

Motherhood As Cultural Citizenship: An Anthropological Study of Limbu Tribe of Darjeeling District in West Bengal

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ABSTRACT

Motherhood is one of the few universal roles assigned to women. Contemporary mothering and motherhood are viewed from a much broader perspective than in previous decades by emphasizing the relational and logistical work of childrearing. Mothering is defined as the social practices of nurturing and caring for people. In most societies, however, women not only bear children but also are primary caretakers of infants and children. Historically, the experience of motherhood has remained a central aspect of most women's lives. The Limbu women of Kalimpong region of West Bengal present a picture of enjoying a better status than their counterparts in the rest of the country. Present paper attempts to highlight pertinent discourse on the status and role of Limbu women as mother with multiplicity of customs, cultural practices and traditional values set against the patriarchal mindset in spite of matrilineal systems in their community. The paper also argues that motherhood as cultural citizenship is a useful concept in understanding citizenship issues for women in Limbu families, their experiences and subject positioning. Furthermore, in the face of discourses valuing women's role foremost as mother and wife, narrating citizenship as motherhood can become central to legitimizing social performance of national identity.

Introduction

Mothers are women who inhabit or perform the role of bearing some relation to their children, who may or may not be their biological offspring. Thus, dependent on the context, women can be considered mothers by virtue of having given birth, by raising their children. The concepts defining the role of mother are neither exhaustive nor universal, as any definition of 'mother' may differ based on how social, cultural, and religious roles are defined. Historically, the role of women was confined to some extent to being a mother and wife, with women being expected to dedicate most of their energy to these roles, and to spend most of their time taking care of the home. In many cultures, women received significant help in performing these tasks

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from older female relatives, such as mothers in law or their own mothers. The social role and experience of motherhood varies greatly depending upon location. Mothers are more likely than fathers to encourage assimilative and communion-enhancing patterns in their children. Traditionally, and still in most parts of the world today, a mother was expected to be a married woman, with birth outside of marriage carrying a strong social stigma. Historically, this stigma not only applied to the mother, but also to her child. This continues to be the case in many parts of the developing world today, but in many Western countries the situation has changed radically, with single motherhood being much more socially acceptable now.

Cultural Citizenship

The concept of cultural citizenship responds to the multicultural context of contemporary societies, in which the concern with equality is increasingly being complemented with a concern with difference. Theoretically, the notion acknowledges the cultural resiliency, social reproduction (the class, cultural, and linguistic knowledge and skills that establish the cultural capital of social groups), and rights-claiming agency of ethnic communities and other marginalized groups as viable and worthy outcomes of social injustice and alienation. Methodologically, cultural citizenship requires that social scientists approach their studies from the perspective of subordinate groups in order to understand the latter's goals, perceptions, and purposes.

Dignity of Life

A married life, where the wife enjoys the respect of her husband and authority over her household, holds as much dignity as the most esteemed of careers, because it gives her the opportunity to create, preserve and protect the most precious possessions of her country, namely, the children of the nation. Motherhood becomes a politics of identity when women are actively engaged in both public and private domain expressions of citizenship. Moreover, this everyday form of citizenship is about being engaged in social, cultural and political issues without necessarily being defined as a member of a particular legal category of citizenship. Applying the theory of cultural citizenship illuminates important aspects of the experience of the Limbu women. Cultural citizenship encompasses the intertwining concepts of aspirations for legal citizenship and an everyday lived experience of citizenship. The home is the origin and beginning of every form of social organization. It is the nursery of the nation. It is the sweet place wherein children are trained for future citizenship. The woman illumines the home through the glory of Motherhood. The mother at home can do the formation of character very efficiently. Therefore, home is the most beautiful training ground for the building of

character in children under the personal guidance of the mother (Davies, 2004).

Sociology of Motherhood

Mothering is the social practice of nurturing and caring for dependent children. It is a dynamic process of social interactions and relationships. Mothering is typically associated with women. Mothering as a female role is a social construction that is highly influenced by gender belief systems. The roles associated with motherhood are variable across time and culture.

