

The Cultural Body and its Changing Discourse: A Case of the Kirat Rai Women of Sikkim

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ABSTRACT

The body as a marker of culture remains inherent to the process of social construction across time and space. The body ideal that is curated at the cultural level often designates individuals to fit into the socially institutionalised bodily norms. The socio-cultural worldview of the Kirat Rai community strongly idealises the women and their bodies on the contours of traditional portrayal visualising the traditional ornaments dhungri, bulaki and chapteysuun and ethnic dress as similar to that of their female guardian deity Sumnina. However, with the advent of modernity and its accelerated influence, the ethno-cultural traits of visualising Rai women in present context have come in conflict with the body ideal endorsed in the dominant media. Consequently, Rai women at present are observed as negotiating with their traditional body images and their identity as mongoloid women which contradicts the global body ideals. This paper draws on the phenomenological approaches to understand the changing socio-cultural connotation of the body and unveil the negotiations carried by women of Kirati Rai ethno-group of the North-East Indian State of Sikkim in terms of their body image. The paper also attempts to analyse the way women are navigating through their cultural identity as Rai women amidst the structural influences of globalisation, modernisation, media and consumer culture on the body and its presentation. Thus, its ontological framework takes cognizance of both the structural contingencies reflected in the bodily choices and practices of the women and the subjective agency of the actors in carrying out various forms of negotiations at the micro level; thereby redefining the macro body discourse.

1. Introduction

The body in the biological lens may connote fundamental anatomy but in the sociological lens it emphasizes on the 'social body' concerning the body and its representation in the wider society. This social body and its discourse is often shaped by the changes the society is undergoing, as well as how the body may respond to the changes. The body in relation to a

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culture remains inherent to the process of stylisation to fit the cultural ideal often set at a collective level. Davis and Thompson (2025) in this context, highlights that, the construction of the body image lies at the intersection of culture, social factors such as normative standards and individual agency to navigate the social. Thus, the body remains malleable to the process of social construction across time and space. Notably, it is the women and their bodies which has felt the necessity of presenting themselves as a fit to the expected standard of beauty prevalent across time¹. Particularly, when female bodies are considered, the concept that “Anatomy is destiny” (Beauvoir, 1995) makes it explicit to argue that the somatic society and culture has constantly associated women with their bodies.

The modern standard of beauty today in the wake of global and widespread media is likely to enforce the set body, beauty norm to be reproduced as popular culture in the larger society. Such enforcements of the body ideal are apparent in Asian societies and this lends credence to Mellor et al. (2009) who has identified that in Malaysia the media platform mediated western body ideals and socio-cultural influences has led to body image dissatisfaction among the Malaysian adolescents. In the similar line, Rai (2022) also argues in the context of Sikkim that along with the impact of media and socio-cultural influences, the transnational capitalism and consumer culture has significantly impacted the way women tend to perceive their body along the lines of the modern dominant one as endorsed in the mainstream media. Against this backdrop, it becomes intriguing to explore how mainstream media representation and popular culture is impacting the Kirat Rai women and their body discourse.

This paper discusses the body discourse among Rai women in context of the undergoing changes across time and space in the light of socio-cultural transformation in Sikkim. Therefore, the paper in exploring the dimensions of ‘body discourse’ addresses how the changing dynamics of society is impacting the discourse of body among Kirati Rai women in terms of their ‘body image’, body management and self presentation taking body and beauty care practices, costumes, cosmetics, hair styles and ornaments as the parameters of study. It takes into consideration the global structural processes of dominant media, globalisation, consumerism which configures the dominant body discourse and thereon sheds light on these structural contexts within which the women perceive their body and construct their idea of beauty. Particularly, the term discourse is employed in the context of drawing out contestations and discussions on how the subject matter of the body has been changing over time, and how this is empirically relevant and perceived by the women of Rai community.

2. Materials and Methods

The history of Sikkim is embedded in its three hundred and thirty-three years long Buddhist monarchical tradition under the Namgyal dynasty (Human Development Report, 2015). The theocratic monarchic system however came to an end by referendum in 1975 making Sikkim the 22nd State of India, constituting the western most part of Eastern Himalayas. Post statehood, with noticeable improvements in literacy rate of 7% in 1951 to 82% in 2011 including 87% male and 76% female who can read and write (Sikkim Statistical Journal, 2013) and various developmental projects; Sikkim has not remained untouched to the socio-cultural transformation (Gazetteer of Sikkim, 2013). Gradual changes in patterns of rites and practices, customs, dresses, ornaments, food culture with the opening up of global cultures in the light of neo-liberalism can be witnessed. In the contemporary time, a shift from the traditional mode of self presentation including dressing style and indulgence in beauty practices has been observed among women of Sikkim in general and Rai women are no exception to it. Subba

¹ Be it from older days of conventional beauty practices involving oiling and keeping long hair to the present day innumerable modern practices associated with body and beauty.

(2015) argues that along with the forces of globalisation, modernisation and westernisation Kiratis have also been affected by market capitalism and consumerism. This reflection is also evident in the ways Rai women are redefining their self presentation and perception of the body and beauty at the outset of modernity through various negotiations. Nonetheless, a thorough review of literature points out that there are many literatures² on Kiratis of Eastern Himalayan region but specifically there is no comprehensive literature available on Rai women specifically on the discourse of body. Therefore, the study exploratory in nature is primarily qualitative and has been carried out in Sikkim.

