

Pawan Chamling

**Social Status
of Women**

In Sikkim

PRRFACE

Today, the 8th March, being “International Women’s Day”, the occasion is being celebrated in many parts of the world spanning the developed and developing countries, including the Third World countries wherever the good message and its implications have done their bits to awaken positive response. Women in India, too, have come a long way in this regard, thanks to various women’s liberation organisations engaged in doing yeomen service in their individual and collective capacity to enlighten and educate the illiterate bulk of Indian women in rural India on the need to understand and appreciate that they, as guaranteed by the constitution, have an equal right of freedom and liberty as their male counterparts and that they are just as entitled to a supreme place in the realm of activity as men are in theirs’. And, all this despite the (much-maligned and) much-antiquated social attitude towards women that persists to this day even after more than five decades of independence. Hence the ‘day’ is also being celebrated in many cities, towns and villages of India with much gusto and enthusiasm befitting the occasion. This ‘day’ for Sikkimese women too, becomes poignantly significant, vulnerable as they are in their present predicament, despite the freedom they traditionally enjoy in our kind of society, and yet, who stand exploited to the hilt simply because of that freedom!!

I take my hat off to all those brave and enlightened women who, risen as they have above the dins of prevailing notions and prejudices that tend to malign women in our society, have made it their crusade to initiate and spearhead a renaissance-like movement, its strong ingredients being its social aspect in which the rightful place of women they have sought to determine. The occasion becomes all the more poignant as the celebration of this particular day (of the year) marks the advent on the international scene of a wholly unique episode that, as part of the global movement now being spearheaded to eradicate poverty, backwardness, illiteracy and near-extinction of indigenous people the world over, has hit the mainstream movement right between the eyes, setting in motion events that continue their impact to this day. Being a Sikkimese son myself and also being deeply involved in the democratic movement I have had the determination and opportunity to lead and conduct, I take this opportune moment afforded me by this momentous day to pay my highest regards and felicitation to all those, brave women the world over who have made this particular day a historic occasion to reaffirm their noble commitment.

Human history is replete with instances to indicate that the human race in its evolutionary march down the ages had at one stage or another had women at the forefront of day-to-day affairs and that, under whose nurturing concern born of motherly instinct, had easily enhanced and assured the prospect of man is survival on this planet. It was the same instinct in women that played its vital role as the very beacon light to guide and shape the destiny of early man through the peaks and valleys of a turbulent evolutionary journey. The hordes of warring men in their primitive existence had found it imperative to entrust their fate and future in the hands of able and wise women who responded to the call of the hour by exerting the kind of leadership that was both moral and strategically dependable. It was the womenfolk who apparently provided everything the blundering men needed for their sustenance and survival through their wise and balanced leadership that was just as bonafide for the need to hunt as well as migrate as it was for leading an attack on the enemy in times of war. Women thus became the conduit

through which all major decisions - social, economic even military in times of war and conflict - flowed so that they were in complete control over all forces that came into play while running the affairs of the clan or the tribe, as the case might be. This status quo peculiar to women of yore, however, was short-lived as men, with the passage of time, began asserting their gender superiority over women based mainly on male attributes that set them apart in the domain of physical strength and fighting prowess that came with the former. Besides, the biological compulsions attributed to women in their role of motherhood apparently became the major stumbling block in the continuity of their leadership function which they could not, under any circumstances, play it down or compromise with. Thus began the downhill journey for women that became ironically more sustained and even more devastating with each successive generation, making women's fall from grace a historic enigma. Still, the fact remains that it was at this point when the exploitation and subjugation of women had reached its height that the crusade against this wholesale injustice on women began in earnest. The litany of defeats and despair that became their lot was fated ultimately to become the fostering ground from which rose a tiny voice that was to reverberate across the peaks and valleys of a movement that in the eight decades or so of its struggle, has assumed global dimension in its impact.

Like everything else that had to do with the rise and fall in women's fortune in general, the first voice of reason against women's miserable plight to become boldly articulated above the din of negative notions and prejudices, was also heard from the corridors of Europe's growing presence in a fast changing mechanized world. The fag end of the nineteenth century together with the early part of the twentieth century formed the most significant period that saw the resurgence of active interest in both political and social spheres of a resurgent Europe to re-define the place of women in a changing social order that became increasingly drawn to the active participation of women even if the purpose served was ornamental to enhance the quality and substance of the occasion; not to mention some of the famed beauties who did, indeed, succeed in influencing great events of historical import through their brain and beauty. World war-I was one such episode that was triggered by an unfortunate event in which the intrigue of a woman's death along with that of her lover, a crown prince, had played a key role.

It was during this period that saw the advent of such personalities outstanding in their fight against injustice towards women and their cause, as Clara Zetkin and Rosa Luxemburg whose dedication to the cause of the down trodden and the impoverished and to the cause of women's emancipation was absolute and beyond question. In their sustained crusade against all excesses perpetrated to subjugate women, the first ever convention on international level was successfully held in Copenhagen in 1910 that was to prove a historic landmark of the century in which the first ever voice to assert the rights and privileges of women the world over was raised in the international forum. It was at that convention that the 8th March became symbolic of women's day of reassertion - more precisely, the day of reckoning - reassert their concerted stand against injustice perpetrated against women since aeon ago. Such women from various countries who converged to the said convention in 1910 was an intellectual par excellence, a committed worker in her chosen field of activity; each one of them was driven by conviction that she had a goal to achieve so that a basic humanitarian cause could best be served. And, that cause became the focus of the main agenda at that historic convention. Hence those

(great) women of vision collectively succeeded in unleashing a potential force of such magnitude that soon made the issue of women's cause and emancipation a major event of great social import with far reaching consequences. It is for this reason in particular that the 8th march is also referred to as the "International Women's Solidarity Day" to signify the spirit of unity that was brought into focus on that eventful day of March 8, 1910.

