

Gender and Exclusion: A Retrospective Analysis of the School Education Scenario in Sikkim

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ABSTRACT Despite many inclusionary measures, exclusion of girls in education continues to be an enduring challenge in India primarily due to structural constraints. Sikkim, the new entrant in Indian union as the 22nd state in 1975 was traditionally rooted in ethos of patriarchal society. With its history of traditional religious based monastic education, exclusion of girls in education was a common phenomenon and bridging the gender gap had remained a challenging task for many years. Based on the educational indicators, official statistics and secondary data as well as the narratives, the paper aims to look retrospectively at the practices of gender exclusion in school education in the past, and at the same time the paper highlights how the development initiatives of the state has positively impacted the sphere of girls' education in recent time.

INTRODUCTION

Gender as a category of social exclusion has been rooted and manifested in various social institutions and exclusion of girls in education is one such form. Despite many inclusionary measures and initiatives in national and international forum, exclusion of girls in education continues to be an enduring challenge in all developing countries including India, which is largely shaped by the structural constraints. Drawing on feminist and intersectionality perspectives, Nakray (2017) argues that the constraints of Indian education policies in successfully achieving the dual goal of economic efficiency and social justice concerning to girls' education from marginalised communities is primarily due to the juxtaposing effect between the power imbalance between the haves and have nots and the institutional discrimination. Das (2019) observed that the low enrolment and high dropout rate among marginalised and socially excluded communities in India is primarily due to the fact that educational institutions have failed to play the anticipated role of being the source of resilience from the structural burdens of poverty and household illiteracy, rather children from these communities have experienced schools to be their adversities. Arguing in similar vein, Kumar

(2019) pointed out that mere inclusion of marginalised groups, particularly Dalits, in educational institutions does not guarantee equality rather it inclined to 'produce newer forms of exclusion, inequality and suppression', as the pedagogic thinking of most institution reflects hierarchical structuring of social structure reproducing a more productive, disciplined and loyal individual out of them.

Educational achievements and accessibilities for girls' education depend not only on the legislative and policy measures but determined to a considerable extent by the socio-cultural and economic milieu of the society. Study of inequality in educational opportunities across sex, regions and income groups by Das (2016) revealed that India is still unable to provide adequate school facilities to all the willing children who wants to attend school and the household's decision of not sending children to school is predominantly determined by monthly per capita expenditure. The analysis highlighted that improving school attendance requires tackling financial impediment and raising household above the poverty line, therefore there is need of providing free education with improved facilities in school along with mid-day meal system. Subrahmanian (2002) argues the shift in the Indian educational policy toward 'rights-based

approach' is welcoming, however is unrealistic to achieve without understanding the underlying structural conditioning; as changing economic reality has conditioned education to restrict itself for development of human capital and the increasing practice of 'unbridled privatisation' of education has juxtaposed to new policy approach. Therefore, he suggested that attaining inclusive right to education requires reframing the existing provision to allow for diversity, difference and exclusion to be reflected in the understanding of 'universal education'.

In a patriarchal social setup like India, due to the existence of deep-seated gender-based discrimination, accessibility to school education remains an exclusionary process for girls. Consequently, despite many legislative measures and state policies for bridging gender inequalities, still wide gaps between the objectives and the situational reality persist. Sen and Dreze (1999) highlighted that the prevalence of female illiteracy has been due to poor functioning of the schooling system, lack of gender neutral primary school system in rural India, low social values attached to girls' education combined with patrilineal property right and patrilocal residence and village exogamy. It should be noted that in India such disparity exists not only in the schooling system but also in the context of higher education. Sabharwal et al. (2019) has analysed that disparity and exclusion is still operational in Indian academia as the participatory rate of women and scheduled castes in academic conferences are much lower to that of men and upper-caste academics suggesting inefficiency of policy measures for inclusive education.

To address this gap, one of the prime focus areas of the UNESCO Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) through the 'Education 2030 Framework for Action' aims at promoting life-long learning opportunities for all and ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education, which is inextricably linked in bridging the gender gap. It further reiterated various socio-cultural and economic factors that act as obstacles for girls and women in fully exercising their right to access and benefit from education. Therefore, the 2030 agenda recognises the right to quality education as a universal and collective commitment requiring political will, global and regional collaboration and the engagement of all govern-

ments, civil society, and other stakeholders to tackle educational challenges and build educational systems that are inclusive, equitable and relevant to all learners¹.

