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Parma, Progress and Perseverance: Exploring the Socio-Economic and Cultural Roles of Women among the Sherpa

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Abstract

Bengal is home to one of the largest concentrations of tribal populations, with communities spread across forests, hills, and coastal regions. Tribal women, making up half of the population, play a pivotal role in sustaining these communities. While men leave for wage labour, Sherpa women emerge as the sole decision-makers, carrying the dual responsibility of managing households and ensuring the financial well-being of the family. The paper focuses on these tribal women of Kalimpong, examining their role in upholding family status, managing household finances, and fostering community welfare. At the heart of this paper lies the Parma system—a traditional labour exchange program where villagers don't receive money for work but instead expect work in return. More than a reciprocal allocation of labour, Parma--the system of work for work--serves as a vital mechanism for fostering mutual reliance, reinforcing shared responsibility, and preserving traditional knowledge and skills. Within this framework, Sherpa women can actively participate in communal activities, such as firewood collection and agricultural labour, which encourages the distribution of resources and alleviates economic burdens.

The paper analyses the role of Sherpa women in sustaining the traditional Parma system. To achieve this, the study employs a mixed-methods approach, integrating household surveys conducted in the villages of Samthar, Lolaygaon and Pedong, with interviews and focus group discussions involving Sherpa women, community leaders, and local government representatives. The analysis particularly aims to explore the economic roles of these women in agricultural production, small-scale trade, and resource management, as well as their efforts to diversify household incomes through entrepreneurial activities such as eco-tourism and artisanal crafts. By analyzing socio-economic data and community narratives, the study prescribes the integration of traditional practices with modern development strategies. It advocates for policies emphasizing gender-sensitive economic planning, easy access to markets, and targeted skill-building programs to empower Sherpa women and drive inclusivity in Kalimpong.

Introduction

Gender equality becomes a cornerstone of International Human Rights Law with the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights by the UN General Assembly.[1]

[1] The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) emphasised equality and non-discrimination as core principles during its third session. Article-I proclaims that "all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights," highlighting the inherent equality of every individual., while Article 2 explicitly guarantees the rights and freedoms enshrined in the declaration without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth, or other status. See, United Nations, *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (1948), https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights, for a detailed analysis.

This landmark declaration affirmed that 'all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights' (United Nations General Assembly 1948). In the democratic ideals of Free India, this principle is deeply embedded, yet has long been overshadowed by societal constructs that historically placed men in dominant roles. Women, as the backbone of families, have consistently proven themselves as agents of transformative change in society. However, they are often denied opportunities to learn, earn, and lead.

Nowhere is this duality (of challenges and contributions) more evident than in Bengal, a vast region celebrated for its rich culture and ethnic diversity. Bengal is home to one of India's largest tribal populations, where women, especially indigenous womenfolk, play a pivotal role in sustaining family economies and managing households.[2] Among them, the Sherpa women of Kalimpong hold a distinctive position. They shoulder immense responsibilities, from managing households to contributing to agricultural and economic activities. As custodians of their cultural heritage, they navigate the balance between preserving tradition and overcoming socio-economic hurdles. Their resilience and adaptability are exemplary, yet their labour remains largely unrecognized. Despite significant efforts, these women often face economic disadvantages and societal marginalization. This reality reflects the broader narrative of gender inequality, as captured by French philosopher Simone de Beauvoir, that 'representation of the world, like the world itself, is the work of men; they describe it from their own point of view, which they confuse with absolute truth' (de Beauvoir 1949: 176). The persistent neglect reflects the wide-ranging issues of gender disparity and discrimination.

True progress begins only when men and women stand shoulder to shoulder, valued equally in every sphere. Yet, women often remain vulnerable compared to their male counterparts and are the last recipients of developmental opportunities – a situation we witness daily. The Sherpa women of Kalimpong are no exception. Although these women play a crucial role in the agrarian economy, household management, and preserving cultural traditions, they continue to face systemic discrimination that limits their opportunities for empowerment. As one Sherpa woman (who works tirelessly on her farmland) interviewed in Pedong Bazar explained, 'We spend the day planting, weeding, carrying firewood, and weaving for the family. After dusk, we are still cooking, cleaning, and teaching the children. But when the elders and men gather to talk about trade, land, or village concerns, we are expected to stay silent. We give our strength to the community, but not our say in its future'. Such a remark encapsulates the silent struggle these women face regularly—enduring hard labour while being excluded from the crucial decisions that could bring positive change to their lives.

While the Government of India has implemented numerous schemes through the erstwhile Planning Commission and now *Niti Aayog*, aimed at improving the socio-economic status of these women, there is still much to be done to uplift them. Notable

[2] In West Bengal, the Tribal population is 52,96,963 as per Census 2011, which is about 5.8% of the total population of the State. The tribal population of West Bengal constitutes about 5.08% of the total Tribal population of the Country. Tribal communities are present in all the Districts of the State. A higher concentration of the Tribal population is seen in Districts like Darjeeling, Jalpaiguri, Alipurduar, Dakshin Dinajpur, Paschim Medinipur, Bankura and Purulia. See West Bengal Tribal Development Department, *Scheduled Tribes of West Bengal*, https://adibasikalyan.gov.in/scheduled-tribes-of-west-bengal, for further analysis.

among these efforts is the 'Beti Bachao Beti Padhao' (BBBP) scheme, which was launched in 2015 to address the declining child sex ratio and promote the empowerment of girls.[3] However, despite these initiatives, progress remains uneven, especially in the remote areas where these women live. As highlighted in a study by the Ministry of Women and Child Development, 'While the schemes aim to raise awareness and provide resources, many women in remote villages are still unaware of these policies, let alone benefit from them'. Women, particularly in isolated villages (such as Samthar, Lolaygaon, and Pedong), represent this daily struggle. These forest villages, although steeped in rich traditions, are far from metropolitan progress.

Despite their remote nature, these communities have preserved their language, culture, and traditional lifestyles, providing a sense of identity that many are reluctant to let go of. However, this preservation comes at a cost. Limited access to education, healthcare, and employment opportunities makes it challenging for Sherpa women to transcend the traditional roles assigned to them. The remoteness of these villages and limited infrastructure contribute significantly to the socio-economic challenges faced by them. The difficulty in accessing education and healthcare in these areas exacerbates the cycle of poverty and marginalization.

