

WOMEN, WORK AND SOCIAL STATUS OF KINNAURA WOMEN

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ABSTRACT

Social status gives us a dynamic concept and undergoes transformation with the changing conditions of life in terms of life chances and life styles. To assess the change, the methodology used in this paper is comparative and analyses the historical dimension of women's being and their contemporary status. This article is divided into four parts. First describes the women's state of being in Kinnaur in the past. Second discusses the women-centred approach and its parameters measuring the status of women. Third examines the empirical data in relation to the social status of women in the contemporary times. The parameters of status analyses include the education, economic-employment, income, participation in social and economic decision-making processes and empowerment, and the access to health-age at marriage, protection coverage, miscarriages and induced abortions, fertility and mortality. Finally, the paper concludes in the form of observations and issues for further consideration.¹. Population Research Centre, Himachal Pradesh University, Shimla-171 005

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INTRODUCTION

Notified as a scheduled tribe, the people of Kinnaur numbering 71,270 (53.87 percent males and 46.12 percent females) constitute 47.07 percent of the total population of the scheduled tribes in Himachal Pradesh and 1.37 percent of the total population of the state (Census, 1991). They have a distinct social structure that combines the elements of a tribe – the racial and ethnic, as well as that of Hindu caste system. Like rest of India, the Kinnauras observe the caste distinctions and also practice the caste based discriminations. They have an elaborate system of religious specific customs, traditions and rituals forming part of their overall socio-cultural milieu that supports its social structure and social practices. More than one-fourth (28.40 percent) among the Kinnauras follow Buddhism. The role of the Brahmin priest and then Buddhist Lama are of great significance. In fact, all aspects of their social life are governed by the religious and ritual ceremonies.

The status of women in Kinnaur is a product of its social structure dominated by patriarchy. In accordance with their traditions, Kinnauras largely practiced polyandry as a predominant form of marriage. Monogamy till recently was an exception. Polyandry was, in fact, directly encouraged by the State through penalties exacted on land partition (Mamgain, 1971, 93-94). In the given system the women not only remained subservient to men but also never enjoyed any property right. Thus, as a corollary of this, the sex discrimination had been embodied in the social structure of Kinnaur. The same had been perpetuating generation after generation. This is evident from the fact that the birth of a son was and continuously conceived as an auspicious occasion, whereas the birth of a daughter was not given any importance.

The comparative analysis of the privileges according to the son and the daughter indicate the latter in a disadvantageous position as she did not have much for her in the family of her origin. Even if an unmarried daughter lived in the family neither she had any share in the property nor a claim over the family property. In real terms, as per the customs and traditions, she did not have anyone else to fall back upon. Her difficulties increased more after the demise of her parents. After them, she was ordinarily given no share of property.

In case the girl child was from an illegitimate progeny, her life became all the more constrained due to her stigmatized identity – poltee. This was also true in the case of an illegitimate son – poltu, who also did not have any property right. However, being son and the daughter, at some stage his property rights became permissive. Although poltee may not have been a common phenomenon but the society remained silent about the man through whose wedlock the girl was born. In view of her poltee status she carried a relatively more share of the burden of family work than the legitimate girl child. Thus, not only discrimination but one could also see discrimination within discrimination. Here social values mattered more than economic. But in the economic sphere too women in general worked harder than the men. When it came to the distribution of rewards, the women did not find any mention.

Similarly, the educational opportunities, as was also true in the case of other parts of the country, were almost non-existent in general and particularly for women. The little attention to their education was conditioned by their socially defined role of bearing and rearing children, looking after the household chores and serving the men.

Women in Kinnaur, like other parts of the country, therefore had been economically dependent on men. However, their contribution to the family economy, if not more had probably been equal to that of men with their considerable participation in the agricultural operations. What the women did not do was plough the fields as they were customarily forbidden. Though there seems to be no rational explanation for this, some so the locals hold the view that land and plough are synonym of woman and man. Therefore, it is the moral obligation of man to plough the land. According to such a custom, analysed in the light of practice of polyandry the women were supposed to remain passive in relation to men. Despite contributing enormously to the agriculture, the women, by and large, remained deprived of rights over agricultural land.

