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GENDERED PARTICIPATION IN THE BUDDHIST HIMALAYAS SIKKIM AND BHUTAN: A COMPARATIVE STUDY ON VISIONS OF FEMALE PARTICIPATION

Introduction

Women's empowerment lies central to contemporary development thought. The idea that women need to be empowered in order to achieve human development and good governance is increasingly emphasized.¹ Indeed, involving the women in local politics is seen as a prime mean to reduce poverty and minimize gender disparities in international discourse.² In spite of the high priority given to local governance and female participation in the Buddhist Himalayas, a lacuna of research exists when it comes to gendered participation in this area. In this paper we set out to fill part of this gap, by exploring how gender influences local participation amongst the Buddhist population of Sikkim and Bhutan. A review of literature on gender relations in South Asia indicates that there may be greater potential of promoting female participation in the Buddhist groups, since their lives are less influenced by many of the discriminatory practices and inequalities experienced by other women in the South Asian continent (Crins 2004: 587, Bhattacharya, 1994: 24).

Both states emphasize local governance as the main strategy for ensuring that development projects reflect local needs and are efficient and accountable. The empowerment of the local citizens, in the sense of enhancing local ownership and self-determination, is articulated as the key to achieve these purposes. A key ingredient is the promotion of local participation through the active involvement of the local citizens, in particular the women, in village meetings.³ In this paper we address the question of the extent to which Buddhist women in Sikkim and Bhutan feel empowered to participate actively in local meetings, and if there are gendered differences. We apply Bourdieu's notion of the field, emphasizing how gendered differences in capital shape female participation.

Our fieldwork led us to believe that there was a fundamental difference in the way in which cultural capital framed gendered participation. This was particularly the case for the division between the illiterate women and men.

In Bhutan, illiteracy was experienced as a handicap for active participation for both men and women. Nevertheless, the lack of literacy came across as a greater handicap to women than to men. By contrast, these differences were not encountered amongst the Buddhists groups in Sikkim. And even if women were less inclined to participate actively than men, the brand of being illiterate appeared much less important for the construction of local identities.

The puzzling issue of the above mentioned difference is how a presumably similar structural position as being uneducated could produce such different evaluations of the value of women's political role. Initially, we assumed that the difference in the formal organization of the state, Bhutan being a monarchy and Sikkim a democracy, might account for the principal differences. A deeper exploration, however, led us to look into different aspects of how power was defined, categorized and articulated under different discourses of state formation. In this paper we seek to gain a deeper understanding of the complexities through which literacy influenced gendered differences under two distinctively different ways of imagining the state. The aim is thus not to describe the present situation of gender participation in these countries, but rather to outline some dynamics of how different approaches to state formation may facilitate or hamper female participation.

The analysis is conducted on the basis of fieldwork carried out respectively in Sikkim and Bhutan in 2005, and thus before the constitutional transformation in Bhutan, which is something that will be taken into account in the analysis which is conducted on the basis of 160 qualitative interviews in Bhutan and 200 in Sikkim. It refers respectively to three villages in Bhutan and three villages in Sikkim.

Theory

In our understanding of gender we take outset Bourdieu's understanding of gender relations as structured around the local political field. In this, the citizens stand in mutual relations to each other. But they do so in a hierarchical order, because some citizens are vested with more resources to gain political influence than others. Moreover these differences may be enhanced by the way in which some forms of capital and some forms of knowledge are attributed more value than others. Such processes of defining the value of capital often take on a gendered form, where capital and knowledge held by men were attributed more value. In exploring these inequalities, we draw on Bourdieu's notion of capital, which takes the form of: economic capital, which covers the economic resources held by the individual; cultural capital, understood as legitimate knowledge; social capital, which refers to valued social relationships, and symbolic capital, which takes the form of honour and prestige (1986). The state holds a central role in shaping the local political field, because it holds the symbolic power to attribute value to, and recognize forms of, capital (1998: 47). Behind the highly concrete distribution

of individual power in the field, lies a deeper structure, which Bourdieu terms *habitus*, defined as ‘the durable, transposable, structured (and structuring) disposition of individuals’ (Bourdieu 1977: 95). It identifies a sense of one’s (and others’) place and role in the local political field.

Adopting a gendered perspective, we approach the study of participation as a process that distinguishes the participation of women and men on the basis of the amount of capital they respectively are able to invest in the field of local politics. The value of the respective capital held by men and women is, however, to a large extent formed by the state, because the state is the site par excellence of the concentration and exercise of symbolic power (Bourdieu 1998: 47). Gender divisions are therefore highly symbolic, with contestation revolving around its meanings and categorization. This struggle moves into the symbolic realm of struggle over shared meanings of social order. Drawing on Bourdieu, the focus therefore needs to be placed on the way in which the state forms the mental structures of its citizens and in this process imposes common principles of ‘*vision and division*’ between men and women. It thereby significantly frames the way in which men and women respectively conceive of the local political field and their roles as political agents. At a deeper level, such categorizations are embodied into habitus through symbolic distinctions between the genders. According to Bourdieu, the state in particular has a formative role due to its power over the socializing institutions, which he deems are crucial to the formation of habitus in early childhood (1998: 40-46).

