

ROLE AND STATUS OF LIMBU WOMEN

6.1 Introduction

Women are the central subject of study throughout ages. Their social status, aspirations and desires have always become the topic of discussion throughout the history of mankind (Majumdar, 2004). The changing status and position of a woman in different period have greatly influenced her social background. Geographically, men and women share the same space. Yet they are not treated equally in this world. There still exist inequality in women education, health care, physical and financial resources and opportunities in the political, economic, social and cultural field. Everywhere in the world, women are accorded a lower status than men (Das, 2013).

One of the least researched themes is the issue of Himalayan women. Despite having a prominent role in hilly communities, women still search for their history. In Darjeeling Himalayan region women occupy different positions in the social structure as they pass through the different phases of their life cycle this is the very basis upon which the community ascribes power, privilege and prestige also changes. Their condition can be characterized by a few facts (i) they hardly participate in politics; (ii) half of them are illiterate (iii) lack of infrastructure development in rural areas has caused inadequate access to basic services such as health, education, water, electricity etc; and (iv) existence of caste, gender and social exclusion further aggravate the already deplorable condition of these women. This Chapter studies the status and the different roles played by the Limbu women in the society.

6.2 Some Concepts and Approaches

i. Gender

Gender is a more popular term and a more scientific concept for examining the status of women. Gender is a socially constructed roles and responsibilities assigned to men and women in a given culture and the societal structure that support them. It is learned behavior, which is dynamic in nature and changes over time. Gender is a concept which deals with the roles and relations between men and women determined by social, political and economic context, not biologically (Mondal, 2004).

ii. Women's Empowerment

Empowerment is the process of generating and building capabilities to exercise control over one's own life. Women empowerment is a model of gender analysis that traces increasing equality of women by empowering them through five phases: welfare, access, participation and control (Mondal, 2004).

iii. Patriarchy

Patriarchy is a concept which means the authority of the father over everything. Patriarchy is perpetuated through a process of institutionalization of social, cultural and religious practices, as well as legitimized through political, legal and economic system of the society. It leads women to internalize as well as to perpetuate patriarchal ways of thinking, both in values and in behavior (Mondal, 2004).

iv. Status and Role

Most people associate status with the prestige of a person's lifestyle, education, or vocation. According to sociologists, status describes the position, a person occupies in a particular setting. We all occupy several status and play the role that may be associated with them. A role is the set of norms, values, behaviors, and personality characteristics attached to a status. Role is a set of expectation for appropriate behaviour associated with a specific status or position in a social system (Vivelo, 1978 & Mondal, 2004).

v. Structure – Functional Approach

It is an etic approach which seeks to understand the inter relations between the women status and the nature of social system. It seeks for the cultural attributes of

women which is indispensable for societal upliftment. It challenges the position of women as a subordinate and advocates the importance of their role and attributes towards the social system. Thereby, peacefully try to maintain division of labour between men and women for the smooth functioning of social and cultural set up.

vi. Marxist Approach

This approach helps us to understand how the modes of production determine the lives of women in the household as well as in the society. It shows how the position of women could be properly analyzed on the basis of production and class structure of the society. It highlights the social oppression of women in the society. It advocates women regarding their social justice and awakes them for capitalist domination in the class system. Marxist class frame work is used for analyzing the women oppression and the politics of sexual antagonism within the society (Mondal, 2004).

vii. Sustainable Development

Sustainable development enhances the balance between natural resources and biodiversity. It ensures the preservation of culture and moral values of local people. It is economically efficient, socially acceptable and contributes to improvement in the quality of life of the people. Sustainable development leads to sustain livelihood with optimum allocation needs of the people and thereby ensuring the needs of the future generations.

6.3 Eastern Himalayan Women at a Glance

The Eastern Himalayan region presents the unique mosaic of diverse cultural set up. Each community has different social norms where the position of a male and female is ascertained. Himalayan women share a relatively egalitarian relationship with their male counterparts. The women have socially established themselves in this economically marginalized and geographically challenged region.

In Himalayan societies there are variations among communities with respect to the women social position. Some societies, especially the ethnic groups of animist or Buddhist traditions are favourable towards women. The women have a good influential role in the social and economic activities of the family, even though, some

of the ethnic group practice polyandry. Their conditions are better than upper caste Hindu women who face discrimination on the basis of patriarchy and sexual purity. They have well defined roles and positions which are not always favourable to them.

