

## Deserted Women in Patriarchal Sikkim and Darjeeling Hills

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*In patriarchal social orders in Sikkim and Darjeeling Hills, which also have kept into practice many elements of feudal social order, the women are subjected to various forms of discrimination and violence; one manifestation of such a social situation is desertion of women in their 40s and 50s. This is a form of cruelty done on women across classes and communities in rural as well as urban areas, despite the fact that they have served their husbands and in-laws with all sincerity and played their role as mothers. The victim women do not get much support either from the society or from the state or the institutions (including the law against domestic violence) and live with a lot of hardship. In Sikkim the Family Court, State Women's Commission, and NGOs come forward with some support but in Darjeeling Hills there is no presence of any institution that could come forward in defense of the deserted women.*

**Keywords:** patriarchy, Family Court, State Women's Commission, short stay home, alimony, sexuality, domestic violence, Family Counseling Centres.

### **Introduction**

One of the ugliest manifestations of patriarchy in the State of Sikkim and Darjeeling Hills is the growing incidents of desertion of middle-aged married women in their late 40s and 50s by their sexually active husbands. The women who have served their husbands and in-laws with all dedications and sincerity, satisfied the sexual desire of their husbands for many years, procreated for carrying their lineage forward, are neglected, humiliated and deserted by their husbands when they needed their protection the most. The husbands secretly develop relations with 'younger women' outside marriage and then throw their existing wives out of the family in one fine morning. Betrayed and shattered, the women move to places for shelter, security and other means to live a life of dignity.

The family- and humane values totter as the close kin, the social support system, and the state-sponsored institutions, which are heavily loaded with patriarchal biases, largely side with the culprit while giving only nominal support to the victim. How do the deserted women encounter such disasters? How far are the social support system and the state-supported protective mechanisms effective in giving support to the deserted women? Whether the protective mechanisms need a thorough revision? The present paper would examine a few cases of women in Sikkim and Darjeeling hills in the light of these questions.

Generally speaking, the social orders that we find in Sikkim and Darjeeling Hills seem to be struggling to free themselves from the commonly shared elements of patriarchy, a hallmark of feudal social order, while embracing the values of modernism and liberal humanism. One has to have some idea of the socially shared culture and the predominant practices in a given point in time because that helps us understand the mode of legitimation and practice of the normative standards that determine the iniquitous gender relations. The rigid adherence to the traditional normative standards often defies the normative and value standard set in by the legal system. Tradition is clearly in conflict with the modern; it is strong enough to defy human and gender sensitivity. Even in the urban context and in the educated section of the society the elements of patriarchy find legitimation as they are put into practice in a large scale. The collectively shared perceptions constitute a part of culture, which is strong enough to manipulate the institutions which aim to wreck the fabric of the shared culture and collective mind set.

When a crisis builds up the society responds by framing some institutions to combat it. Over the years Sikkim has developed some forms of institutional arrangement (the Family Court, the Women's Commission, and the NGOs) to address the cases of domestic violence and desertion but Darjeeling hills locally do not have any such arrangement to take care of the victims of domestic violence, barring the court of law. True, not all cases of domestic violence and cruelty reach the Family Court and when, only in a small number of litigations do come up the cases run for years and in most cases the verdicts end up fixing an insignificant amount of alimony. There is no arrangement whatsoever to penalize the

wreckers of morality, faith and responsibility. The ethos embodied in family tradition, humanity and the language of love, pity or reciprocity are breached at will by the impulse-driven 'rational' men while the system (the law, court, law enforcing authorities or the 'conscience collective') remains a passive onlooker.

### *Sources of data*

The present paper is based on a number of case studies that have been done by the authors in different points in time, starting from 2005, in connection with a research project and out of personal interest. Locating the problem in the field of micro-sociology the paper is based on the information collected by applying the techniques of qualitative research (observation and case study).

The senior author visited to Gangtok on 10-13 May 2005 with the objective of collecting some information in connection with the research project on 'Integrating Support Services with the Family Courts in India - An Action Research in the State of Sikkim', which was done by the Centre for Women's Study, North Bengal University. Teaming up with Prof. Dwibedi, the project coordinator, Prof. Roy did case study of a few deserted women and examined the role of the institutions like Family court, State Women's Commission and the NGOs in protecting the deserted women<sup>1</sup>.

Besides doing case study on the victims of family disputes we recorded the personal accounts or assessments of the knowledgeable persons working in the field of family counseling/ family court/ NGO and State Commission for Women. The junior author of the paper, a sociologist by training, did some case studies of the deserted women, the victims of domestic violence, in some parts of Darjeeling district of West Bengal. The present paper therefore offers an opportunity to look at the victims from a comparative perspective.

### *The case studies from Sikkim*

#### *Case study 1*

Geeta Subba, aged 35, hails from Lumsey 5<sup>th</sup> Mile, Tadong, and

Gangtok. Geeta was married at the age of 25 in 1995 to one Mon Bahadur Rai, a Nepali of the same area. Geeta, a fair complexioned pretty lady, conceived in the first year of her marriage and in a span of nine years of conjugal life she gave birth to five sons. Geeta had studied up to class VII and her husband had studied in class X before dropping out. Geeta's husband was working as a Chowkidar in the office of the PWD in Gangtok. Geeta, a housewife, lived happily with her husband and children in a separate house and did home-making for all the years until the problem cropped up sometime in 2003.

A couple of years back Mon Bahadur developed an affair with another lady of 23 years of age. Geeta knew about the affair but did not have the courage to speak to her husband about it. Her husband finally married the woman and brought her home in October 2004. Mon Bahadur was ill-treating Geeta since he developed the new affair. The atrocities grew in scale after the entry of the second wife and Geeta was finally thrown out of the house. Geeta was ready to accept the second marriage and pleaded with her husband to allow her to live in the house but her husband did not show any sympathy.

After being thrown out Geeta went to stay with the family of her sister in the neighbouring village along with her youngest son (the eldest two had been sent to Bangalore and Delhi for work and two other sons were studying in a boarding school) and stayed there for two months. Her sister treated her well and extended moral and material support.

Geeta's sister took her to the local *panchayat* on the advice of the *panchayat pradhan* who took her to the local police station where she lodged a formal complaint against her husband. The officer at Tadong Police outpost advised her to approach Family Counseling Cell (FCC) at Police Head Quarters at Gangtok for help. Geeta went to the FCC with her sister and registered the case on 6<sup>th</sup> December 2004.