The historicity of gender relations in Bhutan and Sikkim

Religion, even though it holds an amorphous influence, is an important source that shapes the position and status of women and their identity in society. In this section we explore the relation between religion, patriarchy and the state, although it should be stressed that it is a poorly explored field. Following Campbell, pre-Buddhist society was formed by *bön* religion, which held important matriarchal components. In early tantric Buddhism the *bön* devotion to the mother goddess, known as *Khandro*, meaning ‘sky-goer’, was maintained. Moreover, female goddesses and deities were central objects of animistic practice, as archaeological excavations show. A theory is that in order to suppress the female aspects of religion and society, female demonesses had to be subdued. In this way a patriarchal view of the feminine as threatening and uncontrolled could be established, so that the patriarchal imperatives of Buddhism could prevail. Most famously, Songtsen-Gampo (the first ruler to unite Tibet)⁴ literally had to nail down the powerful demoness, *Srinmo*, in order for Buddhism to take hold in Tibet (Campbell 2002: 44). Two of these temples are, in effect, located in Bhutan. If this theory holds true, it seems that Buddhism managed to suppress the female aspects of the ‘big religion’ whereas the power of the feminine aspects continued to survive in the ‘small

religion⁷⁵, at least in the periphery of Tibet: Bhutan and Sikkim. Notably, there are still practicing female shamans in both Bhutan and Sikkim who perform old rituals associated with *bön* religion, but are attuned to a Buddhist context (Crins 2004: 588; Balikci 2008: 3, 145). This stronger position in religion may well have provided Buddhist women in these countries with a greater status in society in the past. In Sikkim, for instance, there was originally a system of parallel descent. According to this system, the daughters held the line of the mother and the sons held the line of the father. Remnants of land ownership laws indicate that inheritance rights were connected to such clan lineages (Mullard, 1979: 62, 78). In Bhutan, matrilineal inheritance (with inheritance vested in the woman) and even polyandry is still practiced in the Buddhist areas, although the latter is confined to more remote districts. What we do not know, however, is whether this tradition for matrilineal inheritance is a leverage of the tradition for parallel inheritance brought to Bhutan by Tibetan immigrants, or if it is the remnants of the pre-Buddhist period, such as suggested by Crins (2004: 588).

According to Bhattacharya the higher social position of Tantric Buddhist women can be ascribed to the influence of Buddhism (1994). Our fieldwork, however, led us to concur with Gyatso and Havnevik, that Tantric Buddhism is embedded in patriarchal notions of power. In their argument, a special feature of the monastic institutions throughout Tantric Buddhist history has been the rationalization of women's subordination. As such Buddhist notions of power carry with it patriarchal undertones (2005: 10-12).

Both Bhutan and Sikkim are intrinsically formed by their roots in Buddhism, but in highly different ways given the way in which their history departs. In both countries Buddhist mythology and the idea of the founders as important reincarnations served as a core narrative of state formation. However, the institutionalization of Buddhism, and in particular the link between the state and religion, differ significantly.

In Bhutan, the strong institutionalization of the Drukpa Kargyupa School laid the foundation for a strong and direct link between the state institutions and the religious institutions of the dual system. In effect, the religious and administrative sphere are even said to be more intertwined than they were in Tibet, thus resembling a theocracy (Aris 1979). Due to the merger between religious and political power, with all important posts held by high lamas, a political patriarchy was effectively installed and legitimized through religion. The dual system eventually became secularized and the state disintegrated into factional fights between local aristocratic families. When the state was reunified the regional nobility was sidelined and the previous strong link between the state and the lamas was reasserted. Patriarchy was continued with the administrative cadre predominantly recruited from the monastic schools, apart from a few elite families. When modern education was introduced by India in the 1960's it was attached little value. Thus the

choice of sending the boys was probably more of a combination of preference for boys of the Indian teachers and a way of accommodating boys for whom no other options were available, in some cases even because it was the girls who would inherit the land. Since it was the boys who were sent to school they became the future power bearers. The effect was to establish a *de facto* patriarchy, mirroring the patriarchal traditions of colonialism and India (Interview Editor of Kuensel, Bhutan, February 2005).

In Sikkim there were also strong links between the monastic bodies and the monarchy, which primarily held symbolic importance. For instance, the head lama of Pemayangtse held the power to consecrate the Chogyal. The lamas were, also concerned with the affairs of the state, institutionalized in the position of the Dorji Lupon (Kumar 1995: 43-45). However, the lack of celibacy meant that Buddhism presumably played a different role. Given the symbolic importance of Buddhism, it is bound to have made an impact, but one that is by no means as directly discernable as in Bhutan, because its lesser institutionalization probably gave it less political leverage as a formative religion of the state. Thus even if it provided the symbolic legitimacy of state power, the Buddhist impact on promoting patriarchy is less obvious and at least poorly researched. Nevertheless, even the less institutionalized forms of tantric Buddhism, those without celibacy, such as is the case of Nyingmapa Buddhism, also embodied patriarchal undercurrents following Gyatso and Havnevik (2005: 12). This is most vividly seen from the duplication of patriarchal traits of Tibetan Buddhism, such as the tradition of sending the oldest son to the monastic schools (Sachdeva 2011: 163). Moreover, the Sikkimese monarchy was less absolute due to the merger between the feudal and political elite in Sikkim, the Kazis, who simultaneously took on roles as feudal lords and governors. As such, much power remained with the secular elite. Finally, the British influence should not be underestimated as it had a much stronger impact on the political development of Sikkim. As an effect, modern education came to Sikkim at an earlier time, with the first English school, Tashi Namgyal Academy, established already in 1906. With this also entered colonial patriarchal ideas of power, and a tradition for recruiting boys. One exception was Paljor Namgyal Girls Senior Secondary School in Sikkim founded in 1963, and promoted by the Queen with the specific purpose of enrolling girls in education. This, however, did little to change the patriarchal organization of political power. Thus whether it was the influence of the Buddhist establishment or the influence of colonial power, modern education, as was the case in Bhutan, established a *defacto* patriarchy.

