

Forest Policies and Tribal Livelihood among the Lepcha Tribe of Sikkim Himalaya

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ABSTRACT

India with 10.4 million tribes has 8.6% of its tribal population. Tribe and forest are closely linked with each other (B.S.Bisht; Tribes Of India, Nepal, Tibet, Borderland, 1994). For thousands of years, forest and tribal populations have progressed in interdependence. Forest plays a significant role in enhancing living necessities for rural community and in upholding ecological balance. Industrial development, have changed the forest policy which has led to convert forest land into commercialization pushing the indigenous group away from their soil. The state of Sikkim in India has a multi-cultural and multi-lingual population including about 22.36% tribes (Sikkim.nic.in). Out of them, Lepchas and Bhutias constitute the largest tribal communities of Sikkim. Majority of tribes are poor, illiterate and victims without assets as compared to the general population and victims of many development projects that have left them homeless. Therefore, the constitution of India /Government of India takes the responsibility to safeguard their interests and the forest. Sikkim as a state has also adopted State Policy of Environment, Forests and Land Use. Under which, basic objectives on how to govern environment, forest and land use are listed.

1. Introduction

Forest is an essential part of the tribal mode of life. It is an integral part in relation with their social, cultural and economic system among the tribes. For thousands of years, forest and tribal populations have progressed in interdependence. Forest plays a significant role in enhancing living necessities for rural community and in upholding ecological balance. Over 53 million tribal people reside in India; about 60% of the rural communities unswervingly rely on forest for their day-to-day requirement. The bio cultural fact of these 'ecosystem people' has made them withstand their life through the ages. However, the racial minorities (STs) in rural India are characterized by topographical segregation as well as strong sense of socio-cultural exclusion. Their living extremely hinge on using timber as well as non-timber forest products (NTFPs) for numerous purposes, e.g. medication, nutrition, financial and other socio-religious purposes. However, it has grown position in recent years in policy strategies of Government owing to its importance in life funding material to large number of forest dwelling societies.

The state of Sikkim in India has a multi-cultural and multi-lingual population including about 22.36% tribes. Out of them, Lepchas and Bhutias constitute largest tribal communities of Sikkim, distributed in the districts of Northern part of the state. The North district is enriched with the wealth of forest and explains an intimate man-nature relationship between forest resources and the tribal livelihood of Sikkim. It also throws light

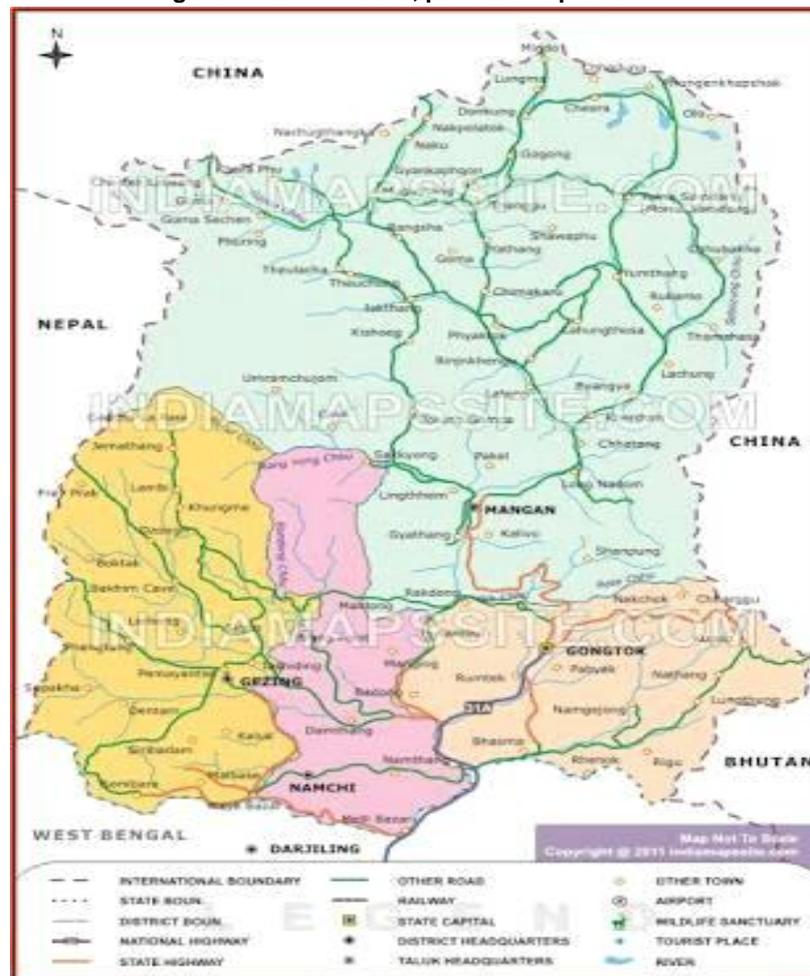
on traditional information and cultural practices of this social group for preservation and protection of forest resources.

