

Feminism and Cultural Tolerance: An Empirical Study of Tribal Women of Kinnaur in Himachal Pradesh

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Abstract: Feminism refers to an intense awareness of identity as a woman and interest in feminine problems. Cultural tolerance is when someone has to accept the cultural belief and customs without any question. For instance, there may be quite few women who actually adhere to their inheritance or divorce rights etc. However, the tribal women are not entitled many constitutional rights as their counterparts are given, yet they are the real epitome of feminism with their primitive tradition and modern outlook. In order to evaluate the feminist outlook of tribal society, an empirical study has been done of a tribal district of Himachal Pradesh, Kinnaur, with the aim to evaluate how far do kinnauri women conform to modern feminist ideas in their attitudes, behaviour and way of life? Kinnaur is situated in the North-Eastern part of Himachal Pradesh, given the status of tribal district and preserves an old age tradition with its own customary law known as *The Bazib –UL-Arz*.

Keywords: Feminism, Cultural Resistance, tribal women, kinnaur, bazib-ul-harz, dab-dab, hari, Kinnauri inheritance Law, Polyandry, Polygamy, zomohood

Introduction: The better half of man is struggling hard to better her lot against the heavy odds set to strangulate her strength, strain her individuality and scandalize her name. From cradle to grave she suffers discrimination and dejection. Therefore emancipation of women became the crucial among feminists. However the status of women in tribal societies stands in contrast with mainstream women's experience. Tribal societies have different laws, norms and customs. They have different faith religious as well as cultural. With the different ways of life, culture and background, tribal society gives status their women accordingly. Though most of tribes in India are patrilineal, where descent is considered through male and property is inherited in the male line. Hindu Succession Act, Marriage Law, Divorce Law etc are not applicable there as they have own law which do not entitle women of these rights, even then they are feminists in outlook and enjoy good status. The concept of Feminism means different things to different people, ranging from a wish to change and challenge the whole existing order of things to the desire to bring about a more balanced and saner equality between the sexes and achieve a respectable individual liberty for women with their natural instincts and characteristics intact. (Tandon,25) feminism is meant both the awareness of women's position in society as one of disadvantaged or inequality compared with that of men and also a desire to remove those disadvantages. It can be better define as a movement from the point of view of, by and for women. Feminism is not a coherent ideology; rather there are so many types and ways of expressing feminism.

These are liberal feminism, radical feminism, socialist feminism, new feminism, eco-feminism and cultural feminism etc. Liberal Feminism is a traditional theory which has evolved from liberalism and seeks liberal principles of justice, liberty and equality to women without questioning (Tandon, 41). Proper education, proper training in critical thinking, is the most important single item on the feminist agenda of liberal feminism" (Wollstonecraft). Radical feminism as name suggests, was based on the principle of liberalism that advocated for equality among individuals regardless of their sex and other distinctions. Other kind is socialist feminism emerged as a reaction to the stand taken by liberal thinkers. They asserts that only political and legal rights are not enough to emancipate women from all of their disadvantages which could only be done through a social revolution that would give them economic freedom vis-à-vis men. Eco-Feminism is a theory that "rests on the basic principle that patriarchal ways are harmful to women, children, and living things". Often drawn between society's treatment of the environment, or resources and its treatment of women, in resisting culture, they believe they are also resisting the cultural patriarchy. The focus of this research is on tracing the status of women in a traditional tribal society of kinnaur in the light of feminist point of view. It is to evaluate the life condition of the women of kinnaur district, who are ironically despite a large number of well meaning constitutional provisions and laws protecting and safeguarding the welfare and interest of tribal woman has gone on unabated and even though comes up as survivors and feminist. It will try to explore feministic outlook of Kinnauri women, what are their approach as far as their rights are concerned, how they confront any sort of discrimination levelled against her? Do they have cultural tolerance for the primitive traditions or they oppose them?

