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Role of education in the development of social condition of Lepcha women in Sikkim

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Abstract

Education is the key to development and mankind growth. Introduction of education has boon to the mankind and have contributed the humans to climb the ladder to see wide and know more. Education provides several opportunities and skill development platform. The general accession of education in Sikkim regardless of gender, caste, social status, religion and other marginalizing social factors, are almost absent and equality exists in the ground of education in Sikkim today. Till date, women education has remained to be an unachievable goal for India and countries around the world because of the superstitious and traditional social practices. The female education in Sikkim shows an interesting result, it was 22% in 1981 and 76% in 2011. The women education in Sikkim is supported by various factors such as gender equality, govt. policies and schemes for girls' education and awareness on education. This paper will firstly, explore into the women education and its role in developing the women status. Secondly, this paper will look for the answers of the following questions; how far the introduction of education has boon to the Lepcha women and how far it has helped them to be empowered.

Keywords: Sikkim, Lepcha Women, education, development, Women status, empowered

Introduction

Sikkim, the north-eastern Himalayan state shares border with countries like Nepal in the west, Bhutan in the east, Tibet in the north, Indian state of Bengal in the south, historically was kingdom and merged with Indian Union in the year 1975 becoming its 22nd state. Sikkim was ruled by monarch for 333 years (from 1642-1975). Sikkim is a home to three ethnic communities' i.e., Lepcha, Bhutia and Nepali. These three communities migrated in the land of Sikkim in different historical times. In Sikkim Lepcha, Bhutia and Limboo and Tamang communities have been categorized as scheduled tribes and Nepali community as a mainstream peopl. These three ethnic communities having different culture, customs and traditions interact and exist in harmony. No community conflict, cultural conflict, religious and ideological dispute could be seen in the society.

Sikkim is second smallest and least populated state of India. According to the census report of 2011 the population of Sikkim numbers 6,10,577 of which male and female are 3,23,070 and 2,87,507 respectively. Major populace i.e., 82.20% of total population is literate ^[1]. Government of Sikkim has been promoting the education and educational institutions constantly. Nar Bahadur Bhandari the second Chief Minister of Sikkim, his tenure is said to have authorized the establishment of 1400 schools in a single go, similarly during the tenure of another government Dr. P.K Chamling saw enhancement in numerous existing schools, new streams and courses was introduced in post-matriculation and existing schools were upgraded from primary to junior secondary and secondary to higher secondary. In the current government, there is a clear emphasis on repairing schools and colleges, as well as substantial recruitment and regularization of teachers, however, one genuinely remarkable achievement in the field of education since Sikkim's integration into India is the establishment of Sikkim Central University, founded under an Act of the Indian Parliament in 2007 ^[2]. Education has played a vital role in the development of the Sikkimese society and economy. Accession of education to girls is another important factor of the better society and in Sikkim girls are allowed to go to school but there are societies in India where a female education is still a question and unresolved issue.

Education enhances the position of women in society creating new opportunities and ground for their empowerment. Although the status of women in Sikkim appears superior to that in other Indian states, their standing in socio-cultural, economic, and political domains remains significantly low, as cultural elements such as customs and traditions of patriarchal societies hinder women's empowerment [3].

The status of women in Sikkim varies depending on the community. In this case, the practice of polyandry among tribal communities may be one factor explaining the higher value placed on women, and local religious practices may also have an impact. Women's economic contribution, socio-cultural autonomy, authority, and involvement in household decision-making are all different. The relative standing of women, however, differed among ethnic groups [4]. Women's position differs depending on the ethnicity and culture they belong to. In some tribal societies women holds a bigger position in India for example: Khasi tribe of Meghalaya- Khasi tribe shows a matrilineal society where men are subordinator to women. The women plays significant role in society, economic activities, and act as head of the family, looks after the entire family functioning in such society, women enjoys good opportunity in decision making. On the other hand Naga Tribe- which is another north-eastern ethnic tribe, settled mainly in Nagaland, Manipur, parts of Assam, Arunachal and Myanmar, shares a patriarchal values, where traditionally men hold the power and authority, with decision making largely dominated by men and property inheritance are always traced through patrilineal lineage. Such society suffocates the gender equality and women's position in family as well as in social strata.