The FCC fixed a date of hearing and summoned Geeta's husband. Even after rounds of counseling the husband did not agree to take Geeta back. Finally the settlement agreement was signed. According to the agreement Geeta was given a *kuccha* house and monthly alimony of Rs 1400. Also, the husband agreed to bear the expenses

of the education of two children whom Geeta took with her.

The relatives and friends of both sides were involved in settlement negotiations. When Geeta was being tortured by her husband, the neighbours had come forward to her rescue and they had tried to dissuade Geeta's husband from ill-treating her. Geeta's children too loved her and they were sad at the way their father treated her. Now, when Geeta lives in a separate house they often come and stay with her.

Geeta is now worried about the future of her children. She is now pleading the FCC to exert pressure on her husband and secure a share of the husband's property for her. She also wants the alimony to be raised.

Geeta confessed that she is totally unaware of her legal rights and she did not have any idea of what will happen to her husband if she moves the Family Court. The FCC never advised her in that line. She, however, is not prepared to risk the support she receives from her husband by taking a harsh step. She was vulnerable enough to be defensive and accept the ill-treatment as her fate.

### *Case study 2*

Mr. Raja Lohar, aged 24, is a graduate and government employee. He is serving as a statistical investigator for the last four years. Raja married Sujata, who hailed from Nepal, in April 2003. It was an arranged marriage. Sujata's parents continued living in Nepal.

Raja lost his mother early and was brought up by her aunt, who stayed in the family along with Raja's father. His aunt was therefore like his mother. Raja's aunt was very caring of Raja and possessive too. Sujata never got along well with Raja's aunt; they used to quarrel often on the sharing of domestic responsibilities. Sujata kept complaining about Raja's aunt to her husband ever since she came to this house. Raja, however, preferred to keep quiet because he never wanted to take a side. The relationship strained further and one day Sujata left the house and went to live with her sister in Gangtok.

Sujata came to the FCC and registered a complaint on 23 April 2005 saying that Raja's aunt was torturing her mentally and physically and Sujata did not receive enough support from her

husband Raja. The FCC, on receiving the complaint, arranged for counseling; Raja's father and aunt also were summoned. Sujata came for counseling with her sister.

After a day's counseling the parties agreed to settle the issue amicably and both the parties were in a mood to forget and forgive. Raja and his father were very keen to get Sujata back and Sujata was not unwilling either. The FCC advised the aunt not to ill-treat Sujata any more to which she agreed. The FCC threatened Raja's aunt that police would take care of her if she failed to keep her promise. Thus with the intervention of the FCC normal family relations were restored.

### *The role of the institutions in Sikkim*

In Sikkim there are two *Family Counseling Centres* (FCC); one at Gangtok (i.e., the one at the Police Head Quarters, Gangtok, which we had visited) and the other at Kaluk Subdivision of West Sikkim district. We visited the FCC at Gangtok and spoke to Mrs. Kidoma Bhutia (centre-in-charge) and Ms. Susma Chhetri (Counsellor) and inquired into the mode of functioning of the centre; they also shared their experience of working in the field with us. Besides, they invited a couple of victims of domestic violence whom we had interviewed at length.

According to Mrs. Bhutia and Ms. Chhetri the Centre was receiving an ever increasing number of cases every year; 90 per cent of the victims who come to the centre with complaints are the women while only about 10 per cent constitute the men. On an average, the Centre registers 6-7 cases every month. In 2004, 63 victims approached the centre for help; 50 such cases were successfully settled by the Family Counseling Centre and nine cases were referred to the Family Court as the FCC could not resolve them. The cases relating to property sharing, child custody and divorce are generally referred to the Family Court. In the remaining four cases the victims withdrew the complaints and settled them on their own initiatives with community support. An increase in the registration of cases with the FCC is primarily because of two factors: (a) the incidence of family disputes is on the rise, and (b) the victims are increasingly realizing the effectiveness of the FCC in redressing their grievances. There is a distinct demonstration

effect of the good work of the FCC on the society; people now generally take it seriously.

The victims generally come to the centre with complaints like (1) adultery, (2) torture and harassment by husbands and in-laws (domestic violence), (3) desertion by husband, (4) alcoholism and maltreatment, and (5) suspicion in the integrity of the partner.

Once a victim approaches the FCC the latter first lodges FIR with the nearby Police Station. Sometimes the women victims are so scared that they do not want to go back home. Most of them leave their husbands' house when they come to complain and take shelter in the house of a close kin and those who have none to ask for shelter take refuge at the Short Stay Home run by ASHI at Gangtok. Then, the FCC contacts the husband and tells him to come to the centre for counseling. On the day of hearing the counselor listens to the versions of both the husband and wife in separate sittings, sometimes together in one sitting, and then the FCC tries for a negotiated settlement with an agreement on the amount of alimony.

The first step the FCC takes is to arrange for treatment of the victim in case she is physically assaulted and provide her a safe shelter, particularly for those who do not have close relatives to support them. As the next step the FCC tries for a reconciliation and restoration of the normal life. In most cases the victims already have spent several years with the husband and have children. Separation means the women victims have to shoulder greater hardship with their minor children. If this fails and the separation is unavoidable the FCC initiates negotiation on the maintenance allowance for the woman. Under normal circumstances the maintenance package includes a monthly allowance of Rs. 500 per month per head, a house to live or rent to be paid in case of a hired house, and an allowance on children's education. The records of 2004 show that of the total 63 cases the FCC registered 50 cases were settled by the FCC and 23 of such settlements ended in negotiated separation with a compensation package. The amount of monthly allowance however varied between Rs. 500 and Rs. 700 per person per month depending on the economic condition of the husband. The settlement is reached through a written agreement which contains the detailed terms and conditions that are binding upon both the parties. The agreement paper is also

signed by the friends and relatives of the parties and the representatives of the police.

In the negotiation process the FCC invites the close-kin and friends of both the parties, who also at times take an active role in finding a settlement. The counselors sometimes pay surprise visits to the houses of the victims to see that the terms of the settlement are being honoured. The FCC sometimes seek help from the police officers and resort to a pressure tactic to discipline the erring husbands, who are the culprits in most cases. Particularly in cases where the husband is alcoholic and is in the habit of assaulting the wife, the pressure tactic is very effective. In cases where the husband agrees to take back his deserted wife the pressure tactic also proved effective.

The FCC we visited runs on Central government fund. The Centre staffs consisted of five lady staff: one counselor-in-charge, two counselors, one typist and a peon. The FCC acknowledged the help of the police department but regretted that the State Government did not provide any kind of support or any policy direction. The counselors regretted that the State Government also does not have any scheme or policy to help the victims of domestic violence, whose number is on the rise. The FCC did not appear to have any coordination with the State Women's Commission. Asked about the performance of the Family Court the persons in charge of the FCC hesitantly expressed their unhappiness.