Kinnaur is located in the North –Eastern part of Himachal Pradesh. It shares its eastern boundary with Tibet. On its south, it has Uttarakashi, on western side lies Shimla district and on the north Lahaul and Spiti is situated. According to 2011 census kinnaur district has a population of 84,298 and it has population density of 13 inhabitants per square kilometres. Kinnauri society, although ahead of primitive way of living, yet carries many age old traditions and customs, some of which are better than the so called advance customs as compared to the ones prevailing in socio-economically advanced area. Kinnauri culture follows some feminist outlook as far as women are concerned. They regard and respect women and are considered decision makers as whole household chores rests on her shoulders. They have a prominent role in most of the economic ventures. They share all the hard and tedious toil with their menfolk. "she clears the fields including breaking stones, parting them for irrigation. She helps in sowing seeds, clearing weeds, plucking and packing the fruits, the household work, care of the children, old and infirm people" (Sharma, 186). Simone de Beauvoir asserts "woman's first and major limitation is that she is physically weaker than man." As far as kinnauri women are concerned they are physically strong, do everything that kinnauri men can do. For marriage a girl is free to get married to any boy she likes to. Elopements (*hari*) can commonly seen in kinnaur, which later on resolved with the local ceremony called *botal puja*. Marriage is negotiated through some middleman and after the settlement of bride

price the girl is married off. Widow re-marriage is also sanctioned there if anybody wants to. Unlike the dowry system prevalent in the mainstream culture in India, tribal society has customary practice called 'Bride Price'. In case of dowry the bride's family has to pay valuables to the groom's family, which found reversed in case of a kinnauri marriage. Kinnauri women are given bride price which may be in the form of some amount or property or any other, valuables, decided by either local deity or the siblings of bride. The price is directly given to the bride to safeguard her future. With regard to their attitude towards divorce, it has been found that both male and female can go for it on equal terms. The kinnauri society is tolerant enough to permit this practice to be followed by either of the sexes. A kinnauri woman does not have the fear of social taboos relating to divorce. After divorce she can also come to her parent's home and live there without any permission or fear of society. "Women enjoy a better status in Kinnaur than in most places in India. A widow can even marry the younger brother of her deceased husband. This free will exemplifies that if a woman is determined enough, she can live life on her own terms. "They can divorce, remarry, and hold their heads higher than conventional Hindu Society." (Sanam, 59). Their frank, easy manners and ability to converse freely is the proof of the liberal society. Among kinnauri society, no discrimination is known to be made on the ground of sex. They accept and welcome the birth of both male and female child equally. Though they too have son preference, they do not discriminate against girls by female infanticide and sex determination. For begetting son they sometime keep secret wish to some deity and after the fulfilment of wish they have celebration and give feast to deity which is known as shukud. This attitude towards girl child manifested in the sex ratio exhibited in the census data of 2011. The sex ratio is stated 818/1000. This shows the attitudes of tribal towards the female child. Both males and females dance together during any festivals or marriage functions. Kayang is a very famous traditional dance form where a chain is being made where both males and females dance together without any social restrictions, points towards outlook of the liberal society. Tribal kinnauri women are given political offices through the Panchayati Raj Act. In many villages of kinnaur we can see women as 'pradhan' of Gram Panchayats. Anita Negi, has been the president of gram panchayat for twenty five years encourages tribal women saying "If a woman is aware of her individuality, and she knows where she wants herself to be and what she deserves, she can reach wherever she wants to be, transcending all the cultural boundaries" (Anita, Interview 2012). Chander Mani, Meena Negi, Dev Sanki, Priyanka Negi are some names, representing women leadership in *gram panchayat* level in Kinnaur.

