

CHANGING IDENTITY OF WOMEN OF DARJEELING HILLS – A STUDY IN CULTURAL, SOCIAL, ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL DEVELOPMENT (1835-1985).

The fate of Darjeeling hills, a colonial creation, was settled permanently when the British took over it as a health centre in 1835. The hill tract otherwise was practically uninhabited at the time of the advent of the first European visitors estimated at a mere 100 in 1835. By attracting migrants from surrounding regions there was a steady growth of population to 10,000 in 1850, to 92,141 in 1881 and to a staggering 1,73,342 at the beginning of the twentieth century.¹ This growth is a remarkable instance of population expansion in Bengal. This colonial enclave has problems of colonial and cultural specificity and one such problem borders around the womenfolk of Darjeeling and how they have undergone phases of colonial and national reconstruction. The present work is a historical survey of the changing trends and the development of a sense of identity among the hill women in the last hundred and fifty years (1835-1985) as they have trudged along the path of modernisation.

Moreover in the wake of the importance of 'Women Studies' at present in developed and Third World Countries, the identity and status of women has become a matter of great concern. As a result this work will be an empirical inquiry into the dynamics of change in the role and status of hill women of Darjeeling. Apart from being a descriptive work on the colonial and postcolonial development of the native women of Darjeeling, the central focus of the present discourse is the women as projected by the colonial authorities in the hill station, which turned into a social space where the European 'selves' and the Indian 'others' started interacting. In doing so the women question became an important social domain for the exercise of colonial power for domination, inferiorisation and differentiating the 'other'. It has been argued here that differences between the east and west was projected in such a way that the latter was made to appear superior in every respect while the *Orient* was seen as a divided, fragmented entity, devoid of a universal language, without democracy, rationalism, capitalism that characterise the western mode of life. Thus the argument built up by the colonizers was that only western intellect, interference and enlightenment would enrich the east and imbue it with strength, vigour, zest and energy. This idea was vigorously projected in

every possible manner- the oriental women was one such focus. The women of the east with her total dependence on the male, belonged to a different universe, living in a closed world apart from the open world of men and their inability to handle important matters or to take any decision. They were typified as illiterate, sexually exploited and promiscuous, vulgar, quarrelsome, indecent and therefore needed to be enlightened by the white masters. Thus the hill women of Darjeeling were one such focus to put forward their discourse and logic. The colonial view of these women was the handiwork of both the British officials and the Christian missionaries. They betrayed their ignorance and showed an avoidance of the imperial truth for they overlooked the intricate, social variation, the long enduring system of oral learning. This research work tries to prove that such British prospective was not the real situation of the hill women, having a unique cultural background and part of the labour force in the tea plantation set up by the Raj. Further this work has highlighted the fact that the white man's burden of providing the native women with education or health facilities was due to the encounter of the colonized with the colonizers and as has already been pointed out, it was an attempt to justify their rule in the hill station as elsewhere in India. They regarded the locals of Darjeeling as the 'allured people' who were not to be disturbed by any Indian issues or problems, and thus were watchful for any signs of restlessness. Yet the colonial rule was a formative period for subsequent development and in the status and attitude of the hill women in particular. Since the shift in the cultural attitude is connected to a socio-economic, educational and political character, this work dwells as far as possible on the modernisation of women in all its perspective and their participation in social, educational, political, economic and cultural issues in the colonial and post-colonial period in their quest for an identity.

This type of gender study of the Darjeeling hills has one great obstacle and that is the difficulty in finding ample records and observations as these are sketchy in nature. Some vital records kept in schools, tea factories, office of political parties and in the Darjeeling Municipality have been destroyed due to fire. Church records on the other hand have been destroyed by humidity. This challenging work on the changing identity of the women of Darjeeling from 1835-1985 also takes into account and tries to systematically organise the fragmented works on some aspects of women studies in the

hills dealing with education, informal women workers, ethnographic works and the tea and cinchona industry that were undertaken by several scholars of the University of North Bengal.

