



# Exploring Voices Of The Mountains: The Role And Position Of Kinnaura Tribal Women Of Himachal Pradesh

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
Received- 22/09/2023	This paper explores the multifaceted roles and position of Kinnaura women in Himachal Pradesh. It examines their key responsibilities in managing household tasks, their active participation in community and religious activities, and their substantial contributions to the local economy through horticulture, agriculture, and small businesses. Kinnaura women play a vital role in their households by overseeing domestic duties and are integral to the social and religious fabric of their community. Their involvement in agricultural and economic activities significantly impacts local livelihoods. This article discusses the role of women in economic, social, political and religious fields, their social status, economic activities, crimes against them and their position as well as status in their respective community. For the claims that has been made through this paper the researcher has also provided the secondary and primary sources of data as far as the findings of the study are concerned.
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Tribal women in India play a crucial role in their communities. According to the 2011 census, Scheduled Tribes (STs) make up about 8.6 per cent of India's total population, which was over 104 million people. Whereas in Himachal Pradesh, the population is 6,864,602, with 392,126 people (5.71%) belonging to Scheduled Tribes. In Kinnaur district, the tribal population accounted for 0.71 per cent of the total population of Himachal Pradesh (Government of India, Ministry of Tribal Affairs, 2014, p. 7). Tribal women play an active role in livelihood activities and contribute to strengthening the economic condition of their families. However, there is scant research on the status and role of these women. Their status is affected by traditional lineage and family structure (Allen, 2012). Challenges such as lack of education, lack of health facilities, lack of property rights, and limited employment opportunities make their lives difficult (Burman, 2012). Even though the Indian Constitution and international laws make provisions to protect their rights, they have to struggle for their basic needs (Hasan & Khan, 2020, p. 9).

Burman (2012) mentioned that the position of tribal women is determined by the responsibilities they perform and the lineage system of the family. The lineage system plays an important role in Indian tribal societies, which determines the social status of individuals and their role in the family. The system of lineage is mainly of two types: matrilineal and patrilineal. In the matrilineal system, lineage is traced through the mother's line, making women's social status important like Khasi tribal people of Meghalaya where women play an important role in carrying forward the family's property and name (Ellena & Nongkynrih, 2017, pp. 1-2). On the other hand in patrilineal system Gangte (2016) noted that the lineage is traced through the father's line, and this system is followed in most Indian tribes like Kuki and Mizo tribe in northeast India (Gangte, 2016, p. 1). In this, the social status of men is more influential, and the role of women may be limited to traditional responsibilities.

In patrilineal societies, women's status is often not considered important to the family's property and name (Nukshirenla & Dhanaraju, 2021, p. 1). Beside this, in matrilineal societies, women's status may be more equal and influential. However, it is not necessary that the status of women is well established only in the matriarchal

family system but the status of women can be good even in a patriarchal society. For example, The Kinnaura tribal society in Himachal Pradesh follows a patriarchal system, where property is passed from father to son. However, women in Kinnaur play significant roles in their community. In Kinnaur, women, referred to as 'Gyone' are responsible for most household, and social tasks. They also play an important role in family decisions. Gautam and Kumar (2019) found that Kinnaura women play key roles in decisions such as buying groceries, managing money, and making choices about family planning, education, and marriage. This shows their important role in both family and community life (Gautam & Kumar, 2019, p. 66).

Beside this Kinnaur women are not limited to household chores but are also actively involved in activities such as farming, animal husbandry, handicrafts, and traditional textile manufacturing, which promote their economic self-reliance. Apart from this, they also participate in religious and cultural festivities such as worship of deities and celebration of festivals. They also participate in panchayats and community (Dev Sabha) meetings to discuss various social issues. Although Kinnaur women are progressing in education and social awareness, they face challenges such as lack of property rights and modern medical facilities. Crimes against women in tribal areas are also becoming a matter of concern due to the increasing influence of modernity. Given these circumstances, special efforts are required to improve the rights and status of Kinnaur women. This paper explores the domestic, social, religious and economic contributions and roles of Kinnaur women. It also outlines their social status and the challenges they face in their daily lives in Kinnaura tribal society.

### Methodology

This study investigates the roles and position of Kinnaura tribal women in the socio-economic, political and religious affairs of Kinnaur district of Himachal Pradesh. Using both qualitative and quantitative methods (primary and secondary data), it employs a questionnaire alongside interviews, case studies, focused group discussions and participatory observations to explore the complex dynamics at play. This approach offers a deeper understanding of the cultural and social factors influencing women's positions in these institutions.

The samples are as follows:



Purposive sampling is used to collect the desired information from the Final Survey Units (FSU).

- a) For analysis of quantitative data, arithmetic mean and Percentage of various indicators are used.
- b) Qualitative data is analyzed by the content analysis.

### Demographic Distribution of Women in Kinnaur

Kinnaur was declared a Scheduled Tribe area by the order of Government of India in 1957. It covers an area of 6,401 square kilometers, featuring hilly terrain and small deep valleys. Kinnaur shares its northern border with the Lahaul-Spiti district, the northwest with Kullu district, the southwest with Shimla district, the south with the state of Uttarakhand, and the east with China. Administratively, Kinnaur is divided into five tehsils: Nichar, Kalpa, Pooh, Sangla, and Moorang, along with two sub-tehsils, Hangrang and Tapri. The district headquarters is located in Reckong-Peo.