Sikkim, a traditional society, rooted in patriarchal ethos with its history of religion-based monastic education in the past, the literacy scenario of girls was in a dismal state and exclusion of girls from such education system was a common phenomenon. Since its incorporation in the Indian union the state undertook many development initiatives, in which universalisation of school education and bridging the gender gap in education were among many priorities. Therefore, based on the educational indicators, official statistics, secondary data, field accounts and narratives of known and pioneer educationists of Sikkim, the paper aims to look retrospectively at the practices of gender exclusion in school education and its scenario in the past, and at the same time attempts to look into changing trend in the sphere of girls' education in recent time.

Conceptual Framework

The subject matter of social exclusion is one of the most engaged concepts in the lexicon of policy discourses providing an integrated analytical framework for analysing historically and socially disadvantaged groups, contextual to the existing social reality of Indian society. The concept is of 'recent origin' (Sen 2000), and it is believed to have been popularised by French Secretary of State for Social Action, René Lenoir (1974) while discussing about strengthening the socio-economic cohesion of marginalised sections that are left out from the society. *Exclusion sociale* is specifically used in the milieu of French policy for selective categories of people, identified into ten groups². Relatively, Power has conceptualised it as 'the inability of our society to keep all groups and individuals within reach of what we expect as a society' (2000: 47).

Social exclusion is imbedded in deprived sections that have been pushed to the peripheries of the society in the process of social formation and organisation, instilling a sense of exclusion from the mainstream society. Singh and Ziyuddin pointed out that in Indian context, social exclusion is prevalent due to the 'denial of equal opportunities by certain groups of the society,

which impose themselves upon others that leads the inability of an individual to participate in the basic political, economic and social functioning of society' (2009: 521). The pervasiveness of the system of inequality, as argued by Puri (2014), is due to the failure of the Indian state in providing an inclusive and just governance.

The existing social inequalities and marginalisation of socially disadvantaged sections of the society are largely based on the notion of caste, ethnicity, religion, and importantly gender, which cut across all the existing sections. Sen (2000) has discussed six important markers while engaging in the discourse of social exclusion, of which 'gender-related exclusion and inequality' is one of important features. Social exclusion of gender has been a widely studied phenomenon in social sciences scholarship wherein education has been equated with empowerment. The National Policy on Education, 1986 affirms that education 'provides the instruments for liberation from ignorance and oppression' (Jain 2005: 16) and is a basic tool of self-defence (Sen and Dreze 1999). It endows one with what Bourdieu (1986) called as cultural and social capital, which can be translated into advantages in educational terms.

Education as an empowering instrument of both sexes has been suggested in numerous studies. Accordingly literacy level and educational attainment are vital developmental indicators. In developing nations, like India, education is a facilitating factor in enhancing the status of women, thus instrumental in achieving gender equality and bridging the gap between privileged and unprivileged sections. Contending on positive correlation between education and women empowerment, Roy (2005) observes that education is fundamental for deprived and socially excluded sections, as it serves as a bridge towards bringing social equilibrium by facilitating their meaningful participation in political and civil life. By generating human resources, economic self-reliance, awareness of health and their rights, education enlightens the members for a rational and critical approach to life which subsequently contributes to micro-level changes in the family and the community. Once it becomes a habit, a part of self-generating culture, it becomes instrumental in bringing changes in collective thought process and perceptions of a

community. Education capacitates and enables women to take their rightful place in society and the development process (Mishra 2009; Sen et al. 1999), paving the way for empowerment of women, which is the buzzword in the discourse of gender equality. Women empowerment is a holistic and multidimensional process and encompasses multiple strategies, and nonetheless the human development model emphasises on education as the most vital component, which endows one with the "human capabilities", the power to reflect, make choices and seek a voice in society (Sen and Dreze 1999). Numerous world conventions on women empowerment have contended for the promotion of women's economic independence. However, economic independence emanating from employability lies on possession of knowledge and skills with degree of sophistication and ability in decision-makings, for which education remained both as the foundation and the key to economic freedom.