Being dependent economically on the men, by and large, the women's autonomy in matters like marriage remains limited. The marriage conducted in accordance with Hindu traditions, involved caste, and ethnic and class considerations. The tradition of rehja observed by Kinnauras explained marriage as an arranged affair that involved the parents of the boy and the girl, sometimes mediated by close relatives and friends. The age at marriage was low for the girls in particular. But consummation of marriage, however, took place at a later age.

The only freedom for the women seemed to have enjoyed was their participation in the social and cultural activities, festivities and other such affairs. Liberty and the leading role of women in dances had a dual function. It provides women an opportunity to have exchange of views with other women. On the one hand, it provides men a source of amusement as well as a chance to the young boys in particular to find a match for themselves on the other. The historical accounts of women's lives reflect on their low social and economic status.

The term status of women needs distinction between women as a biological and gender category. The former represents the anatomical differences between male and female. The latter, as a gender category, concerns with her social, psychological and cultural outlook, including women's own perception of their being in the society. The implication of

which is that the status differences between men and women are created in the society by the people themselves and are the products of social structural factors (Giddens, 1995, 161–62). It therefore implies that the status of women, besides their economic and personal attributes also depends upon the social and cultural milieu in which they are placed. A cultural explanation of status has an inherent ideological bias that stems from the social structure itself. The explanation therefore needs to be more objectives. The Ford Foundation's (1991) Women Centred Approach to the status of women, apparently holistic, is based on the criteria seemingly objective. Accordingly, the status does not mean only the economic attributes of the individual, namely income and occupational status. Besides economic, the social includes the normative structure governing life of women-dignity, social recognition of women and their work, access to food, educational and occupational opportunities. The health of women is measured through their fertility history – length of pregnancy intervals, number of children born including stillbirths, premature abortions, number of survivals, maternal mortality, decision-making about the number of children and right to spacing, cultural value, such as, age at marriage, number of children etc. The status variables described above are quite exhaustive and cover all aspects of social status of women. The present paper thus makes an attempt at understanding change in the status of women in terms of above variables.

The development planning in India and in its states was guided by the assumption that the overall development of society would have trickled down the effect percolating down to the disadvantaged sections of the society including women. Hence, there is an improvement in the status of women. The evidence also suggests that after the World Plan of Action announced at the World Conference of the International Women's year in 1975, that conscious efforts for the development of women were also made in India. It is further supported by the fact that the preparation of a comprehensive strategy for women development was entrusted to the National Committee on Women in India sometimes in the late 1980s. The committee could come up with Draft on National Perspective Plan for Women (1998–2000) in the 1990s.

The general development process at the state level, however, had started sometimes in the early years of independence. In the study area, the efforts for the development of the women got off in the 1950s, though at micro level and on a slow pace. The statistical evidence in the Annual Tribal Sub-Plans Published by the State indicates the development of social, economic and health infrastructure.

In the social sphere, education constitutes one of the most critical factors. It is also known that education in general and that of women in particular has not been a priority almost all over the world. But in the Indian context it remained the least. The historical records suggest that educational development in the district started only in the early 1900s. It is mentioned that at that point of time the efforts were made to encourage the education of the girls. But the customs and traditions hampered their entry to schools. In the 1950s only 5.5 percent of the total population of the district was literate. The number of women literate was only 0.12 percent of the total population. In the 1960s the number increased only marginally to 0.19 percent and in 1970s the percentage of the women literate of the total population increased to 0.44. At the same time, the total number of literate persons was 26.23 percent of the total population (Mamgain, 1971, 294–96).

At this juncture it is necessary to spell out that the state government during the First through Ninth Five-Year Plan made considerable financial inputs to develop the educational infrastructure in the district. Consequently, by 1993, as many as 159 primary schools, 51 middle schools, 24 high schools and plus two schools were opened in Kinnaur district as a whole (Tribal Sub-Plan, 1993, 157). The number of said institutions has further gone up in the recent times along with enrolment of students at varying levels. The district also being important from strategic point of view special attention is

given to it under the Tribal Sub-Plan. At present more than 58.36 percent persons including 72.04 percent males and 42.04 percent females constitute the literate population of the district (SOHP, 1995). Though women continue to lag behind the men, yet during the post-1975 period educational scenario indicates considerable improvement with particular reference to the women.

