

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

STUDY ON THE SHERPA AGRARIAN ECONOMY AND MANAGEMENT OF LOCAL RESOURCES IN A VILLAGE OF KALIMPONG DISTRICT

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Abstract: *The Sherpa, a specific Scheduled Tribe of Indian subcontinent, is mainly found in the Darjeeling and Kalimpong district of West Bengal and the state of Sikkim, though their main habitat is in Nepal. A socio-anthropological study was carried out (145 households with 836 individuals), to have an idea about the agriculture-based economy and local resource management in Sherpa community at the study area, during 2016-18.*

It was observed that, Sherpa community come under the generic term, the Bhotia, along with some other tribal groups like the Yalmo, Toto, Dukpa, Kagatay. The Sherpas of Kalimpong Khasmahal village of the Community Development block 1 of Kalimpong district of West Bengal are basically agriculture-based. Majority of them (68.45%) are living as terrace cultivators. Some of them found to be engaged in trade, service holders and other professions. As terrace cultivators they totally depend upon the natural resources, and therefore develop their own system of natural resource management. They have their own system of land and irrigational management which makes a pattern of their economic life. These resource management systems not only help them to survive in the harsh ecological condition but also give a distinct pattern to their socio-cultural life. The present article has been made to understand how the Sherpas utilize their indigenous knowledge to maintain local natural resources.

Key Words: Sherpa community, terrace cultivation, resource management, village of Kalimpong district.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Sherpas, the ethnic group of Tebetan origin, often is classified under the broad Scheduled Tribe category of the Bhotia. Though native to the mountains of Nepal, in India, Sherpas mainly live in Darjeeling and Kalimpong district of West Bengal, Sikkim and north-east states. In earlier days they migrated to India from Nepal. Racially they are Mongoloid [1].

They are covered under the generic term Bhotia along with some other groups like the Yalmo, Toto, Dukpa, Kagatay, etc. The Sherpa society is Patriarchal, Patrilineal and Patrilocal in nature [2] and is divided into a

number of **Rus** (Descent Groups). These **Rus** are exogamous. Traditionally they were endogamous. However, presently due to their close contact with the members of other communities, they sometimes marry with the people of the non-Sherpa communities. They have their own Sherpa dialect, and besides their own dialect, they also speak in Nepali language. Some of them, especially the members of the younger generation also know Hindi and English. They use Nepali script. They practice monogamy. Adult marriage is the general custom of the society. Both nuclear and extended families are found in the society. They are Buddhist by religion and follow all Buddhist rites and rituals in connection with the socio-religious aspects. **Lama** is the religious head, who acts as religious functionary in all socio-religious aspects. The post of **Lama** is not hereditary. To maintain customary rules and deal with the offences of their own community they have a traditional tribal council, which is termed as **Dash Thari Samaj** [3].

Management of natural resources is a challenging job in the Himalayan provinces. The typical climatic condition of the Himalayan Mountain region definitely influences the life forms and human activities including economic life. In this paper an attempt has been made to highlight the role of ecology in shaping the economy of the inhabitants of the region and in developing their own system of natural resource management. This natural resource management has helped them to survive in the harsh ecological condition.

2. METHODOLOGY

Extensive ethnographic fieldwork conducted in the study area, for two years (2016-18). Different case studies have been noted throughout the survey period. Convenient and snowball sampling has been employed to choose the informants. The information collected was further analysed to get an overview of the study population (145 households with 836 individuals).

The study was conducted in the Kalimpong Khasmahal village of the Community Development block 1 of Kalimpong district, West Bengal, in 2016-18.

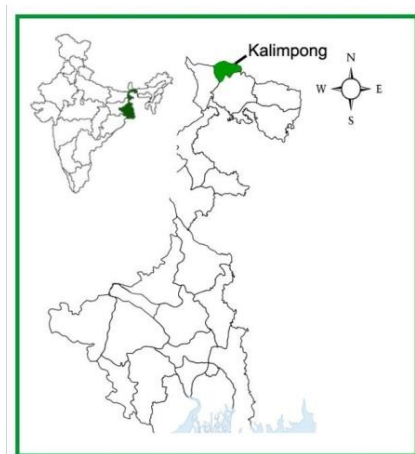


Figure 1. Location map of the study area (Source: Google.com)

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

During the survey, it was observed that Sherpas basically depend on land-based economy. In the term of the land area used by Sherpas in the study area, they cultivate maize (approximately 80% of land area),

millet (40% of land area), paddy (25%), potato (59% of land area) and different types of seasonal vegetables (55% land area) (Figure 2).