Background of Girls' Education

The UN System Task Team on the Post 2015 UN Development Agenda affirmed that the right to education has been seen as an enabling right for the realisation of economic, social and cultural rights, a catalyst for positive societal change, social justice and further reiterated the need of inclusive education highlighting the interconnectedness between development goals and gender equality³. Various scholars (Lockheed and Verspoor 1990; Bhatta 1998; Govinda 2002) have presented compelling justification for investing in girls' education. Sen and Dreze (1999: 109) noted education as an enabling factor for realisation of socio-economic and cultural rights, an instrument to overcome traditional inequalities of caste, class and gender. In developing countries, like India, educating girls and women is the single most effective investment, as it creates multitude of positive remunerations for families (Ozturk 2001), and increases the amount of social capital under their management (Perotti 1993).

Basic education to girls and bridging the gender gap were identified as critical priorities by the World Education Forum in Senegal (Peppler Barry 2000), and these were also major focus areas of the Millennium Development Goals

(MDGs). Retrospectively, in India, girls' education drew urgent attention after independence. Subsequently, the Planning Commission of India in July 1957 setup a committee to look after the issue. Indian Education Commission, 1966, the National Policy on Education (1986) and National Perspective Plan for Women's Education, 1988-2000 were some of the noteworthy initiatives that emphasised the Universal Elementary Education (UEE) and for addressing the issues of girls' education. The 86th Amendment Act, 2002 recognised the right to elementary education as a fundamental right and the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009 made it a legislative mandate for an inclusiveness education for girls (Thapa 2014). Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) and Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan (RMSA), which have been presently subsumed under Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) have a component of bridging gender inequalities.

In Retrospection of School Education in Sikkim

Sikkim, the 22nd state of Indian union was a Himalayan Buddhist kingdom till 1975. There is no historical evidence of an educational system in Sikkim before the establishment of monarchy during the early 17th century. The introduction of Lamaism or Tibetan Buddhism subsequently brought the system of religious based traditional monastic education, which essentially was a priest craft (Risley 1894) focussing mainly on training of the Lamas or monks. The Nyingmapa school of Buddhism, which is the oldest of the four offshoots of the Mahayana system of Buddhism, took firm roots in Sikkim some 300 years ago and flourished on the lines of Tibetan and Indian Gurukul systems. However, even though it originated in Tibet, the monastic education underwent many changes subsequently to accommodate the local realities and context (Acharya 1998). This was the first phase in the history of education in Sikkim.

The history of modern formal education in Sikkim dates back to the establishment of a missionary school in 1883 in Gangtok by a Scottish Missionary Reverend McFarlane (Datta 1992). Subsequently, two more schools, Bhutia Boarding School (1906) and Nepali Boarding School

(1907) were established, which later amalgamated into Sir Tashi Namgyal High School (TNHS) in 1925 (Dewan 2012). The period after witnessed the flourishing of many schools under the initiatives of the state, Scottish and Scandinavian missionaries, and the landlords. However, girls' education began much later in 1912 when the Christian missionaries established the first girls' school at primary level (Kharel 2013). During the regime of Chogyal (Monarch), the late 1940s and the early 1950s witnessed further systematisation of administrative system facilitating educational expansion in the state leading to the establishment of Inspectorate of Education in 1945, a full-fledged Education Directorate in 1954 and also the Teachers' Training Institute (Datta 1992; Pradhan 2013). Despite the initiatives, quality education remained conservative catering mostly to the requirements of feudal nobles during the period, making it out of reach from common people (Datta 1992). This was reflected in the establishment of Tashi Namgyal Academy (TNA) a public school in 1964 with an aim to fulfil the demand for modern quality education for the children of Sikkimese elites (ibid). Therefore, the fundamental reason for the lack of universal education for the commoners was primarily due to lack of educational infrastructure and amenities, which were far shorter than the actual requirements of the people (ibid).

At the time of the merger there were a total of 267 schools of which seventy-nine percent were government-run and twenty-one percent were private schools. However, only three percent of these schools were catering to high school and higher secondary education with only one college for higher education. During the period, the gross enrolment of girl students accounted only thirty-four percent in the overall education system in Sikkim (Pradhan 2013). After the merger, with the large-scale expansion in the activities of state in relation to modernisation and expansion of administrative structure, the organisation of a bureaucratic setup opened up avenues in service sectors and employment opportunities resulting in the need for development of human resources. Accordingly, the state government focussed enormously on the growth of human resources through quality education within the framework of National Educational Policy (NEP), Government of India. Consequent-

ly, in recent times, there has been substantial increase in the school network system. As per the Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation Division (PME), Human Resource Development Department (HRDD), Government of Sikkim, there were 774 government schools in 2014 and 413 private schools as in 2012 catering the educational needs for the children at all level of schooling, that is, elementary, secondary, and senior secondary. The education department, being one of the largest state government undertakings in Sikkim, has a major focus on universalisation of school education throughout the state and rural areas, which is reflected in the existence of 92.34 percent of total schools in rural areas as against 84.71 percent in the all India percentage, ranking 3rd among the North Eastern States (NES), while the remaining 7.66 percent are located in the urban areas (NEUPA 2016).