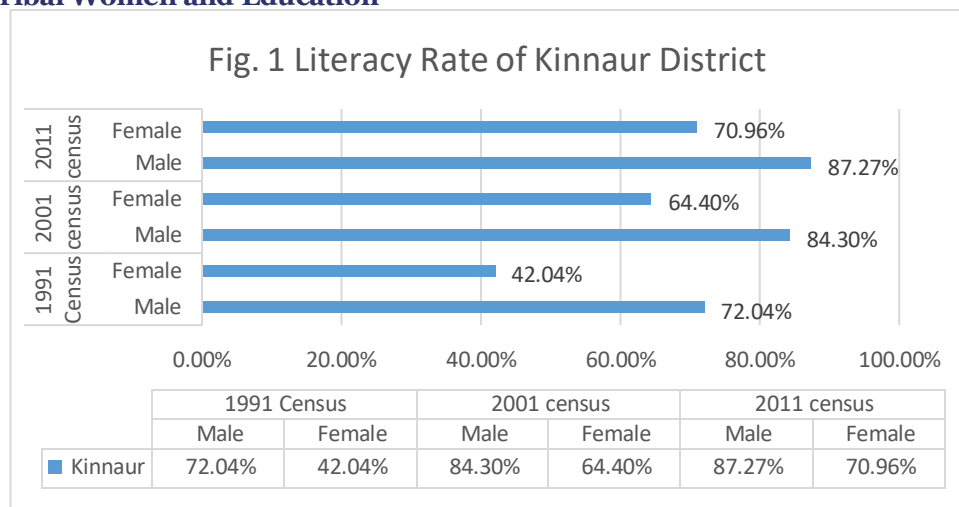
Demographic Profile of Kinnaur District		Total
Total population		84,121
Male		46249
Female		37872
Sex Ratio		819
Male Literacy Rate		87.27
Female Literacy Rate		70.96
Main workers: Agriculture/ Horticulture / Household industry		56,273
Female Workers		22,410
Development Block: Kalpa/ Nichar/Pooh		3
Panchayat		73

**Source:** District Census Handbook Kinnaur Himachal Pradesh 2011

As per the data of 2011 Census, Kinnaur has 660 villages, out of which only 234 are inhabited. The total population of Kinnaur is 84,121, with 46,249 males and 37,832 females. There are 48,746 people belonging to Scheduled Tribes, making up 57.95 per cent of the total population, while 14,750 belong to Scheduled Castes, accounting for 17.53 per cent of the population. The population density is low, at 13 inhabitants per square kilometer. From 2001 to 2011, the population growth rate was 7.61 per cent. The sex ratio in Kinnaur is 819 females per 1,000 males, which is the lowest in Himachal Pradesh. From 1901 to 1971, Kinnaur had the highest sex ratio in Himachal Pradesh. In 1951, the sex ratio in Kinnaur was recorded at 1070, which was the highest

ever in Himachal. However, it has declined continuously from 1971 to 2011. After 1971, Kinnaur's sex ratio has declined by 92 points. Interestingly, the lower sex ratio in Kinnaur is not due to a preference for male children or female foeticide. Instead, it is linked to the high female literacy rate in the region. During fieldwork in Kinnaur, it was observed that many people believe the high literacy rate is one reason for the low sex ratio. They are of the opinion that women after completing their education, often move out of the region for better opportunities or settle elsewhere after marriage, reducing the number of women in the area, which affects the sex ratio. However there are no visible linkages in terms of data available. The literacy rate in Kinnaur is 87.27 per cent with female literacy at 70.96 per cent the highest among tribal women in Himachal Pradesh. Fig no. 1 shows that how after 1911, the literacy rate among women in Kinnaur gradually increased.

### Kinnaura Tribal Women and Education



**Source:** Census of India, 1991, 2001 & 2011

Figure no. 1 shows that the literacy rates among Kinnaura women have shown significant improvement over the years. In 1991, the literacy rate for women was 42.4 percent, while for men it was 72.04 percent. By 2001, there was noticeable progress with the literacy rate for women increasing to 64.4 percent, and for men, it rose to 84.3 percent. In 2011, the trend continued with a further increase in literacy rates. Women's literacy rose to 70.96 percent, and men's literacy increased to 87.27 percent. This indicates a positive trend towards narrowing the gender gap in literacy, with both men and women experiencing improvements, although overall men have higher literacy rate. These advancements reflect the combined efforts of educational initiatives and societal changes, highlighting the importance of continued investment in education by people of Kinnaura society. There are several reasons contributing to the increase in literacy rate in Kinnaur. One major factor is employment in the public sector, with many individuals serving in high- ranking positions such as IAS (Indian Administrative Service) and HAS (Himachal Pradesh Administrative Service), Police and Army Officers. Additionally, active participation in tribal development plans and state initiatives also plays a significant role in providing education and employment opportunities to people. Like opening of Central School and boarding educational institutions in tribal areas by National government's initiatives alongside it tribal people become shoulder bearer of modern development and progress in Himachal Pradesh along with mainstream society. Education is crucial for personal and societal development. It provides knowledge, skills, and critical thinking abilities.