Asked to identify the class and community where atrocities on women are in the crudest form the lady counselors at the FCC mentioned middle and upper class Nepali and Bhutia, particularly in the urban areas. They were prompt to add that there are instances of violence in the rural areas as well, and among the members of communities other than Bhutia and Nepali. In most cases the parties that agree to alimony are the white collar employees in government offices and departments. The counselors of the FCC explain this phenomenon saying that the government employees are generally educated and have stable monthly income. By resorting to corrupt means they can earn extra money to add to the family income. A section of them owns new flats or houses in and around urban centers and gets into politics. This neo-class and new urbanites then use their wider exposure and contacts to satisfy their sexual drives by establishing extra-marital relations

with younger women. The polygamous tendencies had their roots among the Bhutias, who had a feudal past, and the Nepalis, who are the largest supplier of the members of the neo-class. The Bhutia Chogyals, the Bhutia landed gentry and the present day Nepali rulers and bureaucrats do not look at polygamous tendencies as a normative or value crisis. Many among the top political leaders and even the Chief Ministers have reportedly maintained more than one wife. The fact that they continue this practice without any social stricture or stigma, not to say of legal action, is a testimony to the wide social support to this illegal practice. Even for the first wife, the husband having extra-marital affair is no big issue. As we would see in the case studies, the first wives are mentally prepared to accept the second wife just in lieu of an assurance that they would not be thrown out of the house. It is indeed interesting to note that the stipulations of Hindu Marriage Act are flouted at will by the people active in public life. Even more interesting is the fact that there is no sign of movement by the women rights groups to raise this issue as the rallying point. The political parties too are totally silent on the women's rights issue because their leaders help reproduce the patriarchic psyche and culture in the state. With some risk of generalization one could say that the patriarchic control of the society has penetrated deep into the institutions and social psyche in Sikkim and the movement against this pathology is yet to gain momentum.

However, one can notice a growing awareness among the women victims about the existence and activities of the FCCs and Commission for Women, the Family Court and ASHI, the NGO, and that they are coming out in ever larger numbers to lodge complaints with the police and with these organizations. From their experience they can see the usefulness of this move. This is undoubtedly a positive step for the defense of women's rights. In this move the women are however more interested in securing a maintenance grant and other form of material support (housing etc.) and are ready to forget about the humiliation they have suffered in the hands of their husbands. The deserted women see it as a bargaining point and take help of the FCC or the NGO in raising the amount of alimony. They do not move the court even when they are aware that their husbands are on a sticky ground, legally speaking. They are apprehensive of the legal complications and often do not have the means to run a court case for long.

Moreover, there is always the risk of losing the meagre financial support they receive as a part of the separation agreement. As we examine the case studies later in this paper we would see how elements of patriarchy have crept into the major social institutions and people's perception which decide about women's position in society.

### *State Women's Commission*

The Sikkim State Commission for Women (SCW), which came into being following the Sikkim State Commission for Women Act, 2001, is fast growing in popularity and in terms of the magnitude of cases it handles. The SCW has been formed with the backing of the State Government and it functions in close coordination with the government. However, according to Mrs. Manita Pradhan, the chairperson of the SCW, the people are not much aware of its existence and functioning and it does not have a wide network to generate adequate level of awareness among the people about its powers and functions. The SCW is therefore preparing itself to play a more wide and effective role in defending the rights of the women who are vulnerable to atrocities by the men, the husbands and in-laws in particular. Following the statutory stipulations the Commission performs 'various functions by looking into the cases of complaints and taking *suo moto* notice on matters relating to harassment, maltreatment, denial of rights, exploitation and taking remedial action to safeguard the legitimate rights of women and provide immediate relief and redress the women in distress and to ensure democratic welfare policy set up by the Government.' (The Sikkim State Commission for Women, *Annual Report 2004-2005*: 10).

The number of cases registered with the Commission for Women is increasing every year. In 2004-5 the SCW received 180 cases or complaints. Bigamy and fixation of alimony accounted for 80 per cent of the cases. On the basis of the nature of nature of complaints the cases have been classified under the following heads: (1) bigamy, (2) desertion, (3) divorce, (4) maintenance, (5) custody of children, (6) matrimonial disputes, (7) harassment, (8) murder, (9) property disputes (widow property, parents' property or *streedhan*, (10) shelter, and (11) miscellaneous.

The SCW successfully intervened in cases like (a) an unmarried woman's house being seized by her brothers when the lady was outside the State in connection with her job (ref. the case of Miss Chandra Gurung dated 19/09/2003), (b) an widow being deprived of her late husband's property and ornaments by her husband's brother and also of harassment (ref. the case of Rita Debi dated 25/03/04), (c) the case of an widow giving birth to a child as a result of an affair with a man who later disclaimed the woman and the children and harassed her (Ref. case of Smt. Poornima Rai), (d) a working woman being insulted by her boss in the office (the case of Smt. Tshring Doma Lachenpa), (e) the working woman being denied the right pay scale by the Corporation, (f) the case of young lady anchors working with Zee TV being denied the agreed pay, (g) the case of Damber Kumari, who was deserted by her husband after the birth of a son, and so on (for details see the Annual Report 2004-5, published by the Sikkim State Commission for Women, pp. 12-18).

The Commission received nine cases of divorce in 2004-5. In these cases the women have sought divorce from their husbands alleging of ill-treatment (mental and physical, bigamy, and alcoholism). The Commission, on receipt of the complaints involves the inmates of both the parties and counsels them not to go for a divorce. It succeeds in some cases but when it fails to settle the disputes it refers the cases to the Family Court of Sikkim, as the Commission has no power to issue decree of divorce.

We came to know from the Commission that sometimes it does not receive adequate cooperation from the concerned authorities such as the Family Court and the Government Offices while handling the cases. As an illustration of this point the Commission refers to the case of Smt. Tshring Doma Lachenpa, a clerk in the Irrigation and Flood Control Department, who was harassed and humiliated by her office boss (an Accounts Officer). On receiving complaint the SCW did necessary investigation and then approached the Chief Minister for action. But after that nobody knows what happened to the case. Similarly, the SCW took up the case of Mrs. Shanti Mothey (aged 30), who being deserted by her husband Jonathan Mothey, claimed maintenance. She also wanted separation as she was being subjected to continuous torture by her husband. The husband, on the other hand, moved the

Family Court with a complaint of adultery against his wife and demanded divorce. Shanti, on the apprehension that she cannot fight her more resourceful husband, approached the SCW and sought its help. The SCW sought the permission from the Family Court judge to represent Shanti's case with the help of a lawyer of its choice. The appeal of the SCW was outright rejected.