Mention may be made of the fact that in the struggle to liberate women from their traditional plight and bondage plaguing them since centuries in succession, the role of distinguished women apart, dedicated men have also played their unique role in the struggle befitting a truly genuine cause. This apart, the movement for the women's cause has reaped a rich harvest from political platforms that are steeped in democratic values with rigid tenets against gender bias, within whose folds women are not discriminated against. In the obtaining situation that prevails now in Sikkim, I am wholly convinced that it is democracy alone and its rigid tenets against gender bias that can liberate Sikkimese women from the ignominy of a situation in which they are left bereft of the very basic ingredients that make for the protective veil despite their vulnerability and frailty. It is the dignity, the inherent glow which every woman possesses to enhance and safeguard her other attributes that she has been robbed of in the present regime of Bhandari's that needs to be restored. And, this particular aspect of Bhandari's misrule in Sikkim provides the infallible litmus test that more than indicts Bhandari's exploits as totally anti-democracy and anti-people, because morality constitutes the firm foundation of a thriving society which, under the SSP regime, has been thrown to the winds. A social order devoid of moral values invites its own rain. On behalf of the S.D.F. Party I, therefore, pledge my whole-hearted support and commitment so as to ensure that the dignity of women now in grave peril shall be restored to surpass its original glory so that they may be ushered into a new dawn of hope and promise that will enable them to compete with their male counterparts in all spheres of activities - social, economic, political - with all the competence and tolerance born of their motherly instinct so as to help them find a most deserved place in the sun.

With the highest regards,

8th March, 1994

PAWAN CHAMLING,
President,
Sikkim Democratic Front,
Headquarters Deorali, Gangtok.

The myriads of questions and considerations that have to do with the evolving of a society are inextricably linked with those that define and determine the place of women in that society. A society bereft of the proper place of women in it is incomprehensible. It cannot exist, let alone survive. The vicissitudes - of life that beset men in their mundane existence cannot be tackled by men in apparent isolation by dismissing the existence of their counterpart, the women and the vital role they play; the role of women in the struggle can hardly be over-emphasized. Apart from being an integral part of society, the enduring role women play as the very source of creation set them apart with the hallowed glow being further accentuated by their deep sense of love and affection which women alone are capable of bestowing on their loved ones. Given this outstanding quality by virtue of which the human society sustained the rigours of evolution down the ages, the unique contribution accruing from that blessed role becomes truly incomparable.

The status and place of women in a given society, therefore, act like the litmus test that, by and large, determines the degree of progress and development attained by that society in its journey of evolution. "Blessed is a society where women are respected and held in high esteem; such a society is endowed with all the finer qualities that enrich life." This time-tested adage seems completely in tune with the modern-day belief that "liberation of women in a given society determines the liberation of that human society." The basic theme of these two beliefs, though enunciated at different time and place, appears to spell out in no uncertain terms that for a society to evolve in the right direction, the hallowed place of women in it will have to be assured and not taken for granted. Just as children apparently reflect their family background -either good or bad, as the case may be, by their inherent behaviour; so do the class and category of a given society manifest themselves unmistakably to reflect the finer or baser quality, as the case may be, that is determined by the nature and kind of treatment meted out to women who live in that society.

The present SSP government and its leader has, of late, been making a lot of noise just to be heard. The leader believes that his government has succeeded in making a tremendous headway in the sphere of development. Therefore, Mr. Nar Bahadur Bhandari, the President of Sikkim Sangram Parishad (SSP), has been consistently polishing his god-damned marble by trumpeting this belief every time he addresses the public on the slightest pretence, as and when occasioned by the need to fulfill social obligations. According to him, Sikkim under his able leadership has already made tremendous strides on the developmental front, the likes of which are yet to be made elsewhere and that the entire credit for such monumental achievement goes to him and him alone!! In truth, however, Mr. Bhandari is a grand master in the art of eluding himself with the sense of grandeur, which he alone can devise and perceive. Like a true paranoid, he can go to the other extreme in his obsession to tell the people what he really believes even if the object of his belief, like in this case, does not exist. With a straight face, he goes about telling people from the party platform that so much developmental progress has already been accomplished, that without his superior tact and know-how at the game, so much funds would never have come to Sikkim. Even his henchmen and cohorts parrot the same line with the same conviction. From the on-going circus, it seems as though the Sikkimese people, by and large, are the helpless subjects of his fiefdom,

reeling under the throes of a dictatorial regime and no longer the citizens of a free country.

However, we, on our part, have so far successfully countered Bhandari's propaganda campaigns of hoodwinking the Sikkimese people through massive misinformation, much like the "Sikkim Pharkaunchhu" (I will liberate Sikkim) gimmickry. Much has been done by educating the people to reveal the real Bhandari behind the mask he wore for 15 years through three consecutive terms in office to masquerade as the redeemer of Sikkim and the Sikkimese people. There is a massive backlog of unredeemed promises and pledge which the Sikkimese people are increasingly becoming conscious of. The host of promises and assurances he made to the Sikkimese people but never lived up-to them are now being exposed as white lies which he used as a cover-up to conceal his inept handling of issues paramount to the interest of the Sikkimese people. While Mr. Bhandari's efforts to emulate and become a tinpot dictator has now been exposed for what they are worth, the litany of ominous threats in his wrathful utterances which he is in the habit of making time and again as part of his public addresses have also been made public through the medium of pamphlets and literatures brought out from time to time. In this way, the Sikkimese people in general are now being systematically educated by providing genuine information on the sleazy world of Mr. Bhandari and his associates with the result that Mr. Bhandari and his cohorts are now faced with increasing threat of being caught with their pants down. And they know that such a prospect does really exist. But then, the main topic of this work in hand being "Women and their place in Sikkim", I beg the indulgence of the Sikkimese people to allow me to pen my views on this chosen subject.

As far as I know, none in Sikkim till date has come up with anything worthwhile on the subject of women and their place in Sikkim. It seems as though the subject itself is none too inspiring to invite a would be writer to gather enough research materials with which to produce a readable account on the life and existence of Sikkimese women, no matter how mundane and uninspiring their existence may be under the present dispensation of the SSP regime. The literary policy and pursuits of the present SSP regime being strictly confined to the narrow concept of merely singing the glory of its non-existent achievement for its own survival, none amongst the prospective writers in the State has so far dared to work on subjects worthy of potential social values. This apart, the fact that there is a history of ruthless persecution of those intellectual stalwarts who dared to expose Bhandari in black and white through their write-ups leaves much to be desired to encourage such meaningful endeavor. If, however, there is no dearth of media persons and even promising writers who seem to have sold their soul to concede Bhandari's money power, it is gratifying to note that there still are those among the present crop of writers and intellectuals who, despite tremendous pressure, remain firm in their conviction and suffer on account of it. In such vitiated atmosphere, all worthwhile literary pursuits have come a cropper because the voice of reason stands ruthlessly stifled with little or no hope of respite in sight. There are instances galore that stand out as living proof of how some of the stalwarts of democracy have had to undergo extreme pains of physical torture simply because they refused point-blank to toe Bhandari's line that runs counter to the hallowed path of democratic value.