In this way the symbolic influence of Buddhism, together with British and later Indian influences, paved the way for a patriarchal organization of society in both Sikkim and Bhutan. As a result, the women in both countries were relegated to a low status domestic role whilst the high status sphere of religion and governance was reserved for the men (Kotti 2005.) As such, both countries hold a similar historical disposition for patriarchy in the political

arena, although from a somewhat dissimilar historical background. Nevertheless, Buddhism in both countries assimilated local *bön* traditions, and egalitarian position for the Buddhist women in their everyday lives. In there is social context, Buddhist women therefore enjoy more prestige and freedom in the Tibetan periphery of Bhutan and Sikkim than in either China or India, and even more so than in Tibet itself (Crins 2004: 587, Bhattacharya 1994: 25).

Gendered participation in village meetings in four villages in Bhutan and Sikkim

Both Bhutan and Sikkim emphasize the importance of involving women in local politics in order to improve development implementation. In this paper we explore the differences and similarities of Buddhist women's empowerment in these two countries. Taking an outset in Bourdieu's theory we expected that women's empowerment is determined by two factors: the amount of capital which they possess in relation to men, and the gender categories that shape how gender is conceived of and acted upon in the local political field. The empirical argument of this section is that the gendered value of cultural capital in respectively Sikkim and Bhutan takes highly different forms. What we came across comparing our fieldwork was the way in which illiteracy seemed to define political gender roles to a much larger extent in Bhutan than in Sikkim. In Bhutan female respondents emphasized how their political role was defined by their gender. They often narrated how only men took the word at local meetings, whereas women, almost by definition, constituted the 'marginalized group'. This was partly connected to their role in the household, in the words of a woman:

How can I go, I am Nang Gi Aum ['inner woman']. When my siblings go out there is a need to have someone who can shoulder responsibility like me to stay home (Kutum, 59 years, interviewed May 2005, Punakha).

Thus, she felt her central position as the 'inner woman' tied her body to the kitchen, thereby excluding her from political participation. However, her experience was less common than might be expected. The obligation to attend meetings meant that women often participated in place of the men in order to avoid a penalty, typically equivalent to a days work. In Sikkim, the financial incentive was more indirect, in the form of economic pressure of being left out in development activities, or being branded as belonging to the opposition party, which would have similar consequences. Nevertheless, it had a similar impact of encouraging female participation in local meetings. As such, financial incentives, somewhat unexpectedly, opened a space for female participation in both countries. In both cases, however, this needed not in itself foster female empowerment, because the women generally participated to avoid financial punishment, rather than out of genuine interest. However, the following experience from two meetings observed in respectively Sikkim (Ralang,

November 2004) and Bhutan (Gasa, March 2005), indicated a significant difference in the effect of this kind of mandatory participation.

In this particular village meeting observed in Bhutan there were more women than men, because the men were working on a mule track and thus only four men attended the meeting. In spite of men outnumbering the women at the meeting in Sikkim, the outcomes were the reverse of what might have been expected. In Bhutan only men spoke up and women's participation was confined to gossiping with each other. In Sikkim by contrast, the women were quite attentive and quite a number participated in the discussions. As such, it appeared that the women and men were both actively engaged in forming local politics in Sikkim, whereas this appeared to be an almost exclusive male domain in Bhutan.

In Bhutan the space opened for female participation was an opportunity only few women were able to capitalize on because they felt they lacked the cultural capital to do so. The women in general expressed shyness, fears and a feeling of lacking the articulacy to express themselves in a group. The ontological narrative presented by an illiterate woman captures how lack of cultural capital prevented the women from speaking up in meetings:

...we feel so shy and when we are shy no words comes to our mouth and it is only men who talk. Even in the Geog meetings when the Gup asks the women to speak, then the women do not speak because we are shy/.../ I think the reason could be having no education and having no exposure and on top of that we live in remote part.

/.../There is a difference of speaking between people who are educated and people who are not.

I: If it was really important to you... would you then speak you mind?

R: No, I would feel shy. I have the thought in my mind, but I would not be able to speak outEven if I speak up some people might like it, some may not./.../ It is better to keep quiet and stay, most people do not like what other people say. /.../Most women these days don't speak /.../ 'Oh! This woman, she spoke like this', they will say like that. /.../ People like me we don't know how to speak (Respondent 47, 35 years, District III).

In her example the Gup actively encouraged women to speak. Nevertheless, the narrative exemplified how the women's collective identity as that of being unknowledgeable, unexposed and inarticulate, combined with the fear of being disrespected, deprived them the self-esteem to voice their interests. Similarly in Sikkim, exposure seemed to make a⁶ difference to women's ability to participate. Even if the men were uneducated, they often had an advantage over the women because they principally took care of the outgoing activities. This provided them with a valued asset: knowledge that went beyond everyday life in the local field, whilst the bodies of the women were tied to the house and the kitchen.⁷ By contrast to the value attributed to exposure, we experienced a main difference with respect to education. In Sikkim, it appeared

that lack of education did not marginalize the Buddhist women to nearly the same extent as was the case in Bhutan. In general the men would be more likely to take on formal political posts or informal positions as village elders, and they would participate actively at village meetings. Nevertheless, the women were much more inclined to engage actively in local politics than was the case in Bhutan, because they did not perceive their lesser education as a main obstacle to participation, as reflected by an illiterate woman in Sikkim:

... I have never been to school, I have never even seen one, but that does not make me less than the others. I speak in public meetings, I have even met the chief minister, he was good (Pema, 43).