Universalist and Particularistic Approach

The Universalist approach to motherhood is aimed at conceptualizing the work that mothers do. This approach identifies mothers through what they do, rather than how they feel. Mothers share a set of activities known as “maternal practice,” that are universal, even though they vary as individuals and across cultures. These activities include nurturing, protecting, and training their children. An individual’s mothering actions are shaped by their beliefs about family, individuality, the nature of childhood, and the nature of their child. These are also often shaped by their own childhood and past experiences with children. The dynamic interactions between the mother and child create deep and meaningful connections. The particularistic approach to mothering suggests that the role of a mother, their activities, and understandings cannot be separated from the context in which they live. According to this theory, mothering takes place within “specific historical contexts framed by interlocking structures of race, class, and gender”. Furthermore, a mother’s strategies and meanings that she develops are influenced by different social locations, such as the intersections of regional and local political economy with class, ethnicity, culture, and sexual preference. Psychoanalytic theorists have examined the mother’s unconscious actions, exploring her deep attachment to her children. Sociologists have attempted to trace the mother’s actual experience of child rearing, identifying the way that society and culture have affected her behavior and her attitudes.

Objectives and Methodology

The paper attempts to highlight pertinent discourse on the status and role of Limbu women as Mothers with multiplicity of customs, cultural practices and traditional values. Because of the fact that motherhood’ has become a politics of identity when women are actively engaged in both public and private domain and with their everyday activities. Moreover, this everyday form of citizenship is about being engaged in social, cultural and political issues without necessarily being defined as a member of a particular legal

category of citizenship. This study has been agglomerated various data from primary as well as secondary sources of information. The primary data were collected using questionnaire from each selected households, field observation, interview etc. The household details, according to questionnaire were collected through the direct contact with Limbu people. Data are collected from the universe by purposive random sampling method through in-depth interview, open-ended and closed- ended questionnaire and checklist from house hold survey. Whereas secondary data were taken from various reports, books, journals publishing different institutions, websites and various seminars report journals and documents of Kalimpong, Darjeeling district of West Bengal. Both qualitative and quantitative methods have been used for fulfilling the objective of the present study. In addition to collecting and collating the types of statistical and qualitative evidence noted above, group discussions with mothers of varied ages and from different backgrounds were also held.

Limbu Women/Mother

One of the remarkable features of Limbu society is that the status of women is high, Limbus who are one of the Scheduled tribes of the State of West Bengal inhabit in the Hilly regions of Darjeeling District. The present study is about the Limbu community, one of the oldest indigenous communities who are supposed to be originated from Tibet and from there they had migrated to Eastern part of Nepal and then they finally settled to Sikkim and Darjeeling District of West Bengal. The Limbu women of Kalimpong region present a picture of enjoying a better status than their counterparts in the rest of the country. **Limbu people are known as 'Yakthungba' (refers to a Limbu male) and 'Yakthungma' (refers to a Limbu female) in their own language, Yambechha means a male and menchhuma means a female.** This is a misconception created by many that discriminatory social practices are non-existent in the region and therefore Limbu women are fortunate and truly empowered. However, in spite of the version of better status in several parts of the region, there is the harsh reality of some point of discrimination against women in various spheres, particularly in the light of tradition and customary practices and questions of empowerment. The cause of women has assumed another dimension as they are caught in the web of sanctioned age-old practices and their right to constitutional provisions.

The status of a Mother in the tribal societies is comparatively better than that of the women in general society – apparently so. The sex ratio of the tribes in India during 1991 showed 971 females per 1000 males while it was 927 females among the general population. The discrimination against women, occupational differentiation, and emphasis on status and hierarchical