The empirical analysis of the education of the women respondents also reveals that except for 19.7 percent, rest of the women interviewed were educated to varying levels (Primary 15.3 percent; Muddle 30.1 percent; high 31.3 percent; BA 3.3 percent and MA 0.3 percent). In comparison to the literacy level of the district, the women in the sample have very high educational status. Besides, the education of the women themselves, the education opportunities for the girl child are very crucial from the point of view of emancipation of women in the future. In the study area itself there exist primary, muddle, high and +2 level schools.

The educational institutions have now become quite accessible in comparison to the past. While the minimum distance was five kilometers to reach a primary school, it is now just 2 to 3 kilometers in the case of majority of people. The data collected from the field setting reveal that the basic primary education facility is available to 8.4 percent of the respondents within a radius of 1 km and to 79.5 percent it is available within a distance of 2 to 3 kilometers. In the case of remaining respondents (12.6 percent) the facility is located at a distance of 4 to 7 kilometers from their homes. Through the respondents themselves do not have direct gain of available educational facilities for themselves, yet those who have school-going children of young age avail of this opportunity to a great extent. The data also revealed that children in general including girls are sent to school by almost all the parents. This also points out considerable educational consciousness among the parents.

In the economic sphere, the people largely depended upon agriculture. More than 80 percent of the total area of the district remained under variety of crops (Mamgain, 1971, 124). According to the Census of 1961, almost 66.4 percent of the inhabitants of the district were cultivators, 3.6 percent agricultural labourers, 0.5 percent each in trade and commerce and transport and rest of the 29 percent were in other services. The exact number of women involved in agriculture is not available. But their involvement in the agriculture and other type of labour activities was quite common. The women were described as very industrious and carried on work as much as the men and several of them marched along with apparent ease under burden which the effeminate Shimla coolies pronounced to be heavy (Hutton, 1838, 47–48, cited in Mamgain, 1971).

The employment situation of women has however changed considerably over the past few decades, especially after 1950s. Out of total population of Kinnaur, 47.31 percent constitute the main workers. The males main workers are 31.70 percent and the female are 15.61 percent. Among the marginal workers 65 percent are males and 44 are females. The non-workers constitute 47.57 percent and of these 21.50 are males and 26.07 percent are females. The rise in the number of female main workers points out the increasing women's involvement in the economically gainful employment. The industrial classification of the workers in Kinnaur, though, in smaller proportion in relation to the men, indicates women's occupational mobility (SOHP, 1995, 36–37).

A smaller proportion of the population is in the government service and other activities. The empirical findings also suggest that the new projects, such a Bhaba Hydro Electricity Project, in the study area have opened up some work opportunities for the women. The ongoing developmental activities are found to affect the life of the women (Niranjna, 2000). The utilization pattern of these opportunities is lop-sided due to educational disparities. There are only 1.6 percent

of the women respondents found working in the government service; majority (95.4 percent) is distributed in household industry and larger proportion of them in agriculture and horticulture. Only 3.1 percent are worked at the Bhaba Project.

The work participation has enabled the majority of the women (96.5 percent) to earn an average income of Rs. 1,000 per month. Rest of them (1.3 percent, 1.4 percent, and 0.8 percent) on an average earn around Rs. 1000–2000, Rs. 3000–4000 and Rs. 4,001–5000 per month, respectively. Though, in the case of large numbers the income is meager, yet it performs two functions. First, it supplements their household income, and second, it adds to women's social standing in relation to non-working women belonging to same social class and living at the same place. Most of the women in the labour force belong to the scheduled care categories.

There are two visible changes in the social standing of the women. First, the participation of the women in the social and economic decision-making process of the family has increased. But this is limited only to 5.1 percent of the total women interviewed. The majority of the social and the economic decisions are made by the males only (Niranjna, 2000, 73). The second, though also to a limited extent, brought by education and women's increasing work participation is in their age at marriage. This change is in terms of their perception and actual age. In the first category, almost 97.6 percent women opine for minimum age at marriage between 18 to 20 years. Second, almost 32.1 percent women were found to have actually married at the age between 21 to 25 years. Even among those who stated 15 to 20 years (63.8 percent), as many as 30 percent were married at the age of 18 years and above (Niranjna, 2000, 87–88).