According to the 2011 Census of India, the literacy rate among women in the Darjeeling district, where Kalimpong is located, stands at a mere 69.7%, significantly lower than the national average of 74.4% Tsering, a local schoolteacher in Kafer Gaon[4], reflected on this gap, 'For us, education is a luxury. Many of our girls drop out early because they must help their mothers in the fields. Even when we have schools, families cannot afford books or uniforms, and so the cycle of struggle continues.' Similarly, a mother of three from Samthar shared her frustration: 'My eldest daughter dreams of studying beyond Class 8, but the nearest high school is a long walk through the forested hills. I cannot risk sending her alone, and paying for transport is beyond our means. So instead of sitting in a classroom, she spends her days beside me—planting maize, carrying firewood, cooking for her brothers. Every time I see her bent over the fields, I feel a weight in my heart. She deserves books in her hands, yet I have nothing more to offer her.'

Sherpa women in these forest villages endure this dual burden, caught between a modernizing world and traditional constraints. Their efforts to maintain their cultural heritage stand in stark contrast to the systemic barriers they encounter. Through initiatives intended to address these issues, including the nationwide 'Beti Bachao Beti

[3] Launched on January 22, 2015, in Haryana, the Beti Bachao Beti Padhao (BBBP) scheme aims to improve child-sex ratios and empower girls through education. This initiative operates under a tri-ministerial effort involving the Ministries of Women and Child Development, Health and Family Welfare, and Education. The scheme initially targeted 100 districts with critical child sex ratios, aiming to raise awareness and improve enforcement of existing laws, such as the Pre-Conception and Pre-Natal Diagnostic Techniques (PCPNDT) Act, of 1994. Over time, its scope expanded nationwide, focusing on multi-sectoral action to combat gender-biased sex selection, reduce female infanticide, and ensure the survival, protection, and education of girl children. See Ministry of Women and Child Development, Government of India (22 January 2015). *Beti Bachao Beti Padhao scheme*. https://wcdhry.gov.in/schemes-for-women/beti-bachao-beti-padhao/, for further analysis.

[4] Kafer Gaon lies 6 kilometres from Loleygaon, within the Neora Valley Forest circuit. See West Bengal Tourism Department. *Neora Valley National Park and Eco-Tourism Circuit*. Government of West Bengal. Retrieved from https://wbtourism.gov.in for more information.

Padhao' campaign ('Save the Girl Child, Educate the Girl Child'), **'**Mission Shakti**',** and **'**SABLA' (Rajiv Gandhi Scheme for Empowerment of Adolescent Girls), alongside state-level schemes aimed at women empowerment, such as 'Kanyashree Prakalpa**'**, **'**Lakshmir Bhandar', the path toward true progress remains incomplete[5]. While these programs have contributed to raising awareness and improving access to certain resources, the existing circumstances reveal a slower, uneven pace of transformation. The persistence of deeply ingrained societal norms, patriarchal system, inadequate institutional support (at the grassroots level), and limited outreach in remote forest villages creates a gap between policy design and ground policy.

Historical and conceptual framework

In order to grasp the socio-economic challenges these women face today, it is essential to consider the historical context of forest governance in Bengal, where colonial policies, particularly those related to 'forest villages', have had lasting impacts on indigenous communities and shaped the roles of womenfolk within them.

During the colonial era, the term 'Forest Village' did not necessarily imply that the villages (such as Samthar, Lolaygaon, Pedong, etc.) were located within forests, but rather referred to colonies of labourers, typically established by the Forest Department, to ensure a consistent supply of workforce required for various forest-related activities. Although the 1878 Indian Forest Act laid the groundwork for colonial forest governance, it did not include the category of 'forest village'. The Act itself divided forests into three classes: 1. Reserved, 2. Protected, and 3.Village Forests. However, in its administrative aftermath, the Forest Department in Bengal and Assam began creating what came to be known as 'forest villages.' These were settlements strategically located inside forest tracts to provide the Department with a steady and cheap supply of labour for logging, plantation work, resin tapping, and fire-line clearance (Sundar 1997: 122; Prasad 2003: 56).

Unlike 'village forests', formally recognized under the Act—which were theoretically meant to be managed by communities—'forest villages' were essentially labour colonies. Families were allotted small plots of cultivable land and homesteads, but in exchange were compelled to provide their labour to the Department whenever required. This arrangement tied Adivasi households to the state in a semi-servile relationship, restricting their customary rights over forests and replacing them with conditional privileges.

The villagers, who were often referred to as **'**forest workers**'** or **'**coolies**'**, played a crucial role in the maintenance and management of forests. The initial purpose behind the establishment of such villages was to secure a steady labour force for departmental work related to forest conservation, logging, and other administrative tasks in the forests.

At the outset, the relationship between the labourers and the state was highly exploitative. Forest workers were initially treated as serfs by the colonial government,

[5] Government of India. (2023). Annual report 2022–23: *Ministry of Women and Child Development*. Ministry of Women and Child Development. https://wcd.nic.in; Government of West Bengal. (2023). *Schemes for women and child development in West Bengal*. Department of Women & Child Development and Social Welfare. https://wcdsw.wb.gov.in.

compelled to provide free labour for the maintenance of the forests. This forced labour system was intended not only to meet the labour demands but also to serve the dual purpose of protecting and managing the forests. However, over time, the circumstances gradually evolved. As migrant labourers began settling in these areas, they were granted land and homesteads, thus becoming entitled to a small piece in exchange for their services to the Forest Department. This marked the transition from a system of servitude to one where forest workers were provided certain rights and benefits in exchange for their work.

These settlements, which grew into permanent villages, came to be known as 'forest villages'. The origin of these villages can be traced back to British colonial rule in India, particularly with the passage of the Indian Forest Act of 1878.[6] The act facilitated the establishment of forest villages within forest areas to meet the need for field workers who could engage in forest management activities. Under the provisions of this act, villagers were granted the right to cultivate land and were provided with homesteads with a fixed amount of land allocated per household. However, while these provisions allowed villagers to sustain themselves to some extent, the act significantly curtailed their traditional rights over forest lands and resources, leading to diverse socio-economic challenges.

Scholars have noted that such restrictions disproportionately affected Adivasi women. Women, who had long been central to sustaining households through fuelwood gathering, fodder collection, and the use of non-timber forest produce, suddenly found their daily subsistence activities brought under the strict surveillance of the Forest Department. At the same time, the survival of their households became tied to men's compulsory labour obligations to the state, leaving women doubly burdened—constrained in their own resource use while also dependent on male labour extracted for colonial forestry. As Baviskar and Agarwal observe, this loss of customary rights did more than limit economic access: it destabilized the relatively egalitarian position women had historically occupied within tribal communities, forcing them into a new hierarchy shaped by colonial policy rather than indigenous practices (Agarwal 2010: 42; Baviskar 1995: 87).