On visiting the fields Gangtok (urban) and Assam Lingzey (rural) as a part of the pilot study, preliminary interactions to understand the views of body perception and body care practices were carried out with the women. Initially few Rai women were identified based on their active involvement in the community program including celebration of Rai festival Sakewa in the field areas and were approached for informal interaction to be carried out in their favourable time. Subsequently in the process, through snowball approach the number of participants was increased to sixty-five. During the interactions information pertaining to their idea of ideal body, engagement in body care and beauty practices was obtained with the help of open-ended questions. Based on the responses recorded with prior permission from the participants, fifty women who provided with contextual understanding as well as thick description on the subject matter of the study were purposively selected with informed consent. The remaining fifteen from the earlier sample of sixty-five were excluded due to voluntary withdrawal from the study opted by eight women, and monotony of the responses among the seven respondents which were observed as being limited in sufficient depth and specificity. Nonetheless, given the homogeneity of minimal responses, the exclusion of these participants has not impacted the validity and the outcome of the study.

The paper involves an interpretive study among fifty Rai women selected through purposive sampling. The study has relied on the non-probability sampling technique and the participants have been selected purposively as this remained ideal to explore on women's everyday bodily experiences, choices and act, and thereby, draw out the changing discourse on the body. This sample of fifty women was selected taking into consideration the variables of age group, rural and urban set up, work orientation, religion, educational qualification and income level; as these structural factors is likely to shape the body experiences and choices. Therefore, the study includes a heterogeneous group of participants involving different age groups (least being 14 years and highest being 81 years), body sizes/weight (least being 42 kgs and highest being 78 kgs), economic background (monthly family income of Rs5,000- 10,000 to Rs51,000 and above), religion (including animism, Hinduism, Christianity, Buddhism and others), work participation (government, private, business, cultivation/farming) and educational qualification.

In-depth interviews were conducted with fifty Rai women in both rural and urban sectors of Sikkim viz. Assam Lingzey and Gangtok respectively with the help of semi-structured interview schedules based on both open and closed ended questions. Gangtok is the prime urban sector, the headquarter of the State and bears a cosmopolitan character. While Assam Lingzey a village in East Sikkim, is rooted in a strong sense of community where the Rai people are found as living in close knit cluster groups. The subdivision of the sample i.e. fifty Rai women of Sikkim has been made taking 25:25 ratios from Gangtok and Assam Lingzey. Additional ten elderly members of Rai community comprising both male and female have been purposively selected and interviewed to comprehend the traditional concept of beauty and body of women in absence of the literature in this area. These members aged 60 and above were selected based on their strong participation and representation in the local Rai Samaj and/or

² Such as, Subba, 2015; Singh,1993; Rai,2005; Rai 2008; Singh,2008; Chemjong, 1963/1966/1978 and several published papers of Gaenzle, 2016; Sinha, 2006; Rai, 2012; Bain, 2018 and others.

association and includes Rai community head of the village as well as members of Akhil Kirat Rai Association, Gangtok. Therefore, the total sample of the study including the Rai women participants (fifty) and Rai elderly members (ten) is sixty.

The data collected as part of the research process and the narratives of the participants that draw onto the phenomenological experiences has been analysed using the Narrative Analysis Method. Based on the phenomenological framework, the study has drawn on the emergent themes by identifying the patterns in narratives and thereby segmenting it guided by open coding process. The narratives and findings firstly assigned with codes were then subjected to observe the recurrent statements, difference in opinions, formulation of meanings, and statements inducing layered meanings to draw out the themes. To analyse the relationship between the macro structures and micro subjective practices on the body, the variables of income, occupation, rural-urban context, body weight and age has been taken into account. To interpret the changing discourse and identify the beauty and body care, the parameters included notion of beauty, body aspirations, dress preference, body management involvement, body approval and satisfaction/dissatisfaction. Drawing on these parameters that shape and capture the body experiences and choices, the data has been thematically presented and the analysis has been supplemented with the narratives.

3. Who Are the Kirat Rais?

The term Kirat in the present context stands as a blanket term for twenty-six ethnic communities namely Khambu Rais, Limboos, Yakkha, Sunuwar, Tamang, Magar, Gurung, Newar, Thami, Thakali, Jirel, Sural, Baram, Lepcha, Majhi, Chepang, Hayu, Tharu, Toto, Monpa, Sharchop, Doya, Chungpa, Takpa, Lishipa and Sherdukpen of the Hindu Kush region (Subba, 2015). However, in Nepal and Sikkim (Nepalese Kirat region), the Rais and Limboos are considered as the earliest communities that came under Kiratas (Dalton, 1872; Wright, 1877; Vansittart, 1906; Schlemmer, 2004). Contextualising Kirat Rai ethno group of Sikkim, Kirat Rai earlier widely addressed as Khambus is an ethnic community who traces their descent from the Khambuho, the original inhabitants of the land Khambuwan in Nepal (Rai, 2005 in reference to Macdougall, 1977). In the contemporary time, the titles Rai and Khambu are used interchangeably or/and as synonymous to denote the people who belong to the Rai ethno community under Kirat. The Rai population in Sikkim marks the highest of 78,561 that accounts to 13.52% out of the total State population 6,10,577 (Sikkim State Socio-Economic Census, 2006).

3.1 Revisiting the Traditional Kirat Rai Notion(s) of Beauty and Body Care

The traditional concept of body and beauty in the history of Rai remains an aspect which has been left untouched in academic research and no comprehensive literature is available. However, the Rai myths, folklores, lyrics of songs involving description of Rai women and narratives of elderly people sheds light on the traditional beauty concept and practices. The general physical appearance of Kirat Rai women as Rai (2005) states, include short statured with strong bodies, broad cheeks, squashed nose, slit eyes which are usually small in size, fair complexion, black and stiff hair, darker colour eyes and well developed leg muscles. The notion of beauty, body and self presentation among Rai women in traditional times has been strongly idealised on the contours of traditional portrayal visualising the traditional ornaments and dress. The Rai dress and ornaments remain elaborate, Rai (2005) points out the traditional dress of

Rai woman includes, *gunyo choli*³ secured with a *patuki*⁴. While the ornaments consists of *lacha*⁵, *Chuklung* (worn on wrists), *Sumchang* (necklace made of 25 paisa coins of the Victorian era), *Pungwalung* (Necklace made of 50 paisa coins), *Yangchang* (necklace made of rupee coin), *Nathen* (ornament worn on nose made of gold), *Nabit* (nose ornament made of gold worn on the septum), *Fengrang* (earrings) and *Namtu* (also a flat shaped earring). Along with these mentioned, the Rai traditional ornaments as per the available literature of Rai (*Kirati Rai Jati ka Sanskritik Sampada haru, N.D*) also include *chandrama* (moon shaped ornament worn in head), *jantar* (square shaped golden ornament worn in neck) and *kalli* which is silver bangles worn in legs.