In Bhutan, by contrast, the Buddhist women emphasized the disparities in education as a principal cause of gender inequality in local politics. This was reflected in the dichotomy between the *'small people'* and the *'big people'*, which covered a distinction between the village elders and the marginalized sections. The illiterate women almost unanimously felt they belonged to this category: *"I do not know how they can speak, I cannot understand. We are the small people"* (Respondent 34, female, 59, District II). In her reference to herself as belonging to the *'small people'* she thus placed herself at the bottom of the hierarchy. It did, however, not necessarily refer to a gendered difference, as illiterate men who were positioned in a situation of economic dependency also used this label. Nevertheless, it appeared to have a gendered aspect to it, as women who were well to do would often feel equally marginalized, whilst men who were well to do often held the role of village elders, even if they were illiterate. Moreover, the lack of cultural capital seemed to weigh heavier on the shoulders of the women. In the ontological narrative of a *tshogpa* (member of the GYT council, Gasa, interviewed March 2005), who came from a middle-income family:

My parents did not educate me, this is why I am ignorant and stupid.... I am like an animal. I am like a cow (Lham, female, 36 Gasa).

Even her post of village representative did not improve her self-esteem because she lacked the competence to capitalize on the value of this position. This stood in contrast to the effect that such a post had on illiterate men, who experienced increased respect in the village (eg. Dorji, Trashigang, 39 years, male, interviewed May 2005). Similarly, for a well educated female Mangmi (the post below the Gup) such a post significantly increased her self-esteem. When asked how she felt about her position, she replied:

R: I feel very proud./.../ I might get a change to become Chimi or Gup. I would like to gain more influence (Karma Yoden, female, interviewed April 2005).

Thus, for a literate woman, a local position significantly advanced her respect in the local community, whereas the female *tshogpa* might even have the opposite experience, because she lacked the valued capital.

In Sikkim, by contrast, the Buddhist women did not articulate a dichotomy between the *'big people'* and the *'small people'*, although it should be noted that such a distinction is sometimes used by women from scheduled castes (Ranka, March 2011). This reflected how illiteracy did not prevent women from speaking up, or from feeling any lesser than men with similar educational background. As such, education was not necessarily seen as the defining element of political engagement. One woman even argued for the reverse:

How I talk at the public meeting hardly matters. I find that even the educated men are very uncultured when they talk. I sometimes wonder what is the meaning of education. (Karma Lhamu, Female 43 Years, Barfung July 2004)

In Bhutan, even non-formal education might empower women to speak up if it was vital to their interest (Karma Dema, Female, 37 Years, Gasa, Interviewed March 2005). By contrast, education and political engagement were commonly perceived as independent aspects in Sikkim. An illiterate woman in South Sikkim contemplated:

I think better education will give women exposure to become ministers but most of our panchayat members hardly have much education and they are still doing so well. (Tshongtit, Female 38 Years, Barfung, July 2004)

Her view reflected how the link between gender and the role of cultural capital was much weaker in Sikkim. Nevertheless, there was one exception to this general impression, following the reflection of a woman who came from Kalimpong and had married a Sikkimese. This particular woman felt that she could never talk at meetings because it made her feel uncomfortable:

I do not know what to say, all this is beyond my comprehension, my husband can take care of these matters. It will be good if we have women leaders, I feel men make fun of us if we talk too much and I do not like it (Reshmi, 35 Years, Tingchim December 2004) Barfung, June 2004)

A Buddhist woman in Bhutan could well have expressed the initial part of her statement. But then again she originated from Kalimpong (West Bengal) and it is possible that this may have influenced her perception regarding her role. However, her experience seemed an exception. The confidence in their articulacy expressed by Buddhist women in Sikkim is nicely captured by the narrative of a woman with primary schooling, who felt the teachers were taking advantage of them:

...they think they can fool us, but I understand what they were trying to say, I will complain to the chief minister if they do not listen to us (Pema, 46 Years, Gangtok March 2005).

By contrast, Bhutanese women would often feel even more disempowered in parent/teacher meetings, because of the many well-educated people attending these meetings, who would not attend the local meetings. The puzzling issue of the above mentioned differences is how a presumably similar structural position as being uneducated could produce so different evaluations of the

value of women's political role. In the following we will try to discuss the significance of these differences and illuminate their root causes.

Gendered differences in local participation

In this section we will try to gain deeper insight into the background of the uncovered differences in gendered participation in respectively Sikkim and Bhutan. The puzzle is why, given the relatively similar cultural and religious background of these women, did the illiterate Buddhist women categorize themselves as 'small people' in Bhutan, whilst in Sikkim such a lack of cultural capital did not generate similar disempowering distinctions. Clearly it is difficult to single out specific factors that lay at the root of this difference. In the following we will, however, try to outline and discuss some factors that come across as salient in understanding these discrepancies.

The formal organization of political power

An obvious reason for the discrepancy might be the difference between the organization of governance, which was still present as we conducted the fieldwork, with Bhutan being a monarchy and Sikkim, a democracy. This could be expected to foster different degrees of female participation. However, in spite of the different political governance models the institutionalization of local participation was highly similar in both states. Moreover, as previously argued, the difference was perhaps lesser than one might expect with respect to how this impacted female participation in local meetings, where the mandatory character of local participation promoted female participation in both states.

A reason related to the above, might be that women enjoy more rights in a democracy. A comparison of the rights situation of women in Sikkim and Bhutan, however, shows that Buddhist women actually enjoy more rights in Bhutan than they do in Sikkim. The Bhutanese Land Act of 1979 allows registration of land in the names of women, and the inheritance law provides for equal rights for all adults and children, regardless of gender or age. In practice, however, the government reports that traditional systems operate which are informal, flexible and circumstantial (CEDAW 2009). In Southern Bhutan, patrilineal inheritance norms dominate in the Hindu communities. Amongst the Buddhist population in central and western Bhutan inheritance is more egalitarian and women do not surrender their property to men when they marry (Pommeret 1998: 18-19). In effect, the heritage practices are as often detrimental to the rights of men, as heritage often follows a matrilineal pattern in the Buddhist communities (Crins 2004: 582). In Sikkim, Buddhist women are considered to be an asset in the household and command a bride price, but she has no rights of inheritance even when there are no sons. Only when a daughter remains unmarried can parents customarily transfer some

property to her (Lama 2011: 34). However, it is customary that they are given gifts of movable assets (Bhattacharya 1994: 37).