The Himalayan women also certainly suffer from deprivation or exploitation. First, they work for relatively long hours. They are primarily responsible for the collection of fire wood, water and fodder, and thus face great difficulty in the mountain slopes, with harsh climatic condition. As a result, the economic conditions of these women are further degraded, resulting in a much heavier workload.

6.3.1 Traditional and Modern Limbu Women

Limbu women dressed up in traditional attire looks very elegant. The older limbu women in the studied villages were dressed traditionally. They wore *sim* (which is 7 yards long material wrapped in a skirt), a *cholo*, a blouse made of locally hand-woven material of *dhaka*. *Phae* (a long cloth) wrapped around the waist. They always covered their heads with *thakhumya* (a large scarf). They wore a pair of *Nesse* (large flat gold earrings designed), a gold *Mundri* as a nose ring, and *dhungri*, a nose ring. They also use different kinds of ornaments on different occasions, ceremonies and festivals. Some of these ornaments *Phangse* ,(a necklace of nine gold or strings that are strung with glass beads), *Labaphung* (an ornament of gold crescent brooch worn on head), or *Namloi Yogakpa* (a large silver necklace) or *sisiphung nekkhophung* (flower-shaped gold earring stud), *reji* (coin necklace made from old silver coins) and *Swagep* (a gold ring on fingers). Traditional Limbu women like to dance *Yalang* (paddy dance) and *Kelang* (traditional drum dance) on formal occasions such as weddings and religious ceremonies.



Plate 6.1: Showing the Traditional Limbu women

Modern Limbu Women

Modern Limbu society, especially in urban areas, has evolved from the rural society of centuries. Modern society has brought many changes. They do not wear traditional attire or heavy jewellery. They wear different kinds of modern outfit. Previously, Limbu women were usually involved in housekeeping, cooking and parenting. But now, they have wide range of work outside home. Most of them are educated and hold a good position in different work sector. They are building their career outside their houses. Limbu women today, whose mothers and grandmothers may be illiterate or barely literate, could go to college or get specialized training for skilled jobs.

6.3.2 Position of Women from Limbu Religious Point of View

The *Mundhum* refers to the Limbu ritual narrative texts, both in oral and written form, consisting of sacred narratives, legends, folktales, prehistoric accounts, and morals. *Mundhum* always placed the position of women as the creator. Limbu women hold a significant place in religious affairs of daily life. The supreme Limbu Goddess *Yuma* is regarded as the initiator of whole human being. *Yuma* meaning grandmother is regarded as mother of whole universe. Every Limbus worships her, for peace and prosperity of the family. It is believed that Goddess *Tagera Ningwaphuma* is another image of *Yuma* with countless supernatural power and divinity. So in all religious ceremonies the Limbus worships *Yuma*, first of all to get power and permission to

celebrate rituals. Limbus practices many of their own rituals. They believe that lineage is not transmitted paternally. Rather, a woman inherits her mother Gods. According to an informant, it is believed that when a woman marry and starts living with her husband, she brings with her the deities that will then be recognized as the household deities.

6.4 Status of Limbu Women in the Study Areas

In Limbu society women signifies an honour and respect to her family. The family structure is well knitted by her compassion and tolerant quality. Being in the subordinate position, she maintains herself to cope with every change. The rigid and orthodox norms have restricted to exercise her power and judgement in the daily affairs of village life. The status of Limbu women will be examined from different perspectives of social and cultural life.



Plate 6.2 Showing the Female Respondents of the Study Areas

Table 6.1 Showing the Demographic and Socio – Economic Attributes of Limbu Women of the Study Areas

