

Mrs Spatika Rai, Serving Bureaucrat - Rural Development Department, Govt of Sikkim



Interview

1. What motivated you to join the civil services?

Having been brought up in a village, I grew up very close with nature and the rural way of life. As I grew up my parents, especially my father, was a huge motivating factor for me. He always encouraged me to be independent and well-educated. I personally also felt it was important for me to stand on my own feet and be financially independent. My passion to work for the rural people and contribute to society is what drove me to the services in particular.

2. Could you elaborate on your work in the rural development department of Sikkim? What did your primary responsibilities entail?

I was in the rural development department for a long time. I was appointed there first and spent a major part of my career there. In Sikkim, the rural department is very connected with the rural people. My day would start and end with discussions with them. I was working at the ground level as a BDO (Block Development Officer). I would go to the village and visit below poverty line families who really needed us to work for them. It gave me a sense of satisfaction to work for the rural people because it was what I was always passionate about. Seeing the schemes of the Central government flow to the state government and then to the block level was an amazing journey.

3. As a woman bureaucrat in India, what unique challenges have you encountered in your career, and how have you overcome them?

When it comes to the state of Sikkim, there is really no gender bias over here. Women are at par with men. In fact, the percentage of educated women is far more than the number of educated men. Although, I did face many challenges with the terrain. I was transferred to the district area which was in the hills and very far off from the capital and the roads were not that developed. It was especially bad in monsoons, similar to what we are seeing on the news right now. It was quite risky at times to travel to far off places. The roads would often break and you would encounter landslides, often risking your life. That was one challenge I faced as a woman bureaucrat when I was transferred to the district. But as far as official work went, we did not have any gender based discrepancies.

4. What are some of the key accomplishments in your career that have left a lasting impression on you?

I spent almost 5 years as a Block Development Officer. Those years I felt were very rewarding. Even looking back I feel a drop of satisfaction because working in rural areas is not an easy job, it's not everyone's cup of tea. Like I said, it's very far off from the main town area and you are located in the middle of a village which is in itself very challenging. One thing that I did when working as BDO was

I was working in this place called Nandok which is almost 25 km away from Gangtok, and the population was mostly engaged in agricultural work. So I dedicated every Thursday in a week for the villagers and farmers, and gave them space in the office premises to bring in their produce. I termed this as the 'Thursday Haat'. Since the local markets were closed on Thursdays, this allowed villagers to continue to sell their produce and make profits. They would come in groups. Women would cook outside together and pack it and bring it to the haat. An article of that was actually printed in a daily local as well. That was a high point for me because I felt like I really gave something back to the local communities.

5. Sikkim is currently facing a huge environmental crisis. At the rural level, what were some steps you implemented to help deal with this crisis? What long term developments do you feel should be made so that the state is better equipped to handle such challenges in the future?

The Prime Minister came up with the brilliant idea of Swachh Bharat Abhiyaan, during which we advocated the 3Rs-Reduce, Reuse and Recycle at a local level. The ban on single use plastic was also implemented in the district that I was working in. There were 7 villages under my control. Between these areas there are local markets and office establishments where we had banned the use of non-biodegradable plastic waste. We also worked on the segregation of waste. With the help of the central and state government, I worked on a project and pitched it to the Rural Development Headquarters in Gangtok. We were able to bring in a garbage recycle vehicle that is still running successfully.

Every day the vehicle would run to the Gram Panchayats of each of the 7 villages and collect the waste before it was disposed of. That was one of my contributions to the environmental challenges. We have also maintained many plantations and farms under the MGNREGA scheme. There are bamboo plantations for damage control of landslides and Broom plantations that help in soil erosion. We've worked a lot on maintaining our ecology through these initiatives.

6. What do you believe is the biggest policy concern facing Sikkim today and how should it be addressed?

One policy challenge that we are facing right now is unemployment. Many of our people are educated but go to other states to work in private companies. Once they go outside they don't want to return to Sikkim. I see lots of youngsters going to the UK and USA. They don't want to come back. So I feel we are losing something because they could be very valuable to our states, but they are of the view that they are greener avenues for them elsewhere. In Sikkim it's kind of a tradition to come back. During the time of my studies my parents had told me to make sure to come back and settle down here, and I also want my children to come back once they've finished their studies and get jobs here. On that front, I think we need to create more job avenues for the youngsters.

Another difficulty we face is that here there is no yearly UPSC exam. It's very erratic. Sometimes it comes once in two years, sometimes in three years, and sometimes even in five years. So we really need to work on this. I was speaking to my colleagues about this the other day as well. Even if there are just one or two vacancies, we need to follow the UPSC pattern so that our youngsters will want to come back. Otherwise they will continue chasing outside opportunities. I think these are one or two areas where we really need to make policy changes.

7. In your experience, what steps can be taken to encourage more women to pursue careers in the civil services and policymaking roles?

As a woman, I believe other women need to be more focused and career-oriented. Our society is such that women are always blamed for problems. But if you have your own independence, you don't need to bank on someone else if things go wrong in your life. Men have an easy way out. Society doesn't think twice before attaching stereotypes to women. Women should broaden their perspectives and be more global citizens. We are able to impart more knowledge and education as women. As the saying goes-"Educate a woman and educate a family". So I feel education is also another important area to focus on.

8. What advice would you offer to young women who aspire to pursue careers in policy and governance?

As I said earlier, focus is very important. Until and unless you aren't focused and dedicated to your work, it will be very difficult for you. Focus on your studies right from your school to the university level. It is a great pleasure to see women get doctorates and PhDs today, it's very inspiring!

