

Ecology and Status of Women Among Tribals of India

Veena Bhasin

India as a whole is characterized by sharp gender disparities, although women's status varies considerably by region. The family structure in the country is patriarchal, patrilocal and patrilineal. Consequently a boy is looked upon as the perpetuator of the family line, and a girl 'a bird of passage'. The Indian family organization makes discrimination between the sexes. With a secondary status, women play but a submissive role in social life. Despite several economic, political and social changes, women, are still far behind. One of the most unflattering statistics concerning India's girl child shows that the preference for a son runs across rich as well as poor households, educated as well as illiterate families. Widespread use of modern technology, a joint failure of medical ethics and failure to shed concept of a male heir has pushed female foeticide to high proportions. Female foeticide is just one side of the vast anti-women behavioural range in India. The tragedy is that even women, who have the choice, opt for a male child. They feel that only with a birth of a son, they will achieve higher status.

United Nations has defined the status of women as the "conjunction of position a woman occupies as a worker, student, wife, mother..... of the power and prestige attached to these positions, and of the right and duties she is expected to exercise" (UN, 1975). "To what extent, do women, compared with men, have excess to knowledge, to economic resources and to political power, and to what degree of personal autonomy do these resources permit in the process of decision-making and choice at crucial points in the lifecycle?" (Ibid). Status of women is generally measured using three indicators: - education, employment status and intra-household decision-making power. In general women with higher education tend to have a better position (WHO, 1989). In some cases, however, education alone may not be sufficient to enhance status unless it engages employment as well (Hogan et al., 1999). In addition women's ability to communicate with and convince their spouses or other members of the family indicate their decision-making autonomy. Women with great decision-making power are supposed to have a

higher status in the household.

In India women are discriminated due to several historical, religious and other reasons. A girl child is suppressed from the movement she is born in terms of personal development. She is made to undergo the feelings of being inferior and feeble. She is denied the prospects for personal expression. It was reported during women's workshop (1987) that women's "sexuality is suppressed, their labour exploited, their property and other basic human rights denied to them and their humanity demolished". The so called 'national movement' has further "displaced and marginalized women while at the same time, it has turned them into commodities, not just in terms of being used as machines for producing children, doing household work and even doing jobs outside but always controlled by men to whom they belong".

There are various hypotheses about why women have relatively high or low status. The common premise is that women status is high when they contribute substantially to primary subsistence activities. Women position is low in the societies where food getting is entirely men's job like hunting, herding or intensive agriculture. In the historical times when warfare was essential, men were more esteemed than women. Likewise in the centralized political systems men had high status. Men in most societies contribute more to primary subsistence activities, as women have infant and child care responsibilities. However, women contribute substantially to primary subsistence activities that depend heavily on gathering and horticulture and in which men are away on labour or pastoral duties while subsistence work has to be done. When primary and secondary subsistence activities are counted, women work more than men.

Additionally, lots of myths like their childbearing state, emotions, monthly ups and downs, inability to carry heavy weights, lack of self-confidence, paucity of imagination and real creativity are used to validate women's subordination in the society. Male and female and other genders are culturally constructed categories, associated with culturally defined expected patterns of thought and behaviour that are

subjected to hierarchical distinctions, advantages and disabilities. In India the low status of women derives from a lack of control over material or social resources and from a lack of choice in the unfolding of one's destiny. This started with men maintaining their monopoly over the use of ox-drawn plough used for breaking the dry, hard packed soils. Men achieved this monopoly for essentially the same reasons that they achieved over the weapons of hunting and warfare. Their greater bodily strengths enabled them to be more efficient than women. However a single measure cannot be used to assess the status of women; rather a multi-dimensional cluster of variables is required to indicate the status. Status is not a fixed rigid concept it changes over time. Women occupy different positions in the social structure as they pass through the life cycle, and the very basis upon which the community ascribes power, privilege and prestige also changes.

PRESENT STUDY

Tribal societies have been by and large characterized as egalitarian societies especially in relation to the hierarchical character of caste society. However, it cannot be said of women status. Status of women varies in different societies. All societies offer its children the presence of two genders and related roles, according to kinship, sexuality, work, marriage and age. It also supplies the broad guidelines for undertaking these roles through a body of attitudes, specifications, metaphors and myths. In the present study an effort has been to describe the status of women in four different ecological regions, with different socio-economic conditions and cultural backgrounds. The women, which form part of this study are from:-(a) Ladakh, a high altitude area, 3500- 4500 meters; (b) High valleys of North Sikkim, 3000 meters; (c) Bharmour tehsil, Chamba district, Himachal Pradesh, a middle altitude area, 1340 meters; and (d) Kotra and Jhadol tehsils of Udaipur district, Rajasthan. As suggested by the altitudes, these areas have different ecologies and consequently diverse economies. The Ladakhi Bodh women and Bhutia women of Lachen and Lachung in North Sikkim profess Buddhism while Gaddi women of Bharmour in Chamba district own up Hinduism, and the religious sphere of Bhil women of Rajasthan represent different spirits, gods, goddesses, deities, worship, fear, awe,

reverence etc. The Bhils believe in witchcraft, once identified, the witches (always women) meet a severe treatment.