S.No	Characteristics	Average interns of Number and Percentage		
		Teesta valley	Dungra	Bungkulung
1	Female Population in Study areas	363 (51.3%)	254(51.2%)	206 (46.7%)
2	Sex Ratio	1052.17	1049.59	876.59
3	Average family size	6	6	6
4	Economic Status			
	Earner	90	30	15
	Dependent	218	169	177
	Earning Dependent	55	55	13
5	Mean Age at Marriage	17	18	18
6	Percentage of Polygamy	0.7%	2.1%	1.4%
7	Percentage of Divorced women	0.2%	1.2%	-
8	Percentage of widow	4%	4.7%	4.1%
9	Average number of Children	3-5	3	3
10	Female Educational Studies			
	Illiterate	84 (23.5%)	28 (11.4%)	27 (13.4%)
	Simple Literate	51 (14.2%)	29 (11.8%)	54 (26.9%)
	Primary Education	51(1%)	(11.8%)	31 (15.4%)
	Secondary Education	35 (9.8%)	49 (20%)	19 (9.5%)
	Higher Secondary	30 (8.4%)	21 (8.5%)	5 (2.5%)
	Graduates	26 (7.3%)	30 (12.2%)	10 (5%)
	Students	81 (22, 6%)	60 (24.4%)	55 (27.3)

Source: Field Survey (2014 – 2017)

Based on the empirical facts noted in the foregoing table 6.1, the position of Limbu women on the basis of their economic, organizational and personality attributes is examined. It was observed that they do not have much higher social status. But their

role in the family affairs and management for preservation of the culture and heritage is remarkable. They have least control over the resources. They lack their participation in the socio-economic spheres of life. They are in a subordinate and marginal position. But their concealed power and position in functioning the Limbu society is a crucial one. Actually the role played by women in Limbu society is invisible. Therefore, social position of a Limbu woman cannot be totally ignored.

6.4.1 Economic Pursuits and Livelihood of Limbu Women

6.4.1.1 Natural Resources and Women

The Himalayan womenfolk are involved in much income generating works like petty business and small scale trade. Women, Natural Resource and the Rural – domestic economy are closely interlinked in the Himalayan communities. These linkages have shown three common patterns.

- a. Natural resource management is central to the livelihoods of Limbu community in Darjeeling Himalaya.
- b. Women are the primary gatherers and managers of domestic economy and household chores.
- c. Their roles and responsibilities are pivotal not only in domestic work but also to the management of rural economy.

6.4.1.2 Occupational Pursuits

Limbu women play a significant role in the economic upbringing of the family. Apart from doing regular household works she also brings cash into her family. In the Tea garden areas, large section of limbu womenfolk are working. They are working as a women labourer in tea garden namely, *line* or main worker and *biga* or temporary workers. *Biga* workers are employed for the tenure of six months mainly for plucking. In another two study areas, mainly Khasmahal village women are involved in farming activities and in Bungkulung women are engaged in eco-tourism. Many of the senior Limbu women are retired employee from plantation area. The Limbu women are

employed in different occupation. They are working as teachers, government employees and in private jobs. They also do small kind of petty business.

6.4.1.3 Limbu Women and Farming

In the study areas women folk are keenly interested in kitchen gardening. At the backyard of their houses they grow leafy vegetables, corns and local variety of chilly and fruits. It is mainly done for pleasing subsistence needs and for many housewives it is one of the best methods of recreation. Sometimes they also sell their produce like vegetables, local eggs, butter and fowls to local Haat market. Animals like cow, goat, pigs and fowls are reared which provide them with manure and flesh. They are regarded as a sustainable asset of livelihood. They sell them in times of financial crisis.

6.4.1.4 Work Pattern of Limbu Women

In Darjeeling hills, mostly in the village the nature of a women's daily work depends on her status in the family, whether she is an unmarried girl, a daughter in-law or a mother in-law. For instance, when a new bride enters a family, "she must prove herself by her good work", thus increasing her workload and decreasing that of her elder. The work pattern performed by Limbu women of the study areas are divided into the following categories. These categories includes

- a. Household work:** cooking, childcare, washing and cleaning.
- b. Natural Resource Management:** livestock rearing, fuel and fodder collection from forest, water collection from nearby streams.
- c. Livelihood Activities:** farming, petty business, tea garden workers.
- d. Non-agricultural work:** Jobs outside the home, professional or as labour.
- e. Personal Interest:** Most of the women spend their time in personal leisure after completion of their domestic chores which includes watching TV, chatting with locality and gardening.
- f. Other Works:** Participation in village and development programmes.