The experience of Pema Sherpa reflects the wider predicament faced by countless tribal women. As an Adivasi woman from Upper Pedong (Near Damsang Gadi), her routine practice of collecting firewood and wild produce was suddenly criminalized. When caught by guards, she was forced to abandon her bundle and threatened with punishment unless her family provided labour for timber extraction. However, her husband, Lhakpa Sherpa, one conscripted for such work, had been paralyzed due to an injury sustained while working in timber extraction. With him incapacitated, Pema carried the burden of keeping her household alive–denied access to the forest,

[6] This colonial act was introduced to regulate and exploit forest resources for commercial purposes while ensuring a steady supply of labour for forest management activities. Under this act, forests were classified into three categories: reserved forests, which were primarily for commercial use and off-limits to local communities; protected forests, which allowed restricted local access; and village forests, which were intended to be managed by communities but were rarely implemented effectively.
See, Digital District Repository Detail. (2023 October 10). *The Forest Act of 1878*. https://cmsadmin.amritmahotsav.nic.in/district-reopsitory-detail.htm?25146, for further analysis.

constrained by close supervision, and compelled into deep poverty. Her experience, shared by many women, shows how colonial regulations have turned subsistence into a precarious struggle marked by fear, hunger & hardship, while stripping women of the autonomy they had once held in their communities.

This individual narrative also reflects broader patterns shaped by the colonial administration. In practice, the criteria for forest villages varied according to the geographical and environmental characteristics of the area, such as whether the village was located in the plains or the hills. These criteria governed various aspects of village life, including livestock management, grazing rights, and agricultural practices. For instance, each household in a forest village was permitted to keep a certain number of cattle for farming purposes, including ploughing, milking, and other tasks. They were also permitted to keep calves, goats, and sheep for their own use. However, the grazing of cattle was not unrestricted. Grazing was only allowed in specific areas within the Reserve Forest, and these areas were strictly regulated by the District Forest Office to prevent overgrazing and degradation of the forest ecosystem. The establishment of these forest villages thus played a significant role in the management and preservation of forest resources. At the same time, it also served as a means to ensure that the state had a reliable labour force for the arduous work of forest maintenance and conservation.

Against this historical backdrop, the present study focuses on the villages of Samthar, Lolaygaon, and Pedong in the Kalimpong Sadar subdivision of the Kalimpong district, which are home to the Sherpa community. Out of the 64[7] forest villages in Kalimpong district, the selection of Samthar, Lolaygaon, and Pedong was made through purposive sampling. These sites were deliberately selected as they reflect distinct trajectories of livelihood adaptation within forest villages. Samthar presents a predominantly agrarian economy, where women play a central role in subsistence farming. Lolaygaon illustrates a community negotiating between traditional practices and the opportunities of eco-tourism. Pedong, historically located along the Silk Route, highlights the significance of trade, handicrafts, and horticulture. Taken together, the dynamics of these forest villages reflect a historical progression from exploitation to a more equitable system of land and social welfare, illustrating the shifting relationship between land, labour and state power in colonial and post-colonial India.

Field of study: Forest villages of Kalimpong

Situated at an altitude of approximately 1,300 meters in the eastern Darjeeling Himalayas, Kalimpong (District) was formed on 14 February 2017, following its separation from the Darjeeling district. According to the 2011 Census, the Kalimpong district had a population of 251,642. The region is home to diverse communities, including Gorkha, Lepcha, Bhutia and Sherpa populations. The Kalimpong town is the

[7] In 2020, the Government of West Bengal issued an order reclassifying 64 forest villages in Kalimpong district as revenue villages, thereby changing their administrative status. Historically, these settlements were categorized as forest villages during the colonial era to accommodate labourers within reserved forest areas under the jurisdiction of the Forest Department. This policy has considerably reduced and likely eliminated the official category of 'forest villages' in Kalimpong by 2025 (*Millennium Post*, 2021). Retrieved August 24, 2025, from https://www.millenniumpost.in/kolkata/darjeeling-dist-79-hamlets-to-turn-into-revenue-villages-458429.

headquarters of the Kalimpong district. The district comprises 64 villages, among which Samthar, Loleygaon, and Pedong are notable.

Samthar village

Geographical Overview: Situated at an elevation of at least 1,400 feet above sea level, the remote village of Samthar Valley lies 42 kilometres away from Kalimpong. Arching hills, dense forests and mountain streams surround this Lepcha village. With terrace cultivation happening all around this place, Samthar is known for its mountain agriculture, river valleys and diverse flora.

Sherpa Women in Samthar: In Samthar, Sherpa women are recognized for their resilience, as they manage household responsibilities alongside agricultural labour and small-scale trading activities. However, they face multiple limitations due to a combination of historical, cultural, social and economic factors. Traditional gender norms prioritized household duties over education or career development, while the remote location of the village restricts access to schools, healthcare, vocational training and markets. Although women contribute significantly to farming & local trades, their labour is often undervalued. Cultural expectations further constrain personal choice. Moreover, the combination of the geographically distant location and prevailing socio-cultural norms restricts freedom of movement (for women) and opportunities to engage with advanced technologies.

Lolaygaon village

Geographical overview: Loleygaon (also spelt Lolaegaon or Lolegaon) is a Lepcha village situated at an altitude of approximately 1,675 meters, along NH 717A in the Kalimpong II CD block of the Kalimpong Sadar subdivision of Kalimpong district. According to the 2011 Census of India, Lolay Khasmahal had a population of 2,209, of which 1,142 (52%) were male and 1,064 (48%) were female. Situated at the far end of the Himalayan Ridge, Loleygaon is recognized as a popular eco-tourism destination, celebrated for its beautiful landscapes, thriving forests and serene views of the Kanchenjunga.

Sherpa women in Loleygaon: The Sherpas in Lolaygaon have adapted their livelihoods to incorporate eco-tourism. Many families run homestays and serve as guides for trekking and nature walks. At the same time, agriculture continues to be a central activity, particularly the cultivation of organic vegetables and medicinal plants. Sherpa women, in particular, play a vital role in sustaining the local economy. Alongside household and agricultural responsibilities, they actively contribute to eco-tourism management, weaving traditional garments, and preserving cultural heritage by passing down oral traditions.

However, these women also face various kinds of challenges. As the village depends heavily on eco-tourism, the rise of homestays has increased the workload. The womenfolk handle most of the cooking and cleaning. They take care of guests, farms, and manage the household responsibilities. Despite their substantial contribution, men usually retain control over finances and deal directly with visitors, leaving women with minimal acknowledgement and fewer economic benefits. Language barriers (particularly limited fluency in English or Hindi) further limit the ability of these tribal

women to engage with tourists or explore new opportunities in the sector. Moreover, while eco-tourism initiatives in the region provide training in terms of guiding, hospitality, or digital promotion are available, such programs tend to be accessible to men than women. At the same time, cultural expectations also impose additional responsibilities on women to act as custodians of tradition, mainly for the benefit of tourists rather than for themselves. Taken together, these challenges deepen gender inequalities, even within the sphere of the emerging tourism economy of Lolaygaon.