Education is not accessible to everyone, in a country like India, patriarchal structured society, in prevalence of caste and class practices, which advocates traditional practices and superstitious beliefs in society. Historically education was limited to the elites and privilege class in Indian scenario and in Sikkim as well. In this instance, Dick B. Dewan writes "Rev. W. Macfarlane, due to whose assiduous labour of disseminating the holy gospel and the western knowledge among the sleepy hill people of Darjeeling made them wake up from their deep slumber, was the pioneer missionary to devise a broad scheme of education for this hill region". Region of Sikkim was not excluded from what he has said, reading and writing was not fashion of that time. Education is one more arresting instance of their marginalization in society [5]. Educational history of Sikkim has witnessed that common education was enhanced only after the arrival of the Europeans, especially Christian Missionaries. They landed in India, Sikkim with the motive for the propagation of Christian faith, so it is noted that commoners converted into Christian, keeping this fact aside a fact that Missionaries pioneered education in India which benefited commoners, more importantly women. "Women are marginalized within the marginalized communities", so are the victims of exploitation of the superstitious social order, faces multiple layers of discrimination, lack of opportunities, decision making power and abilities are often questioned.

However, women in Sikkim hold a better position and enjoy equality as compared to other states of India because traditionally, Sikkim does not favour gender superiority and inferiority respectively in terms of education. "A striking feature of Sikkim is the absence of gender differentials along many indicators of human development. In 1998-99,

for instance, 83.2 per cent of boys and 82.6 per cent of girls between 6-17 years attended school. Nevertheless, women still face unequal opportunities in a variety of spheres. For instance, Women still remain largely involved in traditional but unpaid tasks of community life. Girls are typically denied the opportunity to pursue higher education since it often involves moving out of the village, district and even the state, sociocultural and family considerations often deny women the opportunity to pursue employment outside the state". With the changing mindset and social environment women and girls are now allowed to pursue their higher education even outside of the state.

"In 1951, Sikkim had an overall literacy rate of less than 7 percent, with barely 11 percent of men and 1 percent of women who could read and write and by 2011, the literacy rate had increased to 82 percent in 2011-with 87 percent of men and 76 percent of women who could read and write" (Sikkim Human Development report-2011).

Table 1: Literacy data of Sikkim, 1981 to 2011

Year	Total Literacy%	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, Government of Sikkim.

Sikkim has made great progress in the education of women. The decadal literacy performance of the women in Sikkim shows an interesting gap in 1981 it shows only 27.4 and after 30 years it reached 76.43 percent in 2011. This encouraging literacy data of Sikkimese women is a landmark for the women education in Sikkim. The state government has launched a number of programs and schemes to encourage and enhance women's education in the state. The state government has introduced a number of policies and initiatives to support girls' education, including free education for girls, scholarships, and financial aid to encourage parents to enroll their daughters in school. In particular at the basic and secondary levels, efforts have been made to boost the number of girls enrolled in and retained in schools. Particular focus is placed on guaranteeing girls' equal access to school. In Sikkim, women can also enroll in vocational training programs so for employment and economic empowerment. The census report clears that the literacy gap has been narrowed to a greater extent. According to the Census report in 2011, 3210 students were enrolled in government colleges of Sikkim among them 59% were female students. The state's overall literacy rate has risen by 30%, while the rates for men and women have increased by 32% and 31%, respectively. The literacy rate also reflects equal participation in education, both male and female approx. The scene of women education in Sikkim is more than national literacy rate and comparatively better than other states of India.