If we see Ladakhi, Bhutia, Gaddi or Bhil women in regard to their educational achievements, legal and political rights, employment opportunities and demographic characteristics, these women do not have high status. Majority of the tribal women in the study area have never attended school; therefore for those who have completed their primary education, it will make a positive difference in their status. Work status of women in these areas is broad and it includes all forms of women's labour force participation: formal as well as informal work, work inside and outside the home, and work for payment in cash or kind or no earnings. In these traditional tribal communities, the women have an important role to play. Gender principles are central to the organisation of traditional communities. Gender and the division of labour that depends on its recognition, are decisive elements giving these societies stability and cohesiveness (Illich, 1982; Abu-Lughod, 1985). Emphasis on gender, a relational concept provides opportunities for looking at full range of social and cultural institutions, which reproduce gender hierarchies and gender-based inequalities. The cultural interpretation of gender is central to the identity and status of women that entails web of relationships. The conceptual framework to analyze women's status comprise the seven roles women play in life and work: - parental, conjugal, domestic, kin, occupational, community and as an individual. In order to appraise the social status of women in these diverse ecological areas, the findings have been divided in to subsequent categories:-(a) a girl /daughter/ a unmarried woman; (b) a married woman;(c) a widow;(d) divorcee; and (e) a barren woman. Apart from the social status, women role in the social sphere; her political domain; religious sphere; economic activities; and decision making have been discussed.

This study is based on data gathered in the field at various times. From Himachal Pradesh, the data were collected between 1976-1979 while I was a Senior Research Fellow for the Project entitled 'Impact of Technological and Economic Development Programme on Biocultural Heritage of Gaddis and Pangwala Population Groups of Himachal Pradesh'. Some material for the Sikkim was collected in the period 1981-

1983 during my tenure as Research Associate for the Project "Impact of Human Activities on Eco-systems and vice-versa with reference to Sikkim Himalayas". The later part of research in Sikkim was carried out when I was working as a Research Scientist. Data from Ladakh was collected in the period 1991-994. The fieldwork for Bhils of Rajasthan was conducted between 1997-1998. The data were collected through range of methods, including personal narrations, household surveys, conversations, observations, observation and interviews with the help of schedules in the selected villages.

FIELD AREAS

The high-altitude, harsh natural environment of Ladakh is characterized by extreme cold and dryness, high radiation, strong winds, low precipitation, low humidity; and desert like extensive barren landscape, rugged topography, steep and vertical glaciated slopes, minimal forest cover and mineral resources, few pastures at high elevations; and settlements in narrow oases like valleys having limited arable land and limited water for irrigation. The region is extremely poor in conventional energy sources (fossils, fuels and wood) and has almost no industrially exploitable resources. Ladakh's subsistence level agro-pastoral economy, traditional social and religio-cultural systems of fraternal polyandry, primogeniture and monasticism are composite part of the cold desert's ecological system. (For details see Bhasin, 1999).

The Bhutias of North Sikkim are a polyandrous tribe of agro-pastoral transhumants who migrate in the high altitude valleys of North Sikkim. The areas which they customarily inhabit are two river valleys of Lachen and Lachung, situated on the banks of tributaries of the Tista-Lachenчу and Lachungчу, respectively at the height of 3,000 meters. These areas are specially 'reserved' ones where the right to settle or own land is not permitted to strangers, irrespective of their ethnic origin. The Lachen and Lachung area has a special status with regard to land settlement, revenue and local administration. Lachen and Lachung have their own traditional local government encompassing *Dzumsha* (village council) and *Phipun* (headman) that resolve all subjects under discussion (For details see Bhasin, 1989).

The sheep and goat breeders and graziers Gaddis of Bharmour in Chamba district,

Himachal Pradesh, in the Mid Himalayan Zone are transhumant, who spend summer in their permanent homes in Bharmour and cultivate their lands. In winter, which is characterized by heavy snowfall, they migrate to lower hills with their sheep and goat. Bharmour tehsil is remarkably mountainous, level and flat pieces are exception to be met with. Slopes are steep and for irrigation they depend on rainfall. They lack adequate education facilities, means of communication, productive and irrigated land, medical facilities, mechanized cultivation and big irrigated holdings. Agriculture production is reduced by the shorter season, low temperature, high altitude and smallness of the land holdings. To compensate for the agriculture deficit Gaddis raise large flocks of sheep and goat. The lush mountainous meadows and grazing grounds in the area facilitate the raising of sheep and goat. Accumulation of snow in winter months, prevents the year round sustenance of large flocks. The socio-cultural system of Gaddis is influenced by transhumance as they are dispersed in winter and concentrated in summer. This alternating pattern of dispersal and assembling makes for certain fluidity in interpersonal relations. Gaddis are Hindus, both in their origin and their social organization. Gaddis of Bharmour have been given the status the status of a scheduled tribe by the Government of India for the sake of development in view of their social and economic backwardness (For details see Bhasin, 1988).

Bhil villages that form part of this study are from Jhadol and Kotra tehsils of Udaipur district in southern Rajasthan. Jhadol and Kotra are backward tehsils having all the three backward productive sectors (agriculture, general industries and small-scale industries). Significant portion of their geographical area is under forest and uncultivable land leaving a small percentage for cultivation. Physioclimatic conditions have led to poor economic and social infra structural facilities. Lack of infra structural facilities hinder the growth of Productive sectors. If proper infrastructure is provided, the region can attract entrepreneurs and capital to exploit natural resources available in the region and develop industrial sector. Forest, land and human labour are principal economic resources of the Bhils. The Bhils undertake various economic activities. They have covered a long journey from subsistence economy to a competitive economy,

from isolation to involvement in the local mainstream and from lawlessness to a law-abiding community. The traditional animistic religious beliefs of the Bhils have been largely influenced and modified by the impact of Hindu sects.

Before starting a discussion or any generalization of the status of women in these areas, it is important to know the factors that help in interpreting the status that they enjoy in their own family.

GIRL CHILD

(a) *Her Work as a Child*: Among tribals under study girls are not considered as burden because of their economic value. In all the four societies girls participate in all types of work at home and agricultural activities along with their mothers. They act as pseudo-parents and look after their siblings. If they have spare time in spite of all these activities and obtain permission from their parents then they may go to school.