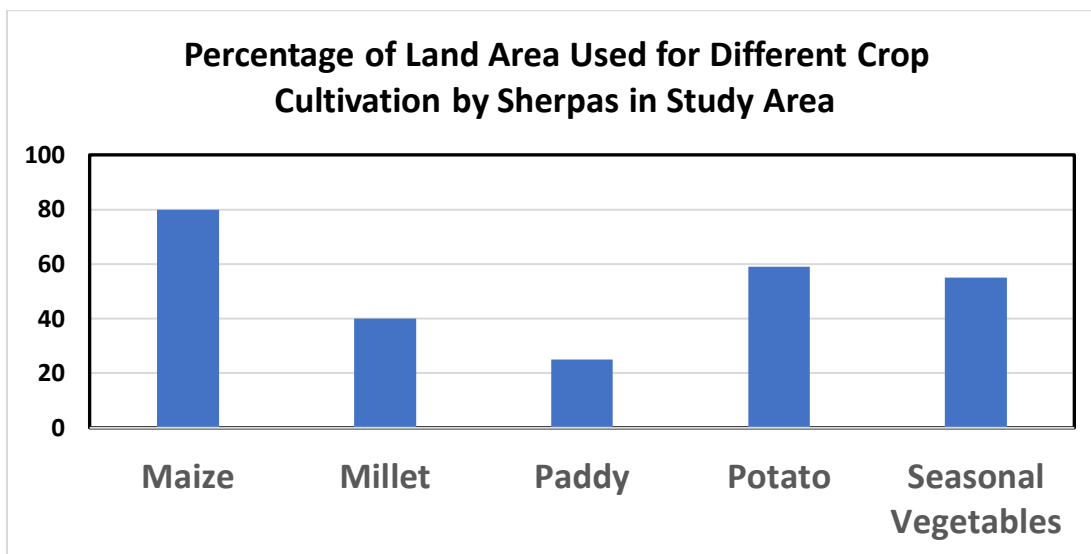


Figure 2. Percentage and land distribution for different crops cultivated by Sherpas in study area.

Researchers reported that, in Sikkim, large cardamom is the main cash crop of the Sherpas, whereas some Sherpas of Darjeeling district of West Bengal cultivate ginger in their field, which is a good source of earning [4].

Depending on the season of the area, Sherpas in the study area produce different types of agricultural crops. Generally, in the month of November - December they start the preparation of the field for the potato cultivation. Harvesting of the potato starts in the month of February – March.

After the harvesting of the potato, they start maize cultivation in the same field, which is ready for harvesting during the month of July – August.

In the advent of the rainy season, i.e., in the month of May – June, they start broadcasting millet seed in the field. Four months are required for harvesting the millet.

Ginger, which is a cash crop among the Sherpas of Kalimpong district, gets started for cultivation in the month of March – May. They collect ginger from the field during the month of December – January.

In case of large cardamom, they get fruits three to five years after the plantation of seeds depending on the quality of the land. Once in a year generally during the month of August – September they get fruits from the large cardamom plantation.

Almost all the household (99%) maintain a small amount of land to grow seasonal vegetables, roots and tubers.

As the Sherpa villages are situated in the hilly terraces, they depend on terrace cultivation. According to previous survey, in Sikkim, the entire cultivable land has been categorized into three groups, viz. Circle-A, Circle- B, and Circle- C. These lands have been categorized on the basis of the quality of the land, i.e. hilly land and plain land. Circle-A type land is the plain land, where twice production in a year is possible. Circle-B type land is the mixture of plain land and hilly land. Circle – C type is the hilly land.

The entire agricultural land of study area is classified into different categories, on the basis of the availability of irrigation facility and composition of soil (Figure 2). These types of land are –

1. **Wet Field** (Pani Kheti): The field, with sufficient irrigational facility. Double crop production is possible in this type of land. This type of land is utilized for paddy cultivation.

2. **Dry Field** (Sukha Kheti): No irrigation facility is available in this type of land. For cultivation land owners depend on the rain water. Maize, Millet, Potato, etc. are generally produced in this type of land.
3. **Large Cardamom Field** : In the large cardamom field irrigation facility does not also exist. The land which is used for large cardamom cultivation, is considered as large cardamom field.
4. **Banjo Field** (Fallow land) : Basically, rocky land is classified as *banjo* field. Cultivation of any type of crop is not possible in this type of field. This type of land is utilized for bamboo grove, house building, growth of fuel wood and cattle fodder.
5. **Cha Bagan** (Tea Garden) -The field with tea plantation.



Figure 3. Agricultural land types used by Sherpas in the study area

All the above-mentioned different types of lands have different economic rate. In Sikkim, large cardamom field has the highest economic value as large cardamom is the main cash crop in Sikkim [5]. Likewise in Darjeeling district of West Bengal Cha Bagan (Tea Plantation) is the most precious land as the people earn more profit from this type of land. In Sikkim, the land revenue rate also varies according to the quality and utilization of the land. In Sikkim the revenue for good quality Wet Field is Rs. 9.90/- per hectare, whereas land owner pay only Rs. 1.40 /- per hectare for *Banjo* Field (Fallow land). Household is the basic unit of economy. These cultivable and homestead lands are controlled by the individual ownership.