Table 2: The literacy rate of Sikkim and India from 1971-2011

YEAR	SIKKIM %	INDIA %
1971	17.74%	34.45%
1981	34.05%	43.56%
1991	56.94%	52.21%
2001	69.68%	65.38%
2011	82.20%	74.04%

It is remarkable achievement of Sikkim in leading the literacy rate of India although Sikkim includes tiny proportion of population while India counts every citizen of the country. However the national literacy and Sikkim's literacy data shows an interesting gap of 8% approximately in 2011. As per the data of 1971, i.e., four years earlier of Sikkim's merge to India the literacy of the state accounted 17.74 percent whereas India then had a literacy of 34.45%. Sikkim's educational journey was not open to the commoners unlike India. It was confined within the elites and the officials.

Short History of Women Education in Sikkim

Sikkim has long educational developmental history. Earlier reading, writing and schooling were wealthy activities. For the common citizen reading and writing was unreachable goal and unaffordable dreams. However, this road of education did not end here rather it elongated and embraced the commoners as a new social, economic and political developmental weapon. With the coming of the Europeans and Missionaries in 19th and early 20th century, Christ's Bible teaching was introduced; moreover, Europeans is also credited for an introduction of formal schooling for the common people. The history of women's formal schooling traces its history to the arrival of Europeans in the land.

India formally allowed Christian Missionaries to come and work with the Charter Act of 1813 and 1833. The intent of missionaries was to preach gospel [6]. In the journey of preaching the Christianity European Missionaries landed in India and in Sikkim respectively. In Sikkim among the Lepchas preach of Gospel dedicated also in the enlightenment and hence reading, writing was embraced by the Lepchas which is now proven as a benefiting factor for the change in soci-economic and lifestyles of the tribe. The Himalayan kingdom was ruled for over 300 years by Bhutia Tibetan rulers and became a part of India in 1975. Prior to coming of the missionaries, Sikkim had a traditional education system primarily to train Buddhist monks; Buddhist scriptures were taught and learned. However, missionaries are credited for the introduction of western modern education in India. Modern education in Sikkim started in 1830s with the establishment of school in Khamdong, Mangan, Sang, Dentam, Chakung etc. later Bhutia Boarding School and Nepali Boarding School was established. Sidkeong Tulku, 8th chogyal of Sikkim introduced school in Gangtok and was confined within the elites, common people lagged in education. The Scottish missionary arrived in Sikkim in the latter half of 19th century and early 20th century and bringing change in educational set up. For the missionaries, ministry through education became the most effective means of evangelizing people [7]. The major neglected portion of the society which is mass population became the victim of Christ conversion and western education the weapon. Christian missionary prioritized education to preach Jesus and that benefited the people anyway.

The minutes of Scottish Mission Council: Eastern Himalayan Mission of 1924 stated the education policy as follows: "The policy of mission is to provide primary education for boys and girls as widely as possible throughout the district, with the addition of secondary and higher education at a few centrally situated places, the need of Indian Christian Community being always kept in the forefront, and the Christian religion being taught in all

mission educational institutions" [8]. For Missionaries' educational institutions favoured the ground of preaching of Christianity in Sikkim due to which they paid attention to, eventually benefited the commoners. The missionaries targeted another important neglected population in the society i.e., females and they involved in educating the girls. The female education should wherever possible be under the superintendence of women missionaries [9]. A female Scottish missionary, Mary Scott, who is credited for pioneering women education in Sikkim and establishment of Girls' school in Gangtok (capital) was under her supervision in 1923, which is now has developed as Paljor Namgyal Girls' School. Later the schools were built in other places like Vok, Chyakhung, Rhenock and Pakyong. Mary struggled so much to educate the women in Sikkim, she worked without a wage during her all long stay and she retired in 1939, after her the mission was succeeded by other Scottish till independence. "According to the administrative Report of Sikkim, there were 35 schools in Sikkim out of which only 5 were Government Schools in 1947". Hence, the contribution made by Christian Missionaries and Mary Scott cannot be forgotten by Sikkim and the schools started by Missionaries are still alive. The government and other organizations are collaborating to guarantee that women have access to high-quality education and chances for both personal and professional development, and as a result, women's education in Sikkim is on an upward trajectory.