From our discussion with the Chairperson, SCW, we drew two important observations: (1) according to Mrs. Manita Pradhan the family disputes are found more among the upper caste Nepalese and mostly in the urban areas, and (2) like the Family Counseling Centre the SCW also prefers negotiated settlements in cases of torture and desertion by way of arranging accommodation and alimony. The Commission does not encourage the women victims to move the family courts and secure divorce even when the charges of bigamy are genuine. We feel that this is compromise with the overwhelming patriarchic pressure and such a submission encourage the erring husbands who are, by and large, convinced that the stipulations of Hindu Marriage Act could be flouted at will, paying a meager amount of alimony. This also does not take the women's rights movement any further.

### *Family Court cases*

The Sikkim State Commission for Women, the Family Counseling Centres at Police Head Quarters, and the Family Counseling Centre run by ASHI refer the cases to the Family Court. These organizations send the cases that they cannot resolve; the cases relating to property disputes and property inheritance, cases relating to divorce and child custody, cases relating to murder and all those cases which are not resolved through their mediation. The fact that the number of cases referred to the FC is increasing every year is a reflection of the good work being done by various organizations working in the field and also that the magnitude of the atrocities is growing.

### *Case study 1*

Rajkumar Pradhan, aged 39 years, hails from Rongpo Duga of East Sikkim district. He was serving as Jail Warden with the State Government. In his family he had his parents, one brother and a

sister.

Rajkumar married Sharita, a resident of Nepal at that time, in 1989 and it was an arranged marriage. With class VIII level education Sharita got a job in the Police Department as a typist.

Everything went on smoothly until 1994. In 1994 Rajkumar was dismissed from service, along with 34 other Jail staff because they were engaged in an agitation against the government in defense of their rights. As Rajkumar turned unemployed Sharita became very repulsive and developed the habit of quarreling on every petty matter in the family. One day Sharita left the house without informing anybody in the family. She left for Nepal to the house of her parents. After a couple of weeks Rajkumar went to Nepal and brought Sharita back.

In 1995 Rajkumar and Sharita had a son. One year and 10 months after the birth of the son Sharita left the house once again. In the meanwhile she had strained her relation with her in-laws. Sharita this time was living with one of her relatives in Gangtok. She took her son with her.

Meanwhile Rajkumar got back his job with the change of government in the state. As Sharita left her in-laws' house Rajkumar filed a missing diary with the police. Sharita on the other hand went to the Women's Commission demanding maintenance. The SCW organized counseling sessions for the parties but no settlement was reached. In its effort to save the family the SCW proposed alimony of Rs. 1000/ a month for Sharita and her son to which Rajkumar did not agree. This was April 2002.

Rajkumar was adamant not to yield. He moved the Family Court the same year demanding divorce. The Family Court gave the verdict on 11 May 2005 and divorce was granted. Rajkumar was ordered to pay alimony of Rs. 500/ per month for the maintenance of the son and was asked to give a plot of land on the road side to his son. The alimony has to be paid until the son reaches 14 years of age. The wife was demanding higher compensation but that was not granted by the court.

### *Case study 2*

Sherhany Subba vs. Sushila Subba case was registered with the

Family Court in November 2004 (case no. 47 of 2004). The case was filed by Mr. Subba seeking divorce. The couple hails from Gangtok. Mr. Subba was 40 years of age, a graduate and a political leader by profession. Sushila (aged 38) is a doctor by profession and working with the government hospital.

In the Family Court Mr. Subba complained that Sushila was in the habit of undermining and humiliating him (she had a strong ego as she was a doctor and was earning more than him) and his family members and the insult was unbearable. The Court gave an ex-parte decree granting divorce in January this year (2005). Sushila then moved the High Court against the FC order. The High Court referred the case to the FC with the observation that the case was not properly heard and there should have been an effort for reconciliation instead of granting divorce. The wife is not interested in alimony as she earns handsomely. She is not interested in divorce as she is keen in saving the marriage. The case was still pending before the Family Court.

***Family Counseling Centre run by the Association of Social Health in India (ASHI), Gangtok***

The Family Counseling Centre run by the Association of Social Health in India (FCC, ASHI, hence forth), an NGO, seemed to be the most active among the organizations working for women's rights in the State. ASHI also runs a Short Stay Home in Gangtok which is very useful for the women thrown out of their house by their polygamous husbands. ASHI also sends its counselors from time to time to the Central Social Welfare Board, New Delhi, for training. FCC, ASHI, has a comprehensive network to address cases even in the remote areas of the State. Despite all the good work FCC, ASHI, has been doing over the years in the State it receives meager support from the State Government; last year it received an annual grant of Rs. 10,000 only. FCC, ASHI, had invited a few women at their office at Gangtok on our request and we could interview them at one place. Here is a brief account of the cases we could cover.

***Case study 1***

Riya Trikhatri, aged 27, wife of Mr. Prokash Mothey (32) a driver

in the Power Department of the State Government, approached the FCC, ASHI, with the complaint that her husband had married for the second time and had thrown her out of the house. Riya also complained of regular physical torture done on her by her husband. Driven out of husband's house Riya started staying in the house of her parents in the same village. Prokash and Riya got married in 1994 and had a daughter in 1996. They were living at Bisal Gaon in Gangtok.

Riya approached FCC, ASHI, on 21 January 2001. The Centre then called both the parties for hearing. In several rounds of counseling the Centre tried for reconciliation but nothing worked. However, in February the same year the parties agreed for a written settlement. According to the agreement, Prokash would pay a monthly alimony of Rs. 1200 to Riya and her son (at the rate of Rs. 600/ per head). Riya admitted that she felt humiliated at the treatment she received at the hands of her husband after serving him with full sincerity for all these years. She said, 'I shall never be able to forgive my husband for his betrayal and I shall never be able to stay with him again.'

### *Case study 2*

Mrs. Laxmi Sharma, aged 38, was the wife of Mr. Gopilal Sharma (56), a mason. They got married about 20 years back and their eldest son, a driver, was now 17 years of age. They had one more son and a daughter. The family was living at Ravangla, South Sikkim.

Gopilal Sharma was alcoholic and in the habit of verbally and physically assaulting Laxmi. One day in early April 2005, the drunken husband returned home late and beat Laxmi badly. Laxmi was badly injured and had 15 stitches on her face.