The state has initiated various policies and programmes among which numerous scholarships, namely, the Pre and Post-Matric Merit Scholarships for School Education, Prerna Scholarship Scheme for Girl Child, Honourable Chief Minister's Merit Scholarship (HCMMS), nomination for higher and professional studies under the Human Resource Development Department of Government of Sikkim, Centrally Sponsored Schemes like merit-cum-means scholarships to students belonging to minority community funded by the Ministry of Minority Affairs, Government of India under the Social Justice, Empowerment and Welfare Department (SJEWD) deserve special mention. The state has also provisions for free education at the school and college level. These initiatives provided enough strength and consolidated the base of school education in general and girls' education in particular.

Literacy and School Education Scenario and Gender Component

A close examination of the literacy rate in the post the 1975 phase shows that, Sikkim despite being one of the youngest states has witnessed a phenomenal change in its literacy rate in a short span of time. Table 1 presents the literacy profile of Sikkim for the past four decades, starting in 1981 till 2011, which shows a considerable improvement in the literacy rate of the state from 34.05 percent in 1981 to 82.20 percent in 2011, as against all India literacy rates of 74.00 percent (Census 2011). Sikkim ranked 7th in the country and 3rd among the NES of India, the first two being Mizoram (91.6%) and Tripura (87.8%). The picture of female literacy rate in the state also shows an encouraging leap in the last four decades from 22.20 percent in 1981 to 76.43 percent in 2011 as against 65.5 percent of the national average. In relation to rural-urban literacy gap, urban literacy rate in 1981 was 54.86 percent, which was increased to 69.85 percent in 1991, 84.82 percent in 2001 and 89.26 percent in 2011, whereas, rural Sikkim's literacy rate has significantly improved from its initial 30.05 percent in 1981 to 44.14 percent in 1991, 67.67 percent in 2001 and 79.82 percent in 2011.

Overall gender gap in literacy has also considerably narrowed in the last four decades from 21.75 percent to 10.86 percent between 1981 and 2011 (Table 2). The gender gap ratio presents a better scenario than the all-India gender gap of 16.5 percent (2011 census). A similar trend is also being noticed in both rural and urban areas. While the gap has narrowed down persistently from 16.02 percent to 7.75 percent during 1981 to 2011 in urban areas, the rural areas of Sikkim has experienced drastic improvement from a whop-

Table 1: Literacy profile of Sikkim from 1981 to 2011

Area	1981			1991			2001			2011		
	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total
Rural	40.25	18.24	30.05	51.94	35.40	44.14	75.11	59.05	67.67	85.42	73.42	79.82
Urban	61.44	45.42	54.86	74.69	63.40	69.85	88.61	80.19	84.82	92.94	85.19	89.26
Sikkim	43.95	22.20	34.05	56.94	46.76	56.94	76.73	61.46	69.68	87.29	76.43	82.20

Source: Sikkim: A Statistical Profile, 2004-05, 2006-07, DESME, GOS, cited in Thapa, 2009; and Census of India, 2011

Table 2: Gender gap in literacy

S. No.	Category	1981	1991	2001	2011
1.	Rural	22.01	16.54	16.06	12
2.	Urban	16.02	11.29	08.42	7.75
3.	Sikkim	21.75	10.18	15.27	10.86

Source: Sikkim: A Statistical Profile, 2004-05, 2006-07, cited in Thapa, 2009; Census of India, 2011.

ping 22.01 percent in 1981 to 12.00 percent in 2011.

A 14-year analysis of the enrolment trend in government schools (2001-2014) indicates that girls' enrolment has consistently remained above 50.00 percent throughout the twelve years span from 2003-2014 except in initial two years in 2001 and 2002, when it was recorded at 49.46 percent and 49.92 percent, respectively. The district wise figures also revealed similar trend. The lowest percentage of girl's enrolment is recorded in south district (48.83%) in 2003. However, in 2010 which 52.28 percent, girl's enrolment out number to that of boys (47.72%). The scenario is more or less the same in all districts of Sikkim (Table 3).

