,10,577² persons out of which 47.09% consist of women population(Census; 2011).

Population wise it is clear that women are lesser in number compare to men, which also makes them to be in a minority group. Throughout the ages women group all over the world³ has been widely been subjugated and excluded from political, social and economic sphere, in which Sikkim is no such exception. Empowerment means “to give strength and confidence” to realize an individual “potential and capabilities”. Empowerment “implies the equal distribution of power between those who have more power and who have less power” (Ghatak; 2004). The term also denotes increased control over lives, bodies and

environment that is in decision making, economic self reliance, legal rights to inheritance, equal treatment and protection against social discrimination (Kishore; 2004 in Dighe and Wadhvaniya; 2013).

Thus it becomes important to critically study the role of women, their status in Sikkimese society and also to analyze their quest towards empowerment with the aid of state intervention in one hand and themselves in the other. In which former provides a platform by being a facilitator for the latter.

In past Sikkim under monarchy had no schemes to empower the local women they had no roles to play in major decision making process, the old law gave no rights to women it was basically about the men and the king. However women played an active role in agricultural, household activities etc., along with male members and some cases contributed more than male members but were confined to private sphere when it came to public sphere in lowest level like village meetings.

II. POSITION OF SIKKIMESE WOMEN IN PAST: POLITICAL, SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC EXCLUSION

During the monarchical period most parts of state was controlled by the landlords (the Kazis) who “acted as a barons” (Basnet; 1974) in order to collect taxes⁴ for king and rule with an iron grip where no women hold the post of landlords and neither in the kings ministry and the people had to suffer the atrocities in the form of forced labour (Sinha 2008) especially peasant women they were utilized for pleasure by the landlords with the aid of its henchmen. Socially they were exploited and legally they didn’t have any right.

The old law of Sikkim also doesn’t give any property inheritance⁵ right to the women the customary law “permits women to get divorce from its men only after paying certain amount of money (zho) and if there was dispute over a child women are allowed to take the girl child only whereas father takes the son”⁶ (White; 1928) the law clearly showed the gender biasness which separated the child in form of a son from his mother and a daughter from his father.

However in 1960’s women were given chance with the support of Chogyal “King” Palden Thondup Namgyal along with his American Gyalmo “Queen” Hope Cooke who started to

¹ Also known as “Myel Lang- the fairy place near Mount Kanchanjunga” in Lepcha language, “Denzong- the valley of rice” in Bhutia language and “Sukhim- the new house” in Limboo language. It became part of India in the year 1975, its capital is Gangtok. The land is rich of flora and fauna and one of the natural sanctuaries for varieties of living species situated in the foothills of the Himalayas. It consists of four districts i.e. North District headquarter Mangan, East District headquarter Gangtok, South District headquarter Namchi and West District headquarter Geyzing.

² About 75% of the population resides in rural areas.

³ Europe (medieval period), Asia and Africa women being subjugated, exploited and excluded with the aid of religion, culture, customs and tradition (dowry, burkha, polyandry and attached with belief like emotional, weak etc)

⁴ Sikkim was divided into 104 estates out of which 61 estates were leased out to Kazis, 15 exclusively belonged to King and 5 estates belong to the monasteries (GOS 1977: 13) in Chakrabarti (2010) A Critical review of Agrarian Reforms in Sikkim.

⁵ Women were indirectly given movable and immovable items in the form of gifts also known as “pewa” depending on the status of the woman family

⁶ Similarly when husband wants to leave his wife he has to give money according to the duration which he stayed with her wife (12 zho for 12 years) The Gazetteer of Sikkim.

promote the national identity of Sikkim⁷ in international level in 1967, “which made the two Sikkimese women, Gayatri Devi Gurung and Chum Dorji Wangmo, travelled to Manila to attend a conference on women’s leadership organized by the Associated Country of the Women World where they represented the Sikkim social welfare society where they displayed items like Sikkimese national flag, *thangka* (religious painting), booklets about Sikkimese history and society etc.” (Hiltz; 2003)

Such initiatives had a little impact on women community in general in the state but at the same time it promised to bring a positive improvement in future. However it was during such developments suddenly “Sikkim Durbar on 15th March 1969 initiated proclamation of scrapping Sikkimese citizenship from women who marries outsider (non-Sikkimese) not belonging to the state of Sikkim” (Basnet; 1974).

The first victim of the proclamation was Ruth Karthak Lepchani who was debarred from her ancient asset, simply due to reasons like she married an Indian male who belong to Muslim community, “she revolted against durbar politically by forming Sikkim Independent Front in 1966 and she was vocal about the cause for Lepchas” (Himalayan Observer in Basnet; 1974). Sikkim government alleged her of spreading rumours against the Chogyal of being biased and favouring only to the Bhutia community and oppressing the Lepchas the original inhabitants of Sikkim. She was later on forced to leave the kingdom and never in her life to return to her birthplace.

