

WOMEN IN SIKKIMESE SOCIETY: CASTE, CULTURE, AND TRADITIONAL GENDER ROLES

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Abstract

This paper examines the traditional roles, status, and lived experiences of women in Sikkimese society through the intersecting lenses of gender, caste, and culture. Drawing upon the distinct social structures of the Bhutia, Lepcha, and Nepali communities, it highlights how patriarchal norms and caste-based hierarchies historically shaped women's positions within the family, economy, religion, and public life. While women contributed significantly to domestic management, agriculture, and cultural preservation, their social mobility, decision-making authority, and access to education and property remained severely restricted—especially among lower-caste groups. Religious restrictions, inheritance customs, and cultural expectations further reinforced their subordinate status, limiting participation in both spiritual and civic leadership. Despite gradual shifts due to modernization and legal reforms, many traditional expectations still persist, particularly in rural areas. This study underscores the dual burden of caste and gender discrimination faced by women and calls for continued efforts to dismantle systemic inequalities and enhance women's agency and visibility in all spheres of Sikkimese life.

Keywords: Sikkim, gender roles, caste system, women's status, Bhutia, Lepcha, Nepali, patriarchy, cultural practices, social mobility, religious restrictions.

INTRODUCTION

In traditional Sikkimese society, women held an important position within the family and community, with clear roles in household management, agriculture, and religious practices. They were primarily responsible for domestic chores, child-rearing, and helping in agricultural activities, though men were seen as the primary breadwinners. Women's roles were influenced by cultural, religious, and historical factors, with expectations shaped by the community's ethnic diversity. Despite their significant contributions, women often had limited decision-making power and were subject to patriarchal norms. However, their status remained strong within the familial and cultural contexts.

Gender Roles and Expectations in Traditional Sikkimese Culture

In traditional Sikkimese society, gender roles were largely shaped by cultural, religious, and historical factors. The community's diverse ethnic makeup, which includes the Lepcha, Bhutia, and Nepali people, each influenced by their own set of customs and traditions, led to varying expectations of men and women. Despite this diversity, a clear division of labor and roles based on gender was generally observed, with distinct roles assigned to men and women.

1. Domestic and Family Roles

Traditionally, women were primarily responsible for managing the household. Their duties included cooking, cleaning, childcare, and maintaining the home. Women were seen as the pillars of the family structure, responsible for ensuring the smooth functioning of daily life. In contrast, men were expected to be the breadwinners, working outside the home in agriculture, trade, or other forms of labor.

In agricultural families, women were not only in charge of domestic tasks but also worked in the fields. They would help with planting, harvesting, and tending to crops, often alongside their male counterparts. Despite the heavy workload, women's contributions to agricultural activities were not always recognized in formal economic terms, even though they were essential for the family's survival.

2. Religious and Spiritual Expectations

In terms of religious roles, both men and women were involved in spiritual practices, but the expectations differed. While men often took on prominent roles in religious leadership—such as priests or monks—women played crucial supportive roles. In Buddhist traditions, for instance, while women were respected and revered in various ceremonies, they were not allowed to become monks or take part in certain monastic functions. Hindu women, especially those from the Bhutia and Nepali communities, would also engage in rituals and temple services but were typically confined to supporting roles.

In rural areas, older women, especially grandmothers, were seen as repositories of traditional knowledge and oral history, often guiding the younger generations in cultural and religious practices. Despite the emphasis on their spiritual roles, women's involvement in religious leadership was generally limited.

3. Marriage and Social Expectations

Marriage in traditional Sikkimese society followed cultural norms where the roles of women and men were clearly defined. Women were expected to marry early and take on the role of wife and mother, with significant pressure to ensure the continuation of family lines. Women's identities were often closely tied to their roles as wives and mothers, and their social status was heavily influenced by their relationship with their husbands.

