

Lake, People and Forest in Sikkim: An Indigenous Perspective

Hasibul Rahaman

Assistant Professor , Department of Sociology, Haldia Govt.College, Haldia , P.O. Debhog, District. Purba Medinipur, West Bengal

Abstract

Sikkim is tiny but beauty. The state is gifted from diverse natural resources like glaciers, peaks, caves rocks and lakes etc. According to different report shows that there are almost 200 small and big lakes are situated in different corners of the state of Sikkim Himalaya as well. But the report of the Ecclesiastical department of Sikkim shows that 11 lakes are considered as sacred. The Kecheopalri lake is important one which is located under Chhojo block of West district of Sikkim. The surrounding village of the lake is inhabited by Lepcha, Bhutia and Nepali people. They are mainly following the Tibetan Buddhism. The people of the lake have close relationship to the lake since time immemorial basically for their livelihood purpose. But now a day the lake has threatened by several activities. Following the idea of Michael Foucault's surveillance religion playing the role of indigenous knowledge to conserve the nature. The paper is trying to find out the possible indigenous techniques through religious line and length from contextual perspective by using sociological tools and techniques.

Keywords: Lake, Sacred, Indigenous Knowledge, Conservation, Buddhist Religion etc.

Sikkim is one of the far flung States of India. The State is located of the foothills of EasternHimalayas between latitude of 27degree 49" and 28 degree 10" north and the Longitudesof 88 degree 28" and 88 degree 55" East. Sikkim is the 22nd state of India came into existence with effect from 16th May, 1975.

Sikkim is land of lakes situated at elevation ranging from tropical to alpine. The majorities of its lakes ecosystems is of glacial origin and are located in the North district, while South District has the least number. All recreational or other activities such as boating, water sports, and irrigation, etc. are restricted in these lacustrine systems, as a result of which the lakes of Sikkim have fared different from other lakes in India. Most lakes in Sikkim are considered sacred and are revered due to ancient mythological connections. Lake Kechopalri is one of them. Although very few studies have been undertaken in general in the lacustrine systems of Sikkim Himalaya.

The paper is trying to find out the possible indigenous techniques through religious line and length from contextual perspective by using sociological tools and techniques. As I try to develop this paper by using sociological tools and techniques like participant observation and with the help of auto ethnography.

Demographic Composition of Sikkim:

Sikkim, a small and beautiful state nested in the Himalayas is a landlocked state bounded and its 3 sides by the international border Tibet, Bhutan and Nepal in the North-East, East and West respectively and south by the Darjeeling district of West Bengal. It has a total population of 6.7lacs (according to the 2011 Census).The social compositions (ethnic group) of Sikkim are - Lepcha (19%), Bhutia (16%) and Nepali (56%) which constitutes a majority of the population of Sikkim is a multi-ethnic state- Lepcha, Bhutia and Nepali forming the main ethnic group.

Broadly, the population can be divided into tribal and non-tribal groups. Lepchas, Bhutias, Sherpas, Limboos and Tamangs are categorized as Scheduled Tribes. The Lepchas are the original inhabitants of the state. Compared to other ethnic groups, the Lepchas still maintain many of their traditional ways. The Bhutias comprise, the Sikkimese Bhutia and Bhutia from Bhutan and Tibet. Ethnically, Limboos and Tamangs belong to the Nepali community. The Sherpas are a marginal ethnic group in the state. Over 70% population consists of Nepalese. They are dominant ethnic group in the state. The people from the plains, mostly involved in trade and services represent a marginal group.

Sacred Lakes in Sikkim

Sikkim is tiny but beautiful and has number of lakes. According to the report of the first draft of the Central University in Sikkim prepared by B.K Roy Burman that there are around 200 lakes in Sikkim several of which are imbued with an aura of the sacred through oral history, myths and legends .According to Government report eleven are considered as sacred which are as follows :-

SACRED LAKES (TSHO) :-

- (I) Omechho (Omai-tsho), West Sikkim
- (ii) Sungmteng chho (Tsho), West Sikkim

- (iii) Lamchho (Lham-tsho), West Sikkim
- (iv) Tolechho (Dhole-tsho), West Sikkim
- (v) Kabur Lamchho (Gabur Lah-tsho), West Sikkim
- (vi) Khachoeopalri Pemachen Tsho (K Khachoeopalri lake), West Sikkim
- (vii) Kathogtsho at Yuksam, West Sikkim
- (viii) Tsho-mGo lake, East Sikkim
- (ix) Guru Dongmar Lake, North Sikkim
- (x) Tsho-lhamo, North Sikkim
- (xi) Mulathingkhai-tsho at Zema Glacier, North Sikkim.

Physical set up of the lake

Like other lakes in Sikkim, Lake Kechopalri has multinomial names among the different ethnic groups of the state. It is situated within 27° 19' 15" N latitude and 88° 15' 06" E longitudes at elevation of 1831m, near Tsozo village in the West District, it has the outline profile of a human right foot. A cursory observation shows the original area of the lake to have been much larger in the past, and to have been later reduced to about a third of the open water area by the gross encroachment of marginal vegetation and by eutrophication. The lake has two permanent inlets and one outlet. Besides ground sources, water is also fed into the lake through two temporary inlets from surrounding hill-slopes over the monsoon. The rock in the lake area belongs geologically to the Sikkim group of granite-gneiss, schist and phyllites (Gulia, 2005: 145).