Religion

In both our fieldwork of Sikkim and Bhutan we found that women held an inferior religious position to that of men. A main reason is that women are viewed as impure because of their menstrual cycle. It is thus also seen as more difficult for them to obtain enlightenment because their cycle is seen to make them psychologically unstable. Concretely, this was expressed in practices where women for instance were not allowed to plough the field, in Bhutan justified by the myth that it would prevent the ox from being reborn human:

R: They say that only men should plough the fields. If women do this, the bulls will not be reborn as human.

I: Who told this to you?

R: *Everyone says this!* (Yanka, 33 years, Female, Punakha, interviewed April 2005).

Moreover, the women were generally seen to be behind the men in obtaining reincarnation. In Bhutan women were viewed as seven steps behind the men, as we will later argue. Similarly, in Sikkim the funeral pyre of the women was eight layered as compared to the men that was seven-layered, because they needed the extra step to attain salvation (Mondal, 1998\1999). The impact of such patriarchal interpretations of Buddhism was most strongly felt by the nuns. In the words of a Bhutanese nun in Sikkim, who specifically asked not to be named:

We have to bow down before the monks and they bow down before the deities. We are not allowed to read all the religious texts.... All we do is clean and prepare the lamps and tie knots in the religious threads. I will want to be born a man (Pema Tshering, June 2004, Taktse nunnery, Gangtok).

This was rooted in a specific interpretation of Buddhist texts associated with tantric Buddhism, which prevented women from learning religious texts as is well described in the novel of a nun's story: 'The Circle of Karma: A voice from Bhutan'. Even if a few nuns attended monastic education in both states, they were not entitled to perform religious ceremonies and their education was purely for spiritual renunciation and penance (Kotti 2005). In spite of the similarities in the patriarchal tendencies of Buddhism, we argue that religion indirectly influenced the way in which the gender roles were constructed. This may appear to be crucial, but needs to be understood against the way in which the state is imagined.

Different images of the state

Different ways of imagining the state, in our findings, carried with it different approaches to local governance. In Bhutan the state was imagined

as a reflection of traditional Buddhist culture, rooted in the image of the theocratic system established during the time of the Zhabdrung in the 17th century: *The emergence of Bhutan as a nation-state has been dependent upon the articulation of a distinct Bhutanese identity, founded upon our Buddhist beliefs and values...* (RGoB 1999: 18). As a consequence, the local governance discourse stressed the traditional aspects of social practice:

This participatory approach to development has few if any parallels in the developing world. It is an approach that empowers local communities within a framework of local institutions and time-honoured customs (RGoB, 1999, s. 39).

The idea of governance as tied up with ‘time-honoured customs’ draws on the idea of governance as a national enterprise rooted in the country’s ‘traditional’ values. This might be viewed as a gender-neutral discourse. However, the argument of the authors of a gender survey conducted by Sherubse College indicates that gendered differences may have its root in local culture and traditions:

Indeed, in legal terms there are few official discriminatory practices in the country. However, it is likely that a more subtle inequality exists stemming from culture and tradition, which could make the true status of women comparably as low as the regional neighbors (Tshomo et. all 2012: 2)

By contrast, Sikkim’s discourse on local governance was dominated by ideas of local democracy and gender equality, which was made a pivotal part of the discourse of the leading party. In a speech of Chamling on Women’s Day in 1994:

The S.D.F. Party is fully committed to ensure that the function and participation of Sikkimese women are fully extended to every conceivable sphere of day-to-day activities, with particular emphasis on those areas that are conspicuous by their total absence. You will, by joining the S.D.F., be part of that movement that will restore your lost dignity and self-respect to help you, once again, hold your head high. Then only we can hold our head high in a society where the hallowed place of women has finally been redeemed to acquire the dignity and high esteem it deserved. He ends his speech with the following words: Long Live Sikkimese Mothers and Sisters! (Chamling 1994).

This discourse was given real content as is evident from the presence of a women’s wing in each political party (*chalei morcha*), which played an important role in local politics. It was followed up by 33% reservation for women at the Panchayat level. In Bhutan the official development approach similarly emphasized gender equality, but there was no preferential treatment for women. Nevertheless, the emphasis on traditional values empowered those sections of society which wished to see a return of Buddhism to its former preeminent position. As noted by Aris, this change reflected an emerging tension between the primary teachings of Buddhism and militant aspects of the institutionalised Drukpa Kargyupa School (Aris 1994: 11). As an effect,

the traditional sections of society represented by the lay monks, the army and the large landholders gained strong positions of power in the local society and state. This was for instance seen from the way in which a high number of local leaders came from a monastic background. In a village in Eastern Bhutan we found that the women were particularly disempowered. In the words of an illiterate woman, who was asked if she could speak up in local meetings:

No, I cannot, I feel shy ... I feel awkward. /.../As I am unable to speak up, I have no influence. The women, even if I speak up the Gup will say: 'ahh, your talk is useless and you are hopeless'. R: /.../Most of the issues are decided among the men, and after deciding they ask if it is ok or not, and we say: 'OK'. /.../ No, they do not have influence, even if the issue is decided amongst the women, the men reject their decision. /.../ The Gup and the men decide. Even if they [the women] say: 'NO', it is decided. /.../ Every time when there is a meeting. The women don't know anything. The men are better at deciding. Even if we speak our talk is condemned; they say our talk is useless, they scold us. /.../The Gup comes for the meeting, and the men scold us and say: 'Ehh, you just shut up and listen to what the Gup has to say!'/.../

The quote displays the general feeling of the women in the village that knowledge owned by the men set the agenda of the meetings, in the process excluding female voices. It reflects the way in which, in their experience, the women are marginalized through male practices of disrespect, ridiculing and scolding. It effectively serves to discipline the women to remain silent, thus placing their political value considerably beneath that of the men. The women would, however, seldom link this to their religious position. Nevertheless this may have played a central role. At least a well-educated and highly analytical woman in the same village linked the political marginalization of women to their religious stigmatization. In spite of her articulacy, her comparatively high level of education and her position as well to do in the village, she found herself unable to participate actively due to religious gender stigmatization:

R: We cannot speak up. We are not respected. It is the men who speak up and it is the men who make the decisions together with the Gup./.../ It is because women have less value than the men. Only if a woman is good in the previous seven lives she will be reborn as a man. So the women have less value than the men. That is why.