In arranged marriages, which were common, families played a central role in selecting partners based on social status, economic considerations, and cultural alignment. Women were expected to live with their husbands' families after marriage, a practice that often placed them under the authority of their in-laws. Despite this, the practice of polyandry, where a woman might marry multiple brothers, existed among some communities, particularly in certain regions of the Tibetan Buddhist culture.

4. Economic Contributions and Expectations

In traditional Sikkimese society, men were generally expected to be the primary providers for the family, engaging in activities like farming, herding, or trading. However, women were not excluded from economic participation. In fact, women in many households worked alongside their male counterparts in agriculture. They were involved in the production of essential goods such as food, wool, and textiles. Women were also involved in artisanal crafts like weaving and pottery, contributing significantly to the household economy.

In addition to these roles, women in rural communities were responsible for gathering firewood, collecting water, and caring for livestock. These tasks were labor-intensive and required a significant amount of time and effort. While men typically held formal economic roles and were the primary decision-makers in financial matters, women's labor in the home and agricultural fields was a key component of the family's overall economic wellbeing.

5. Social Status and Decision-Making

While women were central figures within the family and community, their status was often determined by their relationships with male family members, such as fathers, brothers, or husbands. In some families, women had the authority to make important decisions, particularly regarding household matters and children. However, in most cases, men had the final say in major family decisions, including economic choices and social arrangements.

Women's roles in community decision-making were often limited, as the society was generally patriarchal. Elders, typically men, held significant power in both family and village matters, and women had little political representation. While women may have influenced family and community dynamics in informal settings, they did not hold formal positions of authority or participate in governing bodies.

6. Education and Gendered Expectations

Education for women in traditional Sikkimese society was limited, particularly in rural areas. Education for girls was often secondary to domestic duties, and many girls were expected to contribute to household chores and agricultural work rather than pursue formal schooling. This limited access to education reinforced the gendered division of labor, as women were expected to take on roles centered around the home and family, while men were encouraged to pursue education and participate in public life.

7. Modern Shifts and Changing Expectations

The traditional gender roles in Sikkimese society have been gradually shifting in the face of modernization and education. Women's roles have expanded beyond the domestic sphere, with more women now entering the workforce, attending schools, and even participating in political life. Women in Sikkim today are asserting their rights, pushing for equality in all spheres of life, and challenging the old gender expectations. Nonetheless, traditional expectations still hold some influence in rural areas, where gender roles continue to be entrenched in cultural norms.

Overall, while traditional Sikkimese culture saw clearly defined gender roles with women largely responsible for domestic and agricultural tasks, the changing socio-economic landscape is gradually reshaping these expectations. Women are increasingly becoming central figures in the transformation of Sikkimese society, both in the home and beyond.

The position of women within the caste system

In traditional Sikkimese society, the position of women within the caste system was deeply shaped by both the caste

hierarchy and gender-based social norms. Although Sikkim's caste system was not as rigid or entrenched as in other parts of India, it still played a significant role in determining women's roles, status, and opportunities in society. The caste system in Sikkim influenced women's social status, opportunities for education, participation in the economy, and their roles within the family.

1. Bhutia and Lepcha Communities

In the indigenous Bhutia and Lepcha communities of Sikkim, women traditionally held a relatively higher status compared to their counterparts in many other South Asian societies. However, despite this elevated position, they were still largely subject to patriarchal norms and expectations. Both communities, which followed predominantly Buddhist traditions, valued women for their significant contributions to family life and the community at large. Women were entrusted with household duties such as cooking, cleaning, and child-rearing, tasks that were essential for maintaining the household. Beyond these domestic roles, they also played an active part in agriculture, often working alongside men in the fields. The labor provided by women in these agricultural activities was crucial for the economic survival of the family, and their involvement in farming was seen as indispensable.