(b) *Freedom in Selection of Life Partners*: The ideal, the arranged marriage between an unrelated pre-pubertal boy and girl, both coming from different villages holds good for all the four communities. However, as pre-pubertal marriages are prohibited, girls and boys do come in contact and want to have their say in selection of the partners. The girl choice is also considered but the boy has to fulfill the other conditions. As the bride price is important among these tribals, if one cannot pay, he has to work for the girl's family for a specified time decided by the village council or he or his family has to arrange a bride for the girl's brother or cousin.

(c) *Pregnancy Before Marriage*: In the four societies under study the response regarding the case of a girl who becomes pregnant before marriage was analogous. If it happens then the matter is discussed in the village council and either the boy has to marry the girl or has to pay the compensation to her family. The child is born in her natal family and it does not have an effect on her marriage prospects in any way.

(d) *Education*: Girls have no say on the topic of education. It is entirely parents' decision. Regarding their aspiration to educate their daughters, the parents in the four communities had different response. More than half of them wanted to send their daughters to schools but others thought it was useless. In absence of hired

labour the girls work at home and fields is of utmost importance and all considered the fact that eventually the girls have to get married and start their families. Where parents are enthusiastic about educating their daughters, though they enroll their daughters in schools but rarely allow them to complete their schooling. The girls study up to primary or middle level and get married.

(e) *Beneficiary of The Father's Property*: The concept of patriarchy prevails in subsistence societies, yet views regarding inheritance were different among the four groups. . Previously among Bodhs of Ladakh, primogeniture was the norm, whereby the eldest son inherited all property except the ornaments of the mother used to go to eldest daughter. This has been changed after the introduction of the laws pertaining to abolition of big land estates, and individual rights. Presently, all siblings have equal share in the family property. In the absence of any male sib, the Ladakhi girl is the sole inheritor, and may enter in to a type of marriage by negotiation known as *magpa*, where the husband has no right over her property and takes up residence with her.

Among Bhutias of Sikkim, possession of animals, fields, grazing rights, household effects as well as the house itself are normally vested in the household. Ownership of material property devolves jointly on a set of blood brothers. The daughters inherit two yaks, clothes and jewellery. If there are no sons, adoption of a close relative or any body from the village is permitted with the consent of the *Dzumsha*. However, in special cases where there are daughters they may inherit the father's property.

Gaddi and Bhil girls have no jural rights over the property. Even in the absence of sons, they have no right to claim the property.

MARRIED WOMEN

Woman's Work: Married women in the study area carry out all types of work at home as well as outside that are demand of mixed agro-pastoral economy. Apart from looking after the house, children and cattle major portion of the agriculture is done by women who do weeding, hoeing, harvesting and threshing. Among Gaddis and Bhils women also work as labourers, Gaddis in the houses of landlords in Kangra and Bhils at construction sites or as field or forest labour. Role

of women is not only of importance in economic activities, but her role in non-economic activities is equally important..

Marriage, Divorce And Household Harmony: The ideal is the arranged marriage, however other types are prevalent in the four communities in the study area and equally valid. She should remain married to the boy for the life but it is not always so. In the study area monogamous, polygamous and polyandrous marriages are prevalent. There may be a premature death, marital discord or infertility that threatens family continuation. It was gathered from the ethnographic data that all the four communities were ready with way out to overcome these state of affairs. The women are rarely abandoned. Ladakhi Bodhs are polyandrous and the position of women is relatively high. Premature death of one husband does not affect her social standing. Even in case of infertility, she is not deserted though another wife is brought into the family. It is the case with the Bhutias of Sikkim as well. Among Gaddis and Bhils, it is socially expected and considered as desirable that subsequent to the death of her husband a woman should marry her brother-in-law, but in actual practice the woman has the final say and she may refuse alliance with such a man.

Marriage, according to Buddhism, is essentially a mundane affair, something of a social contract with right of divorce. Among Bodhs and Bhutias parents of the boy arrange marriages but wishes of both sides are respected. Bride price is paid in cash and kind. The negotiations are conducted and betrothal concluded by boy's maternal uncle or paternal uncle sent by the suitor's father. He fixes a bride-price with the father of the affianced bride, who later instead of returning only an insignificant present, sends back almost the equivalent of what he received. The bride-price does not represent the purchase price of the wife. The parents of the girl give her clothes, ornaments and other household items. At the wedding, bride's mother demands *zo-rintho* or *ome-rin* (price of milk) from the parents of the bridegroom. The amount of such demand and compensation is however meager and customary. In case of marital discord among Bodhs and Bhutia, a woman is free to divorce her husband. In most of divorce cases the bride price is returned. In case of remarriage, the groom to be would pay to first husband if she comes from there or to her father if she comes

from her parental house. All these matters are discussed at length and settlements are reached after number of meetings. Among Gaddis, marriage is a religious sacrament, however there is provision for divorce with mutual consent. Dowry system, in its true traditional sense, is not prevalent among Gaddis. However, at time of marriage certain essential items are given to the girl as gifts by her parents. There is no custom, which might be termed reversed dowry system entailing some payment by the parents of the bridegroom to the parents of the bride. However, different kind of bride price is prevalent among Gaddis. In some cases, especially in those where there is a doubt that girl may not be treated well by her husband and his family, some ornaments are demanded as a kind of security from the bridegroom's parents, and these are retained until the parents of the girl are satisfied that the girl is being treated well and has settled down. When there is a marriage by exchange, in which brother and sister in the family may marry a sister and brother belonging to another family, no bride price is paid. In the case of widow remarriage, if she does not want to marry her brother-in-law, some compensation is paid by her new husband to her ex-husband's family in accordance with the possibility of her bearing children again, as well as her age. Moreover, the man has to bear the cost of the marriage much more heavily than the women. Also a girl's father has little responsibility for making a monetary outlay for his daughter by compulsion although he often does give a substantial gift to his daughter at the time of marriage. If a father wants to avoid that too, he can permit his daughter to elope. Similarly *ghar-jawantari*, a typical form of marriage where the boy has to work as a domestic servant in the house of his would be father-in-law for a specified time. Common causes for divorce among four groups are quarrels and tensions due to heavy drinking, unlikeness and diverse views. The custom of bride price is prevalent among Bhils as well because here also the father considers a girl as an asset as she contributes a lot to the family economy. The Bhils also take bride price as it facilitates marriage expenditure. By tradition Bhils are polygynous. Marriage among Bhils is not a sacrament. For a Bhil, both male and female getting married is a mark of adulthood and maturity. The Bhils pay first consideration to the amount of *dapa* (bride