Plate 6 .3 : Showing Women carrying water buckets from nearby *dhara* (springs) and doing farm related works

A glimpse of a daily work routine of Limbu Woman working in Tea plantation area of Teesta Valley: Case study

Smt. Sakuntala Subba (45 yrs) works as a labour in the Tea Plantation. She wakes up at 4 am and does her household chores. By 6.30 am she leaves for factory on foot which is 1-2 km away from her village. Her work starts from 8 am to 4 pm in the factory where she goes for plucking of tea leaves. During winter the duration of work is bit less i.e. from 8 am to 12 pm where the main work is weeding and pruning of tea garden. She brings 8 to 10 kg's of tea leaves every day to factory during plucking season and spends nearly eight hours doing garden work. After coming back from work at 5 pm she again goes to forest either to collect firewood or fodder for her cows and fetches water too. She returns from forest at around 6 pm and freshens up. After this she finishes her left over domestic chores. At 7 pm she starts preparing her dinner for family and goes to bed by 8 pm. During Sunday she works in her small farm at the backyard of her house.

6.4.2 Social Status

6.4.2.1 Family and Marriage

Limbu women bear high religious and socio-cultural status. The field observation shows that they generally marry within their own or outside community. Cross-cousin marriage is not allowed. But marriage between a man and the widow of his elder brother can take place if they mutually agree for that. The widow is free to marry outside the clan either by arrangement or by mutual consent. Culturally, the marriage is mostly arranged by the parents. But, the boys and girls are free to marry by eloping with each other. Arranged marriage is an important ceremony. In this system, women can ask for anything including cash and amount of gold, silver etc. (which they called *sunauli/rupauli*) to make consent of their marriage. This confirms the women family that the man is financially secure enough to keep their daughter happy throughout. Limbu women generally marry twice with the same man, the first one is *sunauli*. The second marriage is called *saimundri* which is conducted after giving birth to a child (Younghang, 2011). This also shows that women's socio-cultural status is high in Limbu community.

6.4.2.2 Impact of Male Migration

In the study areas male migration is mainly due to unemployment and economic needs. The male migration has both positive and negative impacts on the limbu womenfolk. The male migration on the one hand tends to improve economic condition in terms of remittance. The unintentionally created a vacuum in family, putting extra work loads and responsibilities on the women folk. The male migration especially to abroad is accepted as a social prestige for the wife and the family. In absence of male member, Limbu women of the study areas are maintaining the family income and domestic needs. The positive side of migration has contributed in the enhancement of women's empowerment, by making them as the head of the household. She copes with circumstances in absence of their male counterpart. Thus, the male migration has brought changes in Limbu women's confidence and attitudes

in the study areas. But a very interesting thing to note here is that, the increased responsibility does not allow them to take important decision because of the presence of the senior old male member in the family (Mondal, 2004). Limbu women of the study areas are making decisions on a daily basis. In the absence of men they do not take decision that affect the position of household in the village.

6.4.2.3 Health Conditions

In the study areas the health condition of the women depended on the nature of work they performed and the level of economic standard. The main health problem associated with them is arthritis and heart. The rural Limbu women spend most of their time in cooking food in the fire place which has caused breathing problem. They still consult shamans for remedial recovery from diseases and make visit to Government hospitals due to poor economic condition. The strenuous workload has worsened their health and hazard.

6.4.2.4 Gender Inequality – Equality Issues of Limbu Women

Establishment of Tea gardens in the far flung areas of Darjeeling Himalaya has a huge impact on the economic life of villagers. This economy in the study area of Teesta valley is one of the means of sustaining livelihood in a relative isolation. Limbu women are directly involved in the Tea garden work. They are the bread earner in their family. The economic needs of the household are directly related to women's workload. For Instance, woman working in the Tea garden still spend six to eight hours working and two to four hours in collecting firewood, fodder , fetching water from nearby streams and preparing food for their family. But sometimes their role, potentialities and capabilities is forgotten and ignored by the family. This is one of the disadvantages that Limbu women face in particular.

Another important issue in the economy lies in the gender access to and control over resources and decision making on financial matters. Limbu women rarely have control over the resources. Only few household exist where the female is treated the head of the family and has control over the accessibility of resources along with

decision making power. Since Limbu women and men have different roles, needs and interests, the gender inequality- equality has different implications. The rural economy has different impact on both genders. The income earned by male members of the family gives more mental satisfaction to family as compared to female members. Similarly, it is also found in the social ceremonies like marriage, birth of a child etc. The length of naming ritual and mourning period after death varies depending on the gender.