Pedong village

Geographical overview: Pedong is situated at an altitude of approximately 1,240 meters, strategically located on the ancient Silk Route. It is a vibrant hub connecting Kalimpong with other regions of the Eastern Himalayas. The village is surrounded by forests, historical landmarks, and traditional Sherpa settlements.

Sherpa women in Pedong: The Sherpas in Pedong are a close-knit community with a rich cultural heritage. They are known for their active participation in trade and small-scale industries, a tradition stemming from the historical significance of Pedong as a trading hub. The community also engages in horticulture, growing oranges, cardamom, and other cash crops that contribute to the local economy.

In farming, Sherpa women in Pedong do most of the planting, harvesting and processing, while men generally handle the marketing and finances. Although Pedong's history as a trading post has encouraged participation in commerce & small-scale industries, women remain largely on the margins–excluded from transport, business decisions, trade negotiations and cash handling. On top of these challenges are poor healthcare, limited travel opportunities, and the responsibility of caring for both children & elderly, all of which intensify the hardships they face.

Research methodology

The present study employs a descriptive qualitative research design, aiming to provide a nuanced understanding of the lived experiences of Sherpa women in the forest villages of Samthar, Lolaygaon, and Pedong. This approach allows for an in-depth exploration of social, cultural, and economic dimensions of women's roles, moving beyond quantitative measures to capture the complexities of daily life, moral agency, and resilience. The research draws upon both primary and secondary data: primary data illuminate individual and collective experiences within households and communities, while secondary data situate these experiences within historical, legal, and socio-economic frameworks.

Primary data were collected through purposive sampling, a method chosen to target women who are heads of their households[8] and therefore bear significant responsibility

[8] In this study, the term 'head of household' refers to the woman who exercises primary responsibilities concerning household management, decision-making, and activities that ensure economic stability within her family. Selection was not based on formal recognition or status. In multi-generational households, both mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law may perform crucial roles: 1. Mothers-in-law were included when they retained central authority over household decisions, such as resource allocation, agricultural labour, and overseeing childcare. 2. Daughters-in-law were included when they assumed primary responsibility due to the absence, incapacity, or ageing of elder women, or when they were the main contributors to daily labour and household management. In this particular study, the majority of women

for family sustenance and decision-making. This sampling strategy ensures that participants have direct experience of the intersecting challenges of labour, cultural preservation, and socio-economic marginalization. A total of 30 women were selected for in-depth interviews, enabling a balance between breadth and depth of analysis. The interviews focused on the daily responsibilities of Sherpa women, engagement in economic activities, access to education & resources, and participation in community decision-making.

The analytical framework emphasizes the interconnection between gender, labour, and socio-economic structures. By centering on heads of households, the study captures both the structural constraints imposed by historical and contemporary policies and the agency exercised by women in negotiating these constraints. The data provide detailed insights into patterns of labour division, coping strategies, and the negotiation of authority within families and communities. Additionally, the comparative selection of three villages, each representing distinct livelihood strategies—agrarian subsistence (Samthar), eco-tourism (Lolaygaon), and trade–handicraft–horticulture (Pedong)—allows for an analysis of how context-specific factors shape women's experiences, revealing both commonalities and divergences in challenges and strategies across different socio-economic and environmental settings.

Overall, the methodology combines purposive sampling with contextual analysis, offering a holistic understanding of Sherpa women's roles, contributions, and struggles, while linking individual experiences to broader historical and socio-economic processes.

Findings and data analysis

Table 1: Survey data set of thirty Sherpa respondents across Samthar, Lolaygaon, and Pedong villages

Respondent ID	Name	Village	Age	Education	Livelihood	Healthcare Access
1	Pema Sherpa	Samthar	34	Illiterate	Agriculture	Limited
2	Dolma Sherpa	Samthar	40	Primary	Agriculture	Adequate

selected as **'**heads of households**'** were daughters-in-law, as they often assume primary responsibility concerning daily labour, household management, and activities that contribute to household income, particularly when men are absent due to work in forestry or other obligations. This approach ensured that participants chosen for in-depth interviews were those most directly engaged in household sustenance, economic contribution, and decision-making, thereby capturing the dynamics of gender, age, and authority in Sherpa households. This reflects a structural reality in Sherpa households: men's prolonged absences due to engagement in forestry and other external obligations often shift the practical burdens of economic contribution and household management onto younger women. Consequently, daughters-in-law frequently emerge as the pivotal figures sustaining household subsistence, coordinating labour, and making everyday decisions. By focusing on these women, the study ensures that the perspectives captured in in-depth interviews reflect the reality of gender, age, labour, and authority, moving beyond a mere replication of formal or symbolic hierarchies.

3	Yangchen Sherpa	Samthar	29	Secondary	Agriculture	Critical
4	Dawa Sherpa	Samthar	47	Primary	Handicrafts/ Trade	Limited
5	Mingma Sherpa	Samthar	31	Primary	Agriculture	Adequate
6	Karma Sherpa	Samthar	36	Illiterate	Household-only	Critical
7	Pasang Dolkar	Samthar	42	Secondary	Agriculture	Limited
8	Lhamo Sherpa	Samthar	28	Primary	Agriculture	Adequate
9	Sonam Sherpa	Samthar	38	Illiterate	Agriculture	Limited
10	Tashi Sherpa	Samthar	45	Primary	Agriculture	Critical
11	Choden Sherpa	Lolaygaon	33	Secondary	Eco-tourism	Limited
12	Phurba Sherpa	Lolaygaon	39	Primary	Eco-tourism	Adequate
13	Lhakpa Sherpa	Lolaygaon	41	Illiterate	Agriculture	Limited
14	Tenzin Sherpa	Lolaygaon	26	Above Secondary	Household-only	Adequate
15	Namgyal Sherpa	Lolaygaon	35	Primary	Eco-tourism	Limited
16	Dechen Sherpa	Lolaygaon	30	Secondary	Eco-tourism	Adequate
17	Kunga Sherpa	Lolaygaon	27	Illiterate	Agriculture	Critical
18	Paldon Sherpa	Lolaygaon	44	Primary	Eco-tourism	Limited
19	Tshering Dolkar	Lolaygaon	36	Secondary	Household-only	Adequate
20	Chokyi Sherpa	Lolaygaon	29	Primary	Eco-tourism	Critical
21	Norbu Sherpa	Pedong	32	Illiterate	Handicrafts/ Trade	Limited
22	Pema Sherpa	Pedong	38	Primary	Agriculture	Adequate