Amongst many, the *dhungri*, *bulaki* (traditional Rai ornaments worn in nose by Rai women) and *chaptay suun* (a traditional ornament made of gold worn in ears) have a significant impact on idealising a Rai woman and this moreover justified the notion of beauty traditionally. Kirat Rai myths on the other hand has described the women as beautiful with moon shaped faces and long kept hair. The presentation of self in traditional ornaments and attire for Rai women represents an ideal construct. An analysis of various Rai songs⁶, its music video and lyrics further makes it evident that Rai women's beauty and self presentation is always associated with the cultural portrayal of body image, as similar to that of their guardian deity *Sumnina*. These arguments are situated on the narratives of following elderly people who were asked about the traditional concept and practices on body and beauty as well.

An elderly female respondent who is 82 years old states:

In olden times girls had to compulsorily wear traditional ornaments including nose pin, septum ring, bangles in both hands and kalli (silver bangle worn in feet/foot). There were no shoes and slippers when I was young, we used to walk bare feet. But now time has drastically changed and soon after babies are born socks and shoes are put in their feet. Women in our time did not use any makeup/cosmetic products. Even there hardly used to be time for taking bath because of all time engagement in cultivation and agricultural work. There was no time for taking care of one's body and face. Keeping short hair was not allowed for women as it was said that good omen will go away. So hair used to be silky and long. Girls in their childhood used to wear frocks and after they reached the age of seven to eight, they were given fariya choli by their families which they used to wear in everyday life. There were no hanky-panky dresses like there are today.

Similarly, another 68 years old female elderly respondent drawing onto her youthful days narrates:

In our time women with cracked hand skin were considered as those who work hard and pay attention to household chores but now it is considered dirty and unfavourable/unlikeable/inappropriate.

With regard to the attire and dressing, 83 years old male who used to work in a post office but now has retired, contemplating old time with the contemporary one states:

That Kurtha set has recently come. Earlier it was fanke gunyo (sari wrapped around the lower part of the body) in black colour and when other colours came out, it became

³ Traditional Neplai dress including lower garment wrapped around the waist and upper garment i.e. traditional blouse.

⁴ A piece of cloth used to tie around the waist.

⁵ Nepali traditional hair ornament made of long (mostly) red or black threads with colourful tassels attached at the ends.

⁶ Including Kirati *chori* Rai, 2014; *Soi dhole Soi* Rai and Rai, 2017; *Aam Minma Khaplung Mitunglo* by Rai, 2020.

to be known as fariya and that used to be worn by the women. That was the attire they used to stay in. A woman with good conduct and good moral values wearing traditional attire was considered beautiful in our time.

Nevertheless, Rai women of traditional times indulging into traditional beauty and body care practices cannot be refuted. Their adorning practices included wearing *lacha*, gold ornaments and few reported using skin products like face cream, boroline, vaseline and home made skin care i.e. milk cream. While their hair care practices involved oiling of hair with mustard oil or coconut oil. Nonetheless, as the Sikkimese society started to undergo socio-temporal changes the sweeping waves of modernity, westernization, globalization, consumer culture and transnational capitalism paved its way in the traditional societies. This eventually affected the communities with the idea of modernisation which jolted the ethnic roots of almost all communities including the Rai ethno-group, marking socio-cultural transformation. The particular instance also finds reflection on the way Rai women of the contemporary time are perceiving their bodies and negotiating with the traditional notion(s) of body, beauty. In this regard, a question often arises as to Where does the ideal body image of Rai women stand in the present context?

4. Perception of Body in the Changing Context

The portrayal of the body among Rai women historically has been limited to the presentation of self in their traditional attires, ornaments and was restricted and shaped by the same self-presentation based on traditional notion. However, in the contemporary time, the notion of body has been diversified and undoubtedly, the changed time and space plays a crucial role in how today's Rai women are shaping and constructing their ideas on beauty and body care. In the present context, an awakening on the question of self-identity closely associated with the notion of presentation of self together holds the body image of Rai women of Sikkim. This lends credence to Tylka and Wood-Barcalow's (2024) study, that highlights on, the women's self reflexivity concerning their ability to filter out normative body standards, acceptance of unique body and carrying a positive and holistic outlook on their appearance as manifesting into positive body image as well as psychological wellbeing. This argument can be situated from the narrative of 38 years old respondent, popularly known as a biker from Assam Lingzey who is married and currently working in the Department of Public Health Engineering, Gangtok. Embracing her image as a motorcycle rider that does not fit into the normative portrayal of Rai cultural and traditional body image, she delightedly shares:

I travel daily on a bike while going for my official duty and receive a lot of compliments from people saying I look good riding which makes me happy and proud of myself. Since I am a rider I always wear rough clothes like torn jeans, boots and leather jackets and that is how I like to present myself as it gives me a lot of confidence and clothes other than those do not suit my body image.