Women in these communities were highly respected for their role in preserving family traditions. They were often responsible for passing down cultural customs and religious practices to the next generation, thereby ensuring the continuity of cultural heritage. In religious ceremonies, women participated actively, taking part in rituals that were vital to the spiritual life of the community. Despite this participation, higher positions of spiritual authority, such as those of monks or religious leaders, were typically reserved for men. This gender-based restriction in spiritual leadership did not mean that women were excluded from religious practices entirely. Rather, they held influential roles within their families and communities, overseeing important rituals and acting as the custodians of religious and cultural traditions.

However, the status of women, even in these relatively more egalitarian communities, was still shaped by the patriarchal social structure. Decision-making in family matters was predominantly in the hands of men, who held the authority in both household and community affairs. Women, despite their significant influence within the home, had limited formal authority when it came to community governance or larger decision-making processes. Thus, while women in the Bhutia and Lepcha communities were respected and played essential roles, their status was ultimately constrained by the patriarchal framework that governed both family and society.

2. Nepali Community

In the Nepali community of Sikkim, the position of women was heavily influenced by the caste system, which mirrored the broader South Asian caste structure. Women's status and roles were primarily determined by the caste they were born into, and this system divided women into distinct categories with varying privileges and responsibilities. Women from higher castes, such as Brahmins and Kshatriyas, enjoyed more privileges and opportunities than those from lower castes like Shudras and Dalits. Higher-caste women were expected to uphold family honor and preserve social norms, often living under strict codes of conduct that emphasized modesty, purity, and adherence to domestic duties such as cooking, cleaning, and child-rearing. While these women could sometimes access limited education, their roles were mostly confined to the home, and their influence was restricted within the private sphere.

In contrast, women from lower castes faced much harsher conditions. They had fewer rights and less social mobility compared to their higher-caste counterparts. These women were typically relegated to labor-intensive and menial tasks, such as working in the fields, cleaning, or performing tasks deemed impure by higher-caste standards. Due to their lower status, they were often excluded from religious ceremonies, public gatherings, and social interactions that were reserved for higher-caste individuals. The caste system's discrimination against them was compounded by gender-based oppression, as lower-caste women experienced both caste and gender-based marginalization.

Lower-caste women were doubly oppressed, facing challenges not only because of their caste but also due to the patriarchal nature of the society. Their limited access to education and economic opportunities further reinforced their subordinate position in society. They were also excluded from participating in key cultural and religious events, which reinforced their marginalized status. Their roles were generally confined to manual labor, and they had limited avenues for social or economic mobility.

The caste-based discrimination of lower-caste women was entrenched in the societal structure, creating barriers to their advancement. While women from higher castes had some opportunity to maintain family honor and engage in social life within prescribed limits, lower-caste women lived with the constant burden of caste-based and gender-based oppression. This deeply ingrained social hierarchy restricted their freedoms and opportunities, ensuring that women's lives were shaped by both their caste and gender, perpetuating inequality and limited access to power and resources.

3. Caste and Gender Discrimination

In Sikkimese society, caste and gender discrimination were deeply intertwined, with the caste system playing a crucial role in shaping not only the social status of individuals but also dictating the roles and rights of women. The caste system created a rigid hierarchy where women's roles were primarily confined to domestic duties such as cooking, cleaning, and child-rearing. While men, regardless of their caste, were more likely to engage in decision-making, public life, and economic ventures, women's involvement in these areas was severely restricted. The societal expectation for women to remain within the private sphere reinforced the patriarchal structure, limiting their opportunities for participation in politics, business, or other forms of public life.

For women in lower castes, the intersection of caste and gender discrimination was particularly harsh. These women lived lives marked by hard labor, social marginalization, and restricted opportunities. They often worked in the fields alongside men, performing manual labor that was physically demanding, but their contributions were rarely recognized or valued by the larger society. While men had more chances to engage in leadership and economic activities, women from lower castes were expected to adhere strictly to domestic roles, and their labor in the fields was considered secondary.