price). If the bride price is high, then he looks for other options. A Bhil must have a wife and he does obtain one either through a negotiated marriage (by exchange) or through *natra* or by elopement. The Bhils do not attach any importance to the virginity of the girl.

DIVORCEE/WIDOW WOMEN

Among Bodhs and Bhutias, because of automatic levirate, once married a woman has a social security. Traditionally among these groups, fraternal polyandry was practiced and in such polyandrous social structure, women are never insecure. If the eldest husband dies she remains the wife of the brother/brothers. Young widows are rare in these societies. If a younger brother wants to opt out of this arrangement and wants to marry another girl, the girl's father has to pay the compensation in the form of a head and a thigh of yak, *chaang* (millet beer) and cash payment. Among Gaddis and Bhils too the custom of levirate prevails. Amongst Gaddis and Bhils, a wife is the possession of the family, especially entrusted to the husband. In case her husband dies, it, however, does not effect the alliance, as she is supposed to marry her younger brother-in-law (dewar *vatta*). If she wants to marry some one outside the family, he has to pay the bride price to her husband's family. It is socially accepted and considered as desirable that subsequent to the death of her husband a woman should marry her brother-in-law. However it is at the discretion of the widow if she wants to go into the affiliation. Among Gaddis, in case of the birth of a child after the husband's death irrespective of the time gap, the child if it be born in the husband's house, *chaukhandu* (born within the four walls), has full inheritance rights. Woman is responsible for the continuity of patrilineage. As replacement of women is not easy in Gaddi society because of demographic reasons, rights of sexuality are ignored, but right on the womb is there. In case the child is born after a gap after husband's death and away from husband's house, the child gets a share of property from the woman's father or brother, and in case of remarriage the child is entitled to inheritance rights from her new husband. In the later case the amount of the property is settled before the woman agrees to remarry.

It was seen in the field areas that divorce and remarriage is permissible among all the four

groups and the bride price is given back at the time of separation. As among Gaddis there is no clearly defined bride price, there are a few conditions under which marital status is ambiguous. A promiscuous woman who stays with a series of men, and if she bears a child (*hallar* or bastard) and genitor may not be willing to accept it as legitimately his, the child is accepted by girl's parents. There is also a question when a woman leaves one man for another without obtaining a divorce. The first man may object and demand a substantial compensation that the second cannot pay. Under such circumstances the caste council is likely to support the claim of the first man but public sentiment usually is that nothing can be done to force the girl to return to him. The divorcee or widow women among these communities have similar rights and duties as other married women have. The position of women in these environments is related to her economic importance. Women are not viewed as life partners in the usual accepted sense, but also as economically indispensable co-partners in the subsistence economy. Her labour is sufficiently in demand. In all the four groups there are no fixed rules for barren women. However one thing is sure that a new wife is brought to the family. Barren women are generally not abandoned, as their labour is even now valued. Though they may not have many rights however have loads of duties.

WOMEN'S ROLE IN ECONOMIC SPHERE

In the traditional societies which lack market system, the business of everyday living is usually carried on gender division of labour (Illich, 1982). In the study area, the division of labour is mainly between herding and agriculture. In all other tasks concerned with life in the village, such as crafts, house building, watermills and work on boundary walls, there is division between men's work and women's work. Among Gaddis and Bhutias the men are shepherds and women grow crops for food. It is equally valid for Bhils and Bodhs, there too men are out on different duties and women grow crops for food. However the boundaries are not so clearly marked, as there is overlapping and deviations from the rule. There are as well cases where the rule is inflexible and times when change is possible.

Major portion of agriculture is done by

women who do weeding, hoeing, planting, harvesting and thrashing except ploughing (which is done by men) in the fields adjacent to houses or far off fields. The other activities of women include looking after the house, children and cattle. Food processing and cooking is women's job. It is the women who with the assistance of children are largely responsible for the cattle, water fuel and fodder. This permits them considerable time away from home and the village. When they are away from home, they are free to talk to whom so ever they please, male or female, of any caste or creed. As a consequence, communication among women and between men and women is as high as it is among men.

Tribal women are very strong and courageous in the handling of environmental imperatives as can be demonstrated in the trekking and work pattern under the severe limitations of the harsh environment. Several studies dealing with pastoral societies indicate that the position of women in such societies is not very high because the actual care of the livestock and handling of economic affairs is entirely a male domain. However among Gaddis and Bhutias, though women do not directly help in handling of livestock, they do look after their husbands during migrations. They cook for them and carry loads.

WOMEN'S ROLE IN SOCIAL SPHERE

Role of tribal women in the study area is not only of importance in the economic activities, but her role in non-economic activities is equally important. Formation and continuity of family hearth and home is the domain of the women. Women's role as wives, mothers, and organizers and as basic foundation of other dimensions of social life is of extreme importance. Among Gaddis, as men are out for pastoral duties, the socialisation of children automatically becomes mother's business, in the early years of life at least. The Gaddi family assumes mother centeredness with the children and some important decisions falling to the sphere of women's intervention. The role of women in childbirth, funerals and fairs and festivals is an important part of village life. Here women are carriers of traditional information in absence of written records. They are crucial actors in the preservation and dissemination of such knowledge.