I: Who says this?

R: It is the local Gomchen. Everybody knows this. That is why we women do not have respect. That is why our opinion is not respected at the meetings.

I: Has this changed with the decentralization reforms that have taken place in your village?

R: At my mother's time the women were actually able to gain some influence. The women could meet and discuss their problems and then they would all go together and speak up, and sometimes they managed to get what they wanted. Today it is different. The women are not respected and they don't have any influence. It is the men who make all the decisions (Respondent 128, 40 years, District III).

Rather than promoting female participation, it seemed as if gender stigmatization in this particular community had a high impact on women's perception of their political value. This was, in the analysis of educated women apparently enhanced through the local participatory processes, effectively excluding the women from decision making. This stands in contrast to the earlier situation in which the women were, seemingly, able to mobilize themselves collectively and thereby gain influence. It should, however, also be stressed that this particular village was experienced as more disempowering to women than was the case in most villages. The most likely explanation for this was the localized power of the religious community. This was for instance reflected in practices where the local Rimpoche was given the virginity of young girls who, in return, gained the honour of being impregnated by him (conversation Sonam Choiden, Lecturer at Kanglung College, June, 2005). Thus, it does perhaps not give an accurate picture of the general effect of gender stigmatization in Bhutan. Nevertheless, we believe it may indicate the effect, which the reemphasis on Buddhist traditional culture had on local political processes. The effect of this imaginary, we argue, was the revitalization of monastic knowledge and practices. As a side effect, this simultaneously revitalized patriarchal notions of women as having less religious value: the idea of women being seven reincarnations behind the men, of women being impure, and thus unworthy for reading central religious texts, as is more thoroughly argued in the fictitious story of a nun life: *'The Circle of Karma. A voice from Bhutan'* written by Kotti (2005). In a situation where the knowledge of the state and of religion was closely tied together, this influenced the ways in which the political identities of the women were formed. Most influential were state programmes promoting traditional culture rooted in Drukpa Karguypa Buddhism, prescribing a code of conduct of how the villagers had to show respect to their superiors in the state. This was promoted through the local village meetings, in which the villagers for instance were taught how deep to bow for different levels of the hierarchy (Bothe 2011: 295-300). The revitalization of tradition, is, however seldom a neutral enterprise, but tends to empower those vested with the authority to interpret tradition. In the words of Bell, though written in another context:

The ritualization itself is a creative and strategic way of reproducing the past in such a way as to maximize its domination of the present, usually by particular authorities defined as the sole guardians of the past and the experts on ritual (1992: 123).

The process of traditionalizing the past by adding to such meetings an aura of religious deference tended to empower the men, those who were 'traditionally' associated with the sphere of state, religion and politics. Although both men and women were instructed to follow rituals of displaying respect to their superiors in the state, such practices appeared more intimidating to illiterate women. In the words of one:

I: How do you see Dasho Dzungdag?

R: I am afraid of him.

I: Did you ever meet Dasho Dzungdag?

R: Yes.

I: How did you react?

R: I hid myself.

I: Why?

R: Because, I am afraid he might scold me or hit me.

I: Why would he do that?

R: Because I am a woman and I do not know how to behave in front of him.

I: Can you tell me exactly what happened when you met him, did you run away?

R: *No, I met him on the road face to face, so I could not hide in the bushes, so I just hid in myself* (Respondent 15, Female 41, District I)

Thus for an illiterate women the practices of showing deference to state officials generally seemed more intimidating than to men, who were often more well rehearsed in these practise, and could at times even capitalize from their ability to display these practices at a more advanced level. As a result, the female knowledge and capacities that lay outside the public sphere were devaluated. At a corporal level, it taught the illiterate women in their local spaces that they were inferior to their male superiors in the state.

The distinction between the state and religious sphere as a male space and the domestic sphere as a female space was symbolized in the distinction between female and male dress codes. Although both men and women wore the same cloth, the female dress was associated with a non-Buddhist past, whilst the male dress was associated with the sphere of religion and the state, thereby signifying patriarchal images of gender divisions (Meyers 2004: 194-199). This was reinforced by the use of colours on the scarfs and traditional boots of state officials, displaying their rank, whilst the commoners simply wore plain white scarfs and boots, signifying their place at the bottom of the hierarchy. These colours served to guide the citizens in how to act in front of different rank and file as outlined in a manual on how to correctly behave in accordance with 'traditional' Buddhist culture in the meetings with state officials (Lam, D & Tenzing, U. 1999). Such symbolisms are far from neutral, and confer upon their bearer a sense of superiority. In the analysis of Meyers: "*Beliefs about men's dress reinforces the connection between maleness and the world of religious (and other) authority*" (2004: 197). However, the low value attributed to women could generally be overcome with a high level of education, placing the women more at par with the men:

I: How do you personally feel about the system to show respect to your superior?