The hypothesis that is proposed to be verified in this micro study is that the women situation in Darjeeling have undergone a multiple phases of colonial construction and have shown a unique reaction to it as expressed in the indigenised national discourse. In this context of post colonial construct of the colonial discourse, the methodology intended to be used, is a critical analysis of the response and changes of the hill women in colonial situation and in the period of nationalism. This belief is to be also studied in the broader context of the authentic consideration of the nationalist discourse. In order to study the change in women's development from colonial to post-colonial times materials have been collected from primary and secondary sources. The former includes Proceedings from the Hon'ble Lt. Governor of Bengal from the State Archives, Confidential Files of the Home Department, The District Magistrate's record Room, Church records, School and College records, The Planters' Association and factory records and The Tea Board of India records. It will also include old Darjeeling correspondence of government officials, reports by different governmental commissions, census, gazetteers and government statistics. Secondary sources have included memoirs, observation by foreign travellers, books, local and national newsletters, journals and related materials. Interviews with different personalities and mythological accounts have also served the need of oral sources. Random sampling has also been used for factor analysis.

The conceptual universe found in this study is that at the initial stage women's image in colonial Darjeeling was a construction of the white colonial authority. In fact the colonial construction of women by the British all over the world was the 'unfree' women. In India the key components in the colonial discourse formulated and propagated by a section of English writers comprising the Anglicists, Utilitarians and the Christian Evangelicals was that the colonised race was barbaric. It had no civilized history, no culture worth the name and that her entire past was a foolish quest after false ideals. The Hindu society and religion needed British interference and conversion. If India were to live she would

have to remould herself thoroughly in European civilization. The women question on which the British rulers focused their attention became a central question and a strategy of colonial domination and gender issues. Driven by their 'civilizing mission' British writers condemned Indian religions, culture, society as they believed that it was responsible for the degradation and downtrodden condition of the Indian women. The question about the status of women, a part of the colonial discourse of the moral inferiority of the Indians, became a significant tool of colonial ideology to justify its domination over India. This was argued by Christian missionaries as well as by historians like James Mill; both characterized Indian civilization to be crude and immoral. Indian women therefore required the protection and intervention of the colonial state. At this juncture it should be noted that the women were viewed in some specific relations with religion. Therefore the protection of the weak and passive Hindu women became then a strategy of colonial domination and gender issue. Or in simple words, gender characterisation became vehicles for the moral claims on the part of the colonial administrator. The missionaries joined hands with the authorities to make the Indian women the emblem of the downtrodden society. The middle class Indian intelligentsia, comprising social reformers, writers and Sanskrit scholars countered such severe onslaught and negative image on the Hindu religion. As the hypnotic spell of the alien civilization began to recede in the second quarter of the nineteenth century, self consciousness of the Indians rising slowly but steadily, took its place. To both the Reformers intent on reforming what colonial discourse presented as primitive and barbaric aspects of Hindu society, and the revivalist who challenged the colonial interventions into Indian traditions, the women issue occupied a central place in the articulation of indigenous response to the colonial claim. They harped on the wretched condition of the native women.

The social reform movement of the nineteenth century were decisively shaped by the colonial encounter. The derivative discourse, which influenced reformers, like Raja Rammohan Roy and Ishwar Chandra Vidhyasagar could not view the women's problem as being different from those of the British colonial construct. The focus of social reform movements reflected the concerns of the upper caste which constituted the bourgeoisie. The several issues raised – widow's oppression, purdah, growing gender gap in

education – did not affect the majority of Indian women, for e.g. those in agrarian, manufacturing and trading activities or those in matrilineal tribal society where women enjoyed greater freedom.² As a result the stereotype was created to suit the purpose of the elite under colonial rule combining the self-sacrificing ideal Hindu women with the Victorian women's ability to co-operate in the furtherance of their husband's career. They were to be the educated companion and a dutiful wife at the same time. The women's question was a central issue in the debates over social reforms in the nineteenth century. But the issue disappeared from the agenda of public debate by the end of the century. The reason as Partha Chatterjee points was that nationalism did not want to make the women question an issue of political negotiation with the colonial state.³ While the conservatives of Bengal depicted women as symbols of tradition, needing protection against the reformist moves of the English, the nationalist group identified India with the Mother and inspired the countrymen to rise up in arms. Thus Hindu revivalism gradually turned women from passive objects of adoration to a powerful and effective agent for mobilisation. This development was extremely powerful and effective in the anti-colonial struggle because it proved that the Indian women were as superior as the western model.