Respected mother and sisters,

For reasons enumerated above among others that shall be brought before you in another place and another time, the Sikkim Democratic Front approaches you on this particular occasion with the sole objective of re-writing the history of Sikkim with Sikkimese women and their place as the main focus of interest. A singularly unique exercise never attempted before in the Sikkim's checkered history of more than three hundred and fifty years standing. I must concede that I am not an authority on the subject; nor do I claim distinction of being knowledgeable. It is the nature of situation confronting me that makes this exercise a need of the hour. An escape from this commitment at this juncture will be an act of cowardice. Mention may be made here of amateurish attempt made by some writers on the subject, but the less said about their effort the better. The attempts fall far short of the target, doing little justice to the theme to emerge as part of the trash literature that is solely devoted to please Bhandari for personal gains.

The basic theme on which the said articles are based is not the Sikkimese women, their past history and the present plight in which they find themselves relegated to the backburner; the theme, as usual, is Mr. Bhandari and his greatness as enhanced by his political savvy and foresight, even though the latter's claim to greatness is highly dubious. According to unanimous consensus of these budding writers the theme of their write-ups opine thus: the fountainhead of inspiration being Mr. Bhandari himself, the resurrection of the Sikkimese women has been successfully launched under the aegis of the SSP government, the onerous task and responsibility of leading them from darkness to light having fallen squarely on the able shoulders of Mrs. D.K. Bhandari, wife of Hon'ble Chief Minister of Sikkim. The theme itself is blasphemous, to say the least.

What they have tried to imply by describing the awakening of Sikkimese women is conceptually wrong and totally misrepresented which only reveals their ignorance and inept handling of the subject. Their failed endeavour merely shows that they are not conversant with the subject. A critical survey in this respect is a tempting necessity, but before attempting that, I should like to make a brief note on the history of women in general and the inevitably part they played down the ages to shape the history of man as we know it today.

The social scientist and anthropologist the world over are unanimous in their view that the human society at one stage in the distant past had had a history of having passed through a unique phase that was dominantly run and controlled by the care and wisdom of womenfolk in that society. Different society constituted by different people at different time and place had its own level of development and maturity. So was the process of evolving of matriarchal society that, in the dusky past, came into existence at different time and different place with differing level of development and maturity. But the fact remains, however, that the human society as a whole, barring the factors of time and place, shares in equal measure a history of having gone through the discipline and rigour of matriarchal society at one time or another in the distant past.

Well-known authority on the subject like L.H. Morgan and Bachofen have consistently opined that there are historical reasons behind instances that account for women taking over the rein of leadership from their male counterparts to tame the unruly majority in the clan and to take full control in running the affairs of the clans. Unlike today, the institution of marriage being in its formative stage not yet fully assured of its sanctity, the positive role of women played a decisive part as the redeemer of stability and moral discipline in the social fabric of the clan. This apart, the economic aspect of the

problem brought on by a lack of adequate know-how in the area of production of edibles needed to sustain life left no option other than transfer the burden of authority on the womenfolk for sheer survival. The unmistakable power of patience and fortitude in the face of adversity being the hallmark that set women distinctly apart was thus recognized by the early men even though the spectre of stress as we know it today was an unknown quantity to them.

Since marriage, unlike today, lacked social status and commitment, the responsibility of raising children - born not out of recognized wedlock but out of sheer need to appease natural urge - fell squarely on women as the sole provider of both food and undivided affection and care. This made the role of women singularly unique and decisive to ensure the well being of the tribe or clan and to determine its course of evolution in the positive direction. It is for this reason that all ancient hymns and legends are replete with instances where families have been extolled as being totally matriarchal with mother playing the major role to enhance the quality of life for all members of the family. But with the passage of time, the men in general began exhibiting an inborn instinct to acquire and accumulate things material that became pronounced as the horizon of wants began receding farther and farther. As the instinct of acquisition firmed up in men, they became more and more possessive to assert their rights to things they possessed. Thus even marriage - hitherto a simple, no-nonsense affair confined merely to the sphere of carnal pleasure - began to acquire some semblance of status and - dignity to emerge as something more intimate and enduring. With the sense of possessiveness becoming more and more manifest in the psyche of men, marriage as a social event was well on its way to become an institution worthy of its place in the social fabric of the day. Most important, no sooner had the institution of marriage become established as a great social event than monogamy became the social order of the day to which those early men living much before the dawn of civilization were pledged with religious fervour. Polygamy and even maintaining of harems were the social evil that made their appearance much later when mankind became more and more civilized and with it more indolent and pleasure-seeking.

Thus began the downhill journey of women from the pinnacle of glory that was there's before men in their selfish pursuits of greed and appeasement, became possessive enough to treat women as part of their acquired properties to be guarded with meanness and jealous fervour. This inevitable fall from grace of women who once in the distant past had ruled the roost with superb grace, dignity and elan has gone down in the annals of global events as a historic tragedy. The evidence in support of the reality depicting women's apparent fall from grace and a position of superior authority can be seen and experienced everywhere even today as they eke out their present existence in conditions similar to those of bonded slaves. Relevant documents that have now become archival properties are replete with evidence that women once dusky past were often at the head of unruly multitudes who could be led and pacified by the graceful command and authority of womankind alone and not their male counterparts, who rather constituted part of the teeming masses. This fact stands fully corroborated even today by the simple and uncluttered life-style led by the primitive dwellers, and the hosts of tribals that truly represents and reflects the glory of womenfolk as prevailed in the hoary past - dimmed and ill-focused though that glorious past may be due to intervening millenniums. Marriage in their communities is still a simple uncomplicated affair while the status of w

omen as compared to that in other more advanced communities is enviably better and more secure. The womenfolk in many areas of everyday activity can bargain from a position of strength and some semblance of authority.