### Kinnaura Women and Health

Traditionally, when people in Kinnaur fell ill, they would visit local *Vaidas* (traditional healers) who provided medicines made from locally available medicinal plants and herbs. Even today, there are some local *Vaidas* in Kinnaur who treat diseases. However, nowadays, both men and women prefer to go to hospitals when they are sick. According to the data from the Economic and Statistical Department of Himachal Pradesh government for 2020-21, there are currently 03 Regional Hospitals (RH), 03 Community Health Centers (CHC) and 23 Primary Health Centers (PHCs) in Kinnaur. Number of people who frequently use to visited the hospital based on the data provided below in year 2020- 21, more women than men got treatment in allopathic and 2021-22 Ayurvedic medical institutions in district Kinnaur of Himachal Pradesh. A total of 190,640 patients were treated in allopathic medicine, including 77,331 men, 88,394 women and 24,915 children. Of these, 8,061 patients were admitted (indoor) and 182,579 patients were treated outdoor without admitting them as a patient in hospital. A total of 211,245 patients were treated by giving Ayurvedic medicine, including 83,103 men, 95,586 women and 32,556 children. Of these, 781 patients were admitted (hospitalized) and 210,464 were treated outdoor. The number of women in both medical systems was higher than men, which clearly shows that women are using health services more. Additionally, this data suggest the health facilities awareness level of Kinnaura women. They do not rely on local healers but trust modern healthcare centers and participate more frequently

than men. Their situation is not that of a primitive tribe; they are well-connected to the mainstream. It also reflects people's dependency on hospitals and the need for more healthcare facilities.

Additionally, as per the National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5) data for India (2019-20), 83 per cent of births in the past five years in Kinnaur took place in medical institutions, a shift from the traditional practice of home births<sup>1</sup>. Furthermore, 92 per cent of children aged 12 to 23 months received vaccinations. The infant mortality rate in the tribal areas of Himachal Pradesh, including Kinnaur, is 21 per 1,000 live births, indicating ongoing challenges. In cases of complicated deliveries or severe illnesses in children, there is often a lack of adequate health facilities within Kinnaur, requiring people to travel to hospitals in Rampur or Shimla, which needs improvement. In their diet, Kinnauri women commonly use local grains like *Ogla*, *Fafra*, *Koda*, wheat, and barley flour. They also consume dry fruits such as *Chuli* (apricot), *Bemi* (wild apricot), *Khumani* (apricot), *Chilgoza* (pine nuts), and almonds. Overall, while Kinnaur has seen improvements in healthcare access, especially with more institutional births and high vaccination rates, challenges like infant mortality and limited local healthcare facilities for serious cases still need attention. The continued use of traditional medicines alongside modern healthcare, as well as the focus on a diet rich in local foods, shows a blend of traditional practices with modern developments.

### **Kinnaura Women Workforce Participation 2001 & 2011**

According to data from the Department of Economics and Statistics of Himachal Pradesh, in 2001, 54.67 percent of women in Kinnaur were working. By 2011, this number had increased to 59 percent, which is the highest in the state of Himachal Pradesh. Kinnaura women are involved in many activities, such as farming, gardening, and raising animals, along with managing household duties and other jobs. Their active participation in these areas is crucial for the local economy, showing how important they are to both traditional and economic roles.

### **Kinnaura tribal women and Crime**

Kinnaur, traditionally known for its low crime rates in Himachal Pradesh, has seen a marked increase in reported cases of crimes against women in recent years. As per the data of Director General of Police, Himachal Pradesh, in Kinnaur 2010, the district recorded 15 cases, which remained stable at 15 in 2011 and slightly decreased to 13 in 2012. However, by 2013, the number had risen to 23 cases. This upward trend continued into the period between August 1, 2020, and March 31, 2022. As reported in crime in the Tribune article dated April 25, 2022, between August 1, 2020, and March 31, 2022, Kinnaur recorded 67 cases of crimes against women, including molestation, rape, kidnapping, cruelty, and eve-teasing (Lohumi, 2022). This number is lower compared to districts such as Kangra (776 cases) and Shimla (396 cases). But the presence of these cases highlights ongoing safety concerns for women in Kinnaur. Even in areas with fewer cases, there is a need for continued focus on improving women's safety and support.

### **Kinnaura Women: Household Duties & Position**

In the Khasi and Garo tribes of India, matrilineal system is practiced, where children inherit their mother's last name and property is passed down to daughters. Women in these communities play a key role in decision-making and managing family wealth (Roy, 2018, p. 279). In contrast, the Kinnaur people of Himachal Pradesh follow a patrilineal system, where property and inheritance pass from father to son. However, women in Kinnaur play significant roles within the household. The head of the household women, known as '*Gohni* or *Goyne*,' who's selected through a ceremonial process involving the bride's family and a mediator (*Majomi*). This role is usually given to the eldest daughter-in-law, but if she is busy with other duties, another daughter-in-law may take on this responsibility. During the ceremony, the mother-in-law hands over the keys to the household's *Kuthar/Urch*<sup>2</sup> i.e. granary to the new '*Gohni* or *Goyne*,' signifying the transfer of responsibilities for managing the home and fields. The '*Gohni* or *Goyne*' is crucial for family decision-making, managing household affairs, overseeing agricultural and horticultural activities, and participating in social and religious events. This role also involves preserving and passing down traditional customs. The '*Gohni* or *Goyne*' has a special place in the kitchen called '*Gohnni Thai*' or '*Goyne Posrang*,' which underscores her important role in the household. Additionally, head of household women are also key in managing a range of domestic tasks. They handle cooking, cleaning, and other household chores. They also take care of children and elderly family