At this phase the Indian women was constructed according to nationalist inclination as opposed to the women of the white construct. We can see a distinct dichotomy between the '*memshahib*' the Indian lady of white construction imitating the western educated women, independent with a personality of her own with that of the '*bhadramaila*' i.e. the typical Indian women not removed from the Indian tradition and culture, educated and strong. So the National discourse in the late nineteenth century and twentieth century was a critical response towards the white construct. Therefore the pattern of this research work is based on colonial, national and the post-colonial discourse model and investigation, analysis have been woven around the following key questions.

1. What was the colonial construct of the colonised women as applied in Darjeeling?

2. What was the Indian response during the first fifty years of British administration since 1835? The hill women's response to education, dependence on husbands as an independent earning member, and their reaction to the prejudicial influence of their respective religion is to be analysed.
3. What was the Indian response till 1900? The above mentioned points need to be discussed in this time frame and the study of reorganization of the family structure under above mentioned influence is to be examined
4. What was the nature of Indian reaction to the impact of the national movement in Darjeeling? Whether there was the formulation of a national construction of women on ideological grounds or the indigenisation of the national construct of women in Darjeeling hills.
5. To determine whether there were any colonial legacies remaining in the post independence period from 1947 to the year 1985 by focusing on the response of women to issues of ethnic identity, economic rights, political and educational opportunities and changes.

The conceptual frame work guiding the area of study is that in both developed and less developed countries, women are burdened with the cumulative inequalities as a result of socio-cultural and economic discriminatory practices which until recently have been taken for granted. This has led to a surge of feminist enquiry into female oppression and a growing body of literature with a variety of approaches to studies on women. The liberal school of thought feel that women's oppression is rooted in a set of cultural constraint and it is the traditional society that prevents women from competing in the public world as it believes that women are by nature less capable than men. Feminist thinkers in Marxist tradition agree with Engels that women's oppression originated with the rise of private property. The unwaged, unacknowledged work of women at home keeps them subordinate and dependent on the male. They argue that for women to be economically free from men and achieve equality, capitalism must be replaced by socialism. The radical thinkers are more concerned with the sexuality, socialisation, psychic, sexual and ideological structures that differentiate society and cast all women in the role of 'Mother.' They blame patriarchy, a system of power that oppresses women.

Psychoanalytical feminism traces the root of women's oppression in the deeply embedded psyche that makes 'normal' feminine personality excel in family relationship while the masculine personality in separation and autonomy. The Socialist thought traces the cause of Women's oppression in economic exploitation and the patriarchal control over reproduction and female sexuality. It explains how under capitalism everything (work, sex and play) and everyone (friend, relatives and the family) are sources of women's oppression and causes of her disintegration instead of her integration. Black tradition points out that race, class and sex are interrelated oppression on women. All these different approaches lead us to the conclusion that the position of women is not a universal uniform category but one that is culturally, socially and historically conditioned. In other words their position is both spatially and temporally conditioned.

Yet the mainstream feminist thought, has largely been the product of the relatively educated and privileged West. While women in India and the Third world share many of the disabilities with the western women, their experience of discrimination is more extensive because of sex segregation of society, poverty level in general, the traditional value system, patriarchal system etc. As a result the Third World feminist traditions are more sensitive to issues of race, class, ethnicity, sexuality, religion, colour, customs and traditions and to issues of colonialism. This would mean that post-colonial writings involve the re-examination of colonial issues and in this particular case gender issues from the point of view of the native people. For the women themselves may have quite a different representation of their own selves than projected by the dominant males in society.

Against this conceptual backdrop when one sets out to draw a picture of the changing identity of the women of Darjeeling hills one has to use the colonial, national and post-colonial discourse model. The condition of women at home and in society will be observed in their colonial construction and the national construct will be explored. It will also help in studying the winds of change affecting the traditional patriarchal society and identify the factors responsible for the transition in their status and personality.