2. Geographical Location

Background of the study Area

Sikkim, state of India, is located in the north-eastern part of the country, in the eastern Himalayas. It is one of the smallest states in India. Sikkim with the total population of 6,07,0688 (census of India 2012), is located between 27°04'46" to 28°07'48" north latitude and 88°00'55" to 88°55'25" east longitude (K.C. Eklabya, et. al., 2004) with the total area of 7096sq km measuring approximately 112km from north to south and 64 km from east to west. It shares its boundary with Himalayan kingdom of Bhutan in the north and Nepal in the west forming a buffer zone between China on the north and India on the south. The state shares its boundary with three countries and with the Indian state of West Bengal district Darjeeling (Chettri, 2010 op cit). In the North and the North East it is bounded by the vast stretches of Tibetan Plateau, on the East by the Chumbi Valley of Tibet and Bhutan, Nepal on the West and on the South by the Darjeeling District of West Bengal, India (H.H.Kuloy 1972). The capital is Gangtok in the south-eastern part of the state. Long a sovereign political entity, Sikkim became a protectorate of India in 1950 and an Indian state in 1975. Its small size notwithstanding, Sikkim is of great political and strategic importance for India because of its location along several international boundaries.

Figure 1.1 Sikkim state, political map of Sikkim



Source: NDMA, Govt. Of India

Population of Sikkim comprises of different ethnic cultural group of the Lepchas, the Bhutias, the Nepalese and the Plainsmen. Lepchas are said to be the originals inhabitants of Sikkim who have been migrated from the east, along the foothills; from the direction of Assam and Burma (Joshi, 2012 op cit). Lepchas are fond of loving in nature in remote and un-accessible regions, within the mountains, flora and fauna; they even have a large knowledge of forest, the plants used for medicinal values. They are the natures lovers and worship mountain as their deity. The majority of the Lepchas are Buddhist by religion nowadays (S.K. Sharma and Usha Sharma 1998). Sikkim also has the contribution of Bhutia tribes, who are of Tibetan origin and have settled in Sikkim before the invasion of the Chogyals in Sikkim. Their religion is Buddhism and their language is dialect to Tibetan (Ibdi). The Bhutias came to Sikkim in the 14th century and are considered as good traders and many of them are herdsmen looking after their valuable yaks and sheep (Joshi ,2010 op cit). Nepalese are the third and the largest group of people in Sikkim. Nepalese people are good in business and administration, excellent settlers who are said to have emigrated from neighboring Nepal. Sikkim population has also an important role of plainsmen who are engaged in different business sector, they are said to be migrated from Bihar, Haryana, Bengal, Uttar Pradesh, and other places of India. It is said that the influx of plainsmen started after the merger of Sikkim with the Indian Union in 1975 (Dewan,2012 op cit).

3. Objective of the study

The main objective of the study is to understand different forest policies and the direct and the indirect impact in the livelihood amongst the tribal group in Sikkim.

4. Materials and method

Different sources have been used for gathering the information related to the issues of different forest policies and the direct and the indirect impact in the livelihood amongst the Lepcha Tribe in Sikkim Himalaya . The present study is based on secondary data sources. The data and the information that has been used are obtained from reports, books, journals, paper from census of India, ENVIS Centre Sikkim (Environmental Information System).

5. Tribe

A common meaning for a tribe is a set of people that all have mutual ancestry, or a common philosophy and live in their own bounded culture. Tribe is a communal division in a traditional culture comprising of folks or groups connected by communal, commercial, spiritual, blood ties, with a shared culture and language, stereotypically having a recognised front-runner.

6. Importance of Forest

Forest plays a vital part in enhancing living necessities for rural community and in upholding ecological balance. Over 53 million tribal people in India, about 60% of the rural communities unswervingly depend on forest for their day-to-day necessities. The racial minorities (STs) in rural India are categorized by geographic segregation as well as strong sense of communal folk exclusion. The indigenous sets are the most backward social groups with constitutional protection. The tribal in India are typically rural living mostly in forest and mountain ranges.