Education of Lepcha women and their development in Sikkim

Women are marginalized within the marginalized community. In addition to this in a Patriarchal society where women are treated as a subordinator to men, compared in the masculinity, lack of opportunities, education, welfare and development could be noticed. Here, traditionally, the Lepcha society advocates patriarchy. A peek of women's literacy rates over time would be quite relevant to encourage Sikkimese women's educational path towards gender equality. Historically limited access to quality education for Lepcha women in Sikkim has been a longstanding issue, primarily because of societal and cultural barriers. The indigenous Lepcha community in Sikkim has encountered difficulties in obtaining adequate educational opportunities, particularly for women. 80.77% of the lepcha population in Sikkim is literate and the average literacy rate for men and women in Sikkim's Lepcha population is 85.79% and 75.59%, respectively [10].

The government of Sikkim has initiated various programs and schemes to promote education among the Lepcha community, including scholarships, free education, and special schools for indigenous children. Education and employment of the Lepchas may be regarded as the main gift of Scottish missionaries [11]. The Lepchas were poor. The advent of Scottish Missionaries in particular and initiation of modern formal education, medical or hospital services, craft industries, lace making-weaving and knitting industries for women etc. made the Lepchas educated, rational and skilled. This created new avenues of employment for those economically poor Lepchas who basically lived in rural areas which resulted in one of the significant transformations in Lepcha society i.e. the shift in occupation or career.

Many Lepcha who were earlier gatherers or poor cultivators now became teachers, pastors, preachers, compounders,

nurses, doctors, skilled workers etc. which led to the emergence of middle class in Lepcha society, this may be regarded as the most valuable contribution of the missionaries [12]. Before the arrival of the missionaries some of Lepcha was assisting in the court of king as the governors (Dzongpen), they maintained upper class status in society and the rest were just a subject to the rule.

It is worth noting that the pioneering work of imparting modern education by the Scottish mission helped the Lepchas in understanding the significance of their cultural identity in a different way [13]. Women are regarded as the most valuable resource in the Lepcha community, who live in higher altitudes. Eighty percent of the women work in agriculture, providing labor and assistance to men in the field. Yak dung is also collected by women, who use it as fuel and fertilizer. They also make carpets, blankets, and scrolls featuring paintings of Lord Buddha and the eight Buddhist religious symbols. However, in the Lachen village, men always have the final say when it comes to making decisions. This superior-inferior relation in decision making process is seen in the Jhumsa system (traditional system of government which does not involve the government and mainstream politics in and confines the tribal village in North Sikkim) where women's decision is not considered. Some Lepcha women are highly educated and are in government administration, holding white collar jobs.

Lepcha women are active in political and non-political organizations as well, they collectively works inclusive of men for the upliftment of the community. For instance, the only registered association of community that was started in 1925 as 'Lepcha Association' 'Mutanchi Rong Shezoom' in Lepcha and later it was renamed as "Indigenous Lepcha Tribal Association" in 2004. It was established with several objectives among them welfare, enhancement and development of Lepcha education is one. Women are relatively active in the public sphere in Sikkim than in other states of India and South-Asia as a whole [14]. The women participation in political and non-political gatherings shows the liberty and position in society and in decision making. In Sikkim no traditional barriers could be seen which would avoid the women from participating and indulging themselves in public and organize themselves. For the enhancement of education among the tribal students and other backward class student govt. of India through the Ministry of Tribal Affairs established Eklavya Model Residential School in Sikkim aiming to the providence of quality education in the rural areas particularly for STs.