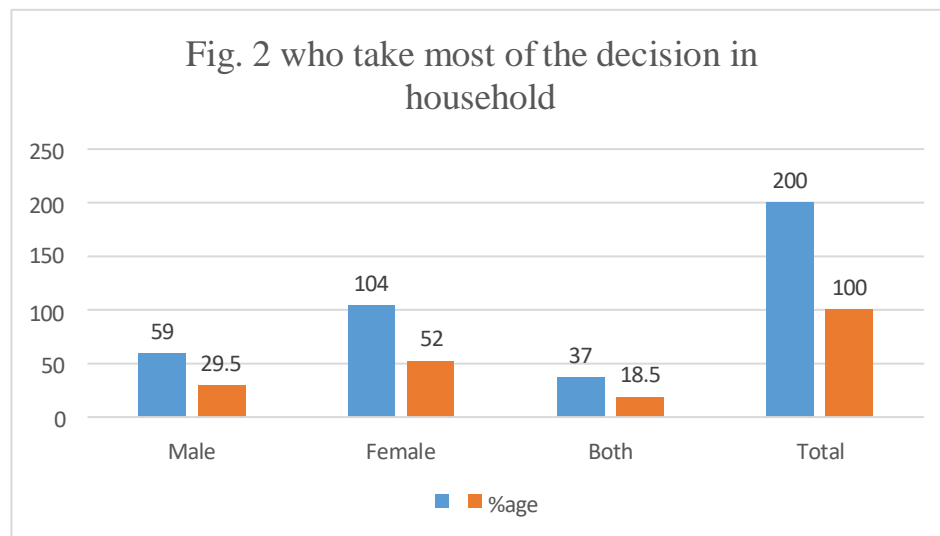
<sup>1</sup> Traditionally, in Kinnaur, childbirth took place on the ground floor of the house called *Khur* (Cow shed) because most people had only one house to live in. And after the birth of the child, all family and his clan is considered polluted (*Jutho*) for 8 to 13 days and during this time the family does not visit the temple of the deity.

<sup>2</sup> Traditionally, in Kinnaur, the granary, known as '*Kuthar*,' was made of wood and built separately from the main house. It was used to store all the grains, along with valuable items like jewelry and money. The '*Gohni/Goyne*' (head woman of the house) was the custodian of this granary. Only she could take items out of it. The *Kuthar* was placed next to the house to keep valuable items and grains safe, especially in case of a fire. This was an important responsibility, and only the *Goyne* was in charge of it, nothing was taken out of the *kuthar* without her permission.



members. Fetching fuel, and fodder from long distances is another important duty, often requiring them to travel over difficult terrain, which can be both physically demanding and risky. Moreover, they handle crop seeds, decide which crops to plant, and store seeds like *Olga* and *Fafra* for future use. They maintain apple orchards, managing tasks such as mulching, fertilizing, and collaborating with men for pesticide application. Women are also involved in labor management, negotiating wages, and coordinating agricultural work like apple plucking and harvest packing.

During the heavy snowfall of December, January, and February, access to fresh vegetables is limited. To prepare for winter, Kinnauri women dry green leafy vegetables such as *Fafra*, *Olga*, mustard greens, cabbage, and tomatoes during the summer. These dried vegetables are used throughout the winter when fresh produce is not available. The process involves harvesting, cleaning, cutting, drying, and storing vegetables in a way that protects them from moisture and pests. Additionally, meat from sheep and goats is dried during winter festivals by baking, and then stored for consumption. These preservation techniques are passed down through generations, ensuring that traditional practices continue and that there is no shortage of food during the winter months. Managing these tasks is a key responsibility of the household's female head. Fig no 2. Shows that who take mostly household decision in Kinnaur.



**Source:** Data collected from Field Study and Tabulated by Resercher

Figure no. 2 above shows that decisions regarding household matters in Kinnaur majority of the women i.e. 52 per cent to be decision independently while, 29.5 per cent are men and in 18.5 per cent respondent that decision are taken jointly. This clearly shows that women in Kinnaur play an important role in household decisions. However, it is also seen that the influence of men is still present. In Kinnaur, women are active in their family decisions, which shows their strong position.

### Role of Women in Social Matters in Kinnaur

Each village in Kinnaur has traditional social management systems for community or household events, including marriages, tonsure ceremonies, birthday parties, funerals, and religious gatherings. These systems are known by different names in various villages, such as *Kamiya*, *Kondo*, *Swari*, and *Lenlama*. For example, in the village of Sapni, households are divided into smaller units called *Shonang*, *Charpa*, and *Desia*. When a household in the *Shonang* unit has an event like a wedding, all men and women from that unit come together to handle everything from event management to cooking and catering on the day of the function. Women play a crucial role in these social systems, often taking on more responsibility than men. They prepare items needed for rituals, facilitate the arrival of guests, cook meals, and serve food. Women also decide on the gifts to be given, such as gold, silver, or money, when attending functions of relatives or friends. Before any event, Kinnauri women manage most of the preparations. They work together to gather firewood from the forest, make flower garlands and hats, and arrange caps for guests. Women collaborate with men to make a list of items required for the event. They are also responsible for preparing fruit wine used in religious ceremonies and weddings. These activities show that women in Kinnaur handle almost all the responsibilities associated with community functions, ensuring that everything runs smoothly.