Politically she didn’t get any chance to run her party, economically she was prohibited of any entitlement of her ancient properties and socially she was marginalized and separated from her ancestor place. The above incident clearly highlights that women were subjugated and excluded politically, economically and socially during the monarchy if any words went against the Durbar.

With the proclamation of the law it was issued for general public and from that day women had no rights over property inheritance legally, which was the major blow to the women community. It was social injustice in the form of gender inequality.

Documentary title “Sikkim” directed by Satyajit Ray highlighted women participation in the grass roots levels in rural and urban areas of the state in the form of manual labourers working for Border Road Organization (BRO) agency of Government of India, in building roads to reach the far flung places of north district (Lachen and Lachung) where, women fetch woods for cooking and water for the household, actively engaging in agricultural activities, existence of women vendors in the market also signified the women actively taking part in the economy of the state.

Illiteracy among women- In the sphere of education literacy among women was very low Paljor Namgyal Girls School was started by the Scotland Missionary to educate girls in 1968 “there were only 11 girls in metric who mostly belong to the Gangtok town and no such opportunities were available in villages” (Savatri Rai⁸; 2011) PNG school, Tashi Namgyal

Academy and Tadong school which were at town had plenty of student enrolled for primary education.

Poor education among the girl child “reasons for slow spread of education among girls in Sikkim are, as elsewhere, poverty, social customs, negative parental attitudes, poor accessibility to schools” this also reflects the period which didn’t gave much emphasis to education esp. girls education and concentrated in primary activities (Lama⁹; 2001).

The enrollment of girl child in higher education was poor as many would drop out due to early marriage once if the girls get married she didn’t have any chances to continue their studies as she would enter into early motherhood and in rarest cases the family of husband gave opportunities to their daughter in law to continue their studies.

Even if the husband family allowed their daughter in law to continue their schooling the society and the school environment would look at the married girl differently letting her to believe that it’s better to stay at home rather than to attend school. The state also didn’t have open school for such married girl where they could have easily continued their further studies.

The condition of women remained stagnant in early years (1975- early 1990’s) it lacked on strengthening and empowering the role of women. In 1996 United Nations, Sustainable Development Department of Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) did report on Gender in Development and Socio economic relations in Sikkim which found that the women condition in Sikkim was poor where higher education for boy child was preferred more than the girls, “the reasons for children not attending schools between 6-17 years specifically among girl child was required for household work, taking care of siblings and early marriage”¹⁰ (Sikkim Development Report 2003).

Political participation among women was very low in political association, bureaucracy and there were no women association and NGO’s. Sikkimese women never represented itself in International Seminar on women sensitization which also limited them to exchange ideas on women empowerment, due to the old law of Sikkim property inheritance for women was limited especially when she marries an outsider and “there was a notable gap between urban educated women and their rural counterparts, and the relative opportunities available to each other” (Eckman; 1996)

III. CONTEMPORARY SCENARIO

State Intervention- In the latter half of 1990’s series of women empowerment policies and scheme was initiated by the government to improve the status of women from the grass root level. Like “Small Family Scheme” which encourage women to delay the early marriage and continue their studies “Girls who are 13 years of age as on April 1, 1997, and who are not married, receive a fixed deposit certificate of Rs 2,000 from the State Bank of Sikkim in their names. The Scheme provides an incentive of Rs 2,000 if she marries after the completion of 21

⁷ Geographically and ethnically, Sikkim had a distinct identity. The traditions, customs and beliefs give a character different from that of India (Joshi; 2004)

⁸ Subhadra Rai is the present chairperson of State Women Welfare Commission of Sikkim who strongly believes that the concept of women empowerment can only be achieved if there is inner belief on the notion “we are women”

⁹ Professor Mahendra P. Lama wrote Sikkim Human Development Report 2001 the third state which published its human development report and Economic Survey 2006-2007 for the government of Sikkim.

¹⁰ The report was based on Sikkim Development Report 2003 which was taken from NFHS survey 1998-99, 2000.

years, an additional incentive of Rs 500 if she marries at the age of 22 and if she marries at the age of 23, an additional incentive of Rs 1,000 is paid to her. So far this scheme has covered over 1,200 children” (Lama; 2001).

The enrollment of girl child in higher education surpasses the boys, the literacy rate of females has raised from 60.41% in 2001 to 76.43% in 2011 (Census of India; 2011) which shows 16% increase in the female literacy rate compared to male counterparts within the group¹¹ over the past decade which is one of the major leap forward for women striving for gender equality in the field of education.