Social mobility for lower-caste women was extremely limited. They faced significant barriers to education, as access to schooling was often restricted based on both caste and gender. These women were denied the opportunity to learn or develop skills that could improve their socioeconomic status. Political participation was also out of reach, as the hierarchical caste system and patriarchal norms excluded women, particularly those from lower castes, from engaging in civic life or holding leadership roles.

Overall, the caste system in Sikkim ensured that women, especially those from lower castes, were doubly oppressed—both by their gender and by their caste. The lack of recognition for their work, coupled with the systemic barriers they faced in education, politics, and social mobility, ensured that women from lower castes had very limited opportunities to improve their lives. The caste and gender-based discrimination they experienced perpetuated their marginalization, making it difficult for them to break free from the cycles of poverty and inequality that defined their existence.

4. Role in Economic Activities

In Sikkimese society, women's roles in economic activities were largely shaped by their caste, creating distinct differences in their work and opportunities. Women from higher castes were primarily confined to domestic responsibilities, such as managing the household, cooking, cleaning, and ensuring the family's overall well-being. Although they played a critical role in maintaining the economic stability of the household, their opportunities for work outside the home were limited. Higher-caste women were often excluded from formal economic ventures or public economic activities, and their economic contributions were largely seen as an extension of their duties within the family, rather than as independent economic activities.

In contrast, women from lower castes were more likely to engage in physical labor, both in agriculture and in domestic service for higher-caste families. These women worked in the fields, performed manual labor, and sometimes worked in other people's homes doing menial tasks such as cleaning or cooking. While their labor was crucial for the survival and economic well-being of their families, it was often undervalued and considered secondary. Their work was typically regarded as an extension of their familial responsibilities, rather than as an individual contribution to the economy.

Women's economic contributions were essential for the functioning of many households, especially in lower-caste communities, where their labor was often the backbone of the family's survival. However, despite the importance of their work, they rarely had access to independent wealth or property. In many cases, women's earnings were controlled by male family members, and they had limited opportunities for financial independence. Their economic contributions were often invisible in the broader society, as their work was relegated to the private sphere and seldom recognized outside the family.

Thus, while women from both higher and lower castes played vital roles in sustaining the economy of their households, the value placed on their labor differed greatly. Women in higher castes faced limited opportunities for economic independence and often had their contributions undervalued, while women from lower castes endured more physically demanding labor and faced even greater social and economic marginalization. Both groups, however, were excluded from accessing property or wealth independently, highlighting the persistent inequalities that shaped their roles in the economic landscape.

5. Religious and Social Restrictions

The caste system in Sikkim imposed significant religious and social restrictions on women, with these limitations varying depending on a woman's caste. For women from higher castes, there were strict expectations regarding their social behavior and religious participation. They were often required to adhere to codes of modesty, which included practices such as *purdah* (seclusion), where they were expected to remain secluded from the public eye to protect their

family's honor. This practice severely restricted their mobility and social interactions outside the home, limiting their participation in community life and reinforcing their roles within the domestic sphere. Higher-caste women's social engagements were usually confined to their households or exclusive gatherings, where their interaction with men from outside their immediate family was highly regulated.

On the other hand, women from lower castes faced even more pronounced social and religious exclusion. These women were often denied access to religious ceremonies and community events, as caste-based discrimination kept them away from many public and spiritual spaces. This exclusion from religious life further marginalized their status in society, denying them the opportunity to participate in key cultural and religious practices that defined the community's identity. In cases where women from lower castes were allowed to take part in religious activities, their roles were secondary to those of men and were often limited to supporting or peripheral tasks.

Even within religious settings where women could engage, leadership positions were almost exclusively reserved for men. Women, especially those from lower castes, had little to no opportunity to take on spiritual or religious leadership roles, reinforcing the patriarchal structure that prevailed in both social and religious life. This dual discrimination—based on both caste and gender—restricted women's ability to assert themselves in either public or religious spheres, ensuring that their voices remained largely unheard in decision-making processes related to both the social and spiritual domains of life.

