

Status of Working Limbu Women in Different Plantation Areas of Darjeeling Himalaya: Some Observation

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ABSTRACT

Women's role in plantation areas of Darjeeling Himalaya is very significant. They contribute about 60 to 70 percent of the labour requirement. In rural areas of Rangli-Rangliot and Kalimpong I block both male and female are employed in this sectors. The women are usually employed in those operations most of which have not been mechanized. They have less access to information and technology due to their poor educational status. But they equally participate in the decision making activities of households and other socio-cultural affairs of daily life. At an average they spend 8 hours a day to work but at the same time manage all the domestic chores of their household. They play a very important role in the family and society. In spite of positive economic role played by the women their overall status in the family as well as society is still subordinate and gender inequality is also rampant. Hence the question arises why women's role is not recognized and why they enjoy the subordinate position? Therefore an attempt has been made to show the status of rural women and their role in overall development of the economy and society. The paper is completely based on empirical research. Field studies were conducted at Teesta Valley Tea Garden and Cinchona Plantation area of Sangser Village (Kalimpong) of Darjeeling Himalaya.

Keywords: *The tribes, General view of their History, sources of information, Local distribution.*

[1]

Introduction

The Economy of Darjeeling Himalaya highly depends on the plantation sectors. The sections of people who inhabited these plantation areas are living in relative isolation where prime focus is the whole day work with a meager income to look after their family. The lack of the alternative source of income generation and employment opportunities had led the both male and female counterparts of the rural folk community to work in the plantation for providing better amenities in life. The rural womenfolk who are less educated employed themselves as labourer in the plantation areas. These women apart from doing domestic chores also bring cash in family to support their children education. The whole day work of 8 hours has shown their status, strength and positive mentality towards the important economic role played in the society. The rural womenfolk of Himalayan society radical differ from their plain counterparts not only in terms of physiognomy but also in attitudes, social, economic and traditional perspectives. The Limbus is one of the ethnic groups of Darjeeling Himalaya professing *Yumasim* religion as their way of life. The supreme Goddess *Tagera Ningwaphuma* holds an immense important in the life of Limbus who is regarded as the creator of this world. The whole idea belief, faith and customs of Limbu tradition revolves around the worshipping of *Yumasam (female household deity)* for better future and prosperous life. 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 judgement in the daily affairs of village life. The plantation sectors has been always been a focus of study to scholars to show various problems associated with owner and labourer. The marginalized sections of these sector women have always remained obscure from the main scenario apart of being an instrumental in the process of productions. The authors have made a modest attempt to study the conditions of Limbu womenfolk of marginalized tribal sections of Darjeeling Himalaya.

Objectives, Methodology and Study Areas

The present paper is the modest attempt of authors to show the position and status of Limbu women folk of the study areas. The aim objectives of the paper are to study socio-cultural profile of the Limbu women and to analysis how far the educational attainment among them has aroused the level of consciousness. The paper also tends to focus on the positive role played by them in the family and their participation in the

decision making process of the households. The paper uses the both primary and secondary data to evaluate their role and position in the family. However field based interview method is adapted to insight into their social and cultural life in the village. Accordingly a schedule was prepared to collect the primary information and secondary information has gathered from a relevant journal articles. The Teesta Valley Tea garden and Sangser Village under Mungsong Cinchona plantation is selected for the proposed study which falls under the administrative divisions of Rangli-Rangliot block and Kalimpong I block of Darjeeling Himalaya.

[2]

Limbu Women of the Study areas: a socio-cultural profile

I start with this phrase “*Women are carrier of tradition to her offspring’s generation*” said by *Pritiful Limbu* an aged old senior lady of the Tea garden. Limbu Women is seen as the torch bearer of her community tradition and morality. The field survey conducted in both the plantation viz Tea and Cinchona plantation shows a very interesting picture of Limbu women encircled with the same problems and few changes in their daily life. The rural Limbu woman had developed a positive attitude towards the recent development going in their local habitat. Some of them had engaged themselves in the women development scheme programmes like *ICDS* where the volunteers aware them about their health. The opening of new schools in the recent times had made them aware of girl child education and its importance. They are working in others formal sectors apart from plantation sectors. Very few of them are highly educated holding a very good place in both the working place and in the locality. The various parameters are taken into consideration to study the socio-cultural aspects which are highlighted below.

i. Age

The study areas have quite high proportion of female population according to sample size. The female of all ages were taken into consideration for study purpose to know their views except infant and girl child age ranging between (5-10 years). In the study areas the mean age of the female respondent in Teesta valley tea garden is 32 years and Sangser Village is 31 years respectively.

ii. Educational Attainment

Education is prime necessity in women upliftment because it enables empowerment. Women can freely exercise her rights take challenges to confront their traditional role and change her life. So 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 in the study areas. 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 the study village. Moreover the lack of schools in the study areas is the main drawback because students have to walk a distance kilometers to reach school. The security issue of a girl child is also the main reason in the study areas 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.