Body image, self identity and presentation of self together have become intertwined and determining factors in identifying the subjective perceptions and ideas on beauty. These factors in the wake of modern capitalist society do not solely develop in isolation but as a result of constant interaction with the wider society and its various agencies. These experiences and interactions are often reflected as shaping the way women are perceiving their body and constructing their ideas on body. For instance, on the question of 'How do you find/perceive your body?', a high school going student who is 14 years old and has a body weight of 55kgs, narrated experience of how her weight becomes problematic as she does not fit into the 'normal standard size/ zero figure'. In her words:

I wish I were slim. I exercise a lot to lose weight. The clothes that I like and are trendy in the market don't always fit me because I am fat, the sizes available in the market are limited so I constantly feel the need to lose some weight.

Similar perception has been noted in the narration of a 25 years old respondent from Gangtok who has completed her MA and is currently undergoing B. ED course. Drawing onto her subjective experiences, she narrates:

I am not satisfied with my body, particularly my height. The main reason behind it is, once I got rejected in a Sikkim police physical interview because my height is just 5 feet. That rejection made me feel that I am really short. Also recently due to lockdown I got fatter and my family and friends were telling me that I look very short and round like a ball. So, because of all these comments, I started daily exercise and I am trying to lose some weight.

The Socio Cultural Theory of Vygotsky (1978) which points out how a sense of dissatisfaction with regard to the body and appearance emerges with comparison to the ideal body images one holds, remains empirically evident. The opening up of the beauty realm in the globalized world expedited by information technology has introduced diverse concepts of beauty, such as Korean (K-pop), Indian mainstream (Bollywood), Western (Hollywood). The representation of women in the dominant media has often been found as mostly endorsing sleek and slender figure, tall heights, sharp facial features like pointed nose which contradicts the general body image of mongoloid looking Rai women. Such portrayal of body image in the domain of social media fashioned by post-feminist ideals does not only narrow the standards of beauty among women but also leads to commodification and objectification of the woman's body (Smith and Jones, 2018). In empirical situation, this argument corroborates with the way Rai women have been subjected to conflict and tension in their own bodies as against the body and beauty ideal shaped by the dominant media. Additionally, the forces of globalisation have opened up cosmetic surgery tourism implicitly facilitating the body modifications, transformation and maintenance practices (Casanova and Sutton, 2013). Therefore, as a result of the conflicting images, concepts of beauty and body as well as the global pressure to reproduce the bodily practices, the dissatisfaction regarding the body image and desire to overcome, among the women becomes prominent. In addition to the beauty standard set by Hollywood and Bollywood which has been commonly noticed among the youngsters in Sikkim, the desire to look like Korean celebrities is also not uncommon. Youngsters longing for a perfect body, flawless and glowing skin was evident among many women including a 21 years old university student from Gangtok who states:

I wish to opt for a skin treatment to have flawless skin like that of Korean pop artists because I feel very embarrassed with my face which is full of acne scars and pimples. I think the face is crucial to make one confident, therefore a perfect body for me is having flawless skin and then having a slender figure.

The body size and the associated health concern and awareness was also evident among few respondents. A 24 years old respondent from Gangtok who has recently completed her M.A degree expressed her dissatisfaction of having obesity and also showed health concerns. She narrates:

I would like to change my whole body because I have obesity and I want my body to be healthy. I always fear that I may get a heart stroke, thyroid or sugar. A healthy body is very important when it comes to a perfect body. I also started going to the gym to keep my body fit. However, it has been discontinued due to lockdown.

The relevance of Socio-Developmental theories could also be drawn in terms of understanding

how the Rai women perceived their body. Puberty and developing stages of life of young women on one hand, and peer influence on the other is an intricate factor which helps in shaping notions on one's body image. The consciousness, the influences and the opinion(s) of others, conditions the way in which the body is perceived and the ideas of beauty are constructed. Nevertheless, body and beauty are often associated together and remain fluid to the dominant body standards which are highly marketised and endorsed in the mainstream media. The empirical relevance of this theoretical argument can be drawn from the narrative of the following respondent.

Bodily experiences of stereotype have been found in the story of a 26 years old respondent who is from Gangtok and a teacher by profession. In her words:

I am very conscious of my height. I wish I had some extra inches is a phrase I say almost everyday to myself. Growing up I have heard my friends calling me purki⁷, portable and it does not always have to be in a teasing manner sometimes in general conversation also if they call me short and say things like you are very portable then it remains at the back of my mind. I try not to get affected but somehow unconsciously it affects my confidence and it shows especially when I choose shoes having bit platform shoes and slippers/sandals with extra inches of heights.

Market capitalism and consumerism leads to major transformation in both beauty and body care notions and practices. Biswas (2024) points out that, post-industrial capitalism has made the body a commodity, open to negotiation to align with the burgeoning politics of beauty industry in India as similar to Dworkin and Wachs's observations in America. This also finds reflection in the Sikkimese context whereby transnational capitalism has turned the body into a site of consumerism at large and the use of beauty products stand institutionalized as a normal practice among the women. From use of minimal beauty products on daily basis like face cream, skin moisturizer, sunscreen (Spf), lipstick, eye makeup and periodic body care involving facials, pedicure, manicure, hair spa, hair colouring etc. to eventually using full fledged cosmetics in terms of situational demand concerning presentation of self in public and social events was reported as revealed by the Figure 1.