7. Relation between Forest and Tribe

Forest is of immense importance to us. Not only does it serve the purpose of providing shelter to humans and animals but it is also responsible for the climate control and atmosphere. It is deemed sacred to many tribes from continents of Asia to Africa. They still depend on these forests for food, shelter, protection and knowledge.

Tribal depend upon forest for many things in different ways. Many of the factors the tribal depend upon include socio-economic condition, distribution cultural and religion norms etc. However, while the primitive tribe live inside the dense forests depending entirely upon the forest for survival. On the other hand, are the "tribal communities" which have by now gotten access to modern way of living and doesn't entirely depend upon the forest, yet hold it sacred as a part of their culture.

In Sikkim, the Lepchas are always regarded as being on a lower plane of civilization than other ethnic groups and considered freedom more treasured than a settled monotonous life style. They are a race of predators and food hoarders, wandering the dense forests and isolated mountains. They have less communication with the outside world and rarer trading facilities and openings than the Bhutias and the Nepalese. The Dzongu region is categorized by great environmental lushness and diversity. The inhabitants hunted, fished, gathered wild plant products and engaged in slash and burn cultivation. In Dzongu, slash and burn cultivation was sufficiently productive in combination with other subsistence and productive activities, to account for the small permanent hamlets. However, the rest of the community remained undifferentiated, the main stratum not having any real roots. The Lepchas had an efficiently organized system which made possible the distribution of the varied resources and products of their land. The geographical position of Dzongu has accentuated its location from the rest of Sikkim. Due to this, Dzongu has not benefitted from the development which has taken place in North Sikkim in the shape of roads and communications - thanks to military settlements - as it does not fall on the highway. The Lepchas of Dzongu even now practice slash and burn agriculture (though in restricted areas of upper Dzongu) and grow dry rice, buckwheat, millet, and barley in these fields following a seven-year rotation cycle. Along with this, they practice sedentary cultivation of wet rice, maize, wheat and vegetables. Cardamom, as a cash crop was introduced at the beginning of this century. Though still a reserved area, the isolation barriers are gradually disappearing as the government sponsored development schemes are being implemented. (One has to obtain a permit for visiting the

Dzongu area. The Deputy Commissioner alone can issue the permit).

The Lepchas rely greatly on indigenous knowledge since ages, they use different parts of plants as medicine as they are readily available, safe and cost effective. The indigenous group mostly relies on herbal medicines as the dispensaries and health centers are located far away.

8. Policies

To understand the policies that is constructed to safeguard the forest and the tribal. It is important to understand why. Besides the fact that the majority of tribal are poor, illiterate and victims without assets as compared to the general population and victims of many development projects that has left them homeless. They are also the vulnerable population (group) with the inability to cope with the mainstream society, culture and political scenario. Therefore, the constitution of India /Government of India takes the responsibility to safeguard their interests and the forest.

It was the Britishers who recognized India's natural wealth and moved on to safeguard it. Post-Independence India saw the government taking further step and forming the Forest Policy 1988. By then many North-east states including Sikkim had already become the part of Indian Union and the government acknowledged the people's wishes/demands to protect their forest.

Article 48A and 55A (g) of the Constitution in accordance with Directive Principles of State policy assign responsibilities to the State and to all people who government that the State shall endeavor to protect and enhance the environment and the protection of trees and wildlife and the protection and improvement of the natural environment, Having compassion for living animals, including forests, lakes and rivers, and wildlife.

Sikkim State Policy of Environment, Forests and Land Use:

In Sikkim, there is a need for "State Policy of Environment, Forests and Land Use". Over the years, Sikkim as a state has expanded in population as a result the forest area is under threat and there is a need for the people to understand that due to the rise in human population as well as the cattle, the many Hydel Projects and demand for fuel wood for cooking and heating purposes has drastically affected the forests. It has become an imperative task for the people to act and safeguard the forest for the future.

The policy lays down the basic objectives that should govern environment, forest and land use as

- Conservation of environmental steadiness through preservation and wherever necessary, renewal of ecological balance that has been distributed due to various biological process activities, faulty land practices and degradation of forest resources.
- Safeguarding the natural heritage of the state through conservation of natural forests of the state, which

represents the wonderful diversity, and genetic resources of the state.