23	Paldhen Sherpa	Pedong	43	Secondary	Handicrafts/ Trade	Limited
24	Dorje Sherpa	Pedong	31	Primary	Agriculture	Critical
25	Sangmu Sherpa	Pedong	27	Above Secondary	Handicrafts/ Trade	Adequate
26	Lobsang Sherpa	Pedong	40	Illiterate	Household-only	Critical
27	Yangzom Sherpa	Pedong	29	Primary	Handicrafts/ Trade	Limited
28	Tsering Sherpa	Pedong	36	Secondary	Agriculture	Adequate
29	Pema Dolkar	Pedong	34	Primary	Handicrafts/ Trade	Limited
30	Rinchen Sherpa	Pedong	45	Secondary	Handicrafts/ Trade	Adequate

The analysis of primary data collected from 30 Sherpa households across Samthar, Lolaygaon, and Pedong provides valuable insights in terms of the educational status of Sherpa women. The chart indicates that nearly half of the respondents (40%) had attained only primary education, while 30% reported completion of secondary schooling. A significant 23% of women were found to be illiterate, and only a small minority (7%) had studied beyond the secondary level. Local reports confirm these figures: many girls discontinue formal education early to assist their mothers in agriculture, animal husbandry, or domestic responsibilities. As Yangchen Sherpa, 29, a resident of Samthar, explained, ‘I wanted to study further, but my family needed me in the fields. After Class 10, I had to leave school to help with farming and looking after my younger siblings.’ Her words echo the broader trend where structural inequalities in access to education—inadequate schools, long travel distances, and financial constraints—compound cultural expectations, limiting women’s future opportunities. Together, the findings highlight the persistence of gendered educational barriers in remote Sherpa villages, perpetuating cycles of socio-economic dependency.

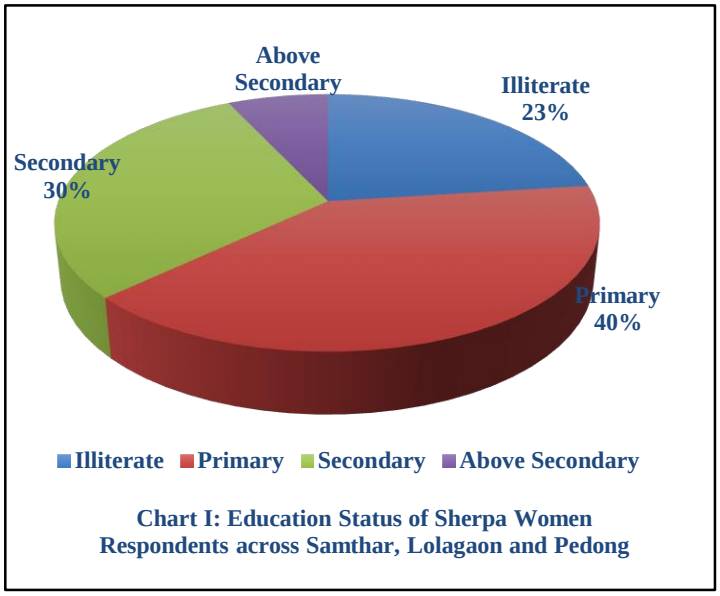

Chart I: Education Status of Sherpa Women Respondents across Samthar, Lolagaon and Pedong

Livelihood roles vary significantly across the three villages. In Samthar, the overwhelming majority of women are engaged in subsistence agriculture, echoing studies on the persistence of traditional farming practices in forest villages (Shrestha 1967: 58; Gurung 2004: 73). Lolaygaon, by contrast, demonstrates a shift toward eco-tourism, with women contributing to homestay management and guiding services. However, men typically control financial transactions with visitors, leaving women's work under-recognized — an outcome that reflects wider gendered inequalities in rural livelihoods (Sharma 2014: 50). In Pedong, women participate heavily in handicrafts and small-scale trade, yet their involvement is often limited to production rather than financial or market-related activities, confirming the observation that women's economic contributions are visible but undervalued (Agarwal 2010).

Patterns of decision-making authority further highlight entrenched inequalities. Only a minority of respondents described themselves as having high levels of influence in family or community matters. Most exercised authority only within household boundaries, while a significant proportion admitted to little or no say in decision-making. This aligns with broader critiques of patriarchal community structures, in which women's labour is central yet their voices are marginalized (de Beauvoir 1949: 128; Mohanty 2003: 65).

Access to healthcare emerged as a serious concern. Half of the respondents reported limited facilities, while nearly one-third described their situation as critical, particularly in relation to maternal and reproductive health. Such findings echo government reports which note that women in remote areas remain largely unaware of, or unable to access, public health schemes (Ministry of Women and Child Development 2015). Field narratives of delays in reaching clinics during emergencies illustrate the stark consequences of this infrastructural gap (Kohli 2012: 78).

A more positive finding relates to the continued vitality of the Parma system. Almost three-quarters of respondents participated regularly in Parma exchanges, primarily for agricultural labour and firewood collection. These results underscore the resilience of traditional cooperative systems, which function as a socio-economic buffer in resource-scarce environments (Caplan 1970: 94; Dore 1971: 124). In line with Sundar's

argument, Parma demonstrates how indigenous communities have maintained solidarity and mutual aid even under conditions of state-imposed restrictions (Sunder 1997). Women's central role in Parma not only reinforces community bonds but also reflects their agency in sustaining traditional practices (Baviskar 1995: 87).

When asked to identify their primary challenges, respondents most frequently cited education, healthcare, overwork, financial dependency, and exclusion from decision-making. These issues closely mirror the gendered burdens described in earlier scholarship on tribal and forest communities, which highlight how women carry a disproportionate load in both productive and reproductive labour (Agarwal 2010: 45; Mukherjee 2018: 142). Overwork, in particular, was emphasized by women who described the dual pressures of household responsibilities and external economic activities. Such findings affirm Amartya Sen's assertion that development cannot be measured solely by economic growth, but must account for the freedoms and opportunities available to marginalized groups (Sen 1999: 12).

Overall, the results indicate that Sherpa women are indispensable to the survival and continuity of their households and communities, yet their contributions remain systematically undervalued. The integration of these quantitative insights with secondary scholarship emphasizes that the resilience of these women is both a strength and a symptom of systemic marginalization — a conclusion echoed across existing literature on gender, livelihood, and tribal development in India.

The Parma system and the role of Sherpa women

> Wherever agriculture is progressive, farmers are forming ever closer cooperative links. The bonds of community solidarity should not be destroyed, but rather preserved and gradually rationalized into modern cooperative forms (Dore 1971: 431).