social ordering that characterize the predominant Hindu culture are generally absent among the tribal groups. Though tribes too have son preference, they do not discriminate against girls by female infanticide or sex determination tests. The Limbu wife has acquired a dominant role of partnership in married life. Their fondles her man like she would a child, loves him like a paramour (lover), keeps him company like a companion would and works with him like an equal partner. While she will do everything for him, she will never be his subordinate. She has gained this status by sheer hard work and not by being demanding. There is nothing she will not or cannot do. She even attends to the funerals of her near and dear ones, something so called 'refined' Hindus do not allow for a woman. The birth of a son is not a special cause for joy (as elsewhere in India), as boys and girls are considered equal to the tribals. The modern mother, who undergoes an abortion after learning from latest clinical techniques, that her fetus is that of a girl, should learn from her tribal sister, to accept the children of either gender, as a gift of God Almighty. A Limbu woman declares her pregnancy with pride and does not welcome her husband till she is willing to conceive again. Delivery is without the assistance of a midwife and mother herself cuts the umbilical chord. The mother nurses the baby with her milk, carries it everywhere in a piece of old cloth hanging from her shoulder. She puts her child to sleep in a bamboo cradle. Older sisters attend to their younger siblings. The young girls are of fair color, graceful and pretty, but as they grow older this gloss diminishes because of frequent child bearing, long journeys to markets and fairs, and heavy domestic and field labor. The Limbu woman does not fight the aging process but becomes a grandmother gracefully.

Empirical Evidences

The sex ratio for the overall population is 940 females per 1000 males and that of Scheduled Tribes 990 females per thousand males. Infants are carried on the mothers' back, held by a shawl tied tightly across her chest. Babies are breast-fed on demand, and sleep with their mothers until they are displaced by a new baby or are old enough to share a bed with siblings. Infants and small children often wear amulets and bracelets to protect them from supernatural forces. Parents sometimes line a baby's eyes with *kohl* to prevent eye infections. Mothers are the primary providers of child care, but children also are cared for and socialized by older siblings, cousins, and grandparents. Neighbors are entitled to cuddle, instruct, and discipline children, who are in turn expected to obey and defer to senior members of the family and community. Adults speak to children using more familiar language. Because authority in households depends on seniority, the relative ages of siblings are important and children are often addressed by birth order.

Socialization

Infant Care

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Child Rearing and Education

Mothers are the primary providers of child care, but children also are cared for and socialized by older siblings, cousins, and grandparents. Neighbors are entitled to cuddle, instruct, and discipline children, who are in turn expected to obey and defer to senior members of the family and community. Adults speak to children using more familiar language. Because authority in households depends on seniority, the relative ages of siblings are important and children are often addressed by birth order. Certain household rituals mark key stages in child's development, including the first taste of rice and the first haircut. When a girl reaches puberty, she goes through a period of seclusion in which she is prohibited from seeing male family members. Although she may receive special foods and is not expected to work, the experience is an acknowledgment of the pollution associated with *Narvan* (*Name giving ceremony*). After birth the last day of the pollution period is set for the narvan or naming ceremony. The household and child are purified together by the Phedangma (medicinal priest or healer) who simultaneously names the child. Pasni- rice feeding or Pasni is customary over this occasion and the child is fed its first solid food. As the study is related to the exclusion of Limbu women, an attempt has been made here to analyze different sectors where they are involved in. Thus, present status of Limbu women has been analyzed so as to explore how they became excluded from the mainstream. For this, it has to analyze different sectors where they are involved in. This is why; present status of Limbu women has been analyzed within some sub-headings as per the sectors associated with them.

The status of Limbu women can be judged mainly by the roles they play in society. Their roles are determined to a large extent through the system of descent. The families try to pass their property by the line of descent. The family surnames too are traced on the basis of the system of descent. Since women in the tribal communities toil hard, they are considered to be assets. Not surprisingly, the practice of bride price during marriages is quite common among them. This is in sharp contrast to the general caste-Hindu population.

Sometimes when the prospective groom is not in a position to pay the bride price, he has to render physical labour and service at the wife's house. In recent years as the capitalist economy is setting in and women are being deprived of their traditional role, their economic value is decreasing and the practice of 'bride-price' is giving way to the system of dowry as witnessed in the general society.