- Frequently investigation the eating away and removal of hill slopes within the structure areas of rivers, streams, lakes, and reservoirs within the interest of soil and conservation for mitigating landslides, floods, and droughts and for the retardation of siltation of reservoirs.
- Increasing the forest/tree cover within the state significantly through substantial forestation, social forestry programs, natural forest restoration through natural regeneration.
- Increasing land productivity through enhanced management methods to satisfy farm animal's desire to accelerate human population in terms of Food, timber, fuel wood and fodder.
- For other purposes, avoid altering forestlands and good agricultural lands.
- Effective land management in urban and village settlements to avoid landslides, flooding, and road harm, bridges, houses, etc.
- Well-organized agricultural land management by regulating the use of pesticides and insecticides to avoid soil and water resource pollution.
- Avoid air pollution by prescribing emission concentrations for vehicles / industries and other air polluting industries, particularly in metropolitan areas.
- Encouraging forest production to be used effectively and maximizing wood replacement.
- Encourage individuals to use alternative heating and cooking energy sources. ENVIS Centre Sikkim (Environmental Information System).

The policy also sets out

- a) Essential environmental, forest and land management strategies.
- b) Environmental, forest and land management strategies.
- c) Ecotourism rights and concessions.
- d) Forest land diversion for non-forest purposes.
- e) Wildlife conservation.
- f) Tribal and forest damage from forest encroachment, fire and grazing.
- g) forest-based sectors.

9. Challenges

Sikkim may be known for its scenic beauty, peace and living harmony with nature. However, the degree of urbanization in Sikkim has moved up from 2% to over 24% in 2011 (Post Facto, Trends and Pattern of Urbanity in Sikkim)

According to the research done by Kalosona Paul and Deepak Sharma, they have stated that population growth in the recent years were seen in small towns like Rangpo, Mangan, and Namchi. The reason for such population growth primarily is due to the influence of employment. There has been growth of pharmaceutical and Allied industries which have not only been devastating effect on the forests but also attracted many people outside Sikkim. With demand of employment many of

these private development projects in form of primarily pharmaceutical and hydel projects have had adverse effects on the entire environment.

Lately, many residences of Sikkim have acknowledged the fact that the forest which remains scared to many are deteriorating or are threatened by external factors. Forest policies remain and are maintained but the challenges have increased with time and these policies seems inadequate.

In 2008, June 20th, the Lepchas participated in Relay Hunger Strike as a protest against hydro-electric projects proposed for the Lepcha reserve of Dzongu in North Sikkim. Dzongu is located in North Sikkim, in India. It lies between Kunchenjunga Biosphere, Teesta and Tholung Chu. During mid-1900s, when Sikkim was still ruled by the Monarchs, the Lepchas were worried about the influx of Nepali settlers, therefore prompted the chogyal (king) of Sikkim to declare the space a "Lepcha Protected Area." This Region, which is surrounded by rivers like Teesta and Rangyoung hold a very particular sentiment to the aborigines (Lepchas) living in the area. Stories that are sacred to them are a part of this region. for example, the Lepchas believe that after death, the souls of the departed would travel along these rivers and would rest on the base of the Kanchenzonga. However there have been heavy influxes of Private Projects which have had adverse effect on the region of Dzongu, in particular as well as the people. 26 Projects have been initiated, out of which 7 such projects run through River Teesta affecting Dzongu Province. (Bulletin Of Tibetology, Lepchas And Their Hydel Protest, Pema Wangchuk)

This Movement started by the Lepchas, spurred mainly by Faith is still an ongoing fight against the authorities, though delayed; there is a need for a stronger, more effective monitoring committee than has ever been attempted in the past.

10. Conclusion

Our paper can be concluded saying that the tribal groups of Sikkim are closely linked with the physical environment thus upholding close connection with the forest resources. Some essential actions have been taken by the Government to improve their life through forest.

The Scheduled Tribes (ST), are the utmost socially and academically deprived and omitted groups in our country. The research shows that the position of this group in the state of Sikkim is somewhat distinct from their counterpart in another portion of the nation. In Sikkim, we don't see scarcity and backwardness among the indigenous group which is a major problem of tribal groups in other parts of India. In comparison with the Sikkim's Scheduled Castes, they are more progressive and advanced. We can see instructional advancement amongst Scheduled Tribe population which is quite remarkable. Likewise, Sikkim has reserved seats for schedule tribe both rural and urban local bodies, which results their good participation in local governance. A great sum of community's representation is found in both state administration and local governance with the reservation provision.

In other areas of the nation, alienation the gradually losing access to their traditional lands among the Scheduled Tribes is also getting lost. Due to the government acquisition of land for development, the major type of alienation from traditional soil has taken place.

The share of property of Lepchas is 20% each and their contribution to land income is 16%. Some members of this group

still have over 100 acres of property. We can conclude it by saying that from the above-mentioned reality that the tribes in this Himalayan state are more advanced and love the high social status and in some cases they are more advanced than the general population that is truly exclusive in the country as a whole.

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