Kinnauri Women: Trapped Between Feminism And Cultural Tolerance: Though women of Kinnauri society enjoy freedom to mix, move around, to get married with own choice, to have education etc, yet social organisation and institutions are still discriminatory particularly with regard to the customary law that guide the ownership of property and inheritance or with regard to exercising authority as a wife in domestic or as an individual in public. Many times she is expected to follow the so called primitive custom, keeping her lips close to question and thus can be seen trapped between the feminist outlook and cultural

resistance, finding imposed custom quite suffocating. Many laws are made to safeguard women in India like property rights, but in kinnaur this right is not given to female as customary law is the base of the society. Bazib-ul-Arz the customary law iterates "Ancestral property belongs to sons. The daughter has no right to property and the property of father is only given to sons". (Bazib-ul-Arz -12-D 422). Many times she is expected to relinquish her rights with her wish. She is expected to not to ask for any property right and thus remain mute accepting the primitive traditions. She has to have the so called cultural tolerance and yield before the patriarchal set up of society. In order to unmute the kinnauri women, Ratanmanjri, the chairperson of an NGO *Mahila Kalyan Simiti*, initiated a revolt against such injustice, and being a scapegoat in the name of cultural tolerance. She has been working hard to provide the property rights to the kinnauri women. She states "if parents will the ancestral property to their girl child then she would be entitled to it". (Interview, 2007). Thus with the firm conviction of the women of kinnaur the property right would surely be provided them in future. Besides this, polygamy and polyandry has existence in kinnauri society, though polyandry is in vanishing phase, yet can be seen in far remote areas of kinnaur. "Woman, under the polyandrous marriage is expected to remain vigilant that she is not targeted for paying undue attention to any single husbands. She has to be equally careful not to create any friction due to her discriminatory loyalty" (Sharma, Matilal, 189). This is her social duty to keep them all happy in a corporate group, which becomes foremost requirement of the polyandrous marriage, what about her own aspirations? Again, she has to have cultural resistance. Being literate and aware of their individuality kinnauri women started discarding polyandrous marriage saying "Polyandry is not for today, it was for primitive. Why should one enslaved oneself for the old custom sake" (Inder Devi, Interview 2012).

Polygamy, another form of marriage, is commonly seen in the kinnauri society it makes the life of a woman whose husband got married to another woman, miserable affecting her psyche and individuality. Polygamy is not supported directly by the society but it remains mute when such marriage happens. Therefore it encourages males and left females helpless and they are enforced to accept the co-wives. She has to remain silent as it is common in society and culture, therefore has to resist the culture. "Polygamy should be prohibited in our society it destroys the individuality of a women and it encourages males to have promiscuous relation with anyone they want" says a woman of kinnaur (interview, 2011). So many women interviewed wanted polygamy to be extirpated from kinnauri society. There are such women also, who opposed polygamy marriage and fight for their rights and encouraged many women of kinnauri society to unmute themselves. kailash kumari from Rarang village of kinnaur dared to fight against her husband for being married to another woman. she asseverates " when law does not allows male to have second wife without the consent of first wife ,then why should we tolerate husband's second marriage just because we are from tribal area?" (interview 2011) This may amaze anyone that this woman is living in her husband's home whereas husband and his second wife are

living in a rented room far from that place. Since Kinnauri people are much inclined towards the Buddhist philosophy of salvation and celibacy, zomohood (become s nun) is widely practiced culture there. With or without self choice girls are sent to nunneries to learn Bhuddist scriptures. Dolma is sent to nunnery without her wish when she was ten years of age. One day she ran away from there and later got married. She asserts "It is my life and just to please my parents, society i can not destroy it. People will stop criticising me when they will get another topic to discuss on".

In conclusion we can say that Kinnauri society exhibits a tolerant, gender cooperative and humane society. They follow and practice the principles of feminism spontaneously despite their being underdeveloped however, on one count, i.e. their attitude towards women, they are found to be in front of non tribal people. In that sense they are veritably progressive with their view point and culture, though they might appear primitive in other considerations. We can asseverate that the status of women in kinnauri society is comparatively better than the women in general society where they have to struggle hard against the atrocities enforced upon her. In this backdrop it can be concluded that tribal culture and its progressive viewpoints provides a source of inspiration for women movements in the mainstream. Despite being underdeveloped geographically and bereft of any rights given to them by the customary law they are the real women, who are coming fore to protect themselves. Women of India look western countries for feminism or feminist approaches rather evaluating the life of kinnauri women can provide them and inspiration to better know themselves.

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