The literacy status of the key informants records significant value in the study. Thus, an attempt has been made here to analyze the literacy status of the 30 sampled key informants. The main female character of each sampled household was taken as the key informants in the study. Among 30 of them, according to the information displayed in the table above, 36.66 percent of them were literate. As the literate informants are concerned, 42.10 percent of them were just literate. Similarly 10.52 percent of them were not completed grade 5 of the formal schooling. Only 21.05 percent of total informants were studied/completed grades 5-8. The data show that other 15.78 percent were attained grade 8-10 and rests of 10.52 percents of them were completed the school level. Thus, none of the key informant's educational status was found more than above the school level. This scenario entails that the overall educational attainment of the literate Limbu women was also not of higher status. As stated earlier, the educational status of Limbu women is poor. So far as the informants understudy are concerned, none of them have achieved master degree. Many of them were illiterate and some were just literate too. Those who were literate have not crossed the school cycle. Thus, it can be said that the educational status of Limbu women was poor and not satisfactory.

Limbu women under study have low level of educational attainment. Most of them have not crossed the school cycle. Further, a huge portion of them were illiterate and same was the condition of just literate women too, there were some causes of educational backwardness. The main reasons are poverty, lack of social awareness of the families and some general trends. Many of the informants understudy responded that they could not go to school for education mainly due to the poverty of their family. The families were dived into the vicious cycle of poverty and were fighting against the problem of 'bread and butter'. They (the informants who were of school age) had to be involved in any sorts of income generation activities of their own and for the family.

The study showed that despite poverty there was another serious hindrance for their education is the lower level of awareness of the parents and family members. The parents were not aware of the education of their children at first. As a result, in some cases, their children left behind the educational access. General trend of the then society was another factor that

was responsible for the educational backwardness of the people. The study shows that there was no trend to go to school for education (regarding education for life) just before 25-30 years. The people at society were so poor. Agriculture, livestock and wage labor were the major sectors where almost all the people were engaged in. Many of the parents did not use to care whether their children were at school or at home. This was privileged in the society. Children used to marry at the age of 15 -18 mostly, despite getting acquainted with education. By this, it can be said that, the educational attainment of the Limbu people (women) was affected by the trends of the than society. People were least aware of the importance of education and accordingly the society was also running. This in long run, made the backwardness of the community in educational attainment.

As most of the women under study were housewife mainly engaged in household works, their level of social awareness was also found having low status. Many of them were unknown to the political, economical and administrative sectors. Though they focused on the importance of education in life, their educational status was also low. They were known to the traditional farming which they adopted from many years as well as their contemporary social and cultural practices but were found unknown to the overall national issues. The historical social role and socio-cultural status of women is changed and thus, the contemporary Limbu women's social role and socio-cultural status is different from the previous one. However, this can be observed more in the urban areas and town only. The Limbus at rural village and traditional homeland are still following their traditional social roles. As division of labor is concerned in relation to the study area of this research, only men plough the field, while fetching water is generally considered as women's work. Women confined to household work. They cook, take care of children, wash cloths and collect firewood and fodder. Men perform the heavier agricultural tasks. They often engage in trade, politics, social work and other laborious work both in- and outside the village. This shows that both men and women perform physically demanding labor. However, women tend to work longer hours have less free time and take sole responsibility to look after their children.

Worship of the Mother Goddess

In Limbu society woman plays an important role not only as homemakers but also as an equal partner to her male counterpart in every sphere of life. She is worshipped as the Goddess of all creation. In their *Yuma Samyo* religion, the Almighty Goddess '*Tagera Ningwphuma*' is considered as the supreme Goddess of creation and the Supreme source of energy and they believe in female source of energy behind all creation. Limbu community shows great