### **Kinnaura women and Agriculture/Horticulture**

In agriculture, Kinnaura women work together and help each other in a practice known as '*kwal*' i.e. mutual assistance. They collectively do tasks such as ploughing fields with the help of spade and digging instruments, sowing and weeding crops, harvesting grain, and cutting and carrying grass. Any other fieldwork is also done together. Through these activities, they make a significant contribution to the local economy. The main crops grown in Kinnaur include Rajma (kidney beans), Peas, Potatoes, *Olga* (*Fagopyrum esculentum*) and *Fafra* (*Fagopyrum tataricum*). In addition, women also irrigate apple trees and crops even at night using small canals (locally called '*Kuhl*'). The production of all these crops depends on their hard work. Kinnaura women work alongside men in horticulture, doing almost every task. They dig pits for planting apple trees on slopes, prepare earthworm compost, and often handle manure and mulching for the trees. They also work with men to spray pesticides, knowing when and what type to use. Women collect cut branches, assist with apple harvesting, and carry apples to collection points. They manage labor for harvesting and packing, handle negotiations for labor rates, and arrange food and drink for workers. In this way, Kinnaura women contribute significantly to getting apples to the market, playing an important role in the process. According to the Himachal Pradesh government's horticulture department report for 2021-22, Kinnaur produced 48,678 tons of apples, 381 tons of apricots, 20 tons of pears, 66 tons of walnuts, and 55 tons of grapes. Kinnaura women handle the collection, sorting, and storage of local fruits such as *Chuli*, *Bemi*, Plums, Almonds, *Chilgoza* and Walnuts. In this way, Kinnaura women contribute significantly to bringing produce in the market and supporting the local economy.

### **Spoiled Fruits and the Processing Skills of Kinnaura Women**

In Kinnaur local fruits & grains wine is prepared by local distilling or brewing method and even in this process women contribute significantly. They employ traditional brewing methods and techniques passed down through generations to create unique blends of wine. This indigenous winemaking tradition not only reflects their cultural practices but also adds to the vibrant culinary heritage of Kinnaur. These women possess extensive knowledge of food and fruit processing of locally produced crops, food grains and cereal in which the traditional distilling system occupy main place. In addition to their involvement in contemporary distilling and brewing practices. Passed down through generations, this knowledge encompasses various aspects of homemade local grain and fruit wine productions, such as fermentation techniques, distillation processes, and blending of ingredients. They understand the local terrain and climate, essential for sourcing ingredients like fruits and herbs used in brewing alcohol. Moreover, Kinnaura women are familiar with the intricate network of distribution channels and the nuances of the market, allowing them to navigate the supply of local wine for the worship, community feasts and fair and festivals auspicious occasion. This deep understanding of the traditional distilling system reflects their resilience and resourcefulness in sustaining their livelihoods within challenging socio- economic contexts. In Kinnaur, government- issued licenses allow households to produce local fruit- based alcohol (In Kinnauri dialect local wine is called *Soor/Rak/Fasur*), with each permitted to store up to around 24 bottles. This initiative supports traditional practices and provides economic opportunities, particularly for Kinnaura women involved in distilling.

In addition, collection of precious medicinal herbs, morel mushrooms, worshipping materials, fiddle fern, fruits and vegetables are all women's work, they collect them from nearby forests and common lands. Additionally, most of the women collect chilgoza (which is the famous dry fruit worldwide) from the chirpine forests. In the upper, middle and lower regions of Kinnaur, a predominant number of women are intricately involved in the meticulous collection of chilgoza from the forest.

### **Local Chuli Tel (apricot oil) and Kinnaura women**

In Kinnaur, the oil extracted from traditional '*Chuli*' i.e. apricot has been given a GI tag in 2019 by the Indian government (The Tribune, 2019). Traditionally, Kinnaura women were solely responsible for producing this oil using local indigenous methods. They collected and processed the oil by hand, a practice that was integral to their way of life. Today, the extraction of this oil has shifted to machines in Rampur and Reckong-Peo. Despite this change, Kinnaura women continue to play a crucial role in the process. They handle everything from collecting the raw material to manufacturing the final product. This ongoing involvement represents an important contribution to the local economy and highlights the enduring role of Kinnaura women in preserving traditional practices while adapting to modern methods.

### **Oil manufacturing**

Before the advent of machine's apricot oil was used to be refined in every household in the mortar with the help of flail. From harvesting of apricot nuts to the final stage of oil manufacturing it was performed by laborious womenfolk of the region. Drying of fruit after harvesting outer shell of apricot was cracked with the help of hammer and stone, after that nuts were separated from outer shell carefully. Those apricot nuts were then dried and for extracting oil finally the nuts were poured into a stone mortar. With the help of a *Yamdaal* (Local Tea Tree bamboo) or walnut bamboo stick, nut stocks were grinded, after grinding the nut pastes were carefully refined by the collective efforts of womenfolk. The residue is again dried in sunbathes for extraction left over

oil and whole process is repeated again. However, that last left-over paste is used in feed for the milching cow and livestock flocks as a source of additional diet.