With the help of a friend Laxmi approached the FCC, Ashi, for help and protection. The FCC lodged FIR with the police and arranged for Laxmi's treatment. On her release from hospital Laxmi was given shelter at the Short Stay Home, run by Ashi. Laxmi said that her husband threatened to kill her and she looked very scared at that time.

The FCC, Ashi summoned Laxmi's husband, elder son and other

relatives for counseling on 21 April 2005. After long counseling session an agreement was reached. Laxmi's husband agreed to take her back; their son too wanted his mother back. Laxmi's husband gave a written undertaking that he would not torture her any more. Laxmi, however, was terrified and was reluctant to go back. She agreed with long persuasion from all sides. The counselors of the FCC, Ashi, make surprise visits to check if everything is going according to the agreement. Laxmi told us that things have changed for the better after that incident.

### *Case study 3*

Chini Maya Bhujel (40 years of age), wife of Dilbahadur Chhetri (40 years), hails from Tagong, Gangtok. Chini Maya and Dilbadur got married some 25 years ago. They had a daughter (23 years), who was married, and a son of 14 years of age.

On 10 May 2005 Chini Maya came to FCC, Ashi, with a fractured hand and wounds in her legs. She complained that her alcoholic husband had beaten her so badly that she had to run for her life. Maya was given temporary shelter at the Short Stay Home for three days. She was taken to hospital, an X-Ray was done and arrangement was made for her treatment.

Dilbahadur, Maya's husband, was called for counseling on 12 May 2005. Among others who came on the day of counseling were Chini Maya's son, daughter, and son-in-law. After counseling Dilbahadur and Chini Maya's children and son-in-law together insisted that she should go back home. Chini Maya was still under a spell of shock and was reluctant to go back. Then everybody boosted her confidence by promising that they would keep a watch over Dilbahadur's movements and behaviour. Dilbahadur gave an undertaking that he will not repeat the same behaviour in future. Finally, Chini Maya agreed to go back to her family.

### *Case study 4*

Dawa Yanzi Sherpa (32 years of age) is the wife of Karma Lendup Bhutia (37 years). After getting married to Karma, Dawa Yanzi lived in the house of her husband at Bhusuk 10<sup>th</sup> Mile, Gangtok. Dawa was the mother of a son and a daughter. Karma was working as a police constable while Dawa was a house wife.

In 2000, Dawa was pregnant for the second time and this time around her husband was having an affair with another lady. Dawa came to know about this affair when she was in an advanced stage of her pregnancy and became depressed. She went to her parent's house for the delivery and her husband never visited her after the birth of their daughter.

During this time Karma brought her new wife home. When Dawa returned home with the new baby she was shocked to see that her position has been taken over by another woman. Thrown out of the husband's house Dawa returned to her parent's house with her children.

Dawa came to the FCC, Ashi, with her brother and requested for help. She also stayed at the Short Stay Home with her children for a week preceding the counseling. Family members from both sides came on the day of counseling. Karma was adamant not to take Dawa back. Dawa looked very sick and thin and that could have prompted Karma to go for a second wife.

As a part of the settlement Karma agreed to a monthly alimony of Rs. 1000/ and a house rent allowance. Dawa looked physically and mentally shattered as she was ill and uncertain about the future of her children in case she dies early. She was falling sick often and was spending beyond her means on treatment.

A couple of months back Dawa urged the FCC, Ashi, to do something to raise the maintenance allowance. The FCC got in touch with Karma, who is now working as a police constable at Melli Police Station. When the FCC placed the issue of raising the maintenance allowance he was furious. As a pressure tactic Dawa and the FCC threatened to go to the Family Court. On the apprehension of losing job Karma yielded to the pressure and agreed to enhance the alimony to Rs. 1500 per month.

### *Case studies from Darjeeling*

#### *Case study 1*

Noorie Gurung, aged 39, lived with her three daughters- Romi, Richa and Rima- and her husband Hemraj 45 in Bettidhura tea-garden of Kurseong sub-division in Darjeeling. She had a regular

job as a laborer in the tea garden. They got married in the year 1991. Her husband was unemployed; he used to work as a labourer on daily wage especially in road-construction. He had to remain away from home most of the times. He developed an extra-marital affair. His wife came to know about this but for the fear of desertion she kept silent. Noorie worked hard to keep her children afloat. She earned by selling 'rakshi' (local alcoholic beverage) and firewood collected from the jungle. She supported her children's education, admitted her eldest daughter to a good school outside of the village as her own village did not have any good school.

Noorie had some elementary education, a class III dropout. She managed to deposit her savings or bought gold as security for the future. But sometimes her husband would take her earnings for his own consumption. Hemraj used to spend all his earnings on women and drink. He never looked after his family. He had the habit of torturing his wife and beat his daughters in a fit of rage. Quarrelling, suspicion on her integrity and threats were the daily affairs in the family. The villagers were also aware of his deeds. But they rarely opposed him as many thought it would be interpreted as an unwanted interference into family affairs. The villagers used to avoid him as he had records of fighting and killing people during the Gorkhaland movement of the 80s in Darjeeling; he was the right hand of one of the political leaders in the hills. Thus the villagers dared not to come to Noorie's rescue.

Hemraj started having an affair with a woman from the neighborhood. The woman was also married and had two sons but was much younger than Noorie and Hemraj. So quarrelling became the part of everyday life. Noorie was held to suspicion by Hemraj and would question her integrity whenever he would get a chance. She was worried about her daughter's studies as Hemraj had the habit of abusing his daughters. Regular fight in the family disturbed her daughter's studies.

In the year 2005 Noorie took this issue to the local body of village affairs called 'panchayat' (local court). The panchayat arranged a meeting to discuss the case and give a verdict. In this panchayat court the families of both the sides were called and after hearing both the parties gave a verdict. The 'panchayat' recommended the couple (Hemraj and the other woman) to leave the village paying compensation to Noorie. Noorie now lives with her

daughters in her husband's house. She is thankful to the villagers and to the 'panchayat' which saved her and her daughters. Although Noorie faces a lot of hardship as single mother, she is living in peace, free of the torture from her husband.