relevance towards its women freedom. They take part in every religious and social function. Even in taking decision, to some extent, Limbu women are consulted. She possesses equal rights with men folk in every sphere of life and shares equal responsibilities with their family members in managing household affairs. Basically, there are four different kind of limbu religious priest namely *Phedangma*, *Samba*, *yeba/Yema* and *Yuma*. *Yeba* and *yuma* is female priests who deals with the evil spirits by their specializations and specialized to perform shamanistic functions. The differences are often difficult to distinguish by a non Limbu . Compared to our general society, a Limbu woman in general has very little wealth of her own or of her family. She has just a piece of rough cloth to cover her womanhood. They are very fond of ornaments. Limbu ladies are very cheerful and light-hearted they often laughing and joking with members of their family or with the neighbours. The Limbu wife has acquired a dominant role of partnership in married life. She even attends to the funerals of her near and dear ones, something so called 'refined' Hindus do not allow for a woman. The young girls are of fair colour, graceful and pretty, but as they grow older this gloss diminishes because of frequent child bearing, long journeys to markets and fairs, and heavy domestic and field labour. The Limbu woman does not fight the aging process but becomes a grandmother gracefully. (Subba, 2005)

Respondent's Preference for the Child

According to maximum no of respondents daughters are equal to sons, three respondents said daughters are preferred, and only one said sons are preferred. The following quote from a 59 year old man is typical of the respondents' statements that boys and girls are equal: "They are treated equally in our village. Girls are given equal value to boys. There is no discrimination. The three respondents who said daughters are preferred, as well as comments made with others in informal conversations, explained daughter preference among some by noting that sons demand more material goods from parents, use drugs and alcohol, and can no longer be depended on in old age, while daughters don't engage in such behaviors and love their parents more. For example, a 48 year old married woman noted that "parents prefer daughters these days because sons are violent. They are aggressive towards their parents sometimes." The majority of respondents suggested that the relatively equal valuation of sons and daughters presents a shift from the past. According to them, People have changed their concept; Daughters can do better than a son these days. Interestingly, some respondents who said there had not been a change over time, all of them said sons and daughters had been equal in the past, as well as the present.

Status of Social Awareness among Mother's

As most of the women under study were housewife mainly engaged in household works, their level of social awareness was also found having low status. Many of them were unknown to the political, economical and administrative sectors. Though they focused on the importance of education in life, their educational status was also low. They were known to the traditional farming which they adopted from many years as well as their contemporary social and cultural practices but were found unknown to the overall national issues. A questionnaire was administered to elicit some information about their status of social awareness, during the field study. By the data elicited from the field, it is found that their level of overall social awareness is low. What many of the informants argued is that this is mainly due to their restriction at household works.

Socio-cultural Status of a Mother

The historical social role and socio-cultural status of women is changed and thus, the contemporary Limbu women's social role and socio-cultural status is different from the previous one. However, this can be observed more in the urban areas and town only. The Limbus at rural village and traditional homeland are still following their traditional social roles. As division of labor is concerned in relation to the study area of this research, only men plough the field, while fetching water is generally considered as women's work. Women confined to household work. They cook, take care of children, wash cloths and collect firewood and fodder. Men perform the heavier agricultural tasks. They often engage in trade, politics, social work and other laborious work both in- and outside the village. This shows that both men and women perform physically demanding labor. However, women tend to work longer hours have less free time and take sole responsibility to look after their children. Limbus practices many of their own rituals. They believe that lineage is not transmitted paternally.. According to an informant, it is believed that when a lady marriages and starts living with her husband, she brings with her the deities that will then be recognized as the household deities. Similarly, it is also found that the length of naming ritual and mourning period after death varies depending on the gender. That is, the period will be long if the person is male and will be short if the person is female. In Limbu society a Mother generally bear high religious and socio-cultural status than the women of most of the other community in the eastern hill. The study shows that they generally marry within their own community but no restriction of inter-caste marriage is observed. Cross-cousin marriage is not allowed but marriage between a man and the widow of his elder brother can take place if they mutually agree for that. The widow is free to marry outside the clam either