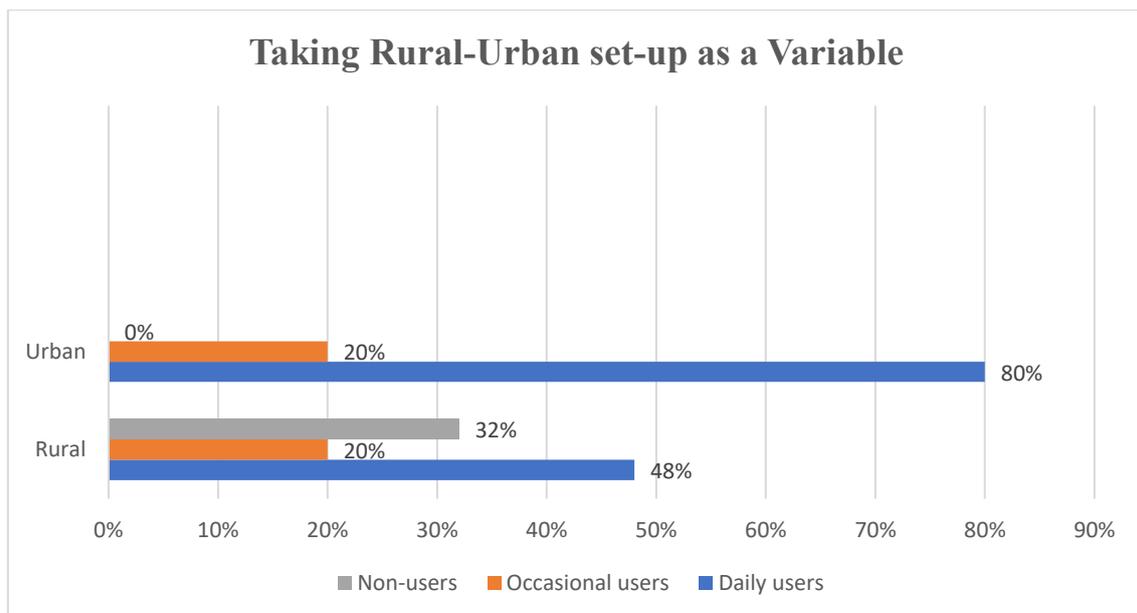


Figure 1. Beauty and Body Care Product Users

⁷ Purki is a Nepali colloquial expression used to denote women having short height.

Evidently the figure indicates all participants from Gangtok (urban sector) are beauty and body care product users. Contrastingly, in Assam Lingzey (rural sector) a remarkable 32% fall under the category of non-users. These sections consisted of women who are mostly housewives and also those engaged in agricultural practices who hardly have any time for beauty and body care practices. Out of the total beauty and body care product users in Gangtok (100%), 20% of the women are occasional users. While the rest 80% are daily users of beauty and body care products of various brands available online and on the market. While in Assam Lingzey (rural sector) 48% of the total sample taken reported daily use, 20% to occasional use and 32% did not use any product. A significant variation in terms of the beauty and body care products being used has been observed between the rural and urban areas.

This practice hints on the way in which the beauty/body care practices are being institutionalized today. Conceptually, Giddens (1991) views the body as ‘a project’ as the body is always in the process of becoming, especially when looked at as something which should be worked at and accomplished in order to create an individual’s self-identity. Contextually in Sikkim too irrespective of the rural-urban setup, there is growing awareness of various fitness programs for body management through various electronic and social media platforms. On the other hand, Sikkim is witnessing mushroom growth of fitness centres like gym, aerobics, zumba, yoga and meditation centres. However, in terms of the beauty and body care products being used, a significant variation has been observed between the rural and urban areas. While the women of the urban area reported to be using the global brands like Lakme, Raga, Khadi, Lotus, Maybelline, The Body Shop, Innisfree etc., the rural women were limited to use of brands like Fair/Glow and Lovely, Vaseline, Boroline, Boro plus, Aloe Vera, Lakme etc. The daily use of beauty products is also seen to be an age specific practice as those women falling in between the age group 51 years to 80 and above were either using occasionally or not found to be daily users of beauty and body care products. While the women of the mid age group (21-40 years old), as well as young girls (between 14-20 years old) were involved in regular use, indicating age as a determining factor in the use of body and beauty care products.

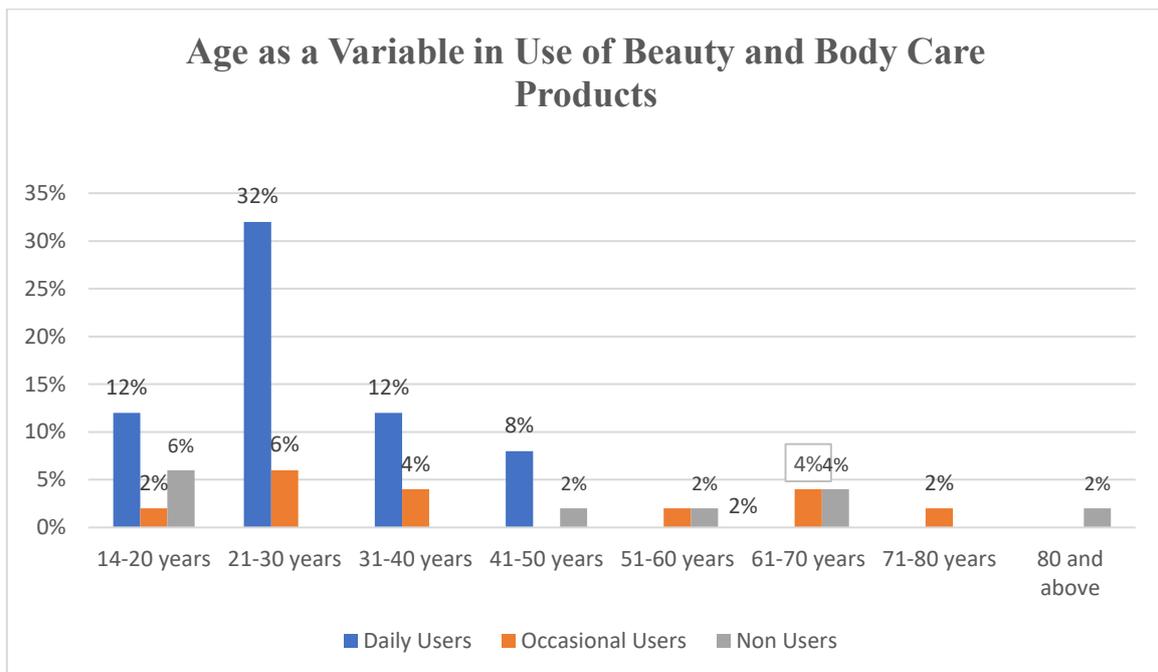


Figure 2. Age Wise Distribution of Beauty and Body Care Products Usage

Furthermore, when it comes to the economic background of the women and trends of beauty and body care practises, the analysis points out that income is not the sole determining factor for use of beauty and body care products. The reason behind the circumstance is of the innumerable beauty and body care brands of varying price ranges, and quality being available in the market. However, on further query it revealed that income categorically determines the quality and the brand of the products being used.