### **Kinnaura women and Animal Husbandry**

The main traditional occupation in Kinnaur is animal husbandry, which includes raising sheep, goats, cows, yaks, horses, and donkeys. Historically, Kinnauris traded wool from sheep through the silk route with China, exchanging it for salt and other goods. According to the Himachal Pradesh government's Economic and Statistical Department data for 2021-22, Kinnaur has 20,310 cows, 2,176 bulls, 84,218 sheep, and 39,765 goats. Managing livestock, including caring for cows and goats, arranging feed, and grazing, is largely the responsibility of Kinnauri women. They participate daily in grazing livestock with their male family members. In summer, goats graze in the fields, while in winter, they are kept in lower-altitude areas with less snow. Women also collect and store fodder for the winter, drying grass and other feed to use when snow covers the ground. This is an important contribution that Kinnauri women make to their households.

### **Role in textile industry**

In textile industry wool work as a raw material which falls in the custody of womenfolk in entire Kinnaur from spinning, thread wheeling, and blanket weaving all work they have to perform generally this work is performed in snowy winter and heavy snowfall days. This work is performed collectively by womenfolk rotationally one day in one household next day in another household. So, by this rotation they complete this spinning and wheeling work of their women group. In this entire process there are different indigenous tool through which different works are perform;

**Shorch**- Spinning instrument which is easily available in local market of Kinnaur which is in pair, by which wool is softened firstly after that wool become easy to spin. Earlier this refining work was performed in every household by the womenfolk but now there is establishment of wool refinery machine in Reckong-Peo and Rampur where entire district's wool is refined. After sheering the wool is carefully washed by detergent powder lateral that is dried on terrace and courtyards for its further processing.

**Takuli**- spinning work is completed with the help of it which is made of walnut wood and blue pine compressed woods because it requires light weight instruments.

### **Role in Household's Handloom Mill**

Mostly Kinnaura women are indulged in handloom work. Traditionally, this work was done by lower-caste (Present Koli) people of Kinnaur, and it was considered a menial occupation. According to the Punjab state Gazetteer: Shimla Hill States 1911, Kinnaur Gazetteer 1971, and 1961 census of India, handloom related work was listed as a primary occupation for Koli people. This work was looked down upon by the upper caste Khosia people in Kinnaur and due to the Koli people doing this work, they were given the tag of '*Cham-Ang*'. In the upper-caste Kinnauri language, this term translates to '*cham*' i.e. 'wool' and '*ang*' i.e. 'person.' i.e. *Chamang* or the people doing wool related work. They were considered lower in status. However, some non-Kinnaura authors, scholars, Census 1961 Himachal Pradesh Kinnaur District Handbook and Kinnaur gazetteer 1971 have connected the '*chamang*' with '*chamda*' and the Koli people with the work of '*Chamda*' i.e. 'leather,' work which is not in conformity with most of low caste people occupation and there is a need for more investigation on how the traditional weavers got to connected with leather work. One of the 57-year-old respondents<sup>3</sup> from Scheduled Caste himself have told in his own words what kind of work his family have had performed: - "I and my family have been doing the work of weaving *Dohri* (Kinnari designed woolen Saree), *Chhalni* (designed Kinnauri shawl), *Pori* (woolen clothes for trouser, coat and sleeveless jacket), and *Gachi* (waist tying woolen thick threads), since long time and have learned this art from our ancestors, this has been over traditional occupation along with this, our family also use to do farming and animal husbandry and are still doing it. I too have learned weaving work from my parents. Earlier in our village, only scheduled caste (*Koli*) people were doing the work of weaving, but now people of all castes, including upper caste including '*Khosia*' people have also started doing weaving work." (Source Field Study)

However, the situation changed when Kinnaur's traditional *Shawls*, *Dohru* (local Sari) and other handwoven items gained recognition across India and began providing economic benefits. As a result, women from all castes, including upper castes i.e. Khosia women have started participating in handloom work. This shift shows how people's occupations have changed over time. Today, Kinnaur's shawls have been honored with a GI tag in 2010 by the Government of India (The Indian Express, 2010). Kinnaura women plays a crucial role in every step of the process, from weaving and cutting to marketing their products. They sell their Shawls at fairs like Rampur Lavi and Kinnaur Reckong Peo Lavi. Additionally, Kinnaura women knit sweaters, caps, socks, gloves, and pajamas for children, and also do sewing work such as stitching caps and bascotes. Their contributions significantly impact the local economy making them self-reliant.

<sup>3</sup> All interviews were recorded in Hindi and the local dialect during the field survey. Later, the researcher translated them into English.

### Role of Kinnaura Women in Religious Matters

In mainstream Indian society and many tribal regions of India, women actively participate in religious fairs and festivals, singing, dancing and food preparation for worship but men usually dominate the worship of deities' tribal communities. However, the role of women in worshipping the main deities is very limited due to male dominance for example, the Santhal tribe, mainly found in Jharkhand and West Bengal, considers Marang Buru as their main deity. Women have less influential roles in their religious ceremonies and community. Due to fear of witchcraft, women are excluded from the worship and sacrifices to Jaher deities during the Sohrai and Magh festivals, which shows gender bias (Kochar, 1966, P. 243). However, distinct tribe from the Santhal tribe, the Kinnaura tribal women play a significant role in religious activities, even though they do not hold primary religious positions like *Grokch* (oracle), *Mohtmim* (managers), *Kamdar* (assistants), or Pujari (priests). Women actively participate in the worship of deities on various occasions. They have the right to perform rituals involving the deity's palanquin or emblem. While the main priest conducts the primary worship, women can still participate in these rituals. Women regularly take part in temple activities during festivals, performing various rituals for the deities. If a deity's palanquin is brought to a household, only the women of that house are permitted to worship it. This highlights the significant role women play in religious practices in Kinnaur.