They are not only competent food producers and house makers but are also the transmitters of rich local oral traditions.

WOMEN'S ROLE IN POLITICAL SPHERE

In all the four societies under study, women power does not extend to societal or political spheres. The economic power of the women in the household is not translated in to corresponding community authority. They are not ignored at household level but are not given due credit and importance at official level. Women supremacy is restricted within the family domain and does not extend to social or political spheres. It is interesting to note that although by convention every village Panchayat has a female member, the lady never bothers to attend the meeting or to take any active interest in the proceedings of Panchayat. Among Bhutias of Sikkim, the village council, *Dzumsha* is constituted of males only. In the absence of a male member, a female can represent her family unit. If a male head is absent from *Dzumsha* meeting, he is fined, however if represented by female head, she is liable to pay half the amount for her absence. This shows that women have a secondary importance in public affairs and community decision-making. Women are generally bypassed and marginalized either they lack the requisite skills, or because women's heavy and unending domestic responsibilities makes attending meetings and participating in decision making difficult. It always happens that men take over the more profitable activities.

WOMEN'S ROLE IN RELIGIOUS SPHERE

All the four societies under study show male dominance in ritual sphere. Both sexes participate in ceremonies, but men shoulder major responsibilities. Men mainly play musical instruments. Women do take part in dancing but their movements are different from men. Bodhs and Bhutias place great emphasis on coercive rights of exorcising and destroying demons. Both the communities have trained male and female specialists for exorcising demons. Bodhs have *lha-ma* (female) and *lha-pa* (male) and Bhutias have *pau* (male) and *nejohum* (female) who play part in exorcising rights. Bodhs and Bhutias

nunneries are geographically separated from the *Gompas* (monastery) and nuns do not perform rituals and funeral rights for the people. They are present only during festivals and certain ceremonies as spectators or at the time of earning merit for oneself. Bhutias even make difference between male and female funeral pyres. In the case of female and male funeral pyres, eight and seven tiers of firewood are laid respectively for consuming the body into flames. Bhutias explain this discrimination in a way that women are one degree below men in the society. To compensate this lower status of women, her pyre is raised higher.

Among Gaddis and Bhils as well men control ritual realm. Women participate in dancing and singing. In the rituals Gaddi *Chela* or Bhil *Bhopa* perform; Gaddi and Bhil women merely participate as spectators. There are no female counterparts of Gaddi *Chela* or Bhil *Bhopa*.

As the religious sphere is most dominating among tribals it constitutes a major field for male domination. The women are deprived of public authority. Religion legitimizes gender hierarchy. The subordination of women in religious activities and their denial of access to positions of religious leadership has been a powerful tool in most world religions in supporting the patriarchal order and the exclusion of women, from the public form (Ortner, 1974; Sered, 1994, 1998; Wallace, 1997; Franzmen, 2000). The religious sphere is a major field for male dominance, and a strategy to deprive women of public authority (Scott, 1988; Jones, 1993). There are a few innovations in religious sphere, and hence these changes must exist within a traditional, ritual and textual structure. Religious institutions are resistance to gender equality. In structure an explicitly male religious framework contains the tribal societies. Though the secular institutions strive to eradicate inequality but it was seen that women of these areas were lagging behind in all fields.

Even the economic power of the women in the household is not translated into a corresponding community authority. However, female labour is central to all economic activities among tribals. Women perform waged and non-waged, productive and unproductive labour. The workload that is associated with these activities most unlikely does not give women any time to indulge in community affairs.

Women play an important role in their household economy. They work in most opera-

tions of all sectors of the local economy and for longer hours each day than men. In addition to the domestic and reproductive activities associated with household maintenance they also collect and gather free goods especially fuel, fodder and water. Tribal women operate effectively in most economic and social institutions, participating in both local and migrant labour activities. Women's autonomy in terms of decision-making is highly constrained among tribals. They have little access to, and exercise limited control over resources; and few are free from threat and violence at the hands of their husbands. Working for wages is not necessarily an indicator of autonomy. The wage earning tribal women cannot make the decision to work on their own, nor do they have control over their earnings. The marriage pattern and family ties ensure that women are not cut off from family support.

In these areas (as in all other areas) women have their own perceptions of gender equality that cannot be easily quantified by standard indicators

Women's Perceptions on the Subject of

1. *Husband's Contribution in Work at Home.* About fifty percent women in the study area replied in affirmative. Husbands should and do help in cooking and bringing water. There is practically no task, other than minding small children, which does not require cooperation of both sexes. The work done by women is constant, diverse and often arduous. The work of men tends to be seasonal. In the men's light working season, they may help in the work at home.
2. *Prohibitions During Pregnancy and Menstruation.* There are no restrictions during pregnancy between Bodh and Bhutia women, while among Gaddis and Bhil women there is restriction on keeping fast. After the childbirth, among Bodhs and Bhutias, the mother observes a period of pollution, when she is confined to the house for a certain period, usually lasting 30 days. Even outsiders cannot eat food or drink water from the house where childbirth has taken place, as a house is defiled by the childbirth (*bangthip*). It is a socially imposed *zem-ches*. They also cannot appear before the shrines of family and village gods. Among Gaddis there are no such restrictions, as sometimes

deliveries take place during migrations. Bhils observe prohibitions during menstruation. They do not worship, cook food and bring water. All the women justified the restrictions considering themselves impure.