One of the major sight to see in 2009 Sikkim election was “against 81.46% male voter turnout, Sikkim’s women have posted an 82.77% turnout of the 31 territorial (excluding Sangha seat which comes under monastery) constituencies in Sikkim, female voter turnout was higher [in percentage points] than men in a staggering 23 constituencies” (Now; 2009) showing more political awareness to select their choice of government.

For the first time in the history of Sikkim women were included in the higher posts of Chief Secretary, Speaker of the Sikkim Legislative Assembly, Cabinet Ministers, Zilla Adhyaksha and the Chairperson of Public Service Commission and Sikkim Women’s Commission¹² in the various parts of government portfolios.

Similarly by passing The Sikkim Panchayat (Amendment) Bill, 2011 it became the first north east state to raise the women reservation seat from 40 percent (2007) to 50 percent (2011) in the Panchayat Raj Institution where proportionate reservation are aimed to constitute women in the post of Sabhapati and Up-Sabhapati in Gram Panchayats and Adhaksya and Up- Adhaksya in Zilla Panchayats. Such initiative provides more opportunity for women belonging to the rural areas in political participation and decision making processes in the grassroots level which was previously male dominated arena.

Similar to that state initiative in empowering women socially is the Chief Minister Rural Housing Mission (CMRHM) were state aimed to transform all kutcha “unstable” houses to be made pucca “stable” houses under the “kutcha house free state mission 2013” were the scheme provided by giving priority to the female in the registration of household. Thus giving major share to the women of the family at the lowest level.

Sikkim Succession Bill 2008 is another such initiative by the state in empowering women socially, the Bill promised to give right to women to acquire or to inherent property though with some conditions¹³, divorced women, only daughter of the family are entitle for property which was previously never given to the Sikkimese women. Such step provides some sort of gender equality in a society.

¹¹Literacy rate of male 76.04 in 2001 and 87.30 in 2011 showing Male literacy rate has increased 11% (Provisional Census of Sikkim 2011)

¹² The Sikkim State Women Commission for Women was formed on 12th November 2001. It was first constituted on 22nd Nov 2002 with the chairperson Ms. Chandra K. Cintury.

¹³ Sikkim Succession Bill 2008 tries to provide property inheritance rights to women with some conditions attached for e.g. If an intestate has left no heir to succeed to his or her property in accordance with the provisions of this Act, such property devolve on the government

State intervention through Public Distribution System and Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (PDMRE), through PDMRE they were able to have food and nutritional security of their families especially the children. As the availability of PDS ration made the women to save some of their earned money or invest in non food items etc., at the same time frequent visit to Fair Price Shops by female member made them more aware of the market price of essential food items. Secondly through this most of the women were able to form informal women groups in the villages this was due to MGNREGA.

The scheme provided money any delay in money meant problem for their families. So they formed one voice in social audit and raised their voice and complaint and put their grievances. And if asked question they gave answer in one voice about the development of programme as they were the ones who actively participated in the project. Such events also made them to form SHG’s in making bags, pickle, soft toys etc.

The wages it helped them to buy household item, send children to schools and tuitions. They are able to visit to their relatives without depending on her husband money. Workers reported that wages in past which they got through these earnings was unavailable to fulfill their children needs. However through the wages of the scheme they were satisfied with their wages, which they get as it helped them.

In the domestic sphere though Sikkimese society is not known for women oppression in the form of dowry, sati, female infanticide etc. but there is widely presence of Domestic Violence and Violence against women by the study conducted by Society for Promotion of Art, Culture, Education and Environment Excellence (SPACE)¹⁴ which emphasis “that 50 percent of women are battered by men and almost 4.8 percent by their in laws/relatives with the approval of their husband” (SPACE; 2002) and in their research strongly recommended for the constitution of body (Government and NGO’s) which will ensure protection of women from domestic violence.

In order to prevent domestic violence against women The Sikkim State Commission for Women was constituted to help and support the women in distress and “to act on the violation of women rights”. Since its formation “1015 cases were settled out of 1050 cases and 35 cases were referred to the courts”. The major objective of Commission is to settle dispute between the families rather than to break the families and to make women aware of her legal rights (State Women Commission; 2011).

In the beginning there were only 13 cases but every year the cases started to increase¹⁵ which also proves that women started to be more aware of their rights and also about the places where their grievances could be heard, in most of the cases the dispute were settled peacefully and if the cases were unsettled it was referred to courts where the Commission provided advocates for the women victim free of cost.