Religiously, Kinnaur is divided mainly into two faiths: Hinduism and Buddhism. As per the data of census 2011, in Kinnaur about 76.95 per cent of the population follows Hinduism, around 21.50 per cent follow Buddhism, and the remaining 1.55 per cent follow other religions. In all three administrative blocks of Kinnaur- Kalpa, Pooh, and Nichar- women actively participate in religious matters and deity worship. In the Kalpa block, most people follow Hinduism, but there is also a significant Buddhist influence. Women consult both deities and lamas during times of illness or for auspicious events, reflecting a blend of both religions. This mix of Hinduism and Buddhism showcases religious freedom in the region. *Devi Chandika* is a prominent *Devi* (Goddess) worshipped here and people also worship Piri Nag *Devta* in Sapni village. Both of these deities have their own chariots used in religious processions.

In the Pooh block, nearly everyone follows Buddhism. People in this area have the freedom to become lamas (monks) or *Zomos* (nuns). Despite being a primarily Buddhist region, most villages have temples and chariots for Hindu deities as well. Women and *Zomos* participate in the worship of these deities, showing the unique religious tolerance of the area. Women consult both deities and lamas during times of joy or sorrow. The *Dabla Shu* (*Devta*) deity, considered a significant Buddhist *Devta* figure, is particularly revered in this region and has its own chariot. Lastly, in the Nichar block, most of the people follow Hinduism, and women consult deities during both happy and challenging times. Maheshwar *Devta*, who has a chariot, is the most revered deity here. However, during events like death or illness, people also invite Buddhist lamas and *Zomos* to conduct rituals at home. This practice shows the blend of religious practices and the flexibility of belief systems in Kinnaur. Overall, women in Kinnaur play a vital role in both community and religious matters. They manage community functions, from preparation to execution, and actively participate in religious ceremonies, demonstrating their importance in Kinnauri society. Whether it is preparing for social events, engaging in religious rituals, or consulting spiritual leaders during important life events, Kinnauri women contribute significantly to the cultural and spiritual life of their community.

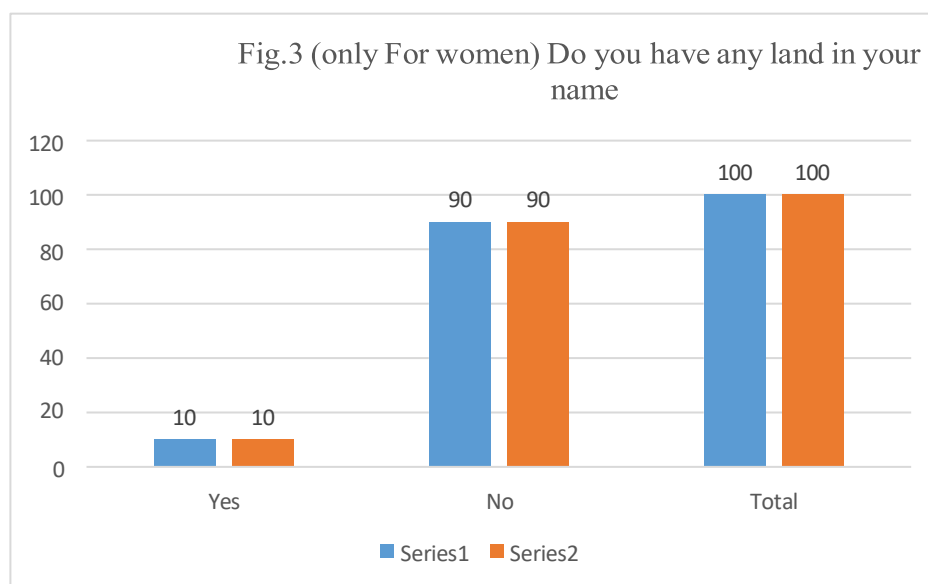
### Grassroots Politics and Kinnaura Women

According to Chauhan, Gosh and Sharma (2009), in Himachal Pradesh while women's voting percentage in state assemblies are relatively high but their representation in elected positions remains relatively low (Chauhan, Ghosh, & Sharma, 2009, pp. 409- 415). In Kinnaur, Himachal Pradesh, women are actively involved in grassroots politics. Although women have high rate of political participation in terms of using right to vote in state assemblies, their representation in elected positions, such as Parliament and the State Assembly, remains very low. No Kinnaura woman has yet been elected to these higher offices of State Assembly or Parliament which is a matter of concern. However, women in Kinnaur are making significant strides at the local governance level. As per the data of Himachal Pradesh State Election Commission's report, from the term of 2021 to 2025, Kinnaura women's participation in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) is substantial. In Gram Panchayats, which have a total of 389 seats (including Pradhan, up-Pradhan and other Members), Out of these, 233 seats were reserved for women. As per the election results, a total of 250 women were elected, showing strong involvement beyond just the reserved quotas. For the Pradhan positions, there are 73 seats, 37 of which are reserved for women, and 38 women have been elected to these roles (Planning Department of Himachal Pradesh Government, n.d., pp. 35-36). Additionally, at the Panchayat Samiti (council) and Zila Parishad (District council) levels, all reserved seats for women are filled by elected women. This data indicates significant progress in gender inclusivity and empowerment at the local level in Kinnaur, though challenges remain in achieving similar representation in higher legislative bodies.