Table 1. Showing the Educational Attainment of the Limbu womenfolk

S. No	Category	Teesta Valley	Sangser
1	Illiterate	32%	21%
2	Primary	21%	37%
3	Secondary	14%	24%
4	Graduation	2%	2%
5	Still Studying	33%	16%
6	Total Percentage	100%	100%

(0-4years population is ignored)

Source: Field Survey 2017

iii. Occupational Pursuits

A 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 both the plantation areas viz. Tea garden and Cinchona plantation large section of limbu womenfolk are working. In the tea garden area two types of women labourer 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 the Cinchona plantation study area no such division was found by the researcher. 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 womenfolk.

Table 2. Showing the Occupational background of the Limbu womenfolk

S. No	Category	Teesta Valley	Sangser
1	Housewife	45%	46%
2	Plantation Worker	35%	13%
3	Casual Worker	4%	4%
4	Private Job	1%	6%
5	Petty Business	1%	6%
6	Retired Employee	4%	4%
7	Unemployed	10%	21%
8	Total Percentage	100%	100%

Source: Field Survey 2017

iv. Marital Status

In Limbu Society marriage is regarded as the social institution bestowed with duties and obligations towards the family responsibility. The woman of the study areas married in quite young age. The two types of marriages are prominent in the study areas *Chori biha (marriage by elopement)* and *Maghi biha (arranged marriage)*. The most common practiced of marriage in the study areas is elopement. In Limbu society woman has right to chose her partner. But marrying within same clan clan group is highly restricted. In my field observation I have found even a divorced woman was living freely in her maternal house and was enjoying the same position as before her marriage. Whereas the widows were also treated well in the family and in some of the family they were the head of the households. Few spinsters who are in late 40's are found in both the study areas. Some of them were working and unemployed with certain physical disability. These unmarried women had never felt as a burden in the family and had been entrusted with certain responsibility.

[3]

Family and Domestic Affairs

The Limbu family is well knitted with the patriarchal system where father is the head of the household. Most of the households have Nuclear family very few of them have joint family. In Teesta valley (80%) have nuclear and (20%) have joint family whereas in Sangser (56%) have joint and (44%) have nuclear family. In case of the absence of father senior most female or elder son became the family head. The father takes the important decision in the financial matters but in matter of marriage and other kinship obligations he takes the view of his spouse. The contrasting thing found in the study area of sangser village was female also makes decision in the financial matter of family. The family property is jointly possessed by blood brothers and even unmarried daughters also share some property. In case of absence of son's daughters inherit the father property. The ornaments and jewellery items are possessed by mother, daughters and daughter-in-law. Most of the domestic chores are done by the woman but male members also help them in some of their work. Women folk usually prepare foods, cleaning, washing and caring of children's. They also look after the domestic animals. They also collect firewood's and foddors for animals, fetching water from nearby streams. Women who work as plantation worker do their all domestic chores before leaving for their daily work. After work also she does left out works and prepare food for family at night.

Participation of women in Agriculture

In both the study area 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 Haat market. Animals like cow, goat, pigs and fowls are reared which provide them with manure, flesh and regarded as a sustainable assets 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.

Political Participation

In the study area majority of the 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. Some respondents are

aware of recent political development in the hills. Very few of them attend political meeting and party rally. Every one cast their vote but choice depends on the decision made by senior male members of the family. So in the study areas women are not so political mobilized and very much influenced by male members.

A glimpse into a daily routine of Limbu woman working in cinchona plantation area of Sangser village: Case study

Mrs Sakuntala Limbu (45 yrs) works as labour in the Cinchona Plantation. She wakes up at 4 am in the morning and does her household chores by 6.30 am she leaves for a factory by walk which is 1-2 km away from her village. In factory she extracts cinchona from the raw materials. She has to bring 26 kg's of raw cinchona every day back to a godown which is located in her village. After coming back from work at 2 pm she again goes to forest either to collect firewood or fodder for her cows. She returns from forest at around 4 pm and freshens herself and finished her left out domestic chores. At 7 pm she prepares her dinner for family and goes to bed at 8 pm. During Sunday she works in her small farm at the backyard of her house.

Concluding Remarks

Women are regarded as the carrier of tradition to next generation. In the study areas senior old woman are passing the knowledge of their rituals, rites and indigenous knowledge to their family and society. They had still retained their belief, customs and habits of growing food. Since these traditions have been passed down from generation to generation orally needs to be documented. Acculturation among limbus is quite high therefore old woman are very much concerned about fading cultural heritage. Limbu society is patriarchal where father is the head of the family. Women are equally treated with respect and dignity but are partially excluded from performing religious ceremonies. Inter caste marriage is permissible but marrying with same clan group is forbidden. All domestic chores are performed by womenfolk. Financial decisions are made by father. Educational levels of women are low compare to their male counter parts. Widows are also treated equally. In most of the household of Sangser village women makes the decision regarding financial matter of the family.

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