Different types of land tenure system are followed by the Sherpas. They give their lands to the tenants for different types of crops on different terms and conditions. Some of these are:

1. **Adhiya:** In this type of land tenure system, land owner leases out his land to the tenant on the condition that the tenant will give 50% share of the produced crops to the land owner. The entire expenditure for the cultivation will be spent by the tiller of the soil. It is the responsibility of the land owner to pay revenue of the land to the Government. This type of land tenure system is applicable for the cultivation of maize, millet and potato.
2. **Kud:** In this type of land tenure system, land owner makes a contact with the tenant that the tiller of the soil will give a certain amount of crop or money to the land owner. Like the *Adhiya*, expenditure for the cultivation will be borne by the tenant. This type of land tenure system is possible there, where fertility of the soil is not so good. As the production of large cardamom is comparatively less in the initial year (third and fourth year) of harvesting, so they follow this type of land tenure system. Owner of the land himself / herself cultivate the land, if he/she is able to manage agricultural labour either from his/ her own family or hired labour from outside and also able to bear the expenditure for the cultivation, i.e. to arrange seeds, manure, agricultural implements, cow/ox, etc.

The tenants who have taken land on lease from the land owners are either entirely land less or possess marginal area of land, which is insufficient to maintain their family. Both the Sherpa land owner and tenant have no biasness to lease out and lease in their land either to their own relatives or to their own community people [6]. They sell their surplus agricultural production in the market. For the purpose of cultivation, they employ cow, ox and buffalo for various types of agricultural activities.

The places, where irrigation facility is not available, for cultivation they entirely depend on rain water. Majority (72%) of the Sherpas has inherited land from their fathers or from in laws. A few of them have acquired their land either by purchase or from the Government.

The Sherpas of the study areas do not use any chemical fertilizer. To get higher yields of different types of crops they use only organic manure i.e., cow-dung. However, when the crop is affected by any type of disease, they use pesticide to save the crop from disease. For the cultivation of different types of crops, they use local variety seeds.

Beside cultivation, some Sherpas also took some other types of occupations such as business, civil contractor, and driver, and both agricultural and non-agricultural labour service in both Government and private sector [7]. Some of them also keep poultry birds, domestic animals like cows, buffalos, goats, pigs, etc., which help the Sherpas in earning little money, which save them to their depressed economic condition. From these domestic animals they get meat, milk from the cows and eggs from the poultry birds. Cows, Ox, Buffalos are also utilized in different types of agricultural operations. They sell the surplus eggs and milk in the market, which is a source of earnings [8].

From the nearby forests of their settlements, they collect fuel wood, dry leaves and also fodder for the domestic cattle. They also purchase logs and bamboo for the construction of houses and preparing furniture from the Forest Department.

Due to the spread of education and close contact with the neighbouring people of other communities some changes have been observed in the economic life of the Sherpas. Among the Sherpas specially among the member of the younger generation, the educated persons are now inclined towards the white colour jobs such as service, teaching, etc. they are reluctant to do laborious jobs like labour, agriculture, etc. [9].

To enable them to face challenges of life and uncongenial environment equal participation of both sexes, co-operation or reciprocity, team work, division of work by sex in economic activities, etc. are the major adaptive strategies. The Sherpa women play a vital role in the economic life. They co-operate with their male partners in different types of agricultural operations [10].

Weeding, transplantations, harvesting, carrying crops from field to house, etc. are done by both sexes. Thrashing, winnowing, drying of crops in the sunlight, storing, pounding are works of females, while ploughing in the field is the job of the males as it requires more labour. In kitchen-garden women [11] share work equally with the males. These families which are not economically well off and having insufficient number of helping hands in the family for different types of agricultural activities, depend on reciprocity and collective works in which families help each other. At the time of need a family may request a few persons to help in certain agricultural or non-agricultural work in lieu of which they are entertained with feast and drinks [12].

4. CONCLUSION

From the above contexts we can come to conclude that The Sherpas harbour detailed knowledge about the field and crops and art of terrace cultivation which transmitted generation after generation among them. Being the agriculturalist in the harsh environmental condition with significantly low availability of irrigation facilities and others associated amenities make it difficult for the Sherpas to meet the day-to-day expenses. As a result, they try to rely on a number of secondary sources for income. Women being an active participant in the economy, retain a stable power position in the family. Recently we noticed a steady shift from the tradition agrarian status towards corporate white-collar jobs. The increasing education profile among the genzs is the prime factor.

5. CONFLICT OF INTEREST

Authors of this article do not have any conflict of interest.

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