### *Case study 2*

Meenu Rai, aged 48, was living with her husband Rambirey (50 years of age) and two sons in Sittong area of Kurseong sub-division. Meenu ran a small shop while her husband worked as a staff in the state-owned cinchona plantation. They had a good earning and a good life and both their sons studied outside in a town school. Rambirey was widely respected as a man of good virtue by the villagers. He used to drink alcohol but never got into a brawl. He had never tortured his wife. But in the year 2011 the villagers were shocked to know that he was having an affair with a woman called Seema who was of his son's age. The woman was married with a drunkard and had a son. Later on, the woman left her husband and started living with Rambirey in a rented room in the neighborhood as his elder son was old enough to drive him away. There was no noticeable change in his everyday life; he kept going to his work, coming back to the new house to his new live-in-partner and had a normal social life. His wife was in a state of shock wondering why her husband had abandoned her. His sons, angry at the turn of events, debarred him from visiting his family. Shockingly, there was no strong reaction against Rambirey from the villagers. No FIR was filed against him and no local body (panchayat) took up the matter.

The woman, Seema, lived with Rambirey without divorcing her first husband. Seema had a good reputation when she lived with her husband. She was subjected to violence (mental and physical) by her husband who would spend all his earning on alcohol. None except her family members came to her rescue. Here in Rambirey's and Seema's (and Meenu) case the 'panchayat' preferred not to interfere into the matter thinking that the quarrel between a husband and wife is just a 'paral ko aago' (fire on hay which extinguishes within a short time). Both of the women did not seek help from the law when their husbands were causing problem to their lives as they thought that taking help from the police and law would invite additional harassment. Seema's first husband

still is a drunkard but she had found peace eloping with Rambirey, who takes good care of her. Meenu leads a lonely life, struggling to find means to run her family. She still finds it hard to believe that her husband betrayed her; she mourns her helplessness by leading a silent and isolated life in the village.

### *Case study 3*

Martha (aged 49) lived with her husband Nathaniel Pradhan (48 years) in the sub-urban area of Gandhigram near Kalimpong; they brought Elisha as a domestic help when the latter was a child from a closed tea-garden in the Dooars region of Jalpaiguri district. Elisha was seven when she came to the house and she lived with the family for ten years. She had to do almost all the domestic works and in return she was given food, shelter and occasional oversized worn clothes. According to her friends Elisha was never an outgoing girl; she always was silent and passive. She had a close friend Binu with whom she loved spending time. Unlike Elisha, Binu was a clever girl and she was concerned for Elisha. Meanwhile in the year 2011, when Elisha reached 17 she stopped meeting her friends, not even her best friend Binu. She preferred to remain inside of the house and engage herself with the work. This sudden change of behavior of Elisha shocked Binu. Binu, along with her other friends, tried to reach her but she gave some excuses to avoid them. There came a point when Binu could not bear the separation. She went to Elisha and forced her to tell everything that was bothering her. Elisha opened up to tell her that her employer Nathaniel manipulated her to have physical relation with him. He continued to have physical relation with Elisha when his wife was out of the house. He threatened Elisha of sending her back to the tea-garden where she belonged. Going back home would mean to live in starvation. She continued bearing this physical assault by her employer and kept silent because of losing social reputation. She managed to live with her agonies and broken conscience.

Binu acted smartly telling the details of the incidence to their Sunday school (Children's gathering in the Church) teacher Lilly. Lilly then tried to counsel Elisha and she confessed all that had happened to her. Lilly took up the matter with Martha (wife of Nathaniel) and his family members but nobody believed her. She received similar

indifferent reaction when she told this to the members of the village Church; no one believed that such a 'holy man' like Nathaniel could do such immoral things to the girl. As a punishment for her audacity Lilly, the conscience keeper, was replaced by another Sunday school teacher. Elisha was sent to another rich man's house (Nathaniel's relative) in Sikkim. As a reward of his manly deeds Nathaniel was promoted to the post of a Pastor of the community Church. His wife Martha knowing all the misdeeds of her husband has defended him in public; nobody knows what happened to her conscience. May be by questioning her husband she did not want to sacrifice her comfortable life and social reputation. Instead, she raised questions on the character of Elisha. Martha never complained anybody against her husband; she did not even approach her relatives or the Church to look into the matter. Elisha did not have the courage or means to take on the power-block which had solid support of the community and the Church. Movement to Sikkim was not her choice; her ejection was a part of the cleaning operation. Nobody knows if the same structural repression will be repeated in her new place of work.

#### *Case study 4*

Rita Sharma (40 years of age) lives with her husband Shyam Sharma (aged 45) and three children in a small town of Kurseong. They got married in 1989. Shyam Sharma owns several business ventures one of which was being looked after by Rita. Rita studied up to class X but failed to pass the Madhyamik examination. Her parents arranged her marriage immediately with Shyam who was then studying in a college. The couple had children and did business for a living. Rita never had a doubt on her husband's character until the day when one of his business assistants came to her to tell about Shyam's occasional outings with some women. But Rita never believed this and took it as for the jealousy of the assistant. Shyam never mistreated Rita but suspicious about her integrity he kept a vigil on her movements. In reality however Shyam was having an extra-marital affair and not Rita, who remained faithful to her husband. An incident took place in 2012 which shattered Rita; their eldest daughter Inu, who was then 22, found out a conversation between Shyam and a lady over a social networking site in his personal computer. The conversation contained number of messages bearing evidence of Shyam's illicit

relationship with the lady. Inu questioned her father about the affair and talked to the lady over the phone. In reaction to Inu's interference Shyam scolded her, warned her not to interfere in his personal matters and withdrew Inu from her college on the pretext that she had an affair with a boy. She was framed inside her house for exposing his reality. Some of the relatives of Shyam, knowing the incident from Inu, took up the matter seriously. But before they could do anything substantial Rita, Shyam's wife, declared that she is okay with her husband's affair as long as he keeps the woman out of the house. She told her relatives that men are born to have multiple women and she has accepted this as her fate. Saving her marriage and family was her priority as she prepared herself for the compromise. The relatives were shooed away by Shyam; Inu was facing cold treatments from her parents, even from her mother for whom she raised her voice.

#### *Case study 5*

Laxmi Tamang (39) of Uttar Polok of Kalimpong was married to Harka Bahadur Gurung (42) in 1993. They have a 19 year old son. Before marriage they had love affair for some years. Laxmi works as a plantation laborer in one of the government Cinchona plantations in Kalimpong division of Darjeeling district. Her husband is a graduate and works as an office staff in the plantation. They had a normal life until Laxmi suffered an inherited mental illness. That time their son was a ten year old boy studying in a local school. After having months of treatment Laxmi was recovering. But by then her husband had started to see another woman from Gangtok. One day he left his family and started living with the woman in Gangtok; he stopped attending his work and stopped looking after his family. Harka Bahadur left ailing Laxmi in a deplorable condition without thinking who would be looking after their only son. Laxmi never filed a complaint against her husband in a hope that he would return home one day. Harka Bahadur returned home after a gap of five years with another wife and a two year old son. He lived separately with his second wife in the same village. Laxmi's mental health deteriorated but none came forward. Eventually she was taken to the care of her brother. Her son was looked after by her in-laws. Two years later Laxmi got well and came to her house and started to look after her son. It has been nine years in the run; Laxmi is struggling to

take care of herself and her son. Her husband Harka Bahadur lives in his parental house with his second wife and son. Nobody has ever complained against him. Laxmi's brother holds grudges against his sister's husband and the family as well. But he can do nothing for her because Laxmi is reluctant to charge her husband.