The religious and social restrictions placed on women by the caste system further deepened the divide between different caste groups, particularly for women from lower castes. While higher-caste women were expected to follow strict social norms and maintain seclusion through practices like purdah, they still had some form of access to religious and social spaces, albeit within a controlled and limited framework. Their roles, though largely confined to the home, were still recognized within the family and community structure. Conversely, lower-caste women faced systemic exclusion, both from religious practices and community events, which reinforced their marginalized position. In many instances, even when allowed to participate in religious rituals, their roles were relegated to subservient or supportive tasks, with leadership positions being held exclusively by men. These religious and social restrictions served to keep women in a subordinate role, further emphasizing the intersection of caste and gender discrimination, where both factors collectively hindered their ability to participate equally in the cultural, social, and religious life of their communities.

Overall, The position of women within the caste system in Sikkim was a complex intersection of caste and gender discrimination. While women in higher castes had more privileges, their roles were still confined to the domestic sphere. Women from lower castes faced not only the oppression of being women but also the added burden of caste-based discrimination, which limited their rights, mobility, and opportunities. Despite their essential contributions to family and community life, women's roles were largely dictated by their caste and gender, leaving them with limited social, economic, and political power.

Cultural practices affecting women's status

Cultural Practices Affecting Women's Status in Sikkimese Society

Sikkimese society, shaped by a blend of indigenous, Hindu, and Buddhist cultural practices, has historically placed women in roles that often limit their mobility and opportunities for advancement. These cultural practices have deeply impacted women's status within the family, community, and broader society, reinforcing patriarchal structures that confine women to traditional roles and restrict their ability to participate fully in social, economic, and political spheres. Although women's contributions to society were essential, cultural norms often relegated them to a subordinate position, making it difficult for them to achieve equality with men.

1. Marriage and Family Structure

Marriage, as a cultural institution, played a central role in determining the status of women in Sikkimese society. In traditional communities, marriages were often arranged by families, primarily to strengthen family alliances and social standing. Women were expected to marry early and assume the primary responsibilities of wife and mother. These roles became the defining characteristics of their identities. The marriage system reinforced patriarchal values, with women expected to submit to their husband's authority. The husband's role as the head of the household meant that women had limited autonomy in decision-making processes, both within the family and in broader societal matters.

The practice of polyandry, particularly in some Tibetan Buddhist communities in Sikkim, is one example of a unique cultural practice that shaped women's roles within families. In polyandrous marriages, a woman could marry multiple brothers, which was seen as a way to prevent the division of family land and maintain economic stability. Although this practice might have provided some level of security for women, it also placed them in a complex position, where their role as a wife and mother was influenced by the relationships with multiple men. Despite these variations, women's roles within the family were generally dictated by marriage, reinforcing their dependence on male family

members for their social standing.

2. Inheritance and Property Rights

Cultural practices related to inheritance and property rights were pivotal in defining the economic status of women in traditional Sikkimese society. In most communities, inheritance followed a patrilineal system, meaning that land and property were passed down through male descendants. Women, regardless of their caste, were often excluded from inheriting land or property, with their rights to ownership being either non-existent or limited. As a result, women's economic independence was tightly controlled by their familial relationships. A woman's economic security depended on her father, husband, or sons. In some cases, when no male heirs were available, women could inherit property, but such instances were exceptions rather than the norm.

Cultural norms reinforced the idea that women's primary role was to manage the household, with property and wealth generally considered the domain of men. This exclusion from property ownership further limited women's economic autonomy, leaving them reliant on the male members of their families for sustenance and security. As a result, women's ability to make independent financial decisions was restricted, keeping them in a subordinate position in terms of economic power.

3. Religious Practices and Restrictions

Religious practices, deeply embedded in Sikkimese culture, also played a significant role in shaping the status of women. In both Hindu and Buddhist traditions, religious roles and responsibilities were typically gendered, with men holding positions of authority and leadership. In Buddhist traditions, for example, women were prohibited from becoming monks, a role considered central to spiritual leadership and authority. Instead, women's religious roles were primarily supportive in nature, with their participation limited to supporting monks and maintaining rituals within the home.