Forest villages are more than mere settlements; they embody the socio-ecological fabric of the region while fostering the strength of traditional community structures. In Kalimpong, many Indigenous cooperative associations reflects the workings of formal cooperatives with their focus on shared economic goals. Yet, at their core, these associations are deeply rooted in age-old values of mutual help and solidarity, where economic pursuits blend with social and even religious life. Among the Sherpa, this spirit comes alive in practices like Parma—a tradition that ensures no one is ever left behind. Such systems are not just about survival; they nurture unity, resilience, and collective effort in places where resources and employment opportunities are scarce.

The Parma system (also known as 'pareli', 'porima', and 'nogar') is a reciprocal exchange of labour, where households come together to assist each other during key agricultural activities like sowing and harvesting. There is no payment involved; instead, each household expects to receive a similar service in return. It is, in fact, a group of labour exchange cooperatives. Imagine this: if 20 neighbors show up at your paddy field, you're bound to return the favor by working on their fields too. In terms of Parma, you don't pay them with money—you owe them your labour. Each of those 20 people has earned your time, and you'll return the favor by working in their fields when they need you. The rules are simple but fair. If someone brings along a pair of oxen to plough your land, the animals themselves are counted as two extra hands. Add the

farmer guiding them, and suddenly you're indebted to three Parma. That means three full days of your work owed back. The system is flexible too: if someone gives you only a morning or evening of their time, you repay them in the same measure. No coins change hands—what counts is sweat, toil and commitment towards keeping the community in balance.

In Parma, trust is everything. If you call people to help in your field but refuse to return their labour—trying instead to push money into their hands—your fields will soon stand empty, because no one will come next time. In rural villages, it is always your neighbors who stand by you in every task, whether it's farming or any other work, and bringing in people from other villages is far too costly to even imagine.

However, for families who are truly helpless and unable to give back their labour, there exists another practice, a system known as Guhaar. The very word Guhaar means "help" in English, and that is exactly what the system embodies. Unlike Parma, where every hand lent must one day be repaid, Guhaar is freely given. Villagers step in to work for a family in need without expecting anything in return. Still, as a gesture of gratitude, the family often cooks a hearty meal—such as dal-bhat (rice and lentils) with meat curry, which is mostly home grown, like people raise chicken and goats, rice or maize (corn) dishes. Sometimes they also offer home brewed alcohol (raksi).

Common among both caste and ethnic farmers, Parma co-ops have been called 'labour gangs' (Caplan 1970: 108). They fit Erasmus's definition of reciprocal exchange labour, which 'usually results in rotation of services during phases of the farming cycle so that like tasks as well as equal amounts of time are exchanged. In Parma, farmers pool their resources, including tools and implements, and undertake cultivation with mutual help. A farmer secures the help of other farmers for sowing and transportation, and in return, provides similar assistance to other farmers' (Shrestha 1967: 71).

Table 1.1: Sherpa activities by date and month*

Name	Date	Activity
Chait-Baisakh Nogar	March-April-May	Prepare fields, sow millet and maize
Jeth Nogar	May-June	Thin and cultivate maize, transplant paddy
Bhadau Nagar	August-September	Weed paddy, sow kodo (*Eleusine indica*)
Mangsir Nogar	November-December	Harvest paddy

* Timings may vary according to the arrival of the summer monsoon and the stage of the harvest.

The most common way of exchanging labour in Samthar, Loleygaon, and Pedong is to help each other collect firewood from the forest, which is done free of charge. Such activities take place in the village because of geographical distances, which force the villagers to pay a high price for the LPG[9] connection. Villagers rarely use LPG; instead, they stockpile wood in front of their houses, primarily for cooking food for themselves and their cattle. Labour Day is celebrated as a festival, where both men and women participate. A rotation system is in place, with villagers taking turns to collect firewood

[9] Liquid Petroleum Gas

for one household at a time, working on each other's behalf. In return, the respective house provides them with tasty food and country liquor. The entire village gets involved; most of the male members, along with the women, collect firewood from the forest, while some women stay back to prepare food.

The resilience of Sherpa women in sustaining practices like Parma reflects a form of resistance to these colonial impositions. By organizing communal firewood collection and agricultural labour exchange, women not only ensured household survival but also preserved a cooperative framework that colonial legislation had sought to fragment (Sundar 1997). These practices demonstrate that Sherpa women were not passive recipients of state restrictions but rather active negotiators in terms of community solidarity, preserving their cultural and economic agency in the face of structural constraints. Women are the carriers of tradition, culture, and history, which we have heard about time and again. Sherpa Women also play a vital role in preserving their culture. After the male members return from the forest, women serve them with food and help them place the firewood. There is no monetary exchange. Villagers again wait for an invitation from another house, but it takes place within the village only.

In Kalimpong, the Parma system not only plays an important role in maintaining unity and resilience within the Sherpa communities but also serves as a source of inspiration for other social groups, fostering a spirit of cooperation and joy. Unlike cash transactions, it emphasizes mutual assistance, where an exchange is strictly reciprocal, and each household keeps a detailed account of what has been received and what is owed. Repayment, however, is often delayed, extending from the spring planting season to the fall harvest. Sanctions for not fulfilling exchange obligations include the continued dependence on others for similar assistance and the withholding of help from households that fail to reciprocate (Caplan 1970: 108). Such mechanisms help maintain the integrity of the system, ensuring that cooperation remains central to community life and economic survival. It also demonstrates how Sherpa women sustain community cooperation while simultaneously resisting structural constraints imposed upon them. Yet beyond Parma, their contributions extend into the wider economic and social fabric of the forest villages of Kalimpong, shaping their households and communities in decisive ways.

Socio-economic status of Sherpa women

The socio-economic status of Sherpa women in Kalimpong reflects their central role in both the household and community. They are key contributors to the economic sustainability of their families, often balancing multiple responsibilities, including agricultural work, household management, and caring for children and the elderly. While their labour is crucial, their work is frequently undervalued or goes unrecognized in formal economic measures.

Economic backbone

The roles and responsibilities of Sherpa women are pivotal not only to the approaches of sustainable development, eco–friendly production & consumption patterns, management of natural resources, but also to domestic and household management. They engage in a variety of income-generating activities that ensure both

immediate survival and long-term stability. Here's how they play a foundational role in the local economy:

Agricultural practices: Sherpa women actively cultivate maize, potatoes, millet, and leafy vegetables, staples that fill their family tables. Their work does not end with sowing and harvesting – they also dry, store, and process the crops with the same care as their mothers and grandmothers once did. Farming here is more than manual labour; it is a tradition carried forward. The women follow age-old organic practices: rotating crops so the soil can rest, composting with animal manure, and crafting natural pest control from locally available herbs – all in harmony with the land. These are not abstract knowledge but living traditions, handed down like heirlooms from one generation of women to the next. 'We do not need chemicals; the soil gives back when we treat it well. My mother taught me this, and the land has never failed us', explained Maya Sherpa, a 46-year-old farmer from Samthar.