3. *Ownership of Jewellery After Marriage.* More or less all the women considered it as their right to own jewellery.
4. *Permission of Remarriage of a Divorced Woman.* All women agreed on the point that like men, women should also have the prospect to remarry. The four societies under study do have provision for remarriage of a divorcee or a widow. The equality of sexes can be seen in the attitudes and practices concerning marriage and divorce in the four groups.
5. *Women's Talk.* Tribal women talk about their homes, children and emotions; while men talk about work, innovations, ideas and politics. Tribal women in the study area are separated by language. They speak local language; Hindi is mostly understood and spoken by men. Now-a-days children who go to school can also understand and speak Hindi. Education is generally conceived by tribals as a means of upward social mobility for men. The women's mobility on social ladder is through marriage to a person who is likely to be socially mobile. They think, it does not effect women social position whether she is educated or uneducated. Thus mostly boys are sent to school. This discrimination against girls is not because of her lack of intelligence or ability to learn, it is only that it is not going to help her in the traditional life style. The problem of conversing with women is that all questions have to be asked through men and getting the answers by men. Men translate, take things for granted, and mould their answers to suit their occasion.
6. *Concept of Women's Space.* Among tribals in the study area the concept of women's space is where only women may sit, work or enter freely at any time is relatively informal and flexible and depends on the separation of activities that result from the sexual division of labour. It is a characteristics feature of traditional societies to set apart, or see a distinction in physical space, which is used by men and women (de Schlippe, 1956; Edelberg and Jones, 1979; Ladurie, 1979; Illich, 1982). In the study area, there are no

such private or intimate spaces for women, though men have public space to hold meetings, settle disputes, and discuss political and farming issues. There is at least one such space in each of the settlements, either under a tree or in the open space. Women do not have a similar, formal sitting space. The water mill is another space, which interchangeably becomes men's or women's. However as there are several water mills in each settlement, if women ate at one, it tends to be only women and children, but there are no fixed rules. When women occupy public spaces like water source, water spring, field etc., men usually do not join them. The women interact with each other, not with their men as couples. In the study area, the interaction between individual men and women varies according to kinship relation and relative age, which ranges from relaxed informality to extreme avoidance, marked by women covering their head and men averting their glances. Men who are not kin, especially elders do not come closer to an area where a group of women is sitting. By these standards the tribals also maintain the integrity of the gender divide

The courtyards are mainly women's space (except during threshing when men and women work together in the courtyard). All food processing is done here. Washing of clothes, spinning of wool, embroidery, providing bath to children etc is all carried out here. The kitchen is a women' domain. The grazing grounds in and around the village, near water source are areas where old women, young girls and small boys sit with babies, to mind cattle and sheep and goat. In the transhumant societies of Gaddis and Bhutias, both summer and winter pasture contains the elements of time and space when compared to village economy. That is to say, the pastures are spatially removed and are at different altitudes. Being seasonally used, they bring the concept of time. They provide gender differences in the utilization of resources and such as animals as opposed to field crops, male instead of female labour. The tribal women in the study area have been denied roles associated with masculinity as a result of ideology of the family and kinship, which identifies paternal roles with authoritative roles. Few women who have succee-

ded in acquiring some positions in communal life have found that their competence or their executive methods are frequently challenged or ridiculed.

7. *Equal Rights to Men and Women.* Tribal women in the study area recognise the fact that they have been discriminated against in education, income, consumption, status and access to power; they have a worse health record than men; they suffer from social, cultural and legal discrimination and often from violence. They are discriminated on grounds of equity (which refers to equality of opportunities and choices) and efficiency. There is need for quantitative measurement, for a complete set of cultural and rights indicators to assess women's rights.
8. *Labour Work.* Earlier when a woman was working on her farm or collecting minor forest produce from the forest for her family, she felt belonged to it. However with the change in scenario, when she has to do the labour work, she has to collect forest produce for the other agencies, her economic role becomes different. They feel as they are working as unskilled labourers, it does not help in improving their position. Providing skilled training to women may help in elevating their status. Tribal women insist on a need based plan for providing work on year round basis, in line with the multiple occupational pattern of their work.
9. *Violence Against Women.* Few tribal women are free from threat and violence at the hands of their husbands. Violence often becomes a tool to socialize family members according to prescribed norms of behaviour with an overall perspective of male dominance and control. Kelkar(1991) situates violence against women 'in the socio-economic and political context of power relations' and it should include 'exploitation, discrimination, upholding of unequal economic and social structures, the creation of an atmosphere of terror, threat or reprisal and forms of religio-cultural and political violence (Kelkar, 1991: 1). However, the violence in the form of female foeticide and infanticide suffered by women of other castes and communities it seems is not present among tribals.
10. *Voting Rights.* Tribal women take pleasure in their voting rights and about 85 per cent of women in the study area exercised their

right. Most of them follow the advice of their husbands or some of them are under pressure to accept the wishes of their husbands.

11. *Reproductive Rights.* Women in the study areas have no personal opinion on the women's movement in the other parts of the world on the reproductive health issue as a part of women' reproductive rights. They are not comfortable with the idea of women regulating their own fertility. Though they do manage to have abortion with crude methods but men tackle major issues of planning the family. However, the women's reproductive health problems are originated in gender inequalities, control of power and resources.
12. *Utilization of Health Services.* Utilization of health and maternal health services is influenced by the characteristics of the health delivery system such as the availability, quality and the cost of the services. However, it does not necessarily means that if medical services are operational in an area all women are expected to avail the facility. It may be true that, even under the same conditions of availability, the response is different. Other factors such as social structure and status of women are equally important. In the study areas women could not take the decision on their own about going to health centres. It was not only peer pressure but lack of education was the deciding factor.

ARGUMENT

Tribals speak little of statuses and roles when talking about their social life. What they do talk of are the skills for managing the environment for making a living. They also talk of marriage, married life, children, and their socialization within a community of relationships.