6.5 State of Educational Status and Problems: Some Case Studies

Education is a milestone of women empowerment because it enables them to responds to the challenges, to confront their traditional role and change their lives; so that we cannot neglect the importance of education in reference to women empowerment (Hazra, 2011). Socio-economic factors contribute significantly to disparities in literacy and educational attainment among women in rural and urban areas. The Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe population have been discriminated against and confined to the lowest rungs of social and economic hierarchies. As Dreze pointed out, “educational disparities, which contribute a great deal to the persistence of massive inequalities in Indian society, also largely derive from more fundamental inequalities such as those of class, caste and gender,” (Dreze, 2003). High poverty rates and dependence on agriculture, call for increasing rates of child labor force participation among many of the tribes in India. The tribal dropout rate is extremely high relative to the mainstream population Children often enroll in primary education and then drop out of school in order to help the family. This applies more to females than males both among the mainstream, Hindu population and the tribal groups because girls are expected to help out with domestic chores more than boys at a very early age (Nambissan, 2000; Vasavi 2002; Jha and Jhingran, 2002). Traditionally, the Hindu society has demonstrated its preference for sons and has treated boys and girls differently, based on social and cultural norms. Parents often allocate their scarce resources towards the schooling of their sons. For the poorer sections of the population, it is worthwhile investing in the son’s education, as that would generate

income for the family in the future. Daughters are expected to get married early, and parents have to save money for dowry payments. Further, parents do not want to invest in their daughters' schooling because the latter have limited labor market opportunities and earning potential (Sathar and Lloyd, 1994). For the poorer sections of the Indian community, education for girls is often considered to be consumption good rather than an investment good. In rural Darjeeling Himalaya, it is still experienced that Limbu women did not have enough access towards education in the study areas. Limbu women understudied have low level of educational attainment. Most of them have not crossed the school cycle. Further, a huge portion of them were illiterate and same was the condition of just literate women too.

During the field visits it was found that the main causes of educational backwardness. The major causes were: poverty, socially least aware family and general trends. The main reason for their educational backwardness in the olden days was the predominant patriarchal system not providing enough chances for women to get higher education even if they wish. Spending on education and especially for a girl child is still perceived as a waste of money and resources by some orthodox people in the study village. Moreover the lack of schools in the study areas is the main drawback because students had to walk for kilometers to reach school. The security issue of a girl child is also the main reason in the study areas for which many of them left schools and were inclined toward domestic chores of the household which resulted in the high rate of girl dropout.

6.5.1 Rural Limbu women and Illiteracy : Case studies

The percentage of women illiteracy in the study areas is mainly due to social and economic reasons. In order to understand the problem from ground reality the researcher had made a case study through field survey and observation. The case study attempts to highlight the women perceptions about their educational backwardness at the past and the changing situation in contemporary times.

6.5.1.1 Case study from Teesta Valley: Focusing in the Traditional Village society

Dhannti Limbu, 87 years old widow from Fulbari, Teesta valley Tea garden says she is illiterate not because of her choice but because of her fate. Born in a rural village family with a meager income, her father was not in a position to send all his children to school. Both parent worked in tea garden; therefore she was left in the house to do domestic chores and take care of her siblings. She shared bitter experience of her childhood regarding school. During her days Darjeeling hills was ruled by colonial Britishers and tea garden was administered by them. They were known as “*Saheb*”. She still remembers how children were refrained from going schools and forcibly made to work in gardens as labourers. Moreover the family economic conditions and rural poverty was the main reasons behind her illiteracy. Her mother had told her a Nepali proverb “*Padi lekhi ke ko kaam halo joti maam*” which means what the use of education? Until and unless you do not plough how will you get your food? This also sometimes made her to think that garden work was important to sustain a livelihood. Therefore she also started to work and remained isolated from books and pen. But for now she said, time and place has changed. Education has become a prime necessity to have a happy life and she encourages her grand daughters to be educated because she does not want them to face the same circumstances.