Further analysis of stage wise enrolment of students highlight that the girls' ratio has consistently improved over the year in all levels of school education, that is, elementary, secondary and senior secondary level (Table 4). However, looking retrospectively, way back in 2001, the girls' percentage dwindled in the higher level of school education, especially in the senior secondary level (44.9%), which presently as significantly improved.

OBSERVATIONS AND DISCUSSION

Sikkim, traditionally, being an agrarian society with 74.85 percent of the population residing in rural areas (2011 Census), did not encourage education in general, which is reflected in popular Nepali aphorism ...*parhigunikekam, haolojotikhayomaam* (what is the use of education when ultimately you must work in the field for sustenance). When this worldview is further abetted with strict adherence to male dominated social institutions predominant among all the three major communities (namely, Lepcha, Bhutia and Nepali) of Sikkim, discour-

Table 4: Stage wise and sex-wise break up of students in government schools (2001, 2010-12, 2014)

Stages	2001			2010			2011			2012			2014		
	Boys	Girls	Total	Boys	Girls	Total	Boys	Girls	Total	Boys	Girls	Total	Boys	Girls	Total
P-P	12205	11003	23208	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1877	1807	3684
I-V	38837	38166	77003	34150	34738	68888	30452	30594	61046	27079	27421	54500	20824	20605	41428
VI-VIII	11779	12843	24622	13037	16706	29743	15074	18283	33357	16629	19340	35969	16994	18499	35493
IX-X	4236	4010	8246	5706	6680	12386	6583	7998	14581	7691	9352	17043	10088	11760	21848
XI-XII	2520	2057	4577	3666	3837	7503	4527	4884	9411	5113	5751	10864	6555	7724	14279
Grand Total	69577	68079	137656	56559	61961	118520	56636	61759	118395	56512	61864	118376	56338	60395	116732
	-50.5	49.5	-100	-47.7	-52.3	-100	-47.9	-52.1	-100	-47.8	-52.2	-100	-48.26	-51.73	-100

Source: PME, HRDD, 2015

Table 3: Enrolment in government schools (2001-2014)

Year	East Sikkim			South Sikkim			North Sikkim			West Sikkim			Grand Total		
	Boys	Girls	Total	Boys	Girls	Total	Boys	Girls	Total	Boys	Girls	Total	Boys	Girls	Total
2001	28021	27921	55942	18860	18430	37290	5051	4831	9882	17645	16897	34542	69577	68079	137656
	50.08	49.92	100	50.58	49.42	100	51.11	48.89	100	51.08	48.92	100	50.54	49.46	100
2002	27500	28176	55676	19125	18380	37505	4833	4784	9617	17557	17451	35008	69015	68791	137806
	49.39	50.61	100	50.99	49.01	100	50.25	49.75	100	50.15	49.85	100	50.08	49.92	100
2003	27018	27909	54927	19203	18326	37529	4757	4883	9640	17784	17793	35577	68762	68911	137673
	49.19	50.81	100	51.17	48.83	100	49.35	50.65	100	49.99	50.01	100	49.96	50.06	100
2004	26064	27185	53249	16244	17020	33264	4639	4842	9481	16594	16935	33529	63541	65982	129523
	48.95	51.05	100	48.83	51.17	100	46.93	51.07	100	49.49	50.51	100	49.06	50.94	100
2005	26593	27740	54333	16700	17414	34114	4839	5045	9884	16953	17131	34084	65086	67331	132417
	48.94	51.06	100	48.95	51.05	100	48.96	51.04	100	49.74	50.26	100	49.15	50.85	100
2006	25030	26555	51585	15530	16127	31657	4465	4676	9141	15655	16012	31667	60680	63370	124050
	48.52	51.48	100	49.06	50.94	100	48.85	51.15	100	49.44	50.56	100	48.92	51.08	100
2007	23621	25304	48925	14659	15576	30235	4315	4674	8989	15008	15553	30561	57603	61107	118710
	48.28	51.72	100	48.48	51.52	100	48	52	100	49.11	50.89	100	48.52	51.48	100
2008	23137	24977	48114	14438	15642	30080	4245	4600	8845	14961	15559	30520	56781	60778	117559
	48.09	51.91	100	48	52	100	47.99	52.01	100	49.02	50.98	100	48.3	51.7	100
2009	23016	25020	48036	14225	15636	29861	4137	4427	8564	14833	15455	30288	56211	60538	116749
	49.91	52.09	100	47.64	52.36	100	48.31	51.69	100	48.97	51.03	100	48.15	51.85	100
2010	23060	25780	48840	14842	16204	31046	3987	4453	8440	14670	15524	30194	56559	61961	118520
	47.22	52.78	100	47.81	52.19	100	47.24	52.76	100	48.59	51.41	100	47.72	52.28	100
2011	23169	25756	48925	14785	15989	30774	3877	4292	8169	14805	15722	30527	56636	61759	118395
	47.36	52.64	100	48.04	51.96	100	47.46	52.54	100	48.5	51.5	100	47.84	52.16	100
2012	23135	25827	48962	14820	15983	30803	3792	4192	7984	14765	15862	30627	56512	61864	118376
	47.25	52.75	100	48.11	51.89	100	47.49	52.51	100	48.21	51.79	100	47.74	52.26	100
2013	23133	25386	48519	14967	16031	30998	3803	4106	7909	14856	15609	30465	56759	61132	117891
	47.67	52.32	100	48.28	51.71	100	48.08	51.91	100	48.76	51.23	100	48.14	51.85	100
2014	23249	25262	48511	14837	16038	30875	3662	3934	7596	14590	15161	29751	56338	60395	116732
	47.92	52.07	100	48.05	51.94	100	48.2	51.79	100	49.04	50.95	100	48.26	51.73	100