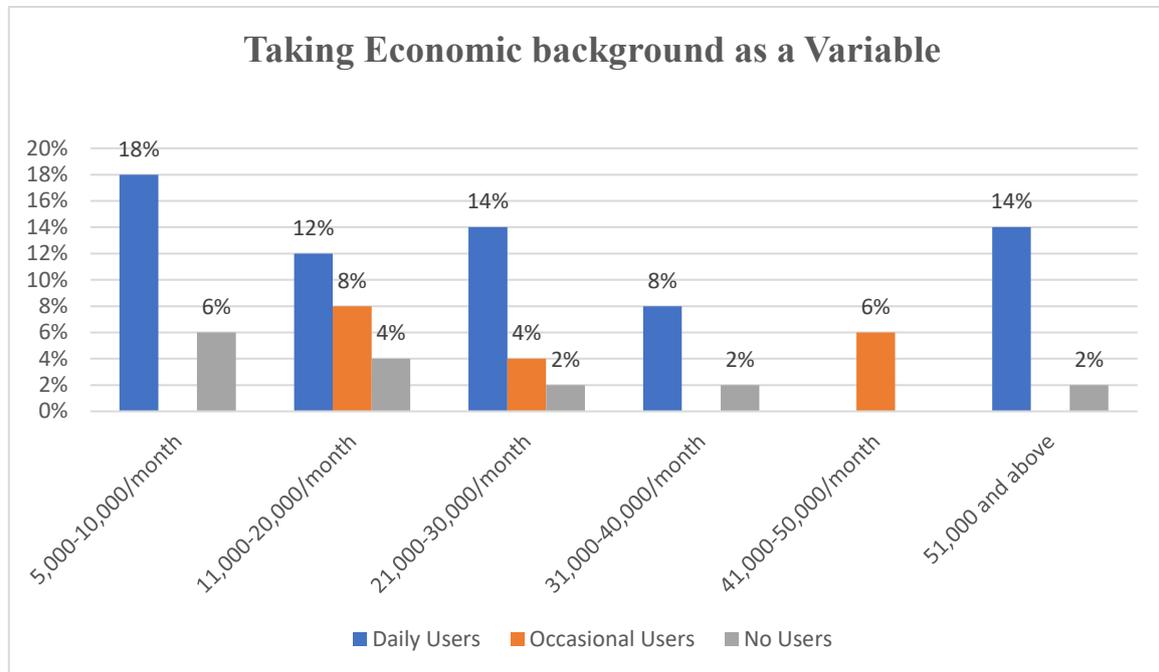


Figure 3. Distribution of Beauty and Body Care Products Usage by Income

The spending pattern as well as using the types of branded body and beauty care products is largely determined by one's income level. Figure presented above shows the variation on beauty and body care product users as per the respondents' income level. In the case of women not earning (house wives, students etc.), their family income has been taken for analysis. The figure indicates that the highest 18% of daily users of cosmetics/beauty and body care products belonged to the income group of Rs. 5,000-10,000/month. Another 14% each fall within the monthly income range of Rs. 21,000- 30,000 and Rs. 51,000 above, while 12% have an income level of Rs. 11,000-20,000/ month. The lowest percentage of daily users accounted for 8% falling under the monthly income between Rs. 31,000-40,000/month.

While the remaining, 18% from the income group of Rs. 11,000- 30,000/ month (12%) and Rs. 41,000- 50,000/ month (6%) falls under the category of those who uses beauty and body care products only when they have certain occasions to attend such as parties, marriage ceremonies, festivals and social gatherings.

Interestingly, a form of alternative economic negotiations in relation to their maintenance and management of body and self is apparent among the women. Such that of,

A 45 years old respondent from Assam Lingzey having a monthly family income of Rs11,000-20,000 narrates:

The shopkeeper from whom I buy my cosmetics and body care products has a very good relation with me and is like a brother to me. So he gives me things on credit. Even if there is something I like and want to buy but do not have cash to buy he will always give me the product and I can always pay him when I have money.

Another 14 years old respondent from Assam Lingzey whose family income level falls within

Rs.5000-10,000/ month talked about sharing clothes and cosmetics with her siblings. In her words:

I am the youngest sister and we are four daughters in total. My sisters always let me wear their clothes and because of that I always have plenty of choices to wear. Same with beauty products as I am the youngest I get the least amount of pocket money but I don't even have to buy cosmetics as I can always use my sister's make up.

Commenting on her alternative way of negotiation with regard to body maintenance and management, 26 years old respondent from Gangtok who is a teacher by profession and has a monthly income of Rs. 31,000-40,000 remarks:

I recently have discovered a new thing and this thing is my solution to all needs. Since we are women no wonder what, we always end up buying so many things. We don't always make calculative decisions when shopping and we love experimenting with new beauty and body care products and this results in hoarding products unnecessarily. What I have done now is called thrifting⁸. I have recently discovered that the things you don't use anymore can always be thrifted. I thrift my old clothes, shoes, and some unused cosmetics (which I impulsively bought) on Instagram and in return I get cash. With this cash I can always buy things and maybe save a little.