Similarly, in Hindu practices, women were often excluded from key religious duties and leadership roles within temples. While they participated in religious ceremonies and rituals, their roles were generally considered secondary to those of men. This religious division reinforced the broader societal expectation that women's roles were limited to the domestic sphere, depriving them of opportunities to hold spiritual authority or influence in religious communities. These restrictions also had wider social implications. Women were often relegated to roles that supported men's spiritual authority, making it more difficult for them to assert any form of leadership within their religious or social spheres. This dynamic, rooted in religious customs, worked to further entrench patriarchal values within the broader cultural structure of Sikkimese society.

4. Social Expectations and Gender Roles

Cultural practices in Sikkimese society reinforced strict gender roles that confined women to domestic duties and responsibilities. Women were expected to manage the household, raise children, and contribute to agricultural work, particularly in rural areas where farming played a central role in the economy. Despite their significant labor contributions, women's work was undervalued and often invisible, as it was considered part of their familial duties. Men, in contrast, were more likely to participate in public life and decision-making, both within the family and the larger community.

Social mobility for women was highly restricted. In many cases, women's roles were confined to the home, and they were expected to remain within the domestic space to maintain the family's honor. Mobility, both within the household and in society, was limited, especially for women from higher castes who were expected to adhere to strict codes of modesty and seclusion. These cultural norms ensured that women's public presence was minimal, reinforcing the belief that women's primary domain was the home, while men were responsible for the outside world.

5. Rituals and Social Norms

Cultural norms also dictated women's roles in social events and rituals. Women were expected to play central roles in family rituals, festivals, and ceremonies, yet their participation was often secondary to that of men. While men typically led religious and social rituals, women's roles were largely confined to maintaining the home, preparing offerings, and supporting men in the execution of ceremonial duties. This cultural division reinforced the idea that men were the leaders in both religious and social contexts, while women's roles were restricted to supporting functions.

Rituals related to marriage, childbirth, and death were particularly gendered, with women playing key roles in supporting these life events. However, even in these contexts, women's participation was often limited by the cultural expectations of their role as caregivers, and they rarely had the opportunity to take on leadership roles in rituals or ceremonies. These gendered expectations restricted women's ability to assert themselves as independent individuals

within their social and cultural milieu.

Overall, Cultural practices in Sikkimese society have historically shaped the status of women by reinforcing patriarchal values and restricting their roles in both the domestic and public spheres. Practices surrounding marriage, inheritance, religious participation, and social expectations confined women to subordinate positions within families and communities. These cultural norms, while vital to the functioning of traditional society, also perpetuated gender inequality, limiting women's social, economic, and political mobility. Despite these challenges, women in Sikkimese society have continued to play an influential role in preserving cultural traditions. However, their full participation in all aspects of society has remained constrained by these deeply entrenched cultural practices.

Conclusion

The traditional roles and status of women in Sikkimese society were shaped by a complex intersection of caste, culture, and patriarchal norms, varying significantly across the Bhutia, Lepcha, and Nepali communities. While women were integral to household management, agriculture, and cultural preservation, their roles remained confined within gendered and caste-based boundaries that limited their access to education, property, religious leadership, and political participation. Women from lower castes experienced compounded marginalization due to both caste and gender-based discrimination, resulting in fewer economic opportunities and severe social restrictions. Cultural practices such as arranged marriages, patrilineal inheritance, and gendered religious norms further entrenched their subordinate position. Although socio-economic modernization and legal reforms have gradually improved women's visibility and agency in Sikkim, traditional expectations continue to influence gender roles, particularly in rural areas. Achieving gender equity in Sikkimese society requires persistent efforts to dismantle structural barriers and promote inclusive cultural transformation.

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