The aims and objectives of the work is to fill up the gap caused by lack of systematic study and paucity of records; also to examine the workings of a colonial discourse in Darjeeling and the reaction of the native women to it. The work focuses on the factors for migration to Darjeeling hills, the adjustments made by women in her new settlement and their reaction to the colonial reforms and demands. It has studied the different ethnic groups and women related traditions, changes in their life style as compared to their original home; the impact of education on women, participation of women in the social, economic and political schemes of the *Raj* and their response to it. To analyse whether the colonial representation of the hill women was the absolute truth, and then it examines the working of a nationalist discourse in the hills with particular emphasis on the response shown by the local women to the various societal changes as part of post colonial studies, it seeks to identify the changes, if any, emerging in the patterns of role performance in the family, decision-making and behaviour pattern as a result of education and employment of hill women. Its aim is to investigate whether the changes in women have led to improvement in their status or deterioration. The work besides identifying the past and the present has focused attention on some of the change or change resistant socio-economic, political and cultural institutions. The work intends to investigate public health issues, economic and educational matters related to the hill women and whether they are legacies of the colonial past.

The different chapters in the present study includes a brief sketch of the history of Darjeeling to understand the social, economic and political conditions prevailing in 1935, which enhanced migration to this region. The push and pull factors involved leading to migration of individuals and families has been discussed. The second chapter of this work studies the response shown by native women to the new world where the general pattern of living, cultural tradition, social stratification, customs and attitude regarding women were greatly influenced by the dominant British culture and their respective ethnic specificities. By examining the dominant discourse on the colonised women it is possible to comprehend the subtle exercise of power in the various social, cultural and economic spaces created by the British for serving themselves. Focus has also been put on the participation of women in the colonial economic process, educational facilities

and the health measures offered by the government and in particular by the missionaries.

Chapter three deals with a comparative study of noticeable changes in the lifestyle, social attitudes and tradition of women in Darjeeling with respect to her original homeland. Some important ethnic groups such as Sherpas, Tibetans, Lepchas, Indians and Nepalese including those who were Muslims by religion have been taken into account. Cultural amalgamation and the rise of a culture unique to the hills have been examined. In doing so the work has focused on the hill women as a colonial construct confined to a stereotype role juxtaposed with the idea that they enjoy cultural specificity which no European model can conveniently describe. It seeks to study their traditional background and culture and the restructuring of the family due to rapid urbanisation.

The fourth chapter has taken into account the intensification of educational opportunities for hill women in the early twentieth century bringing about a gradual change in the perception and attitude of the local women of Darjeeling towards society, culture, colonial and national education, health measures and employment. Emphasis has also been laid on the participation of women in politics and the complexities of cross-national politics, that prepared the ground for awareness and a sense of a growing identity, in spite of the '*Ghurkha loyalty*' of the masses towards the colonial masters. Other than the participation of a few women in urban centric politics it was the tea belts that saw the mobilisation of the women in the labour union movements setting a new trend for the future. At the same time the beginning of the native's attempt to provide education as an alternative to the colonial education accelerated the pace of indigenous education and its effect on the hill women's quest for an identity. The work analyses the formulation of a national indigenous construct of the local women.

Chapter five has sought to examine the concept of post colonialism in the context of Darjeeling hills and the question of race, ethnicity and gender studies. The search for identity by participation in collective action leading to the *Gorkhaland* agitation has been discussed. The hill women's participation in economic activities and whether the post-colonial society is still negotiating with the various legacies of Pax Britannica has been

investigated. The work analyses the participation of women in governmental, non-governmental sectors, organised and unorganised work especially in agro-based industries, cottage industries and agriculture in the hills. The work explores the changes in the lifestyle, the effect upon the family with the entry of married women into the labour force in the post-colonial period. The final chapter of the work examines the response of the hill women to the educational opportunities and the health facilities offered by the Indian government and the problems involved in these areas.

In view of the above it can be said that the study has sincerely striven to put together all available records, observation on gender study to give a concise account of the status of women in the hills of Darjeeling along with the problems faced by them on their way to modernisation from 1835 to 1985. It has examined whether the dominant discourse mirrored the actual society as viewed by the local women as the 'others'. The research has tried to develop the native women's model rather than to accept the image as projected by the western culture. It also speaks of the subverted native discourse under colonial rule that gradually organised itself and expressed itself in various social, economic, political and cultural spaces leading to the changing identity of the hill women of Darjeeling.

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