In relation to the spending pattern in body and beauty care, market capitalism has a heightened role in providing options in beauty and body care brands to choose from. The options available in the market cater to factors of affordability (products available in different prices), variation of products (varieties in brands), and availability of global brands. Income in this regard is likely to categorically determine the quality and the brand of the products being used. Nonetheless, the global structural processes of globalisation, transnational market capitalism, consumerism and dominant media paving to ideological hegemony has resorted women to perform the popular culture in their everyday life.

5. Self Presentation and Negotiation in the Everyday Life

Substantially the ethno-cultural traits of visualising Rai women in present context have come in conflict as a result of sweeping waves of modernity, influence of westernisation, information technology and global exposure. Martinez and Turner (2024) points out that, the women's body image is largely impacted by body size comparisons as well as self-objectification with the internalised body ideal. This body ideal as depicted in dominant media can be inferred as contradictory to the traditional visualisation of Rai women wearing cultural dress, heavy traditional ornaments and keeping a braided hair adorned with traditional hair ornament *lacha dori* while covering the front part of head with head scarf. Consequently, with the desire to maintain their body image along the lines of modern dominant one, the women at present are often seen as negotiating with the traditionally idealized body image.

The exposure to the mainstream Bollywood culture and the global alien culture including that of Western and Korean subtly impels women to negotiate in numerous ways to meet the dominant body image. Consequently, the modern day Rai women have been found as introducing various ways of negotiation to achieve this dominant body image. The following section intends to explore the various ways in which the negotiations are being made. A 27 years old PhD research scholar from urban Sikkim who loves the traditional portrayal of her body image occasionally comments:

⁸ It is a recent trend in vogue which includes buying and selling of second hand products in online/ social media platforms.

I love wearing Rai dress during social events like programs, festivals and while attending weddings of relatives but not the ornaments because I find it quite heavy and uncomfortable. So I wear it with minimal ornaments which are usually non-traditional, minimal and modern.

Commenting on the discontinuation of the use of traditional ornaments, a 58 years old respondent who is a cultivator by profession narrates:

I used to wear dhungri, bulaki (traditional Rai ornaments) but now I don't wear it anymore and have kept it all. My daughters tell me that I look different and younger without those ornaments as compared to when I used to wear them.

Contemplating her body image and self presentation in cultural dress, a 38 years old respondent from Rural Sikkim who works in Gangtok PHE (Public Health Engineering) department and is well known in her village as a 'lady rider/biker' states:

I am proud that I am Rai and I like to wear Rai dress but when it comes to handling it becomes very tough for me as I regularly travel on my bike. Also, it does not suit me because usually I carry very rough and tough looks in my everyday life. Even while going to the office, I go in tracks and jackets. If certain occasions are there in the office, where I need to look more presentable, then I wear formal pants. I rarely wear a Rai dress and when I wear it, I try to walk slowly and softly to look more feminine which I always do not find comfortable. As in my casual dress I hardly bother and walk very roughly.

The way in which the body is being perceived and constructed in the contemporary time does not remain aloof from the larger social context. The interplay of cultural and religious influence in everyday lived experiences also has an impact on how women are constructing their ideas on body and beauty and similarly perceiving their body. The following narratives provide empirical support to this argument: A 25 years old woman's narration reflects on how one's religious worldview clashes with her cultural portrayal of body image:

I don't have ethnic costumes and ornaments because I never prefer to wear a Rai dress. Talking about ornaments I am a born Christian (El Shaddai) and my parents do not allow me to wear heavy ornaments or even pierce my nose and ears which traditionally was practised among the Rai community. We believe in simplicity.

Another 24 years old respondent from who is a university going student pointing at her relatively short height of 4'10", states:

I don't prefer to wear our ethnic costume often because I don't have good height. I am not tall, so it is not feasible for me to wear heels all the time and without heels I feel I don't look good in the ethnic costumes.

Ideas of negotiation to a large extent are shaped by many factors among which educational influence and role of parents/family are more prominent. If education has made the women more aware of the body related concerns, then the role of parents in socialization also has reported changing the outlook of young women on fitting into the dominant body images. These two factors therefore remain intricate in the way young women are redefining and shaping one's idea on body and beauty.

6. Factors and Agencies in Construction of the Modern Body Image

On exploring the impact of modernity, the primary roles played by various agencies such as media, internet, family, peer influence, popular cultures like Bollywood, Hollywood, Korean

movies as well as social conditioning remains apparent. These agencies play a vital role in influencing the way women in general are constructing their body image in the contemporary time and the Rai women as well are not isolated from the influence. Moreover, such influences are observed as affecting the way women across the societies are perceiving their body. For instance, Taniguchi and Lee's (2012) comparative study emphasises the heightened role of the media in contributing body image disturbances among women who particularly remained largely exposed to social media in both western (America) and Asian (Japanese) culture. Moreover, globalisation and information/interactive technology to a larger extent has influenced the way Rai women are perceiving their body and constructing their ideas on body and beauty both in terms of dressing and body care. The influential agencies like the use of the internet, the role of media, influence of Bollywood and Korean pop plays an instrumental role. For instance, a case of the high influence of Bollywood in the body shape and size is evident in the response of 41 years old respondent from Assam Lingzey and a post-graduate who is currently working in the department of Rural Management and Development (RMDD):

From Bollywood I like Aishwarya Rai Bachan's body. I think she has a perfect body. I saw her in one of the movies though I don't remember the movie's name but it was my first movie and since I saw her, I find her very beautiful and her body as ideal.

Interestingly, the role of the media and information technology in disseminating the foreign culture is highly evident as a section of the young generations were found to be highly influenced by Korean culture. The narrative of 16 years old, school going respondent from Assam Lingzey substantiates this argument:

I watch many Korean shows on YouTube and my favourite K-Pop star is Lisa from Black pink. She is a singer and dancer. Above all, her body is perfect and she is very beautiful. I like Korean fashion so I always wear oversized hoodies, and baggy tops. I like dressing Korean and also looking like one.