R: For example, you are lady and I am man. But even so you are educated, your parents brought up you well, and God had blessed you well, you have

position is society. But me I am a man, I do not know anything but still I have to respect you because you have status that is part of Driglam Namzha. So, that is why it is important for us to know where our superior stands and where we are. (Tshewang).

One exception to this general process of subordination was a woman interviewed in Western Bhutan, who seemed to be empowered at a level even far beyond any other women we met, and in her own account played a central role in local politics. The most plausible explanation found was the fact that she was the owner of one of the Zhabdrungs shoes:

I: Do you bow down to all people who are superior to you, who have come to visit or see Zhabdrung's shoes?

R: If I had to bow down to every person it is very hard, I cannot do it. But when King and all come I bow down. If I had to do for everyone then I cannot. (REF)

Much against the practice of the villagers in general, she would actually refrain from bowing to any other authority than the King himself. This was hard to explain in any other way than the fact that she held an important relic of the traditional Buddhist past: the shoes of the Zhabdrung. Similarly, in Sikkim, a woman who owned a cup from which the Chogyal had drunk tea experienced that this added to her status in society, because people came to her house to inspect the 'Cup'. This attributed to her a position of prestige as 'the woman with the Chogyals cup' (Chungchung 32 Years Ralang, September 2004). However, the relationship between the state officials and villagers in Sikkim was of a much more egalitarian nature, although it was not one of mutual respect. Here we found more informal practices of showing respect to state officials, for instance the Panchayat President, by placing your hands together and using the Nepali word for respect 'namaste', when asking for favours (also used by the Buddhist group). But there were no officially promoted and codified rituals connected with such meetings. Moreover, the discourse was one of equality as opposed to hierarchy. We suggest that this is a key in understanding why the Sikkimese women felt less stigmatized and were more self-confident, assertive and played a significant role in local decision-making, even if this was not as yet at par with the men. But, more importantly, a position of illiteracy was not necessarily associated with a position of no political value. For one woman interviewed it was in effect quite the opposite:

R: Thank God I am not educated, education makes the language of the person very polite and sophisticated and for politics I need to be loud and rough.

I: Do you feel this kind of participation in the meetings gives you respect:

R: Yes, it is good. I get to travel, good food even, money and then I get to be near people of power. I think I can join the Chalei Morcha (women wing of political parties in Sikkim). (Yangchen, 35 Years Female, Gangtok, June 2005).

The difference between the experience of the Buddhist women in Bhutan and Sikkim, we thus argue, can best be explained by the difference in the

way in which local governance was imagined. Whilst Bhutan pursued a traditional approach and emphasized hierarchical governance practices, Sikkim opted for a model of political equality. Even if gender equality played a role in official Bhutanese discourse, the main difference lay in the way in which it was practiced. The promotion of gender equality in Sikkim versus the emphasis on Buddhist traditional culture, which in its essence held a bias towards patriarchy, made a significantly different setting for promoting gender equality. What came across is the way in which women's political value and participation was advanced in Sikkim, whilst it seemed that the political value of women in Bhutan, in the best case, remained unaltered, and in the worst case was devalued. Meanwhile, the paradox was that the Sikkimese women seemed unable to capitalize on this wider space for political influence. In effect, the rights of women in Bhutan remained significantly better than those of the women in Sikkim, as we have previously argued.

Although the aim of this article is not empirical, we feel a need to briefly follow up on developments since the fieldwork was conducted in 2005. In Sikkim the gender quotas have been further increased to 50 percent at the lowest level of the zilla panchayats.⁸ As an effect there are even districts in which female panchayat presidents outnumber the male presidents. Since the gender quotas go in turn this means that female panchayat presidents have become the order of the day, thus providing female role models in the local spaces. In Bhutan even more profound changes have taken place with the constitution of 2007 opening up for increased female representation. Prior to the constitution the National Assembly only had one female representative, whilst the new assembly had ten percent women. In addition efforts have been made to upgrade the symbolic value of high-ranking women at par with men. As such, the women are now also given the honour of displaying their high rank in the form of full coloured *rachus* (silk embroidered cloth), with the colours of rank matching those applied for men. Moreover, one of the political parties in the upcoming election is headed by a woman. Whilst it should be acknowledged that these efforts are likely to elevate the position of the women in the higher echelons of the state, the main question is what it does to the position of the illiterate women at the bottom of society. In our estimate, it may change less than might be expected, because the traditional ways of imagining society remains rooted in Drukpa Karguypa culture, which is essentially patriarchal (Bothe 2011: 530-540). It thus probably takes more than the change of the colour of the female cultural attribute, to counter a long tradition of associating maleness with the spheres of power – the state and religion. Change of the kind that will advance the value of the illiterate women, drawing on the Sikkimese example, may well require a change in the way in which the state is imagined, as one based on equal worth between the genders.

Conclusion: State discourses and gendered participation

What our fieldwork signified was that the differences in gendered participation between Sikkim and Bhutan were not rooted in processes of exclusion. In effect female participation in meetings was encouraged in both countries. Rather, the inability of the women to participate on equal terms with the men prevented the illiterate women in Bhutan from gaining influence. Their lack of educational capital constructed their gender role as that of citizens with lesser value. Surprisingly, however, a similar position of illiteracy did not devalue the political value of the women in Sikkim to a similar extent. In effect quite a few illiterate Buddhist women were empowered in Sikkim. In this paper we have sought to illuminate how these differences were constructed.

Both Bhutan and Sikkim share a similar background in Buddhist thought, which essentially advocates a patriarchal way of organizing power. But it integrated pre-Buddhist religion and practices, thus opening up for more egalitarian practices co-existing with Buddhism. Moreover, the influence of colonialism meant the installation of a *de facto* patriarchy. Since it was the men who were educated they came to monopolize military, monastic and political power. As a result of this development, the women were equally marginalized and referred to a domestic role in both countries, from a presumably more egalitarian position.