The Health scenario in the past was closely linked with the belief in the supernatural, indigenous medicinal herbs and plants, local deities, gods and spirits and the Hakims (Ayurveda physician). The modern system of medicine was introduced in 1914. This was primarily to cater for the needs of the staff members of the forest department of the British India Government. The people in general did not have any benefits. It was later in mid-1940s and in the 1960s, a number of medical centres came up at different places in Kinnaur. A number of specialist's service, such as, treatment for leprosy, tuberculosis, and immunization to control communicable diseases, sanitation etc. became a part of the health programme in the district.

At present, Sungra has four levels of health delivery system. These agencies operate under the directions of the State's Directorate of Health. The Maternal and Child Health care is given top priority with the objective of providing protection to the women against the risk of unwanted pregnancy, risk of abortions and sexually transmitted diseases. In 1990–91 district Kinnaur had achieved a target of 75 percent sterilization operations of the eligible women, which increased to 83.20 percent during 1993–94. The female sterilization is quite common and this is substantiated by the empirical data also. As many as 26.5 percent women in the study sample were found to have undergone this operation. Another 37.5 percent used spacing as a method to avoid unwanted pregnancies. Abstinence as a method is also in vogue as it is a culturally conditioned phenomenon, supported by the customs and traditions of Kinnaur. This forbids husband and wife to live together. During this period the wife goes to her parent's house. The other factor causing abstinence is the employment when the husband moves to another place for work and comes only periodically. This reduces the chances of more pregnancies and therefore less risk to women's health.

At this point it may be mentioned that a considerable number of women (26.3 percent and 3.8 percent and 1.1 percent) do have a risk to their health 1 to 3 times miscarriage respectively suffered by them. The incidence of induced abortion one to two times on health grounds is found among 8.9 percent and 2.0 percent women respectively (Niranjna,

2000, 92–93). The fertility levels among the women range between 1 and 5 plus children. The majority of who have minimum two to three children (31.8 and 30.8 percent respectively). Those going beyond three children constitute almost one-fifth of the total number of women interviewed (Niranjna, 2000, 97). The mortality in 1970 was at 220 per 1,000 women, caused mainly by some type of fever (Mamgain, over the last three decades and is at the lowest, i.e. 8.8 per thousand (SOHP, 1995).

The women's reproductive health is closely associated with women's access to health facilities. The most common and the minimum level of health facilities located within a distance of one kilometer is the Sub-Centre, looked after by a Primary Health Worker and Auxiliary Nurse Midwife (ANM). They provide basic guidance, particularly to pregnant women, maintain records of immunisation, provide pre- and post-natal care to the expectant women and other such services. Generally, a doctor visits the centre once a week. The expectant mothers are called and given counseling and medical assistance as per their needs. The empirical data revealed that this facility is within the reach of more than 75 percent of the women.

The Primary Health Centre (PHC) is well equipped with doctors – a general physician, two to three specialist including one in maternal and child health, pharmacist, qualified nurses, and ambulance facility, and a minor operation theatre caters to the health needs of general public as well as the expectant mother. A majority of the respondents have access to PHCs within distance of only 1 to 2 kilometres (27.8 percent and 31.9 percent respectively). The accessibility decreases with increase in distance. This causes some problem too, as women have to neglect their household chores and children to have the benefit. It is observed that the number of distantly located women health seekers is very often less in comparison to the women living at a relatively closer distance.

One of the field observations, however, reveals that the people seeking health care services do not have much choice to make. While there is greater dependence on the government created health facilities, there are very few respondents who prefer to visit private doctors and nursing homes. The private health facilities being expensive, almost 90 percent of the respondents prefer government hospitals. The numbers of those who like to consult private practitioners, however, are negligible (2.6 percent). The villagers also seek help from the traditional faith healers. The traditional faith healing continues to be a constant feature of the rural and the tribal areas. The women are more inclined to visit such places. In case of emergency the patients are rushed to bigger hospitals. At this level there is hardly any discrimination observed by the Kinnauras. One of the significant developments in the study area is health consciousness, particularly about the health of the mother and the child.

Finally, on the basis of foregoing discussion based on the documentary evidence and the empirical data, the following observations and issues emerge.