Yet not all voices speak only of care and lasting tradition. From Pedong, 52-year-old Yangchen Sherpa reflected on the difficulties that accompany this work: "We grow what we can without chemicals, but it's harder. The men handle most of the market work, and sometimes our effort is unseen. Still, I believe the land listens to women – we speak to it with patience.

The time-tested methods align with broader principles of organic farming, which emphasized sustainability (Agarwal 2010; Shrestha 1967). Similar traditions can be found in other Himalayan agroecologies (like the 'barahnaja' system of Uttarakhand), where multiple crops are interwoven in a single field to maintain ecological balance (Gurung 2004). Beyond subsistence, Sherpa women also sell surplus produce in local markets – a critical source of income. In this way, farming becomes more than survival – it is both a heritage of care for the land and a lifeline for the family.

Animal husbandry: The involvement of Sherpa women in animal husbandry is integral to the sustainability of livestock farming in their communities. They rear yaks, cows, goats, sheep, and poultry, which provide dairy products, meat, and eggs for both consumption and sale. They participate in processing activities more than marketing. Their expertise encompasses various aspects of livestock care, including rearing, milking, breeding, and feeding schedules, all of which are crucial for maintaining healthy livestock populations that contribute to household income.

A total of 93 per cent of employment in dairy production is by women (World Bank 1991). Womenfolk, especially Sherpa women, contribute the most to total employment in dairy consumption. Studies indicate that they can easily care for three to four cross-bred cows while also attending to their families. Goats & sheep are preferred as they are easily manageable and require minimal external inputs. Backyard poultry has long been practised in underprivileged Sherpa communities, proving not only affordable & high-quality nutrition for families but also some income through the sale of eggs and birds. Poultry manure from these small units is rich in both major (N, P, K, Ca, Mg, S) and minor (Fe, Zn, Cu, Mn, Mo, B and Cl) nutrients, contributing significantly to soil fertility (Gupta 2014). Many rural women prefer indigenous multicoloured poultry birds because they produce brown-shelled eggs, which are in high demand. These poultry birds are easy to manage, environmentally sustainable, and can be fed on home-produced food grains and kitchen waste.

Small businesses: Many Sherpa women craft traditional items, such as woollen garments, woven baskets, and handmade tools, which are sold locally or to tourists. With Kalimpong being a hub for eco-tourism, Sherpa women contribute to homestay management, cultural performances, and guiding services, directly engaging with tourists and showcasing their culture. Women often manage small shops and roadside stalls, selling essentials or locally sourced products, further bolstering the community economy.

Financial strategies: These women often participate in informal savings groups or self-help groups, pooling resources for larger investments or emergencies. In terms of household finances, they allocate resources wisely, ensuring that every rupee stretches as far as possible for food, education, and healthcare. These groups not only provide financial security but also foster a sense of community and mutual support among women (Global Communities 2023). They enhance access to credit at lower interest rates, reducing dependence on expensive informal lenders. This access enables these women to invest in income-generating activities, such as small-scale agriculture or livestock rearing, thereby improving economic stability (IPA 2025). In the remote villages of Samthar, Lolaygaon, and Pedong, where access to formal financial services is limited, these informal practices play a crucial role in empowering womenfolk, promoting financial inclusion, and supporting community development (UN Women 2023).

Family management

Beyond their economic roles, Sherpa women's contributions to household and community life demonstrate extraordinary multitasking abilities. They seamlessly integrate caregiving with economic activities, showcasing resilience and resourcefulness.

Caregiving duties: Sherpa women are primary caregivers, nurturing their children while instilling cultural values and language. They often engage children in daily tasks, teaching life skills through hands-on participation. The elderly, revered in Sherpa culture, receive dedicated care from women, who provide emotional support, manage healthcare routines, and ensure they are integrated into the social fabric of the household.

Household management: In addition to economic tasks, they are responsible for cooking, cleaning, and maintaining the household. Traditional meals are often prepared using locally grown ingredients, reflecting their commitment to cultural preservation. In rural areas, women undertake the physically demanding task of collecting firewood for cooking and water for household needs, sometimes walking long distances to access these resources.

Balancing dual roles: These women exhibit exceptional time management, splitting their day between household tasks and external economic activities. For example, a woman might work in the fields during the day and return home to cook meals and help children with their studies. During peak agricultural seasons or community events, they adjust their routines to meet both familial and communal demands.

Emotional and social anchors: They often mediate conflicts within families and among neighbours, maintaining harmony in their communities. By participating in

community gatherings, festivals, and ceremonies, they foster social bonds and ensure the continuity of Sherpa traditions.

The contributions of Sherpa women form the very foundation of their community. Far from being passive participants, they are active architects of their families' well-being, as well as the cultural, social, and economic resilience of their villages. Through their labour, knowledge, and decision-making—ranging from household management to sustainable agriculture and animal husbandry—they sustain livelihoods and preserve traditions. Empowering these women through education, access to resources, and formal recognition of their contributions can create a ripple effect, enhancing the stability of the Sherpa community, strengthening social cohesion, and fostering sustainable development across these remote regions. Their leadership and expertise demonstrate that investing in women is not only a matter of equity but a strategic pathway to the holistic growth of the entire community.

Challenges and inequities

> **'**Proud parent's son you are, raised by horse and carpet. I have the life of a daughter only and must rest myself on water and air**'** (Freiburg 1995: 124).

This song, sung by a girl to a boy, points to the difference in caring for sons and daughters among the Sherpa. Although the women in Kalimpong are crucial to the economic stability and sustainability of their families and communities, they face a range of challenges rooted in gender inequality and the harsh environments they inhabit. Much of the inequity visible today in education, healthcare, and access to resources can be traced to the colonial construction of forest villages. As Sundar and Agarwal argue, by redefining forest communities as state labour colonies, the Indian Forest Act of 1878 institutionalized gendered burdens: women's traditional responsibilities were rendered precarious, while their access to resources was placed under constant surveillance. The marginalization that Sherpa women face today, therefore, reflects not only the influence of tribal patriarchy but also the enduring impact of colonial and postcolonial governance structures that reconfigured gender roles within forest societies (Sundar 1997; Agarwal 2010).