In spite of these historical similarities, Bhutan and Sikkim, at the time of our fieldwork, presented two different models of state formation. Whereas Bhutan had remained a monarchy, Sikkim, through the merger with India, had adopted democracy as its model of governance. However, we argue, this, in itself, was less a cause of the gendered difference in local participation, since both countries placed local governance at the centre of their development policies. Moreover, female participation in local meetings was considerable in both countries due to the fact that the price of non-participation was too high.

The most significant difference that might explain the gender disparities, we thus suggest, lies not in the systems themselves. Instead, we propose that the differences in the gendered importance attributed to education need to be understood against the differences in the ways in which the state was imagined. As such, attention should be directed towards the difference in the way in which power was defined, categorized and articulated in these societies. Whereas emphasis in Bhutan was on reproducing a traditional image of society, Sikkim emphasized a discourse on gender equality. It was, however, not that patriarchal notions of power were officially promoted in Bhutan. In effect gender equality was also promoted here. Nevertheless the emphasis on traditional Buddhist practices in the local spaces meant that a patriarchal understanding of gender relations was, so to speak, smuggled in through the back door. As such, the idea of male superiority in the political sphere seemed to be reified through the empowerment of traditional sections of society, in particular that of the Buddhist establishment. It was corporally ingrained in

the illiterate women through state promoted respect shown towards the top officials of the state, the majority of whom are men. By contrast, in Sikkim, the emphasis on gender equality went beyond the level of the discourse, with women's political wings and gender reservations as a main outcome. This established a basic distinction which made the illiterate Buddhist women in Sikkim view themselves as what Aristotle termed 'bios', that is individuals who take on the role as political beings, as opposed to Buddhist women in a similar position in Bhutan, who in general viewed themselves as 'zoe', that is as simply beings without political value (distinction taken from Foucault's reference to Aristotle (1990: 143). Surprisingly, however, the position of the Buddhist women in Sikkim did little to advance their situation of rights, with the status of women's rights being considerable better in Bhutan.

It leaves the question if the current liberalization of Bhutanese politics may change the status of women to be more at par with that of the women in Sikkim. A guess is that there probably will be change. The emergence of a female party president shows the increased empowerment of educated women. At the local level, however, it seems likely that change may be slower, because of the continued emphasis on traditional ways of organizing social order. As such, it seems likely that women's political position will only increase with the new generation of women, who are more educated and who perhaps will claim higher respect.

The latter conclusion may at first sight seem to fall nicely in line with Bourdieu's understanding of habitus, in the argument that gender categorizations are socially ingrained in early childhood. However, at a closer look, the inertia lay not as much in early childhood socialization, but rather it seemed to be associated with the way in which the state was imagined as respectively a traditional or an egalitarian entity. This opens up for a critical perspective on Bourdieu's early vision of habitus. In effect, it may appear that social change does not necessarily display the inertia that Bourdieu's notion of habitus is commonly associated with, which he is often cited to argue can only be changed in situations of crisis or structural change (eg. Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992, p. 136). Instead, we suggest the answer lies in his later work on the state and symbolic power, where he argues that the way in which the state forms the mental structures of its citizens frames visions and divisions of society. As such, the power of the state over categorizations, language and symbolism may justify the difference in gendered value attributed to education, and thus the way in which illiterate men and women respectively perceive of their roles as political agents (1998: 40-46). Bourdieu stresses the role of primary socialization in forming these categories. What this article indicates, however, is the way in which the ritualization of political practice in Bhutan had the side effect of upgrading the political value of the men whilst decreasing the value of the women, in particular that of the illiterate women. As argued by Bell, ritualization is never simply the 'dead weight' of tradition. Rather it

is the maintenance of a tradition through exact duplication of fixed activities is an inherently strategic activity that promotes the power of those invested with the competence to define tradition (1992: 123). The empowerment of traditional sections of society thus enhanced patriarchal ways of categorizing gender divisions, which was legitimized by a specific interpretation of Buddhism. By contrast, in Sikkim, the emphasis on the political value, knowledge and dignity of women had as its effect to diminish the political gender gap. Thus, it appears that the way in which the state is imagined and the practices it promotes can, respectively through rituals and preferential treatment, effectively influence gendered perceptions of local participation over a relative short time span. This indicates a need to rethink habitus as a more flexible and dynamic entity than was originally envisioned by Bourdieu.

NOTES

1. Empowerment is defined in terms of increased self-determination.
2. Eg. http://www.wunrn.com/news/2008/08_08/08_11_08/081108_governance.htm
3. Chief Minister of Sikkim: 'We have realized that the best way to achieve comprehensive development in the State is to increasingly decentralize and devolve the functioning of the Government to the people at the grassroot level. The basic idea is to give a sense of ownership, introduce transparency and make the governance accountable...'. Shri Pawan Chamling <http://www.pawan-chamling.org/newsnevent/villagespech.html>.
The Bhutanese Government equally placed their trust in local governance as the engine of social change, seen to: '...enlarge opportunities for people at all levels to participate more fully and effectively in decisions that have a bearing on their lives and livelihoods and the future of their families, communities and the nation' (RGoB, 2005). Strategy for Gross National Happiness. Thimphu: Royal Government of Bhutan.
4. Srong-btsan sgam-po, r. 617 – 649 C.E.
5. Small religion is the non organized.
6. But even if women were generally unexposed there was one situation that seemed to overwrite both the lack of education as well as lack of exposure: a position of widowhood.
7. Bhutan: Respondent 110, 21 years, District III.
8. http://www.telegraphindia.com/1120831/jsp/siliguri/story_15918011.jsp#.UW1AP6sbtXg

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