### *Case study 6*

Sonu Lepcha (29) was married to Rajen Mukhia (35) in 2010. They now have a two year old son. Both are from the same village Shilam busy in Kalimpong subdivision of Darjeeling district. They both work as casual laborers for the forest department office near their hamlet. Sonu gave birth to their son Rojan in 2011 and started staying home to look after the child. Rajen continued with his work in the forest department. He was given work for about eight months a year and for the remaining four months he used to work as an assistant to a carpenter named Phurba. Phurba had a 19 year old daughter Seti with whom Rajen developed an affair while working for Phurba in the latter's house. Rajesh in course stopped supporting his wife financially leaving them in hardship. Sonu resumed her work in the forest department as a casual labour in order to sustain her family. Within a few months of developing the extra marital affair Rajen eloped with Seti leaving his wife and son in distress. Sonu now lives in her father's place with her son. She works to feed her only son and she is now determined to send her son to a good school. Sonu would not consider a second marriage even though she is only 29 years of age.

The above case studies collected from the Darjeeling district show men deserting their wives when they reach a particular age-group, late 30s and 40s, when they are sexually active, fed up with the monotony of having sex with their wives and are in a mood to explore new areas of sexual activity, developing physical relation with girls of much younger age (compared with their wives). Their legal wives by then are in late 30s and early 40s, are mothers of child/children and nearing menopause or have already reached it. The men, while developing new affairs desert their wives and children forgetting their responsibilities towards them and throwing all moral and value standards in the wind.

The cases from Darjeeling hills show that none of the deserted

women except one tried to reach the 'panchayat' (local court) for justice. They bear all the humiliation and insult inflicted on them by their inhuman husbands in order to save their families; they are worried about the consequences of sudden withdrawal of financial support and protection by their deserting husbands. The women felt too insecure at the prospect of divorce or separation from their husbands. Most of the women were financially dependent on their husbands. It is being observed that the women were deserted by their husbands after they had a child or two. Two of the case had peculiar issue where women did not take any actions against their husbands (see Martha and Rita's case study) despite of knowing that their respective husbands were having affairs outside of their marriage. In Martha's case the husband happened to be a prominent religious leader of the locality; later he was seen as being handed over the higher authority of the religious institution he served. Majority of the desertion of these women by their husbands was caused by the men who developed an extramarital affair and alcoholism. A common problem among the cases was found to be the lack of attention and support that the husband were obliged to offer to their family members. In almost all the cases the children of the couple had to be looked by the women who were deserted by their husbands without a support from their husbands and the in-laws.

### *Concluding observations*

Desertion of married women and children, mental and physical torture on married women by their husbands and other in-laws are the ugliest manifestations of a patriarchal, feudal, inhuman social order, which has the backing of the 'conscience collective' among the communities both in Sikkim and Darjeeling hills, and in other places of India. Although such cases are on the rise desertion of wife and atrocities on her by her husband are largely treated as the 'problem of the victim' or 'family problem' and not a 'social problem'. Uncontrolled sex, search for novelty in sexuality, easy availability of 'willing women', and family feuds drive men, in their 40s and 50s, to develop physical relationship outside marriage while negating family responsibilities and the value system stemming from the Hindu Marriage Act and the larger social tradition. The age of the deserted women also bears

significance since the husbands desert them when, in their late 30s and 40s, they are already mothers of two-three children and have lost much of their sex appetite and appeal as they enter menopause.

The wife, the children, who are the direct victims of the circumstances, make all efforts, with the backing of their relatives and friends, to make a compromise, even by accepting the illicit relation of their impulsive husbands, in order to save the marriage and the family. The neighbourhood community and the village church do not see much of a problem with the deserting husband and counsel the wife to reconcile, suggesting that they should accept their husbands and their relation with the 'other woman' in order to live in peace. All the organizations, NGOs, or the institutions set up by the state appear to be in a reconciliatory mood and not in combating mood. This is encouraging the erring men to continue with their atrocities against women and their amoral, irresponsible acts. The deserting husbands, driven by sex desire, are ready to forget about their responsibilities towards their own children.

The provisions of Hindu Marriage Act are flouted at will since the women are not empowered (in terms of control over material and human resources, awareness of rights, and will to fight for justice) enough to put up an effective resistance, rebelling against their erring husbands; they are more concerned about securing a regular maintenance grant from their husband so that they can survive along with their children. The collectivity is also not ready to side with the deserted women to put up a social resistance.

In Sikkim there is a kind of institutional arrangement comprising of the State Commission for Women, the Family Court, the family counseling cells and the NGOs to deal with the cases of atrocities against women and in certain cases they come up with settlements in the form of reunification of the family, fixing and enhancing alimony, regular monitoring to make sure the provisions of the agreements are adhered to by the conflicting parties, giving shelter in the short stay homes, and even taking the erring husbands to the Family Court. The FCCs and SCW usually persuade the tortured and humiliated women to go back to their husbands even when they feel insecure and reluctant to go back. Counseling the women victims to compromise may be a 'pragmatic' stand but

such surrender does not strengthen the women's rights movement in the state. There seems to be reluctance on the part of the State government to come out with a comprehensive strategy to arrest the ever increasing cases of bigamy among the neo-urbanite class who are mostly the upper caste Nepalese and who have secure government jobs and political connections. The commonly shared perception that drives this group of men to bigamy is that they have money to set up a new family and enough manipulative power to escape punishment for their irresponsible acts. Bigamy is practiced primarily by the government employees yet there is not a single instance of their employer sacking them from jobs although their actions amount to gross violation of the provisions of Hindu Marriage Act. With the instillation of more fighting spirit in the women's groups and greater will-power in the government and the Family Court at least the provisions of Hindu Marriage Act (against bigamy) could be strictly enforced. With some exemplary punishment the culprits could be 'disciplined' and this could, in turn, have a demonstration effect on the potential perpetrators of violence against women.