Rise of Civil Society- NGO in the form of Mantalaya situated at Tadong, East Sikkim, actively participated in

¹⁴ SPACE an NGO based on Gangtok underwent to study the presence of Violence against women and domestic violence in Sikkim in the year 2002.

¹⁵ In 2003-04=103 cases, 2004-05, 159 cases, 2005-06= 100 cases, 2007-08= 162 cases, 2008-09= 110 cases, 2010-11= 101 cases, 2011-12= 65 cases which dealt with Matrimonial dispute, Dissertation, Custody of children, maintenance allowance and property dispute, Women Commission Report.

protecting women in distress and provided short stay home for 3-6 months which works as a rehabilitation centre and runs side by side with Sikkim State Commission for Women. Most of the cases are brought to the Commission through the Panchayats. Such body's provides a platform where women empowerment in social sphere is assured.

The formation of Nayuma Women's Cooperative Society (NWCS) was one of the major milestones in the empowerment of women in Sikkim. It became the first women cooperative in Sikkim which has women members belonging to the urban and rural areas. It is pro women society which aims to benefit the women of Sikkim by employing educated and uneducated women of urban and rural areas.

NWCS was formed in 2001 by Mrs. Tika Maya Chamling¹⁶ who held the position of Managing Director but shortly she resigned and left society in the hands of young women entrepreneurs it has currently 30 members on the salaried bases. The society gives importance to local women and trains them for 2-3months in making traditional and indigenous products like thankas, bags, bakku and hanjju, different traditional community dress, soft toys, sweaters, etc.

Apart from handlooms NWCS also runs grocery store and café shop in Gangtok where they employ women and the store promotes items like home made pickles of dallae korsani, taaba (bamboo shoot pickle) achar, chicken pickle and buff pickle which are made by women Self Help Groups of south and east district of Sikkim.

One of its major achievements was at the National Cooperative Fair 2009 which was held at Jaipur, Rajasthan where for the first time Sikkim women cooperative society participated and was adjudged "First in the Pioneering Cooperative Societies Category leaving behind 164 Cooperative Societies of India" (Cooperative News Bulletin). It has participated in National Expo/ Fair of Women in places such as Goa, Assam etc.

It aims to be successful and wants to participate in International Expo and bring pride to the country and the state, wants to enroll more local women member and to provide better opportunity especially for uneducated and minimum qualified women to provide platform for a way forward and to establish more units in the state to empower the women.

In the survey when interviewed with the women worker in NWCS they stated that cooperatives provided them vast experience in the entrepreneurship, women from both from rural and urban areas were doing job, came to know more about public world and confident enough to i can head her own business.

Such positive attitude of women community in Sikkimese society promises better scope for social capital¹⁷ in building mutual trust and cooperation in achieving common goals providing positive effect in the society. Further paving way for women community to their quest towards empowerment.

¹⁶ Mrs. Tika Maya Chamling raised the foundation of NWCS basic theme was to empower the women of Sikkim.

¹⁷ Robert Putnam defines social capital as those features of social organization, such as networks of individuals or households, and the associated norms and values that create externalities for the community as a whole.

IV. CONCLUSION

Women of Sikkim over the years have changed significantly due to global flow of ideas and cultural interactions which is driven by communication, technological revolution and with flourishing tourism and cooperative society. At the same time there is strong initiative from the state government in bringing change in the grass roots levels to empower the women.

The real empowerment in true sense can only be seen when the expression of women community are manifested. In context of Sikkim every time when policies are frame for women their action is appraisable over the years the literacy rate among the girl child has improved, there is more political participation than their male counterpart, in the grass root there are various women Self Help Groups through which they are financially independent and saves money for themselves and for their children.

The Cooperative society in the form of SHG's which are the basic concept of western world are widely implemented by the state and accepted by the women community in general, where there is inclusion of indigenous knowledge in preserving and promoting traditional culture and heritage which shows strong and positive trend towards empowerment among the Sikkimese women.

SHG's which is building trust and cooperation with women community at one level by establishing strong norms and value within the groups which binds women morally and to work in groups/association at the same time strengthens them individually both in public and private sphere. It not only bring political and social awareness but also brings economical stability for an Individual women which in turn that economic Independence latter strengthens the society and the state.

The journey of women in the state of Sikkim has both highs and lows though they have not suffered as much as their counterparts in rest of India still gender inequality persist in the form of women property inheritance, domestic violence, a women cannot be pipon "village head" in north district of Sikkim where traditional system of governance "Zumsa" exist. It needs more responsible women cooperative society and caring Mamtalaya in rural parts of state and more state intervention in gender issue for empowerment of women. Lastly Sikkimese women are in progress to reach real empowerment which should come out from women itself helping in their quest of real empowerment.

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