Our own Sikkim provides a unique case in point where the predominance of tribal population is undeniably well known. Women from the communities of Bhumihar, the Rao and Naidu from the South and the women from our own communities of Lepcha, Bhutia, Limboo, Tamang, Rai, Sunuwar and Thami in respect of their status and dignity in their respective communities are several notches higher than those enjoyed by women of non-tribal but more enlightened and advanced communities. The former, by and large, are often seen to move in their communities with much greater degree of independence and freedom that are above reproach than by those in the non-tribal communities, despite their much-hyped and liberated sense of freedom and social activities; the social taboos and the ever-present spectra of appeasement attached to matrimony in terms of bottomless pit of dowry are all too apparent to belie such outward show of liberated case which, in reality, is an attempt at masking the ugly face of hypocrisy that lies beneath. In every tribal community, marriage is a solemn affair in which bride's parents and relatives have greater say to endorse and safe-guard the interest and future of the daughter they have brought up with utmost care and affection. There is a prescribed code of conduct which the bridegroom and his parents and party are obliged to honour and carry out with all modicum of virtuous behaviour and gentlemanliness they are called upon to muster. Any breach of the prescribed code of conduct would invariably warrant immediate penalty in terms of kinds that have to be made good by the groom's parents without reservation. And, the salient part of this unique exercise lies in the spirit of goodwill in which it is carried out than enduring stamp of mutual trust and understanding. A nuptial ceremony consummated with such elaborate regard and fidelity for tradition leaves no room for condoning the most heinous act of bride-burning that has become the bane of certain communities that leaves so much to be desired.

The above description depicts an attempt at providing a glimpse of how the sacred bonds of matrimony in the tribal communities of Sikkim are normally forged. The same, of course, is true of tribal communities that lives in the hilly neighbourhood of the State. In the same context, mention may also be made of cases that end in divorce, as normally happens in all other communities inasmuch as divorce as a scourge of marriage is an accepted universal phenomenon as old as the history of man itself. While divorce as a necessary evil is hardly encouraged or condoned, the untenability of a marriage on the rocks vis-a-vis the party responsible for the impending break-up is usually given a thorough scrutiny before arriving at the justification of such an extreme step. The break-up is either averted through suitable mutual compromise if such an avenue is available to work on; or, in extreme cases of hostility where mutual compromise becomes an impossibility, the marriage will be dissolved with suitable arrangement for compensation and alimony.

A re-marriage by either party in a bid to pick up the thread and start life anew is always made welcome and not objected to. In the same breath, a widow, if eligible in terms of age and willingness, can always venture into second marriage with no social taboos attached to her state of widowhood. Life is in the living to make the best of it, and a second chance to make a go of it is never denied socially, even if the aspirant happens to be a widow. But, the fact remains and it cannot be brushed aside as a passing fad,

however, that with the ugly inroads made by the growing impact of capitalist culture engulfing all stratas of Tribal's social fabric, the hitherto much-extolled simplicity steeped in down-to-earth cultures and traditions that unmistakably characterised the simple annals of their life-style is fast becoming a thing of the past, never again to be retrieved and resurrected. In spite of all this inherent characteristics acquired and cultivated through constant practice over countless centuries cannot be shed overnight. Human-kinds are creatures of habits and habits, as a rule, have a way of emerging as second nature through repeated practice over long periods of time. There is a grain of truth when one says that 'old habits die hard.' This is why the tribals in general, despite differing social standing in their respective communities, tend to reflect in varying degrees some of the basic attributes that are pristinely tribal which make them all that more a symbolic reminder of their hoary past.

A brief foray into the history of w omen made above vis-à-vis their status and position in society makes it abundantly clear that they -both w omen and their status -have had to pass through stages wrought with varied changes of fortune that, by and large, reduced w omen and their plight to the present level. But the notion that w omen had always been subjected to abject submission by men because of the latter's superior strength and position can no longer be accepted as the gospel truth despite the fact that such notion does exist in our society which is not true. But, the fact that the leadership privilege at one stage during the evolving of the human society in the remote past had been w omen's exclusive preserve has been amply demonstrated above which can hardly be denied.

"The inevitable changes that overtook the process of production in the area of economy notwithstanding, the lengthy and protracted wars which men engaged themselves in did much to erode the viability of women's leadership over men," so opine most men of authority on the subject. A woman's leadership during wars was often jeopardized by the prospect of childbirth and the prolonged maternity leaves that became mandatory, when, in essence, her presence on the battlefield to conduct a raging war would be vitally strategic necessity. This particular aspect of the problem the face of an on-going war being positively daunting, the unavoidable process of transfer of leadership from the realm of w omen to that of men appears fairly plausible.

'SOCIAL STATUS OF WOMEN'

The experts and the wise ones on the subject have always been unanimous in their concerted view that mankind at some stage in the remote past had entrusted themselves in the hands of womenfolk, their counterparts, for the much-needed leadership that came from the latter's infinite sense of patience, forbearance and the capacity to love and tolerate. These wise w omen, on their part, did extremely well to fulfill the assigned role with dignity and much elan that earned them the esteemed sobriquet of "Maha-Mata" - the Mother Superior in common parlance. However, there are some schools of thoughts that disagree with this version of the universal belief or view, mired as they are in the quicksand of blind traditions and beliefs. But there are other more complex issues with regard to w omen and their past history vis-a-vis the kind of society they lived in, that are apparently riddled with wide ranging controversies. This apart, even the circumstances accounting for the decline and fall of w omen from the exalted position that was theirs' in the dusky past of leading and guiding the early human race have often been ascribed to

reasons that are plagued with differing views and opinions which only help to confound a layman further.

Even in India where there are a host of organizations working on multitude of complex problems faced by Indian women at different levels of the social pyramid that, despite the common meeting ground where they serve an equally common cause, though of differing nature and complexity, are widely divided in their approach to identify the basic cause/causes responsible for the fall of women from the much-enviable position of grace and authority believed to have existed in the distant past. In this regard, the opinion put forward by 'Shetkari Mahila Aghadi', an organisation pledged to uphold the rights and privileges of Indian women engaged in agricultural pursuits in the rural India provides a specific example. According to them the decline in the existing empowerment which women of yore enjoyed while at its pinnacle began from the day all agricultural produce became commercialised commodity that saw the end to the system of bartering that was in vogue till then. In other words, the means of production along with the produce went on to be controlled and regulated by men alone, while the otherwise robust role which women played till then, was apparently relegated to the realm of non-productive chorus of domesticity and with it, began the exploitation and subjugation of women that followed in their reversed role of the meek and the downtrodden.