The Indian family has many forms and different structures. These have direct bearing on the status of women, not only in terms of the number and quality of relationships to which they have to adapt and the distribution of functions and roles, but also with regard to the allocation of resources. In the study area nuclear, joint, polygamous nuclear, polygamous joint, polyandrous nuclear, polyandrous joint and extended types of families are present

The beliefs and ideas held by locals have a vital influence on the lives of the men, women and children. For one thing, it reinforces the

gender division of work, place, tools and language. According to religious beliefs, women are considered impure, that is why they are not allowed to use plough and interact with supernatural beings directly. The present position and condition of the tribal women is not an accidental affair. It has evolved because of the operation of several forces in the past. The economic cycle and division of labour in the tribal areas has given an important role to the women. This economic role has undoubtedly affected the social position of women, who have social freedom that is quite remarkable in its scope. There is cultural similarity among the different tribal groups in the respective areas under study, as the women from different areas have the similar economic roles to play, necessitated by the demands of environment to grow food for their own consumption. The economic value and worth of women therefore as (a) an independent and necessary unit of economic activity without which the given economic system will not survive, (b) as complementary to the men as work force, in the organised functioning of the whole economic system.

Role of women is not only of importance in economic activities, but her role in non-economic activities is equally important. Women's role as wives, mothers, organisers and as the basic foundation of other dimensions of social life is of utmost importance. The tribal women in these areas occupy an economically significant place that is reflected in the generally high position and the importance that they have. The socio-economic equality of sexes can be observed in the attitudes and practices concerning marriage, divorce and household harmony. The tribal women work very hard, in some cases even more than the men. However these women are not backward. They have power in their own sphere, no men tell them what to do. They are responsible for their own share of work and share the benefits of their own work as long as the unit of production and consumption remains the home. Their own perception and that of their men, is that women share major share of socio-economic activities and consequently they are respected, well thought of and think well of themselves. The concept of patriarchy, which prevails in subsistence societies, conveys respect rather than envy between the genders (Illich, 1982: 1992). Despite the fact that tribal women live their lives as dependents throughout their life cycle: as daughters, sisters, and wives; or as mothers of

sons, they have far more power and independence than modern suburban housewives. A woman always has it in her power to leave her husband if she is angry, dissatisfied or unhappy. She has great freedom of movement as children, if any, remain with the husband. Her labour is sufficiently in demand so that she can move not only back to her natal family but also to a sister's husband's house or a more distant kinsmen's house. She can stay there till such times as she returns to her husband's house or finds a new one. There is no great need for her to return to the natal village although this is the usual practice. Whenever a man in these regions acts on a assumption that his authority will be accepted simply because he is a man and fails to take into account the wishes or feelings of his wife, sister or daughter, he often gets himself into trouble. There is no way for a man to force women's compliance with his wishes. Her economic ability and consequent social position has resulted in special institutional privileges that are bestowed on the women. In spite of having freedom they seldom have a voice in the political sphere. They are not ignored at household level, but are not given due credit and importance in political and religious subjects. They are like invisible hands shaping and maintaining the structure of society.

Even as doors to education and health opportunities have opened speedily for women, the entry to religious and political fields is still not effortless. Even in the economic field, if they are working outside the household, they have an unequal situation in the labour market. They are treated unequally under social welfare systems that affect their status and power in the family. Women receive a small share of credit from formal banking institutions, as they have no collateral to offer. Women normally receive a much lower average wage than men. They are paid less than men for equal work. According to Human Development Report, 1995, the average female wage is only three-fourth of the male wage in the non-agricultural sector in 55 countries that have no comparable data; all regions record a higher rate of unemployment among women than men; in the developing countries, women still constitute less than a seventh of administrators and managers; and women still occupy only 10% of parliamentary seats and only 6% of the cabinet positions.

Before the 1980s it was assumed that all

women shared a common subjugation, and reason for their oppression were open to explanation. However multiculturalism and identity politics overcame this consensus and set the debate about differences. Full range of social and cultural institutions, which reproduce gender hierarchies and gender-based inequalities include legal equality and excess to education and health. In the tribal areas under study the economic cycle and division of labour in the area has given an important role to the women. Environmental resource management illustrates that sustainability, especially in fragile ecosystems of Ladakh and Sikkim, is better achieved by knowledge, skills and techniques of local people, which include mostly women. This does not necessarily mean that women are generally more environment-friendly; it is just that division of labour has given an important role to the women. Women's participation in the economic activity is important for their personal advancement and their status in the society. Work participation is influenced by a combination of number of social, economic, cultural and demographic factors. This economic role has undoubtedly affected the social position of women, who have social freedom that is quite remarkable in its scope. There is cultural similarity among the different groups in the study area, as the women from different tribes have the same economic roles to play, necessitated by the demands of environment to grow food for their own consumption. The economic value and worth of women therefore as (a) independent and necessary unit of economy without which the given economic system will not survive, (b) complementary to the men as work force, in organised functioning of the whole economic system. Women exhibit ingenuity, creativity and initiative in solving their daily problems of sustenance and survival and often demonstrate organizational skills as revealed during labour exchange (mutual aid groups) and communal service ventures. These social networks are important for the local economies. This cultural acceptance of the fact of their raised status gives them a voice in household affairs that is almost equal to their husbands. The economic power of the women in the household is not translated into a corresponding community authority. The male head, which is custodian of property, manages the family finance. Selections of the bridegroom for the daughter or sister, acquisition

or disposal of property are all domains of the male members or eldest male. In spite of a substantial contribution in the subsistence economy, a women's right is not recognised in the transmission of landed property and this makes her dependent upon men. The socio-economic equality of sexes can only be seen in the attitudes and practices concerning marriage, divorce and household harmony.