Kamalphul Limbu 60 years old married woman from Limbu goan, Teesta valley Tea garden also narrates the same kind of circumstances as Dhannti Limbu. But the interesting thing that caught my attention was some of her replies which were strange and hilarious. She told me her parents did not send her to school because they thought if she learnt how to read and write she will start to write letters a to her lover and will elope from her house. In olden days, there was stereotype thinking towards women education. Limited schools which were almost kilometers away were also one of the problems on the basis of security issue that refrained rural limbu women from getting education

6.5.1.2 Case Study from Dungra: Focusing in the Contemporary Situation

Priyanka Subba (Limbu) 26 years old working woman from Dungra Kalimpong said that the time has changed now. She had never faced an inequality in her upbringing and was sent to a good English medium school. Her parents had always encouraged her to pursue higher education. It was with their support and encouragement; she completed her Masters in Economics and is now employed to one of the Institutions. Priyanka is fully motivated and independent working woman living outside her home. She said completely depends on family background and mental perception of parents how they look upon their daughters. In field visit it was found that the educated parents are concerned for their children education. But on the other hand many young girls in the study areas had stopped going to schools once they failed. **Archana Limbu** 20 years old woman from Teesta Valley said after failing twice in board examination she decided to leave school and started to work as a labour job in tea garden. When I asked what her parents decision were, she said they also agreed with her. This is the gloomy part of the educational backwardness in the study areas in the contemporary times. The general lack of awareness among the womenfolk and encouragement and support from most of the families has made education a negligible factor.

6.6 Political Participation and Awareness

Women's political participation is one of the important issues in the context of empowerment. In conventional analysis it means activities related to electoral politics like voting, campaigning, holding party office and contesting election. But in broader sense it encompasses all voluntary actions intended to influence the making of public policies, the administration of public affairs and the choice of political leaders at all levels of government. Political interventions by women of India today range from movement for peace and good governance to protest against dowry, rape, domestic violence, food adulteration, price rise etc (Desai, 2007). However in this section the researcher discussed participation of rural women in formal politics by analyzing the

indicators like women voters and women elected member of Limbu Community in the local and regional level politics. Many factors are responsible and decisive in the election of Women candidate such as literacy, financial position, liberal family background, support from other members of the family, strong personality. Since most of the women lack access to these, few women gets tickets and even fewer get elected from this handful of women candidates. The participation of limbu women in politics of Darjeeling Hills is remarkable. The first lady MLA of Darjeeling Hills was in fact a Limbu woman Renuleena Subba from Kalimpong who was the member of All India Gorkha League. But for now hardly Limbu woman are found holding an executive post in the local political party in study areas. Also they do not participate much into political discourses. Only recently, women from different ethnic groups including Limbu women have made an immense participation on going Gorkhaland Movement. Though women in Limbu society are relatively free, still there are discriminations (social and psychological) as explained above, yet the women are not much interested into politics. In the study areas majority of the male members were very active in the political affairs. Womenfolk are so busy among their household activities that they hardly give any interest towards it. Some respondents were aware of recent political development in the hills. Very few of them attend political meeting and party rally. Some of the females did not even bother about whether their names were in the electoral role or not. Of course most of the female exercise their franchise in the election and that percentage increases with the rise in educational levels of the Limbu women. Some of the Limbu women cast their vote but choice depends on the decision made by senior male members of the family. So in the study areas women are not so political mobilized and are very much influenced by male members.

6.7 Influence of Print and Mass Medias on Limbu Women

Women of study areas have some access to mass media. Though relatively more percentage of male read newspaper, the Limbu women are also not lagging behind. More than 45 percent of women head reads newspaper daily or occasionally. Both male and female watch different TV programmes either regularly. About 80 per cent

of Limbu women watch TV regularly. Women are fond of Indian serials. The Limbu women of Dungra Khasmahal, Kalimpong liked to watch local channel for local news updates.