Source: PME Section, HRDD, 2015

agement becomes more pronounced vis-à-vis girls' education. Such social structures emphasises on strict gendered division of labour and compliance to private-public dichotomy where the women were assigned to private domain with economically unproductive work of rearing, caring and managing households chores. The conformity to such gendered norms acted as constraining factors for investment in girls' education, resulting in virtual exclusion of girls from the education system. The lack of social support for girls' education was evident in societal perception, which was reflected in the Nepali adage *...chori cheli arkako ghar ma janey jat* (daughters and sisters are meant for others' home). Here, the use of the terminology 'jat' reflects how the concept of 'othering' is being internalised by the family members for their girl child. This has been widely accountable for lack of encouragement and motivation for girls' education in traditional Sikkimese society and implying universal practice of early marriage for girls based on patrilineal and patrilocal residence. In synchronisation of the prevailing view of the society, Mr. P. B. Thapa, an 84-year-old former school teacher and headmaster of Makha, East Sikkim, recalled how he was discouraged by his own relatives and villagers upon his decision to send his daughters for high school education in Kalimpong during the 1970s. Such view implies the action of sending girls for higher study as irrational investment, as they will be leaving their parental home after marriage and restrict themselves within the domain of private family life. The prevalence of such societal notion and the stories of not sending a girl child to school for the same reason were plenty and were widely prevalent across the communities.

However, after the democratisation process in Sikkim and with it becoming a part of the Indian Union in 1975, drastic changes in overall education scenario were encountered. Under the National Policy of Education and Framework, girls' education began to pick up momentum among the masses. Consequently, the state's initiatives of prioritising on social development led to massive social transformation of Sikkimese society as reflected in bridging gaps in gender inequality to a considerable extent. In the initial stage of school education in Sikkim, Mrs. Shiva Kumari Rai, an 81-year-old, and one

of the pioneer women educationists of Sikkim, who was appointed as a primary school teacher in the decade of 1950s in Linzey, East Sikkim reveals the scenario of girls' education in Sikkim in the past. She shared her reminiscences during a Teacher's Conference in Gangtok in late 1950' where she was the only women participant, where a dignitary remarked, *"...aja auta nari yo samuha ma dekda, malai lagyo, aba Sikkim ma siksha ko jyoti Sikkim ko durgam ilaka ko chori cheli ma failina thalecha..."* which is literally translated as 'Today when I see a woman participant in this gathering, I realised now the flame of education has started spreading among our daughters and sisters even in remote corners'. She also recalled how she had to convince the parents to send the girl child to school during her early years of teaching career in school.