Vandana Shiva, an Environmentalist intellectual and activist comes up with another version of the sub-story based on the historic event that marked the advent of industrial revolution in Western Europe. She gives valid reasons in support of her theory as to how women met their Waterloo at the hands of men to account for the ultimate downfall that became their lot when they were no longer in a position to wield the authority they had once enjoyed over men in the hazy distant past. In her book, "*Staying alive: Women, Ecology and Survival in India*" she has stated her reason underlying the said debacle which run somewhat on this line: with the advent of industrial revolution that overtook most countries in Europe, the changing scenario witnessed the emergence of a strange culture that made deep and lasting inroads into the then widely held norms and beliefs that, by and large, shaped their basic instinct for survival. Preservation of 'Mother Nature' and her rich bounties to them was sacrosanct to ensure the survival of humankind. But in the new scenario that emerged with the on-going revolution, this sacred view was willfully thrown to the wind. In its place the new generation saw the ghastly transformation of the hitherto benign nature and her resources into veritable sources of raw materials for making machines and tools with which to produce manufactured goods and artifacts for sheer profit and material comforts. No sooner did the profit concept become an established criterion for material progress and advancement than the holistic aspects of the crusade then being waged with missionary zeal against vandalisation of nature and her resources was categorically withdrawn... causing new equation to emerge between nature and men by which the former became completely subordinated. While a new relation between men and women took on an entirely new meaning and connotation that defined and designated the place of men far above women,...

Despite such wide-angled views on the decline of women's stature, however, the controversy so generated is hardly the core of the issue that is central to the emancipation of women in general. It is the issue of women's empowerment that has to be understood in all its entirety for what it is worth. The issue of women's empowerment is multi-

faceted and hence it cannot be viewed as a product where it can be doled out in measured doses. It is essentially an ongoing process by which an efficient policy-making framework is constituted so that policy issues fed into it become part of the agenda for debate and discussion. There being massive distortion and discrimination built into the social system, the need to remove them has become greater today than before; only then the integration of women into the social, political and economic mainstream can become a process for meaningful change. This apart, women's empowerment in its true sense is not all about creating greater awareness about their rights and privileges so they can take up the cudgel with renewed vigour and activism. Most importantly, it is the need to address the attitudes of men, the perceived threat of male chauvinism, towards gender equality that remains the core of the issue, without tackling which the process of women's empowerment can never become a success story.

Social status of Women in Sikkim

The bulk of the population in Sikkim consists essentially of tribals despite the fact that, barring the Lepcha and Bhutia communities, the rest of the bulk remains yet to be decreed as tribals by stature. Hence the latter remains totally excluded from the policy - framework specifically constituted to benefit the notified tribals like the Lepchas and Bhutias of the state. The communities of Rai-Limbu, Tamang, Gurung, Manger, Sunuwar and Thami share a basic common trait - the traditional mumbo-jumbo linked to their customs and cultures - that is truly archaic in character which more than reflects their ancestral background as being that of tribals. Despite existing disparity in the population bulk - the notified tribal communities of Lepcha and Bhutia followed by the diasporic groups with strong leaning towards tribal ethos like Rai-Limbu, Tamang, Gurung, Manger, Sunuwar, and Thami forming the major bulk - the presence of which in overwhelming numbers has left its own impact on the minority communities of Bahun, Chhettri and Newar that is singularly significant. It has gone a long way to highlight the unity of Sikkimese people in ways that faithfully underlies the diversity that exists in between. Geography and its rugged character rather than historical events is primarily responsible for shaping the destiny and character of Sikkimese society. An insight into the geo-physical factors is thus called for in order to explain the underlying unity factor in the face of existing diversity. Unlike other more volatile states, the socio-economic fabric, despite centuries of feudal dominance, has remained less severely defined to help it retain its human face. Because of its rugged topography, extensive agricultural pursuits in Sikkim remained a distant dream for feudal chieftains aspiring to become strutting landlord. Zamindari system, therefore, could not take firm roots to become an institution with unwritten codes that, under the feudal dispensation, could have become the veritable arms of tyranny and repression. Its natural death, when it came, was a foregone conclusion, thus prematurely putting an end to all era that had hardly begun.

Based on this premature death-knell suffered by Sikkim on the agriculture front, many knowledgeable experts on the subject are of the opinion that Sikkim is a specific case whose journey from the pastoral stage from where it was picked up for obvious reasons, to the threshold of the modern capitalist mainstream consisted in one big forward leap across the chasm and travails of graded process that lay in between; thanks to the Sikkim's past history of how, sandwiched, as it were, between an independent Tibet of the day to the north and the expansionist Colonial Raj of the British to the south, it had

played its traditional role of a buffer state by virtue of its geo-political presence. In the process, it had managed somehow to acquire the dubious distinction of being an independent fiefdom that virtually went unchallenged. In the midst of all this and more, however, there are historical evidence portraying a past that speaks volumes on the feudal excesses, the brunt of which was stoically borne by specific ethnic groups of the day. But such excesses were strictly limited to the narrow section of the ruling elite. The tell-tale remnants of the said culture, however, persists to this day as a hazy water-shed of the unholy past.

The feudal past of Sikkim, despite the blemishes that shroud it, seems wholesome enough in today's perspective, particularly when there are instances of a similar past elsewhere plaguing the present with a vengeance of awesome proportion simply because such a past was deeply etched in the psyche of the people who inherited the gory legacy in toto. The on-going atrocities being perpetrated in one form or another in the country on pretences apparently dictated by the politics of the day are but the same legacy of a notorious feudal past that is being re-lived to justify history's penchant for repeating itself. In Sikkim, on the other hand, the dominance of tribal population apart, the sobering legacy of a less notorious feudal past, are factors that have had a combined influence in shaping and defining the status of women in the contemporary Sikkimese society which, by and large, is comparatively much exalted than in most other places. From childhood to adolescence (and even thereafter) they enjoy all the love and affection and other family privileges from parents that, by any standard, are completely at par with those enjoyed by the male child. In fact, parents tend to be more protective of the girl child in a male dominated family where the boys tend to rule the roost. She, as she grows up, goes to school that is just as popular and reputed as the one attended by her brother(s). In this regard, a Co-education school where both can study becomes the popular choice. Most importantly, they both enjoy equal property rights which is the unique feature of Sikkimese society that is pristinely tribal. Hence a social status such as this for women in the Sikkimese society leaves little room for cause that is debatable.