The present study corroborates the premise that women status is high when they contribute substantially to primary subsistence activities. Although they lack control of material and social resources, their contribution to subsistence economy give them important and irreversible position. It may be concluded as it is observed that ecology and environmental factors existing in tribal areas under study have given these women a special economic power, and an elevated status. However, there are certain domains in which men continue to dominate, as is culturally required. Moreover, community still is in the hands of men. There is kind of duality observable here. Men dominate in public, in social and religious affairs, and continue to play the role of the head of the family and breadwinner, women enjoy a greater say in their family life, they have a greater deal of social freedom and several of their actions are condoned/tolerated. This confirms with Ortel and Rosalindo's thesis in one way that in spite of the public/domestic dichotomy the ecological/economic division interferes further modification in women's position. Here one may say that the public/domestic dichotomy is not the only criterion for determining women's status in society.

All the tribal societies in the study area are patriarchal in which men dominate in public sector. However, in their own world women have a freedom, and a self-expression. They can only be understood on their own terms. With the onset of development programmes economic changes are taking place but tribal women remain traditional in their dress, language, tools and resources, because they grow food crops rather than cash crops. Significant changes have taken place in the two decades separating the United Nations Conferences on women in Mexico City (1975) and the meeting in Beijing (1995). Modernization is bringing changes, which affect men and women differently. Modernization brought by outside agencies is set in a male-biased ideology, women are seen as inherently

‘incapable’; the new techniques are aimed at men by men. Male values are also reflected in the view that development is solely dependent on technological and economic advances. Such values exploit both the environment and vulnerable groups such as women (Hewitt, 1989: 351). The thought that women are being treated shabbily, women centered programmes for developments were evolved which tended to overlook the importance of man-woman relations. Inadequate planning and implementation as well as culture resistance gave rise to more gender disparities. The association between cultures, economic organizations and different patterns of women’s labour force participation ought to be implicit. Though efforts have been made in almost all countries to improve the status of women but it is still an unequal world.

KEYWORDS Ecology. Society. Position of Women. Himalaya. Plains

ABSTRACT The present study corroborates the premise that women status is high when they contribute substantially to primary subsistence activities. Although they lack control of material and social resources, their contribution to subsistence economy give them important and irreversible position. It may be concluded as it is observed that ecology and environmental factors existing in tribal areas under study have given these women a special economic power, and an elevated status. However, there are certain domains in which men continue to dominate, as is culturally required. Moreover, community still is in the hands of men. There is kind of duality observable here. Men dominate in public, in social and religious affairs, and continue to play the role of the head of the family and breadwinner, women enjoy a greater say in their family life, they have a greater deal of social freedom and several of their actions are condoned/ tolerated. Here one may say that the public/domestic dichotomy is not the only criterion for determining women’s status in society.

REFERENCES

- Abu-Lughod, L.: A community of secrets: The separate world of Bedouin women signs. *J. Women Cult. Soc.*, 10: (1985).
- Bhasin, V.: *Himalayan Ecology, Transhumance and Social Organisation. Gaddis of Himachal Pradesh*. Kamla-Raj Enterprises, Delhi (1988).
- Bhasin, V.: *Ecology, Culture and Change: Tribals of Sikkim*. Inter-India Publications, Delhi (1989).
- Bhasin, V.: *Tribals of Ladakh: Ecology, Human Settlements and Health*. Kamla-Raj Enterprises, Delhi (1999).
- Bhasin, V.: *Human Settlements, Human Activities and Health Among the Tribals of Rajasthan*. Unpublished Report (2002).
- de Schilppe, P.: *Shifting Cultivation in Africa: The Zande System of Agriculture*. Routledge and Kegan-Paul, London (1956).
- Franzmann, Majella.: *Women and Religion*. Oxford University Press, Oxford (2000).
- Hewitt, Farida: Woman’s work, woman’s place: A gendered lifeworld of a high mountain community in northern Pakistan. *Mountain Research and Development*, 9: 335-352 (1989).
- Hogan, D.P., Berhanu, B. and Hailermarium, A.: Household organization, women’s autonomy and contraceptive behaviour in southern Ethiopia. *Studies in Family Planning*, 30(4): 302-314 (1999).
- Human Development Report (1995).
- Illich, I.: *Gender*. Pantheon Books, New York (1982).
- Jones, K. B.: *Compassionate Authority: Democracy and the Representation of Women*. Routledge, London (1993).
- Kelkar, G.: *Violence Against Women In India: Perspectives and Strategies*. Asian Institute of Technology, Bangkok (1991).
- Ladurie, Le Roy: *Montveion: The Promised Land of Error*. Vintage Books, New York (1979).
- Ortnel, Sherry: Is female to male as nature is to culture. In: *Women, Culture and Society*. Michelle Rosaldo and L. Lamphere (Eds.). Stanford University Press, Stanford (1974).
- Rosaldo, M.: Introduction. In: *Women, Culture and Society*. Michelle Rosaldo and L. Lamphere (Eds.). Stanford University Press, Stanford (1974).
- Scott, John Wallach: *Gender and the Politics of the History*. Columbia University Press, New York (1988).
- Sered, Susan S.: *Priestess, Mother, And Sacred Sister*. Oxford University Press, Oxford (1994).
- Sered, Susan S.: Religiously doing gender: The Good women and the bad women in Israeli Ritual Discourse. *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* (1998).
- United Nations Conference on Women in Mexico City (1975).
- United Nations Conference on Women, Beijing (1995).
- WHO.: *Preventing Maternal Deaths*. World Health Organisation, Geneva (1989).
- Wallace, Ruth A.: The Mosaic of Research on Religion: where are the Women? *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* (1977).

Author’s Address: Veena Bhasin, Research Scientist ‘C’ UGC, Department of Anthropology, University of Delhi, Delhi 110 007, India