Empirical observations and analysis drawn from interaction with the numerous stakeholders such as government officials, school administrators, teachers and parents revealed that along with the process of consolidation and strengthening of education sector and growing opportunities in Sikkim, education has been able to permeate down to the common people at the grassroots level, as evident in the growing literacy rate of the state presented in Table 1. Also, with the socio-structural transformation, patriarchal notion of perceiving 'girl child as other's property' has begun to experience the requisite change. Instead education as an empowering tool for self-reliance and enabling factor for enlarging choices has surfaced. Within a short span of time girls' participation in education has immensely improved and apparently no significant bias against girls' education is observable, which is factually verifiable through the diminishing gender gap observed in Table 2. Such achievement is accomplishable through the various flagship inclusive measures and schemes of both the Central and State governments, which extend financial help to the aspiring and needy students in the form of scholarships for pre-matric, post-matric, and girl child (Prerna Scholarships) to name few. The Honourable Chief Minister's Merit Scholarship (HCMMS)⁴, initiated in 2010 by Government of Sikkim, nominates Class V toppers of Government Schools for pursuing further education in the best schools

within the country. With the girls representation of 57.5 percent out of 937 students nominated from 2010-2019, the trend indicates how girl students are stepping forward to avail the opportunities by breaking gender stereotypes. These policies and programmes thus have become instrumental in facilitating and sustaining their participation in school education thereby raising the literacy rate as well as bridging gender gaps and ensuring inclusiveness in the school education. Increasing literacy rate and shrinking gender gap certainly points toward the fact that women are coming out from the shackles of traditional bondages and gender stereotyping, and trying to carve a niche for themselves by availing the opportunities thrown to them by the state initiatives in social sector. The trend also indicates the changing social perceptions and outlook of the society towards education of the girl child, which indeed shows the credibility to the State's initiatives for various schemes and implementation of programme in educational sectors.

Though, as shown in Table 3, the State's initiative towards free and compulsory education is arguably being fruitful in promoting girls' education. However, a comparative analysis shows a perpetual decline in the enrolment rate of boys in government schools at least at the primary level. Interaction with teachers and principals of government schools reveals that with the improvement in the economic status of the people, there is a growing trend of sending their children to private schools, which has become a common practice in Sikkim. Since, the Government of Sikkim has implemented the policy of free education including school uniforms textbooks, and essential stationery items, etc., Mr. A. D. Chettri the then Principal of Yangang Senior Secondary School, South District of Sikkim in 2017, categorically stated that students in the primary sections of government school in general and his school in particular are mostly from those families who does not have a stable source of income and cannot afford to send their children to good private schools. The favourable ratio of the girls in the government schools and inverse ratio in private schools at the elementary level in 2013-2014 (44.5% for girls as against 55.5% boys) has also been reflected in the trend analysis of girls' education under SSA by Thapa

(2014). The study reported that such practice could largely be attributed to free education in government schools in contrast to the comparatively expensive nature of private school, which requires affordability on the part of parents. It can also partly be the manifestation of patriarchal social structure, deep rooted gender relation combined with patrilineal property rights, which are closely interlinked with relatively low values attached to girls' education, resulting in conferring more priority to boy child when the question of future investment is concerned (Thapa 2014). Yet, as discussed in Table 4, there is an encouraging indication that participation of girls in higher level of school education is equal or better than their male counterpart.

Current Trend of Girls' Education

As discussed earlier, the state is witnessing tremendous improvement in human development indicators, particularly in education. An analysis of educational indicators like the Gender Parity Index (GPI), Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) and Net Enrolment Ratio (NER) provide a comprehensive understanding of inclusiveness in girls' education and helps to locate Sikkim in comparison with other north eastern states and the national average. The available data on GPI (2013-2014), which is a socio-economic index to measure the relative access to education of males and females (UNESCO 2009), indicates that the primary level has GPI of 0.91, which is lowest among the North Eastern States (NES) and lower than the all India average as well (Table 5). Nonetheless, Sikkim's rank in terms of GPI at the elementary level, which combines both primary and upper primary levels is better than all India average and ranks third among North Eastern States next only to Meghalaya (1.13) and Assam (1.07). However, at the secondary and higher secondary level, Sikkim presents a favourable GPI with 1.15 and 1.24 respectively, which is higher than the corresponding all India figure of 0.90 and 0.89. Among NES, Sikkim's performance is at par with Meghalaya with minor variations. This indicates that girls are gaining better access to education at secondary and higher secondary levels when compared to their counterpart, thus paving the door for higher education.