This, however, was one face of the old Sikkim in the feudal past when the overall economic scenario, despite wide ranging disparities accounting for the yawning chasm that existed between the rich and the poor, was fairly on an even keel for a tiny fiefdom with correspondingly small population, while the majority at the receiving end was willing to make the best of the bargain proffered to them. This is amply illustrated by the fact that in the 330 years of its feudal existence Sikkim had never had a history of population decimation in any noticeable degree that could be attributed to the plights of famine though its dependence for food-grains on sources outside the State, which increased correspondingly with the increase in population, bears a history of long standing. Even though the times were hard, a simple life-style that became the common mode adopted under the circumstances by both the rich and the poor, made the burden less painful to bear. This apart, Sikkim's role in the then geo-political framework of the region as the buffer state in existence between two entities with divergent political identity ensured a safe passage for Sikkim to its economic fulfilment that, any way, was not too demanding. The basic needs were, therefore, forthcoming from the north also as Tibet sought to establish a trading link with the colonial neighbour of Sikkim to the south through trade routes that exclusively passed through Sikkim while the colonial overlord to the south (of Sikkim) was all too benignly disposed toward Sikkim for its own interest

that were varied and many. Sikkim's mega efforts to reach out for an all round development began in earnest soon after India, its southern neighbour became a sovereign independent State in August 1947. The ensuing decade of the fifties that followed saw the rise in expectation of a better and more firmly established economic future for this backward State under the fast emerging leadership of the then Maharaj Kumar, more popularly addressed then as M.K., the legal heir to the Sikkimese throne. This aspiration was further heightened by Prime Minister Nehru's visit in 1958 to Sikkim, accompanied by his daughter, Indira en route to Bhutan via Nathula Pass. By this time, however, much had been achieved already in the areas of internal development that covered important fronts such as internal road communication, HRD, Healthcare and Agriculture to mention a few that came on the heel of 1950 Treaty signed between Delhi and Sikkim, the former agreeing to provide the funds for the aforesaid development programmes. Needless to say that the next decade that followed saw tremendous spurts of development being made in Sikkim that, until the forties, was stagnating in a eighteenth century ambience.

In such a scenario where efforts are directed, albeit under the dispensation of an ambitious would-be monarch, towards positive goals, then such meaningful drive becomes symbolically representative of a people who are rightly proud of their place in the evolving society of which they are the masters. A society consisting of people having such unique aspiration is apt to take pride in the place they will have carved out for their womenfolk and protect the same with the zeal and ferocity they would - treasured tradition. In such a society the place and status of women undoubtedly acquire an enduring image worthy of high esteem.

Unfortunately for the Sikkimese people the head of the SSP government and his cohorts in the cabinet turned out to be a bunch of renegades even as they have been voted to power for the third consecutive term now in its last leg. A renegade like Bhandari and the kangaroo cabinet he heads have together had no compunction in putting money and power before everything else while corruptions - moral, ethical and material - and the life of ease and depraved degradation have virtually become the guiding principle that apparently shape the policy of the government they rule with impunity. Almost all educated girls in the bloom of their youth and just out of their school or college, as the case might be, became damsels in distress the instant they set out in search of jobs they needed to help supplement the family budget their parents provided. And those occupying ministerial berths in the government took on the role of the proverbial knights in shining armour ready to rescue the damsel knocking at the door from her distress! But, of course, there always was a price to pay and in most cases even the parents of the damsel were helpless to do anything about after the said price had been paid, particularly on occasions when the Number One in the government with all the power flowing from him happened to be the knight in shining armours !! Such despicable occurrences in due course of time became part of the ritual when the ministers in the Kangaroo Cabinet felt they could not be deprived of their due share of the flesh as that would go against the protocol it was their right to enjoy !!!

The sole credit for the authentic rumour making its round in Sikkim that prospective female candidate seeking employment in the government must be prepared to go to bed with the concerned minister in charge of the said vacancy, goes to none but this hell-hole of the SSP government.

But can we blame our helpless girls just out of school or college when they become prey to the wolves in the government simply because they have wanted to make a start in life!?? The entire blame for such unspeakable state of affairs goes solely and wholly to those so-called leaders in the SSP government who are ruling the Sikkimese by proxy while their life-style is totally alien to the one lived and led by the average Sikkimese. This is why they in the government try to set themselves apart by treating our young sisters and daughters as slaves conquered and subjugated by their superior power, and who must serve their masters in all possible manners to appease their craving for the flesh! Nowhere else is the moral bankruptcy of these so-called leaders of the SSP outfit seems more evident than on the party platform whenever they choose to address the public on rarest of rare occasion. Frankly speaking if the non-performance syndrome of the SSP regime now trailing behind 14 years of misrule and mismanagement hounds Bhandari and his henchmen which, by and large, accounts for the minimum contact the SSP leadership maintains with the public, it is Bhandari's increasing lack of fire in his speeches that has done much to make Bhandari fight-shy of public appearances. There is nothing by way of substance in what he has to say because the litany of unredeemed promises he made to the public remains unsubstantiated and unfulfilled and he has already shot his bolts with which to re-cycle his pack of lies, leaving him nonplussed and confused. Now, he has switched over to spewing not fire because he has none; but he spews more than his share of filthy speeches that, with your mother and sisters around, can hardly be stomached! ! Yes, the language is so obscene and sleazed that it is not fit even for the gutters! ! When Bhandari gets going with his filthy rendering peppered with equally filthy dialogues, it seems as though he is addressing an audience consisting of pigs in some remote jungle, away from civilization. It is the intermittent guffaws punctuating his filthy dialogues he fits in for the villagers palates, that are heard from the audience that seem to egg Bhandari on to go on his marathon speech. There are madams galore sharing the same platform who, however, seem totally immune to Bhandari's cheap jokes rendered in equally filthy rendition of contents and language. In all this show of mock bravado, Bhandari cuts a pathetic figure trying to bluff a people he knows can no longer be bluffed, and yet, for survival, he betrays himself by believing in the potency of his own bluff!

Apart from above, there is the misfortune of having to come across masses of equally obscene literatures denigrating our innocent daughters of Sikkim, thanks to the present SSP government for having created the kind of atmosphere needed to fester such obscene trend in society that is utterly in bad taste. Those so-called leaders in the SSP government with the Number One in the lead are not only on the edge of the morally permissible limit, but they are already over it. They have not only achieved everything in the book there is to be achieved in their bid to cross the Laxman Rekha; they in their journey down the pit of moral degradation have finally hit rock-bottom to ensure that there is nothing they can do to better their record. When the leaders are busy creating situation that is ominously foreboding enough to attract God's wrath the way the people of Sodom and Gomorrah did, it is quite natural that our daughters, despite their innocence, will be subjected to all kinds of gossips and character assassination. And that precisely is what has been happening in Sikkim lately while, the SSP government, true to form, is doing nothing to stem the rot which is truly nauseating.