6.8 Influence of Hinduization on Limbu Women

The village society in the study areas is composed of heterogeneous elements. The social groups with diverse ethnic and linguistic origin have immense influence upon one another along with adapting nature of the people with particular ecological niches offered by the physiographic and climatic setting of the area. During my field visits and interaction with the womenfolk of the study areas, I found the very Hindu Nepali influence on Limbu women was immensely great. They observe all the Hindu major religious festivals and ceremonies. Their customs, traditions and pattern of lifestyle is more accustomed to Hindu women. They take fast during pujas for the lifelong prosperity of their family and husband. Some women go to temple every Monday for worshipping and observe fast throughout the day. During the month of ‘*Sawan*’, they wear green glass bangles and put ‘*Mehendi*’ on their hands and goes to temple for worship. The Limbu women with green poote (necklace) and a red bangle on her hand symbolize that she is married. She puts scarf on her head as a mark of respect to her elder brother -in -law which is typically observed in the gestures of Nepali Hindu women. The limbu women of the study areas are very much inclined towards Hindu faith and belief in the religious ground. Some old traditional women refrain themselves to call their husband by their name. The Limbu women also follow *Yumaism* and even worship ancestral God and Goddess but influence of Hinduization is also prominent in the study areas.

6.9 Social Awareness of Limbu Women

As most of the women understudied were housewives mainly engaged in household works, their level of social awareness was also found having low status. Many of them were unknown to the political, economical and administrative sectors. Though they focused on the importance of education in life, their educational status was very

low. They were aware of the traditional farming which they adopted from many years as well as their contemporary social and cultural practices but were found unknown to the overall national issues. A questionnaire was prepared to gather some information about their status of social awareness, during the field study. From the data collected from the field, it was found that their level of overall social awareness was low. What many of the informants argued was that this lack of awareness was mainly due to their restriction at household works. An informant said that the couples were of equal mental status during their marriage time. According to her, both of them were from farming background. But, her husband gradually started to be involved in social and political activities at local level. After ten years, he has become a local level political activists but she is still confined to the household work. She shared her experience that she has become dull. This was mainly due to her involvement in household works and making herself limited to it.

The aforementioned discussion helps now to summarize the facts that the women were least aware than the men. The main reason for their status of low level of awareness is their limitation in household work. This is becoming an obligation without any alternatives for them, like many other women of the rural society.

6.10 Findings

Women play an important role in the upliftment of the society. They made lots of contribution and sacrifice for the family. The status generally refers to the position in the society in relation to men. The status of women is generally measured using three indicators: education, employment status and intra-household decision-making power. Women with great decision-making power are supposed to have a higher status in the household (Bhasin, 2013).

The subject of women authority is regarded as a controversial issue in most of the society. The physical weakness and fragile attitudes embarked their incompetent to exercise their power. In the study areas, regarding leadership quality of women, very few gave positive replies. Some said "*Pothi basnu hudaina*" a Nepali proverb saying

“over exercising of power is not good for woman” because they are vulnerable. The above proverb clearly signifies even though Limbu women enjoyed her freedom but certain limitation is drawn. During the field work it was observed, female representatives were not holding an executive position in the village associations

The social status of the Limbu women can be explained from the nature and timing of food intake by them. This shows their position in the family as well as society. Customarily, it is presumed that out of love and affection the mother or sisters in the family take them food after their husband, brothers or children. It however indicates the psychological position of the females in the family in the name of sacrifice. However the unmarried women in the Limbu families take food whenever they think it is necessary and in that sense they are more independent except few married Limbu women.

Paradoxically, in Limbu community Grandmother Goddess “*Yuma*” holds an immense importance for welfare of every people. Each households worship *Yuma* for peace and prosperity. *Yuma* who resemble female fraternity clearly indicates the position of women in Limbu society. In most of the tribal society of the family lineage is matriarchal. Does it make Limbu women to be seen as subordinate, or due to many responsibilities of domestic chores they refrain themselves from such position.

As Jones (1976) has asserted that, within a traditional society of Limbu, women have a greater degree of autonomy than a naive observer might expect. Again the autonomy extends in several directions it may have to do with task performed with roles in ritual, or even with relationships in marriage. Seddon (1983) cites a strong tendency in 'high-caste' Hindu families, and particularly amongst Brahmins, for women to be more oppressed than among the tribal groups, such as the Limbus, Magars, Gurungs, or the 'untouchables.'

Therefore the position and status of Limbu women depends on the existing social and cultural norms of the society. The Limbu women of the study areas have shown the

very good prospects for betterment of society. They are coping with changing circumstances. The elderly womenfolk played a vital role in maintaining cultural life of the Limbus. They are the real protectors of cultural heritage in their society.

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