Table 5: Gender Parity Index, 2013-14

State	Primary	U/Primary	Elementary	Secondary	Higher Secondary
Sikkim	0.91	1.05	0.96	1.15	1.24
Arunachal Pradesh	0.96	1.00	0.97	0.92	0.96
Assam	0.99	1.07	1.01	1.10	0.95
Manipur	0.99	0.98	0.99	0.98	0.91
Meghalaya	1.00	1.13	1.04	1.15	1.32
Mizoram	0.93	0.94	0.94	0.98	1.02
Nagaland	0.96	0.98	0.97	1.00	0.93
Tripura	0.96	0.96	0.96	0.96	0.76
All India	0.93	0.95	0.94	0.90	0.89

Source: School Education in India NEUPA, 2014

Table 6: GER and NER in secondary and higher secondary, 2013-14

Category		GER			NER		
		Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total
Elementary	Sikkim	129.89	129.32	129.61	95.49	94.74	95.12
	All India	95.11	99.09	97.00	86.57	90.26	88.31
Secondary	Sikkim	90.21	106.65	98.37	24.90	27.40	26.14
	All India	76.80	76.47	76.64	45.53	45.74	45.63
H. Secondary	Sikkim	54.81	70.60	62.62	14.48	18.19	16.32
	All India	52.77	51.58	52.21	30.25	30.62	30.43

Source: School Education in India NEUPA, 2014

Gross and Net Enrolment Ratio

In terms of GER in secondary and higher secondary level Sikkim's average stands better at 98.37 and 62.62 respectively, in 2013-2014, when compared to the corresponding all India figure of 76.64 and 52.21 percent. In case of girls, at both secondary (106.65) and high secondary (70.60) level, the figure is higher and more favourable than the boys (Table 5). Despite this, GER in higher secondary level is much lower than secondary level indicating a huge proportion of children of the age group out of system in this level.

In terms of NER, Sikkim's position at the elementary level is fair and satisfactory when compared with the all India figure. However, the major concern is the lower percentage at both secondary (26.1) and higher secondary level (16.32) in comparison to the national average, which also remains true in relation to girl's enrolment ratio which is 27.4 percent and 18.9 percent respectively (Table 6). Despite the positive transformation in the socio-economic domains of Sikkimese society, this presents a major concern in

the educational scenario requiring introspection and further exploration. Nonetheless, on the brighter sides, within the state NER at all levels of school education girls are better placed than boys indicating change in the societal perception towards the girls' education.

CONCLUSION

Drastic transformation in girls' education was discernible in the study, which primarily is a consequence of the various policies and programmes taken up by the state as counter measures to address the exclusionary process in education. This in turn resulted in fighting social stereotyping against girls' education, which were deeply embedded in the socio-cultural milieu of various communities prevailing in the earlier development stages of Sikkimese society. The deterministic state policies have helped women to partially shatter the traditional bondages and reach out to various avenues brought by education. In the journey, the government schools in Sikkim, with its free and compulsory education policy has liberated many students

to break themselves from the vicious circle of poverty, illiteracy and gender stereotyping. It is both encouraging and a desired observation to witness the growing participation of girls in higher level of school education. However, this also raises the question whether such a trend continues after school education for higher studies in technical, professional and general studies, which requires a further exploration to ascertain the trend.

Further, the present scenario of government school education presents itself in a compelling condition where the number of enrolments is observed to be gradually dwindling especially at the primary level. Since government school is accessible to all social categories and all marginalised sections even in the remotest corner of the state, strengthening the government school system in terms of quality education, teacher student ratio and addressing the infrastructural constraints with proper monitoring of the educational policies and programmes by the education department can further help to strengthen the government schools, which can bridge the gap of educational achievement across the state including the gender gap.

NOTES

- 1 From <<https://en.unesco.org/themhes/education-and-gender-equality>> (Retrieved on 23 August 2019)
- 2 For further discussion on how the French policy makers categorised people into ten groups see Peace (2001)
- 3 From <https://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/pdf/Think%20Pieces/4_education.pdf> (Retrieved on 23 August 2019)
- 4 The selection of HCMMS is carried out through competitive examination among the Government School toppers who have completed Class V. 20 percent of the selected students are sent to other states of India whereas, 80 percent are sent to the best schools within the state, as per the state HRDD.

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