Whenever Bhandari goes out on official tour of the State, it has become an accepted ritual to have young and attractive female employees of the visiting station lined up along the footpath to the Guest House with garland in their hands to welcome the chief minister. This has, indeed, become a part of the official ritual that is a 'must' without which *Budo* would be offended beyond measure! And woe betide those if *Budo* (the old man, as Mr. Bhandari's cohorts used to call him), is denied this important protocol without which the welcome ceremony would be incomplete!! A ritual of this nature would be a normal practice if observed at the public level where it would add considerable charm and dignity to the occasion. But at the official level the whole exercise becomes a ridiculous circus and that is exactly what it has become lately to make it a talk of the town.

No decent Sikkimese worth his salt can declare under oath and vouch for the uprightness of character and moral behaviour as far as the leadership hierarchy of the SSP outfit is concerned. There is nothing noble about their moral behaviour and character make-up and the decay is so complete that if a dossier is prepared for every single scoundrel in the kangaroo cabinet headed by - Bhandari himself, a sizeable volume on pornography will emerge that can be sold like hot cakes. The Sikkimese in general are, therefore, keenly aware of the fact that no SSP leader at the upper echelon of the government can be entrusted with the safe-keeping of their young daughters, or sisters or even their wives when these wolves are around! Because they have a natural tendency to pounce on anything wrapped in women's attires -even a lamp-post wrapped in saris on a foggy night with poor visibility!!

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES OF THE SDF PARTY

The theme that a society bereft of a secular face tolerant enough to accept women as an important component of its 'mainstream usually suffers from intellectual regression and atrophy and that such a society tends to remain in the doldrums of inefficient backwardness, has already been discussed in some details it deserves. It is for this reason that the present plight of Sikkimese women and their place and status in society vis-a-vis their counterparts, the Sikkimese male, need to be re-evaluated to help determine the rightful place which should be theirs' in the emerging new order we have set our mind to establish. Only then, we shall be in a position to help create a society that can be expected to forge ahead, fully geared to cope with the changing nuances of a fast changing world. In order to bring about a radical change in the current ground realities and to pave the way for the revival of democracy, the plight of women in today's Sikkim in particular and the place, status and future of Sikkimese women in general must figure way up in the Party's priority list for active consideration and redressal even before we may dare to reaffirm our commitment to democracy itself and to the pledges we have concertedly made to restore democracy in the State. Sikkimese in their ignorance cannot hope to tread the path to progress and prosperity by being so callously indifferent to the plight of their womenfolk who constitute half of the state population.

We have made it absolutely clear in the foregoing pages that Sikkimese women in their tribal dominated society have comparatively easier and better excess to freedom and liberty than in any other society we know of. But in this regard, we have to be explicitly clear in our stand and understanding that the ruling -government of Sikkim Sangram

Parishad's and its leaders have taken undue advantage of this singularly unique tradition that stands exploited to the hilt for purposes peculiar to their depraved needs. Factually it must be understood, however, that there are certain salient features in our way of life that are uniquely peculiar to Sikkim and the Sikkimese that stand as hallmark of our age-old customs, cultures and traditions. But, unfortunately for Sikkimese, all this and more stand ruthlessly trampled underfoot by Bhandari, and his followers as if to demonstrate their total supremacy over the sanctity of an age-old institution that, according to their incestuous behaviour and misconduct, can be violated and vandalised at will! ! And by their unforgivable conduct and misdemeanour, they have brought untold shame and bad name to Sikkim and her people. No matter how hopelessly dismal the present scenario may seem, this Party, the Sikkim Democratic Front, is firmly entrenched in its commitment to restore and resurrect the truly inherent spirit and essence of that freedom that have stood desecrated and desanctified at will by those in power. All this projects a dismal scenario, but the S.D.F. Party is fully committed to bring order out of the present chaos that is so palpably pervasive: For this to happen, the following few suggestions will be worthy of note :-

- (a) The excess to freedom for social interactions for womenfolk in our tribal-dominated society being less stringent, it must not be construed to mean that they are at liberty to do what they please with their physical appearance to become the focus of carnal attention for those at the helms of power; neither should this mean to imply that they are under obligation or even under compulsion to surrender their modesty before the insanity of those same wolves for whom the propensity and madness for such fleeting pleasure have become the norms. We have our own preserved values, some of which are down-to-earth in content and meaning; but that does not mean to imply that ours' is a permissive society and which is what we wish to drive home for all to know, including those morally corrupts in the government that all this orgy must stop. Women's liberation does not imply to mean dressing up every evening and partying at the best of hotels and night clubs and do things our forefathers never even thought of doing in their wildest dream, till the wee hour of dawn!! All such nonsense are the product of a perverse mind and, therefore, we must free ourselves from such perverse conceptions to lead a clean and meaningful life.
- (b) The Sikkimese women, too, on their part, should learn to appreciate the true value of that freedom so extended to them so that the true essence of this liberty, as understood by them in the new light, may become much more meaningful than they have ever realised. The true meaning of freedom as implied by the buzz word 'women's liberation in short should be understood to mean that they, too, have the right to share equal responsibility with their male counterparts in running the affairs of the government by virtue of occupying positions of authority and power. This apart, my conviction tells me that the greatest freedom women can ever enjoy should be to have the right to voice their concern against all injustices in general while such freedom as I freely condone for them should enable them in particular to fight against hordes of excesses perpetrated on them in a world full of male chauvinism.
- (c) If a society, however weak and unsure of its footings, may someday regain its place worthy of the citizens who, by dint of hard work and perseverance, determine the fate of that society. A ghost society very much like a ghost township enmeshed in the mire of impoverishment and decay has every possibility and prospect of becoming a boom

society very much like a boom town. But, if a society becomes totally devoid of basic human values with which to exert its identity on the moral plane, then such a society invites its own ruin. Because decency born of moral uprightness is one of the pillars of civilization. Every woman is endowed with the power and blessings of motherhood and since a mother plays an important role in shaping the character of the child she brings up, all women in a given society must become endowed with exemplary strength of character. But, it must be mentioned here that a society cannot be led up the garden path through sweet talk and glib tongue in praise of the role of women alone; the men in the same society must also come forward, fully prepared to exert the moral leadership by recognizing the rightful place of women befitting the positive role the latter play in that society. This imperative as applied to all political leaders and workers should have its own impact inasmuch as they, by their own avowed commitment and pledges to serve the cause of society, are the forerunners of that society. In such a scenario, the women on their part, must, therefore, recognize the profundity of their hallowed place in that society vis-a-vis the meaningful role they are called upon to play in the sphere of character building.