The Kechopalri Lake is situated under Chho-jo block of West Sikkim. The lake is surrounded by forest which is characterized by bio-diversity. The village is also named as Kechopalri. The village of Kechopalri is a residential place of multi-ethnic groups. It is primarily inhabited by Buddhist religion and most of them are enjoying tribal status.

Khechopalri Lake: Sacredness and oral History

Many legends and belief are associated with the formation, existence and sacredness of the "Khechopalri Lake". The lake is situated in the west district of Sikkim which falls under the sacred landscape "Demazong", a land of hidden treasures. It has been narrated participatory rural appraisal (PRA) exercises with local communities at Khechopalri and Yuksam Guru Padmasambhava, who is highly revered and worshipped by Sikkimese Buddhists was seen in a place called "Humgri" in the 10th of full moon of lunar eclipse. It is believed that the entire area was blessed by him. Four famous religious sites of this sacred landscape have been considered the four plexus of the body where Khechopalri is one of them. Khechopalri symbolizes the thorax the body (Khecho-Flying-Yoginies or the taras; palri-palace) whereas the other i.e. tashiding symbolizes the head plexus (Tashi-holy sky; ding-island), Yuksam symbolizes the third eye (meeting place of three lamas) a place of meditation, and the Pemangstey the heart plexus (pema-lotus; ngstey center) of the body.

The most sacred among all lakes and highly revered by the local people is the lake "Khechopalri" captivated by the magnificent beauty owing to lush green tract of forests. The place is dominated by the Lepcha community, and is the aboriginals of Sikkim. They followed 'Bon' or 'Mune' religion and indulged with the animal sacrifices (animism) to placate the various deities of forest, river and wide (Jain: 2000). At present they follow Buddhism and animism are not common. But still they have the strong with nature was observed in their belief of sacredness associated with "Kechopalri lake". The lake is originally named as Kha-chat-palri meaning the heaven of Padmasambha preached 64 Yoginies. According to Buddhists followers the lake is dwelling place for the Goddess Tara Jestum Dolma, who is the mother of Lord Buddha and particularly the Khechopalri lake is considered to be her footprints. The worshipped the lake as "Cho Pema" the female Goddess. It has number of religious sites located all around the lake. Holy caves namely Dupukney, Yukumney and Chubukney are present where lamas incarnate and Rimpoches mediated. Foot prints of Macha Zemu Rimpoche can also be seen on a stone near the chorten. Two monasteries are present in the Kechopalri area and where the pilgrims and the local communities offer prayers. The Hindus believe that Lord Shiva mediated in the Dupukney cave located just above the Kechopalri lake, hence the place is also worshipped during the 'Nag Panchami'.

As per the oral history, narrated by a young lama (19) of the Kechopalri monastery during field work, it is said that there were two sister lakes in the northwestern part of the Himalayas. The elder lake is still present there but the younger lake migrated to western part of Sikkim in a place called Yuksam (the first capital of Sikkim) and settled in Labding pokhari. The people of Yuksam did not respect the Labding Pokhari and disposed wastes into the lake water so goddess got unsatisfied and field to the place called Chojo where it could not fit and hence again shifted little above in the present place called Khechopalri. Still the dead Chojo lake is seen at the down hill with no open surface except the marshy land with terrestrial vegetation.

The other legend states that the lake is called "Chho" as many years back, some Bhutia communities had settled around the lake Khechopalri. They had herds of cattle that grazed in the dense forests around the lake. One day a white holly ox came out of the lake called Chhonlang (Chho- lake, lang-ox), which was sent by the

lake goddess. This white ox started to graze around the lake and finally migrated with herds of cattle belonged to the Bhutias. When the owner noticed a foreign animal in his herd, he tried to locate its original owner. Eventually not knowing to whom this white ox belonged he slaughtered the animal for its meat and was surprised to notice that instead of blood a whitest discharge oozed out. And then people started to worshipped over the lake.

People and Lake: Symbiotic Relation:

As we can say that man and nature has kin relation since time immemorial. The lake Kechopalri is not exception of it. So far as field data is concerned that the tribal people of the village of Kechopalri had close connection with the sacred lake and its surrounding forest. On the basis of oral history we can highlight that the people of lake area were totally dependent on it when shifting cultivation was the main occupation. They are fully mind set up from religious point of view. As a result of this they are keeping it as a sacred item and the symbol of totem. During these days of the invention of the state of Sikkim, we are supposed to observe their kin relation with the said lake and they were economically dependent on the lake and its surroundings. The local Buddhist tribes are collected leaves, fibrous roots of different plants species and sold to local folk medicine practitioners. Not only that but also some of them are collected the pieces of wooden material and made Buddhist doll and selling to the pilgrims.