by arrangement or by mutual consent. Culturally, the marriage is mostly arranged by the parents. But, the boys and girls are free to marry after eloped to each other. 'Asking for women's hand' is an important ceremony. In this system, women can ask for anything including cash and amount of gold, silver etc. to make consent of their marriage. This confirms to the women's family that the man is financially secure enough to keep their daughter happy. Limbu women generally marry twice with the same boys, culturally. The second marriage (called *saimundri* in their culture) is conducted after giving birth of the child. The family of women gives what they want to give to their daughter/sister in this second marriage thinking that this couple is permanent and long lasting as having the child. This also shows that women's socio-cultural status is high in Limbu community. The two most general forms of marriages are elopement marriages and arranged marriages. When elopement marriages take place the boy separate the girl during a fair or the *Dhan Nach* and the boy ties a *baina* (payment of advance staking claim in that property). The Limbu people believe that a girl touched by a boy can be claimed by the lad. . The most important customary rules in Limbu society is the announcement and declarations of marriage that have to be made in the presence of elder persons called from different villages and relatives of both sides, girl and boy.

Dynamics of Change

The *media & communication* as well as *entertainment industry* has encroached upon the traditional culture and the life style of the people of Darjeeling district. The impact of Hinduism and combine *macro-religious practices* affected their traditional religious believes. New *transport facilities, educational development, developed modern administrative and financial systems*, the commercial forces are affecting and changing their social condition. The Limbu mother's are going out for jobs nowadays. The emerging role of media towards women empowerment is responsible for the shift towards their "outdoorness". .As a very result of westernization the Limbus are very much habituated with mobile phone and television nowadays (Subba,1999). The recent trend of information & technological development has been observed in modern Limbu society. The customs of marriage enormously changed due to influence of modern education in both male and female. From a very beginning of modern society Limbu has mislaid their traditional identity of house pattern, dress and language. Today when westernization acutely embedded in Kalimpong, young Limbu generation are immensely accepted the global culture and unaware about preserving their own traditional treasure. Family size and composition, working mothers, Delayed child birth, the decline of the extended family, these are few important reasons for changing role of modern mothers.

Conclusion

To conclude, it may be stated once again that though the women in the Limbu society in India enjoy a greater freedom to mix and move around, their social organizations and institutions are still discriminatory particularly with regard to the customary laws that guide the ownership of property and inheritance or also with regard to exercising authority both in the domestic and public spheres. Today, some Limbu women have established careers in every field – in politics, media, business, professional performing arts, legal services, education, and the medical profession. Contemporary Limbu women are highly appreciated for their incredible achievements in a short period. Young Limbu women today, whose mothers and grandmothers may be illiterate or barely literate, may go on to college or obtain specialized training for skilled employment. (Limbu, 2007). Although there are only a small number of Limbu women compared to India's total tribal population. Contemporary Limbu society, especially in urban areas, has evolved from the village society of one hundred years ago. Modern society has brought about a lot of changes. Limbu women's responsibilities usually include maintaining the home, cooking, taking care of children and in-laws, as before, but now also include helping educate their children and perhaps managing a shop or pursuing a professional career outside the home. The Limbu women manage financial investments in land or property. There are many women whose husbands still work as Gorkha soldiers in different areas. Those women learn to manage their lives very efficiently by themselves. Certain social norms, values and practices that were found in existence in the contemporary society have been found as one of the agents responsible for the socio economic backwardness of Limbu women. The study showed that early marriage is developing in the Limbu society as one of the social practice as they generally get marriage during the age of 15-20 years. Similarly, marriage expenses system, fist and festival system, Consumption pattern and saving structure are the key component of socially and economic backwardness of Limbu community. The study has surfaced that, most of the Limbu left their traditional skills based activities such as chullo making, broom, flute, mat, rope, Plaguing materials; daily uses bamboo items, wooden items and others due to the lack of market facilities and deficit of raw materials. Limbus are very much inclined with their natural habitat. As regards to their socio-political administration, the traditional caste council 'Tumyanghang' or 'Jatisamaj' is still a trend among them. Within the tribe a Limbu's identity is deeply rooted in the village of his birth and residence. For a Limbu the identity affiliated to a village draws attention to clan affinity, possession of ancestral and other properties in the form of land holdings, participating in community rituals, celebrations, and in the governance of the village polity.

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