In the present dispensation under the SSP regime, the function of women and its purpose is wholly ornamental, there being no specific role assigned to them that may act as catalyst to make their mark. This regrettably is downgrading the entire women populace who deserve a far better deal than this. In the S.D.F. Party, however, this will not be allowed to happen; rather their place and prestige shall assume as those of comrade-in-arms and fellow-travelers with common political goal and avowed commitment as those of their male counterparts of the Party. The S.D.F. Party is fully committed to ensure that the function and participation of Sikkimese women are fully extended to every conceivable sphere of day-to-day activities, with particular emphasis on those areas that are conspicuous by their total absence. Our fight in the defence of women's liberation and their rights and privileges shall be relentless; it will always remain an article of faith with us. In this context, it may be mentioned here that this is perhaps the first time ever in the history of this State that the cause for the emancipation of Sikkimese women is being taken up in real earnest and it is a pleasure to know that the onus of carrying on with the struggle to its meaningful conclusion has fallen squarely on our shoulders. As I have been entrusted with the onus of leading this Party, the S.D.F., endowed with such high ideals, I should like to call upon my colleagues and fellow members and workers - the majority of whom are young and energetic, and who are the active arm of the Party - to follow the instructions noted below both in spirit and meaning as these form the guidelines that, I am more than sure, will help the Party achieve its political goal, if faithfully followed and adhered to:

1. All male members, starting from the President himself of the Party must respect and recognize their female counterparts as colleagues and comrade-in-arms and not as some object of amusement they can fool around with.
2. All complexes associated with being the member of the weaker sex are things of the past. All female members of the Party must come forward boldly and with grim determination to find their rightful place in the sun.

3. Women are no longer baby-producing machine, nor are they puppets to do other people's biddings. They are so many cogs in a social wheel without which the wheel cannot perform its assigned function.
4. If wealth is lost, nothing is lost; if a friend is lost, then something is lost; but if character is lost, then everything is lost." So goes the English couplet noted above that puts the significance of one's character and its strength in a nut-shell.
5. Affairs of the hearts between members of opposite sex is a natural phenomenon to which the Party shall have no objection; rather it would encourage the same to culminate into a blissful union by the instrument of marriage. But, skylarking in any form will not be permitted under any circumstances .
6. (a) Let us pursue a life of clean and simple living while practising noble and sublime thoughts and deeds. If we can lead such a life then there can be no place in our daily routine for things that are both vulgar and obscene, .such as the quality of language in our day-to-day interaction and the kind of material contents that motivate our reading habit.
(b) Those members in the leadership hierarchy of the Party who feel entitled to misbehave with female members of the Party by virtue of their position shall invite most stringent action on disciplinary ground. In extreme cases of misdemeanor, the guilty involved in the act will have to face censure in public.
7. In view of the prevailing disparity that exists between the Sikkimese male and female population of the State, I call upon all members manning the various committees and cells serving various purposes that are built into the structure of the Party, to go all out in their efforts to up lift and improve the lot of the much-maligned and beleaguered women populace who, nevertheless, constitute fifty percent of the total population of the State.
8. For their own emancipation, the Sikkimese women must learn to think for themselves, because in their ability to think for themselves will come the capacity to fend for themselves. .We men, on our part, should, therefore, be most prudent and even wise; in re-defining our role to make sure that the process of self-help so designed to make women self -reliant in both thought and deed, is not, in any way, being sabotaged by judicious doses of male chauvinism, even though this particular bane of women's lib. in Sikkim does not exist in any form. The ball, after all said and done, is very much in the w omen's court; it is up-to them to handle that 'advantage' to score victory.
9. As soon as the S.D.F. Party assumes power at the helms of the government, exploiting of w omen as sex kitten shall be deemed as a crime punishable under the law. This particular aspect of our avowed goal in our drive to bring justice to w omen should be brought to the knowledge of the public at large through well-organized information campaigns and, above all, through the most reliable medium of faithfully practising what is being preached. Any person found guilty of misadventure in the domain of sex and sleaze shall be made to pay for his folly, no matter how well-placed and influential he may be in the society he moves about.
10. Those female members and workers in the S.D.F. Party to whom the consideration of money, power and pelp is more important than the regimen of basic human values from which w omen of character derive their strength, then such female members and workers apparently catalogue themselves as unfit to remain in the S.D.F. Party.

11. Once the pro-poor and people-oriented government under the leadership of the S.D.F. Party is established in Sikkim, all efforts will be directed to bring women in the mainstream so that they will have full access to all avenues of opportunities in which they can participate with their male counterparts, including lucrative employment opportunities in the government they may seek through merit.

If there is any formula or mantra that will bring about the emancipation of women, it is the mantra of awareness that must be inculcated in our womenfolk so that they may become aware of their basic fundamental rights and privileges. They must be socially conscious of their place in society and must make every effort to improve and enhance the quality of that place through active participation in the roles assigned to them. Such an opportunity is being made available to you now and, therefore, come one and come all, for such a golden opportunity comes but once in a lifetime. You are cordially invited to join the movement that is out to make history; in fact it is already making history by bringing under its folds myriad's of downtrodden Sikkimese who have begun already to feel liberated from the shackles that tied them down in the last 14 years to abject subjugation. And, I tell you that you too fared no better; in fact, it was worse because in your case, even the last shred of dignity was torn asunder and snatched from your grasp to leave you naked and helpless! You will, by joining the S.D.F., be part of that movement that will restore your lost dignity and self-respect to help you, once again, hold your head high. Because I feel and strongly believe that the dignity of the Sikkimese women for all true Sikkimese is the dignity of Sikkim itself which, under the present hostile SSP regime, has hit rock-bottom and which needs to be restored and resurrected at all cost to its original glory. Then only we can hold our head high in a society where the hallowed place of women has finally been redeemed to acquire the dignity and high esteem it deserves.

Long Live Sikkimese Mothers and Sisters!