The State Commission for Women has not been given adequate space or any judicial power by the Government or the Court where it can act with freedom and authority. Thus its requests for action remain unattended by the State government or by the Family Court. The weakened SCW could lead to further crippling of the women's rights movement in the state. The lady counselors of FCC, ASHI, were complaining that they feel insecure during their field visits while dealing with high-tension cases. They cited a couple of instances when their workers were attacked and threatened of dire consequences for their support to the distressed women. This indicates that the forces that are willing to stand by the women victims do not get enough community or institutional support.

Only a few women dared to approach the FCC, ASHI, for help since they are aware of the far reaching consequences of involving the external agencies in 'family matters'. Some of the women need immediate help and financial support. They do not understand the complication of court cases and police intervention and always insist on a deal that would help sustain them. The women are well aware that once they come out of the house and seek the intervention of the FCC, or any other formal institution, it would

be a point of no return. They understand well that when their husbands have fallen for women who are much younger and capable of satisfying their husband's sexual desire they stand no chance of winning them back. Being 'pragmatic' the women victims give up the fight since they do not want to risk the monthly allowance. At times, the husbands tend to flout the terms of the settlement agreement and stop paying the maintenance allowance. In such cases the FCC, ASHI, seeks the help of the employer to put pressure on the erring husband and recover the amount from his salary. The counselors of ASHI told us that the employers usually cooperate in such cases.

The community, family members, relatives, neighbours feel for the victims of domestic violence but there is no organized resistance. This social force that represents the vales and pity is not articulate and as a result the victims do not get adequate support that they deserve. Had this force been organized there could have been more prevention, support and effective resistance. In order to give legitimacy to village level women's groups there should be appropriate legislation or ordinance and such groups should constitute a part of rural self governments. Now that the *panchayats* are in place in Sikkim it would not be difficult to build women's rights cell in the local bodies. Such groups should be backed by an effective network of all the organizations and the government departments. Without a sincere political will on the part of democratic and administrative bodies and without a collective resistance at the social/community level it would be impossible to fight the elements of patriarchy that has a strong roots in Sikkim and Darjeeling hills.

What of cases in Darjeeling hills are common with the cases in Sikkim is the overwhelming presence of the elements of patriarchy which can condition the conjugal relations and the relations in the family. The patriarchy works both covertly and overtly, at the individual and collective levels, in expressed behavior and psyche. That explains why the men enjoy a free hand in developing illicit relations outside family and why there is no social condemnation or organized protest against atrocities against women. The near total absence of control over material and human resources make the middle-aged women vulnerable and constrained not to go for an all-out protest at the social and institutional level. Even when a

voice is raised against the men by an exceptional few, the power hierarchy gets into action to discipline the defiant voice. Women in Darjeeling hills are doubly constrained because there is total absence of institutional or organizational support (like the Family Court, NGOs, and Family Counseling Cells, Commission for Women or NGOs) unlike Sikkim. The local power blocks like the Church, formal and informal *panchayats* deal with such cases with a clear bias in favour of men.

Considering that patriarchy has an overwhelming support of the cultural traditions and communities in both Sikkim and Darjeeling hills, and also considering the fact that the cases of bigamy and domestic violence against the hapless women is on the rise in the state there ought to be a comprehensive policy of the government for protection of the rights of the women. The policy should evolve a mechanism of integration of the activities of the Family Court, the State Commission for Women, the FCCs, the NGOs and the police. Under the leadership of these organizations the 'village level women rights groups' need to be formed, which should be empowered with training in legal rights and in capacity building so that they could put up community resistance in cases of atrocities. With human resource development and greater control over productive resources for women and organized community resistance with the backing of institutional support the problem can be addressed better.

We would conclude the paper with a reference to a cultural syndrome *machismo* that worked in Latin American countries, especially those with large indigenous and backward *mestizo* populations. Understood as a collective liability, *machismo* encompassed values and behaviours antithetical to progress: traditionalism, the absence of a firm work ethic, an excessive dependency on familism, authoritarianism, and corruption and, most importantly, a voracious sexual appetite.<sup>2</sup> Years later the term *marianismo* was used to describe a complementary series of attributes among Latin American women: passivity, self-denial, a vocation to subservience and an exaltation of motherhood (Stevens, 1973)<sup>3</sup>. We are aware that to understand a community in terms of national culture traits is not only unscientific but also an injustice to the whole community. However, it difficult not to notice the presence of *marianismo* syndrome, when authoritarian male

domination leaves its hegemonic impact on the minds and behavior of the women who strive hard to restore some sense of security and dignity but do not strike back. It would be misleading if we stop with a cultural explanation of the condition of women in Sikkim and Darjeeling hills a political economic explanation would perhaps be more appropriate.

### *Notes*

1. On 13<sup>th</sup> the team visited the Family Counseling Centre, located at the Police Head Quarters, Gangtok, the Family Court located at the Sikkim High Court, the office of State Commission for Women at Gangtok, and the office of an NGO named Association of Social Health in India (ASHI), Sikkim Branch. The team met Mrs. Manita Pradhan, Chairperson of Sikkim State Women's Commission, Mrs. Kidoma Bhutia (in-charge) and Ms Susma Chhetri of the Family Counseling Centre at Police Head Quarters, Mr. Uday P Sharma, a Judge in the Family Court, Mrs. Mongalmit Lepcha (Coordinator, ASHI), Anjali Thapa (Counsellor, ASHI) and Mrs. Aruna Tamang (Counsellor, ASHI) and collected information covering various aspects of the project.

On prior request these persons and organizations had invited some victims of family disputes, whose cases have been taken up by these organizations, for counseling/litigation and settlement, to their respective offices so that we could meet and interview them at length. This arrangement enabled us to meet about ten victims (both men and women) and record their cases in detail in order to understand the nature of the problems and the methods resorted to by these organizations/institutions to resolve them. This exercise also enabled us to draw some understanding of the nature of integration or coordination these agencies have amongst them while addressing the cases of family disputes. As we went through the individual cases we had a good grasp of the social roots of the family problems in the state. The leaders and counsellors involved in women's rights movement in the state also came forward with interesting suggestions for working out a better coordination between the Family Court and other organization working with similar objectives.

2. Philosophical and literary writings, like those of Samuel Ramos and Octavio Paz in Mexico, further contributed to create a Latin American mystique around national character. *Labyrinth of Solitude* (Paz, 1961) continues to be cited by social scientists as it had been inspired by serious research. Filled with provocative insights and some distortions, *Labyrinth* exemplifies the sexualization of social relationships. For details see, Maria and Fernandez, 1994: 249-275

3. For details see Stevens, 1973.

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