In many Sherpa communities, traditional gender roles prioritize education for boys over girls. Various factors indicate the high social status of Sherpa women, including the practice of bride price, autonomy in decisions regarding marriage, the ability to seek divorce or remarry and the absence of child marriage. Conversely, the indicators of the lower status of Sherpa women are reflected in their lower educational attainment, lower literacy rates, higher dropout rates in school, limited property rights, and being prohibited from participating in religious rituals and decision-making. Living in the forest villages of the Darjeeling hills, these women are not very educated as they are busy with their daily activities, which prevents them from attending school. There are higher cases of dropouts from school in this case of a girl child, as she has to look after her siblings & domestic chores. This has historically left many women without formal education, thereby limiting their access to opportunities outside of domestic and agricultural work. The lack of nearby schools and cultural expectations for girls to assist with household responsibilities further restrict their educational prospects. The male members work as daily wage labourers within the village; therefore, the entire

responsibility of managing the household lies exclusively with the women. In Samthar, Pedong & Lolaygaon, local reports have noted that, even though there were efforts to promote education in the area, the education of the girl child remained limited due to traditional gender roles.

Sherpa women also earn significantly less than men for comparable work. These women have always formed the bulk of the tea pickers across all tea plantations in Kalimpong, while men are employed in the factories. A major reason for this is to lower wages, as women are paid significantly less (Sharma 2014: 45- 46). Since these women are at the lowest rung as tea pickers, they are in no position to negotiate and claim better rights and work conditions for themselves. The women also said that their actions may have direct implications on the livelihood and rehabilitation of their families, so they are even afraid to take leave even when they are not well, as this could mean not having a house. Thus, their responsibility of providing compulsory (and almost bound) labour to the tea estate, while also looking after the household chores, pushes the women into extreme vulnerability.

Healthcare for Sherpa women is also constrained by their geographical isolation, cultural norms, and economic limitations. Living in remote Himalayan regions, they often lack access to adequate medical facilities, with long travel times and under-resourced clinics delaying critical care during emergencies. This is particularly detrimental to maternal and reproductive health, where home births without adequate assistance contribute to high maternal and infant mortality rates. In Samthar, local reports in 2015 described the struggle of a pregnant Sherpa woman who had to be airlifted to the nearest hospital in Kalimpong after complications during childbirth.

Beyond maternal health, women also face serious challenges related to menstrual hygiene. Low wages make sanitary pads unaffordable, forcing many to rely on unsafe alternatives, while the absence of adequate toilet facilities further exacerbates conditions of poor sanitation. Spending endless hours in the fields, while constantly exposed to pesticides, takes a heavy toll on health—often leading to reproductive health issues such as abnormal bleeding, anaemia, and hormonal disorders. Social stigma around menstruation adds another layer of difficulty, discouraging open discussion and timely care. In recent years, grassroots initiatives like the distribution of biodegradable pads and peer educators have started addressing these concerns, but systemic interventions in health infrastructure, protective workplace measures, and widespread awareness are still urgently needed.

Additionally, exposure to indoor smoke from traditional stoves, poor nutrition, and limited awareness about the prevention of diseases leaves these women vulnerable to respiratory illnesses, anaemia, and preventable diseases like tuberculosis. Mental health issues, driven by the strain of isolation, heavy workloads, and natural disasters, remain unaddressed due to cultural stigmas and a lack of support systems. Financial constraints further intensify these challenges, as the high cost of treatment and travel often compels them to delay or forgo the essential medical care they urgently need.

Conclusion

From the above discussion, it can be concluded that Sherpa women in the forest villages of Samthar, Lolaygaon & Pedong are the backbone of the community. Yet,

their crucial contributions coexist with deep-seated systemic marginalisation. The findings reveal a stark gap between the substantial roles of women in terms of household responsibilities, sustainable agriculture & preservation of culture, and their restricted access to education, healthcare, livelihood options, and decision-making authority. In terms of female literacy, girls in the community often drop out of school to fulfil domestic and agricultural responsibilities. The Healthcare System is also critically inadequate, with isolation contributing to high-risk situations, particularly for maternal health, while lack of awareness exacerbates challenges related to menstrual hygiene & occupational hazards from pesticide exposure. This inequity, the findings suggest, is not merely a reflection of contemporary social norms; it stems from the enduring impact of colonial–era 'forest villages', which transformed the structures of the traditional Sherpa community into a state-controlled labour system, disproportionately burdening women and curtailing their autonomy over forest resources.

At the same time, the Parma system functions as a vital socio-economic buffer against resource scarcity. Sherpa women are central to sustaining this tradition of reciprocal labour that ensures household survival & reinforces social cohesion. Yet, this very resilience highlights a critical issue: the labour of women, whether in the cooperative framework of Parma or in their daily toil, remains largely informal and unrecognized, perpetuating their economic visibility. This challenge is evident across all three villages studied. While in Samthar, the central role of women in the agrarian economy is hampered by limited access to markets and modern technologies, in Lolaygaon, the rise of eco-tourism has increased the workload of women in terms of hospitality, yet without a corresponding increase in financial control or decision-making power. In Pedong, despite its historical status as a trade hub, women remain largely excluded from commerce, sidelined in terms of business negotiations and cash handling.

Although recent years have seen a growing awareness of education and healthcare, several developmental initiatives have begun to take shape; yet, the pace of change remains slow. In the forest villages, Government programs like 'Beti Bachao Beti Padhao' and other state-level schemes exist but are limited in impact due to a persistent gap between policy design and grassroots implementation. To address these challenges and promote sustainable development, targeted, gender-sensitive interventions are essential. Policies should support cooperative systems like Parma, providing resources to strengthen these networks while ensuring women hold leadership positions, thereby validating and enhancing a culturally embedded system that fosters communal resilience. Development efforts must prioritize the specific needs of the Sherpa women, including building all-weather roads to improve access to markets and healthcare, establishing local clinics focused on maternal and reproductive health, and creating safe and accessible high schools to encourage continued education for girls. Vocational training should move beyond generic skills to focus on context-specific opportunities, such as formal training in hospitality and digital marketing for women in the Lolaygaon tourism sector, support for artisan cooperatives in Pedong to access wider markets, and training in sustainable agricultural technologies for women in Samthar. Financial literacy programs and support for women-led self-help groups are also crucial to enhancing economic autonomy.

In conclusion, uplifting the Sherpa community in Kalimpong is inseparable from the empowerment of its women. Their struggles are not isolated incidents but symptoms of a larger structural failure to recognize their value and protect their rights. Investing in terms of their education & healthcare is not merely a matter of social equity; it is the most strategic pathway to unlocking holistic, sustainable growth for the entire region, ensuring that their efforts and resilience are met with tangible opportunity, recognition, and equality.

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