

Pastoral Women of Himalayas

Veena Bhasin*

Department of Anthropology, University of Delhi, Delhi 110 007 India

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ABSTRACT Women are the backbone of the economic structure, as the production system is dependent on them. The role and status of women vary according to the traditions of cultural group. Pastoral Societies depend for sustenance on livestock herding and use of pasturelands. Due to certain specificities like accessibility, fragility, marginality, diversity or heterogeneity; life in general is tougher for women among the pastoralists. The pastoral production activities implicate the services of both sexes, but women's involvement varies in different culture-ecological conditions. Women play a central role in the pastoralist way of life, providing labour for the various tasks with regard to the livestock, the land and the household. The pastoral societies have been largely seen to be male dominated in which men have economic, social, political and cultural powers special to men. Patriarchy denotes a culture of power relationship that promotes man's supremacy and women subjugation. With a secondary status, women play but a submissive role in social life. In the pastoral areas under study, the economic cycle and division of labour in the area has given an important role to the women. Women's participation in the economic activity is important for their personal advancement and their status in the society. The economic power of the women in the household is not translated into a corresponding community authority. The women in study areas contribute more labour for smooth running of the household than men do. The pastoral women suffer disadvantages in areas of education, employment, health and medical services. The present study corroborates the premise that women's status is high when they contribute substantially to primary subsistence activities even if they lack control of material resources. It may be concluded as it is observed that ecology and environmental factors existing in pastoral areas under study have given these women a special economic power and an elevated status. Men dominate in public, in social and religious affairs, and continue to play the role of the head of the family and breadwinner, while women enjoy a greater say in their family life, they have a greater deal of social freedom and several of their actions are condoned/tolerated. This confirms the thesis in one way, that in spite of the public/domestic dichotomy, the ecological/economic division interferes further modification in women's position. Here one may say that the public/domestic dichotomy is not the only criterion for determining women's status in society. To understand gender relations, it is necessary to realise the extent to which the masculine and feminine roles are interconnected and how one builds up on the other. There is a need for rethinking the relative power and status of women and men and also linkages between the domestic and public spheres in these societies. The idea of a comparison between the status of men and women is not straightforward. There is always too much behind the scenes action so it is never clear who has the upper hand. There is multiplicity of logics operating, practices of power and prestige at play. It is too complex to be understood in black and white terms. There are grey areas in which it is not clear in who is the subordinate of the two.