Furthermore, along with the above mentioned factors peer influence as well as family have an important role to play as agencies of influence in this regard. Friends, peer groups, family, relatives as well as people of the community that prevail as socio-cultural channels are often cordial influencers on phenomenological everyday experiences on body image of the women. In this regard, social conditioning and age factors most likely come into play. Empirically locating among the Rai women these factors were found to be instrumental in shaping and constructing one's idea of body and beauty. In this regard, a 45 years old housewife/homemaker from Assam Lingzey who narrates:

When I was in my 20's I never applied any make-up and my face was good at that time. I only started to use make-up after my 30s as my sister suggested looking at my skin that was getting darker and pigmented.

With regard to peer influence and also social media mediated ideas on trendy practices related to the body, a 30 years old respondent who runs a grocery shop in her village Assam Lingzey states:

When we were in college, one of my friends saw on facebook and shared her idea of getting similar tattoos as a symbol of friendship. So five years ago me and my four other friends went to a tattoo shop and got similar tattoos on our hands.

In addition, the socio-economic conditioning of one also remains an important factor in perceiving their own body as well as constructing their ideas as exhibited in the narrative of 45 years old respondent from Assam Lingzey who works in agricultural farming:

I prefer a body that is slim because in villages we have to do a lot of work and we have to do it fast, for that if we have a body of bigger sizes it becomes difficult to work and fatter the body more tired you get while working. As in villages, work usually includes running and physical labour in the agricultural field.

The social conditioning as an important agency in constructing as well as constraining one's idea of body/beauty is narrated by a 62 years old respondent from Assam Lingzey. She comments:

When I was young, my friends used to cut their hair imitating some actresses. They also used to part their hair in side, cut fringes. But I could not cut my hair then because my economic situation was not sound then and I used to be ashamed thinking people would talk behind my back if I cut my hair despite my family's troublesome economic situation. Today, my economic condition has hardly improved but my children do not resort to this pattern of thought.

Tiggemann (2011) laying out the socio-cultural model emphasises on the socio-cultural channels including the role played by media, family, peer and culture in socialisation and internalisation of the societal ideals of body and beauty. In accordance to this theoretical lens, the empirical narratives presented above highlights how the body is not only confined to itself but is subjective to various factors and agents that contribute to the larger discourse of the body. All these factors mentioned above together are found to be imperative in assessing and exploring changing discourse of Body among Rai women. The women and their bodily choices, expression and opinion therefore remain at the sublime of the structural factors and agencies. Furthermore, it is under these embodied experiences the women are found as navigating and redefining the larger body discourse.

7. Conclusion

The body discourse among Rai women has undergone paramount changes in socio-cultural context. The global structural forces have facilitated major transformation in terms of beauty, body care notions and practices among Rai women of today. Under this structural contingency the traditional notion of body and beauty stands in conflict with the modern dominant notion(s). The desire to achieve the modern body image and present their bodies in the line of dominant one as represented in media has undoubtedly contributed to the loss of etho-cultural representation of Rai women in larger society. Nonetheless, the contemporary discourse on the body of the Rai women can be seen as cultivating new dimensions. One can witness various negotiations being carried out by the women at present to fit themselves in the demand of modern somatic society and influential global forces of market capitalism and consumerism. However, the whole discourse on the body lies central to the social phenomenon and cannot be confined because as time changes it is likely to change accordingly. Besides, it remains crucial to note that the very notion of the body is subjective and varies from person to person and across time and space. It is in this context an 'ideal body' remains an insurmountable question open to various contestations.

This paper on the changing body discourse among Rai women attempts to fill in the research gap by exploring the area that remains untouched in academic research pertaining to the local context of the Rai community. Women and their bodies often are positioned as markers of cultural expressions in almost all societies. Nonetheless, the normative body ideal that remains gender codified is often perceived as what Berger and Luckmann (1966) conceptualises "taken for granted" reality, thus, deeply embedded and institutionalised in the socio-cultural norm. The paper explores the dimensions of body discourse and address how the changing dynamics

of society is impacting the discourse of body particularly taking Kirati Rai ethno-group of Sikkim. Underlying the fast emerging homogenised culture laden with the dominant idea of beauty and body in modernity, the conflict and negotiation among Rai women with respect to the choice of either retaining the traditional presentation of self, or following the prevailing dominant idea of beauty and body becomes apparent. Therefore, this study underscores the negotiating and conflict that takes place in everyday lives of women with regard to their self-identity, consumption pattern, body image and self presentation contributing to the epistemological background of the body. In its methodological venture, the paper takes into account the phenomenological approach to unveil the subjectivity of the women in their perception, practices and negotiations carried out to understand the structural context within which the women perceive their reality. This approach informs future qualitative research to bridge the complexity between subjective and nuanced experiences of the participants and objectivity of the structural contingencies that shape the experience. Thus, adoption of similar approach may be hinted where the boundaries of understanding the subjectivity through objective reality remains fluid.

The paper by highlighting the cultural body and its changing discourse further intends to foster awareness and consciousness on the global cultural homogenisation process witnessed in Sikkim in general and Rai community in particular. Therefore, to mitigate the vulnerability of women to the dominant body standards at the expense of traditional cultural representation it may be suggested and encouraged that at community level the local media may endorse the heterogeneous representation of women from local cultures. The local government may extend support to the local artisans who stand threatened amidst the global cultural homogenisation as the women have reported the unreachability of local artisans who produce ethnic clothes and heritage garments at present. Nevertheless, it is important to highlight that women are provided with spaces that nurture discourse on body autonomy that remain culturally informed rather than normatively moralised at both private (home) and public (school, workplace, online community) domains.

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