Ecological Degradation:

Sikkim, is nature's paradise in the lap of the Eastern Himalaya. Bumchu is an annual festival held around Kechopalri Lake and it is perhaps the most significant annual festival in Sikkim. Undoubtedly, fairs have great importance in our life. But the fact is that the pilgrims in the festival help accelerate the ecological degradation of the lake in the following ways:

1. **Outwash:** Outwash (mainly triggered by activities of pilgrims) that was produced around the periphery in the lake during festival was observed as a pollutant of the once crystal clear lake. It is being accelerated due to heavy rainfall.
2. **Cattle- grazing:** This is also detrimental factor polluting the lake's water through extra and is a common phenomenon surrounding the lake.
3. **Religious offerings:** Addition of offerings to the lake reduces the water quality found through the observations and results. This is a constant phenomena, the highest level is during the festival.
4. **Loss of the biomass:** Most of the shop-owners used the tree looping with leaves from the surroundings for temporary construction effected the lake's environment indirectly and decimated the biodiversity.
5. **Sanitation and hygiene:** There are no proper toilet facilities. Subsequently the pilgrims used the surrounding areas (especially south and north-east corner) of the lake for human defecation purpose. The pollutants would percolate into lake's water during the monsoon and alter the ecological balance of the lake. There is no provision of water-sports, but pilgrims throw several products into the lake without being noticed which certainly disturbed the biodiversity of the lake.
6. **Water quality:** The PH of the lake water signs of being more acidic in nature. The possible reason for this could be leachates generated by the decomposition of waste materials.

Pollution and Water Quality Degeneration:

The concentration of dissolved oxygen decreased with increase in temperature found after the festival. This is probably by increase in biochemical reactions due to addition of offerings which consume dissolved oxygen at a rapid rate and its concentration tends to decrease just after the festival. This is an important indicator of pollution. Low content of dissolved oxygen just after the festival reflected the presence of organic matter in water offered during the festival.

Chlorides are readily soluble in water. Changes in chloride contents between pre and post-period of festival may be related to salts generated from the surrounding area through the activities of pilgrims. This also is an indicator of pollution levels.

The concentration of iron and ammonia increased and the high concentration of these also support the pollution of water. Some plankton like protococcus and Tetraspora also supported this.

Therefore, the impact of monitoring of lake water chemistry indicated that the offerings and other activities influenced the water quality by away of pollution loading of the lake Kechopalri. Hence, the Lake Kechopalri is faced with slow and certain pollutions.

Proposed Recommendations:

The proposed recommendations are as follows:

1. Afforestation of areas degraded by forest fires is should be undertaken.
2. Instead of prayers being at the lake proper, pilgrims should be encouraged into conducting prayer ceremonies at the monastery.

3. The management plant should be implemented through the Kechopalri Development Authority formed by local people.
4. Education on importance of Lake Ecosystem should be initiated, especially for school children.
5. Construction of houses, slash and burn agricultural and grazing in the lake catchment should be stopped.
6. The festival committee for the annual Bumchu festival should be authorized to collect and administer funds for proper sanitation, and provision of drinking water, parking facilities and garbage bins.
7. Anthropogenic outwash and agriculture runoff into the lake should be checked, along with land use practices which contribute to degradation.
8. With the help of local community, mechanical and manual checks should be applied to control invasion of the lake by weeds.

References:

1. Chopra, P . N ., (ed.) ,1992 : Encyclopeadia of India: Sikkim, Vol. XIV .Rima Publishing House, New Delhi:.
2. Choudhury, M., : Report of Sikkim, Centre for Himalayan Studies, North Bengal University.
3. Govt. of Sikkim, Home Department .Gangtok: Notification No. 70/HOME/200
4. Khanna , S., : Area and Issue Profile of Sikkim. Research Report, Ladenla Road,Darjeeling.
5. Risely, H. H., 1894: Gazetteer of Sikkim , B.R Publishing Corporation, New Delhi.
6. Sikkim: A Statistical Profile 2004-2005; Directorate of Economics, Statistics, Monitoring and Evaluation, Govt. of Sikkim, Charch Road, Gangtok .

The IISTE is a pioneer in the Open-Access hosting service and academic event management. The aim of the firm is Accelerating Global Knowledge Sharing.

More information about the firm can be found on the homepage:

<http://www.iiste.org>

CALL FOR JOURNAL PAPERS

There are more than 30 peer-reviewed academic journals hosted under the hosting platform.

Prospective authors of journals can find the submission instruction on the following page: <http://www.iiste.org/journals/> All the journals articles are available online to the readers all over the world without financial, legal, or technical barriers other than those inseparable from gaining access to the internet itself. Paper version of the journals is also available upon request of readers and authors.

MORE RESOURCES

Book publication information: <http://www.iiste.org/book/>

Academic conference: <http://www.iiste.org/conference/upcoming-conferences-call-for-paper/>

IISTE Knowledge Sharing Partners

EBSCO, Index Copernicus, Ulrich's Periodicals Directory, JournalTOCS, PKP Open Archives Harvester, Bielefeld Academic Search Engine, Elektronische Zeitschriftenbibliothek EZB, Open J-Gate, OCLC WorldCat, Universe Digital Library , NewJour, Google Scholar