### Kinnaura tribal women: Challenges and issues

However, even after contribution in all spheres of life as well as being the Inseparable part in the process of progress women face significant challenges in Kinnaur regarding property rights. The traditional law, '*Wajib-ul-Arz*,' or '*Rivaaj-e-Aam*,' excludes women from inheriting ancestral property. This longstanding custom denies wives and daughters their rightful share, reflecting deep-rooted gender inequality where it comes to inheritance. Despite legal provisions aimed at ensuring equal rights, these traditional practices persist, limiting women's access to and control over property. This issue highlights the broader struggle for complete gender equality and the need for reforms to address these disparities within Kinnaur's tribal communities. Fig no 3 shows the women's land ownership among respondents.



**Source:** Data collected from Field Study and Tabulated by Resercher

The above fig no 3 clearly shows that women in Kinnaur have very limited property rights. Property is in the name of women only in those households where there is no son and if a son is born after marriage, this property is transferred from mother to son<sup>4</sup>, due to which women do not have permanent rights over the property. The Wire (2019) documented how Rattan Manjari, social activist from Kinnaur, has been at the forefront of efforts to address this issue. For decades, she has challenged the traditional practices and fought for equal property rights for women. Manjari's activism includes legal petitions, public campaigns, and a signature drive supported by around 22,800 women (The Times of India, 2013). In spite of her significant efforts and substantial local backing, progress has been slow due to procedural delays and limited government action.

Her movement highlights the ongoing struggle for gender equality in property rights and underscores the need for legal and social reforms in Kinnaur's tribal communities. In 2015 Himachal Pradesh High Court Justice Rajiv Sharma upheld an order passed by the District judge of Chamba in 2002 to grant legal rights to the women in the family property. The Himachal Pradesh High Court granted tribal women the right to inherit ancestral property under the Hindu Succession Act, 1956, replacing the old customary laws. Justice Rajiv Sharma's 48 pages ruling gave the judgment, stating that tribal women should have equal rights to property, and customary law cannot be above the Constitution of India (Bhadur v. Bhartiya & Others, 2015; The Indian Express, 2015). Following this landmark judgment, voices from Kinnaur also rose, and social activist Rattan Manjari filed a separate petition in Himachal Pradesh High Court for property rights for tribal women in Kinnaur. However, the matter is still under sub judicious status in the Himachal Pradesh High Court. Furthermore, in a judgment

<sup>4</sup> In case of demise of the property holder then his son is considered the automatic successor of his landed property but in case of sonless landholder's then his daughters and widow wife become owner of his land estates but they don't have any exclusive property rights on that land because they have only limited rights on that property due to the customary law of '*Wajib-ul-Arz*' of the region. The women does not have right to sale, gift and mortgage that immovable property till the time of knotting in marriage institution in case of daughter. After the marriage of daughters the land is automatically disposed from them in case if their nearest bloodline household's don't give them no objection certificate. If daughters are able to obtain the no objection certificate from bloodline householders then they become absolute owner of landed estates then they can bequest that property to their son and descendants after attaining no objection certificate from their nearest householders again making a legal document. However this can be attributed to the scarcity of arable and horticultural land in the cold desert of tribal Kinnaur of Himachal Pradesh. So in the customary law of the region there are special provisions to protect and secure the arable land from outside people.

on December 9, 2022, Supreme Court of India bench led by Justice M.R. Shah asked the government to review the provisions of the Hindu Succession Act that deny tribal women the right to inherit their father's property. The Court stated that just as non-tribal women have equal rights in their father's property, tribal women should also have the same rights. Tribal women are entitled to inherit equally with men (The Hindu, 2022).

### Conclusion

It can be concluded that the role and Position of women in Kinnauri society is extremely important and extensive. They not only take care of the entire responsibility of the household but are also more active than men in various social activities. Whether it is organizing weddings or other social events, Kinnauri women work more than men. They also play an important role in agriculture and horticulture, ploughing the fields with the help of trawler and digging instruments, Kinnauri women do all the difficult tasks that are usually done by men. Along with this, they also do tasks like harvesting the crop, plucking it and then taking it to the market. Apart from this, women also handle the work of operating small canals (locally called '*Khul*') for irrigation. In the field of animal husbandry too, women play a major role. They graze sheep, goats and other cattle as well as arrange for their fodder. Their contribution is also important in refining wool from sheep to preparing the final product. Apart from this, women extract oil from apricots and make wine by processing damaged fruits, which reduces the wastage of fruits. Kinnauri women also actively participate in social and political spheres. In religious matters, even if they do not hold key positions, their participation is still significant. They are active in activities like worshipping deities, dancing and singing along with the palanquin of the deity, and worshipping the deity on special occasions. When the palanquin of the deity is brought to the landlord's house, women exclusively worship the deity. In temples too, they participate in the deity worship on the occasion of various festivals. In short, women are backbone of socio-cultural life along with being an equal partner in economic progress. In spite so many contributions, Kinnauri women are still facing some significant challenges. They do not get the right to inherit property; property is inherited only by sons, against which women have been fighting for years. Apart from this, increasing crimes against women are also a serious concern. Thus, Kinnauri women make significant contributions to society at every level, but their overall development can be ensured only by addressing their challenges.

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