Table 3: List of EMRS in Sikkim

Sl. No	District	Name of EMRS	Year of Sanction	Functioning year
01	Mangan	Swayem	1997-1998	2007
02	Soreng	Gangyap	2005-2006	2007
03	Namchi	Suntolay, Melli	2015-2016	2016
04	Pakyong	Thekabung, Parakha	2016-2017	2017

Source: Social Welfare Department, Tribal Affairs Division, Govt. of Sikkim

Tribal education is one of the mostly focused elements of the government with the goal of strengthening STs and to achieve equity with mainstream society. As per the census of 2011, Sikkim is a home 0.2% of tribal population in India. Sikkim is a home to 2.06 lakh of tribal population,

which is 33.8%, i.e. 2,06,360 persons of the total population of the state. The community such as Lepcha, Bhutia, Limboo and Tamang are recognized as tribes of Sikkim [15]. To encourage education among the communities of Scheduled Tribes, the Sikkim government has put in place various policies and initiatives. These clauses are meant to help tribal children with their educational demands and obstacles.

Government of Sikkim also provides an educational loan for the students pursuing higher education within country and outside in a low interest. The governmental schemes, policies, and programs have benefited the tribal in Sikkim to change their social profile. Lepcha women have advanced much in the present times; they are encouraged to go to school and also for higher education, run administration, take participation in politics etc. is seen. Hence, the education is boon to Lepcha society, Lepcha women. The state has made important advances in female literacy and literacy in general in recent years, as Sikkimese women increasingly get into the government and other service sectors in an effort to achieve economic independence, improved status, and social mobility, the value of education has been emphasized across all segments of the state's population.

It has come into notice that a slow spread of education among girls in Sikkim [16]. The current state of affairs is drastically different from a decade ago, as gender gaps have been closed at all educational levels and there is higher gender equality. Sikkim jumped significantly from its 12th place ranking in 2011-12 to fourth place among all Indian states on the general Educational Development Index in 2012-13 [17]. In the development and upliftment of the society and economy of the state women has equal contribution. The governmental effort in developing the course of education has encouraged women to enroll and has geared to secure their goodwill and empower themselves.

Conclusion

Education, a ladder of mankind development and has shaped the human thinking. Education in Sikkim revolved around the elites only in the initial phase but with the coming of the Scandinavian Missionaries, Scottish Missionaries education developed for commoners, missionaries were intent to sow the seed of gospel, however, benefited the people of Sikkim. Women education in Sikkim is the contribution of missionaries, girls education were emphasized by missionaries, they did not only teach gospel, knitting, weaving was taught along and so later developed into fully fledged modern formal school. Today women in Sikkim are no less competent than men in any field of work, women really have achieved big. However, Sikkim is not a fully developed state, yet is struggling to be developed. Women education, equal opportunities, gender inequality are somehow still a question today. Quality education has been emphasized by the government, financial assistance for students belonging to STs and OBC community has encouraged a mass number of students in education. Lepcha women are somehow lagging in education because of their settlement in inaccessible rural areas. Women of such areas lagged in basic healthcare and health related awareness which seeks governmental attention. Education is a tool which provides a platform to women and empowers women with the providence of knowledge, skills and develops

confidence to counter the gender stereotypes and traditional practices which barriers them. Education helps in opening of new job opportunities and platform for Lepcha women to be economically independent and deduct dependent upon men. Education also provides an entrepreneurships, vocational training and programs which contribute in economic wellbeing of theirs and community. Education is needed to have for the wellbeing and basic healthcare because educated women are more likely to seek healthcare services and adopt healthier lifestyles, tribal women lagged in basic health awareness, health issues, hygiene practices, reproductive rights etc. Education also empowers women socially, patriarchal norms limits the rights and opportunities of women often, education helps in breaking such challenges and encourages them to participate in community decision making processes, promote gender equality which has been a major social issue ever globally. Education provides a moral ethics to women that are free from stereotypes and illogical faiths and beliefs. Women and female figurines are depicted as Mata Lakshmi, Devi Durga, Kali, Saraswati and word 'Mother' is often used to depict the purity, greatness, love and affection, bravery and goodness, positivity, however reality that are practiced are different than the depiction.

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