First, the descriptive analysis of social and cultural milieu of district Kinnaur reveals that like other parts of India, the impact of Hinduism has been profound. Though Buddhism is also followed by almost 30 percent of the Kinnauras, yet the caste system continues to determine the status of an individual and the group. The caste distinctions and discrimination also exist and it is particularly so between the twice-born castes and the scheduled castes. In the recent times, the class is also gaining ground among Kinnauras. This is mainly due to the educational and occupational mobility which have taken place, particularly among men. But acquisition of class attributes by scheduled caste Kinnauras do not in any way accord them the status of twice-born. In the given scenario, the question of status change among women becomes a complex

phenomenon. There are reasons too. First, the identity of women-both in terms of caste and class, is associated with men. At the level of the community, the ecological settlement of different castes continues to be the same. Therefore, the departure from the traditionally ascribed position becomes difficult even when the economic status is undergoing change. The analysis suggests that social structure with its cultural and economic basis continues to affect the status of all including the women.

Second, the parameters of status described in the women centered approach, include the social, economic and health. The data analysis indicates definite change taking place in the social sphere of the life of women. This is reflected in the increased literacy, development of educational infrastructure, and to a greater extent the accessibility of the girl child to the primary education. The change can be attributed to two major factors. First, the strategic location of district Kinnaur has attracted the attention of the political leadership, planners and policy-makers. Therefore, the financial inputs have been quite adequate. Second, there is emerging education consciousness among Kinnauras, particularly due to occupational mobility which education in combination with reservation policy has brought about in Kinnaur. The women are in the State Administrative Service, police department, legal profession and so on. But these women are urbanised, living in metropolitan centres, having access not only to education but to quality education. The impact of this is felt back home in the village and the women are motivated by the achievement of their own community member. This though requires further empirical investigation, yet is certainly a factor adding to the educational mobility of Kinnaura women.

The changes in the economic sphere are also taking place and affecting the social standing of the women. The women are now found to be working, though majority in the low prestige occupation, in different type of employment set-up. What is important from the economic point of view is that employment outside the home has helped them to have some income of their own. The income, as suggested by empirical data, is no doubt less but it does add to their prestige in their vicinity of living as well as it supplements their family income. The entry of women in the government service also act as an instrument of status change. This has further added in the case of a few of the women's participation in the decision-making processes of the family.

The other area of change pertains to the reproductive health of women. To begin with the age at marriage has increased in the case of as many as one-third of the women. Now they marry at a relatively higher age, that is 23 years or even more. The women are almost totally covered by the innumeration program. The couple protection rate is also going up. This safeguards the women against unwanted pregnancies and also helps them to control over their fertility. The birth rate is certainly coming down along with mortality rates for women. But the problem of miscarriages is empirically found to exist among one-third of the total women interviewed. But the number of induced abortions reported is quite low. The data indicate the changing of health infrastructure in the district. But distance affects the degree of accessibility to a considerable extent. According those who live close by to a health facility have better access than those who are at a distance.

Despite the changes taking place in various aspects of the status of women, there are ascertain problems that continue to keep the women at a low social status. This is observed that the number of women affected by the ongoing changes is very small in comparison to those who have not experienced the change. It may be recalled that in the introductory section it was argued that social structure influences the position of women to a considerable extent. It, therefore, also implies that to accomplish the complete change there is a need to bring about changes in the social structure.

What should be the nature and quantum of change, is a question that requires dialogue. Along with, it was also observed that there are some areas, particularly contraception technology etc. where a definite bias exists against women. A question, therefore, arises why should more women be subjected to sterilisation operations and why do the men refrain from it? In other words, the values of patriarchy need a change.

Lastly, the women centered approach need to be culturally oriented. It no doubt comprises both subjective and objective factors, but the objective factors, particularly imposition of contraceptive technology against the indigenous technology sometimes gives rise to conflicts. This is the reason that the women are caught up between the two and the fertility continues to be high. The empirical data did indicate some women having four to five children whereas the prevalent norm is one to two children or even three. It is, therefore, felt that objective criterion in a given social and cultural setting and due to the operation of various values operative in a society may not even be considered important by the people. The problem therefore remains how to tackle it.

Notes

- Divided mainly into two castes, namely Khashias (twice born castes including Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Rajputs and Vaishyas) and Beru (Scheduled castes).
- A detailed discussion on Kinnaur and social-Cultural, economic and political life of the people of Kinnaur prevalent in the early 1970s is available in the M.D. Mamgain (ed), gazetteer of Kinnaur (1971).

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