

## Forest Resource Management and Lepcha Tribal Forest Culture: A study in the context of Colonial Darjeeling (1865-1947)

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**Abstract:** *The present paper aims to locate the colonial bureaucratic management in terms of forest policy and its sporadic impact on the Lepcha tribes presumed to be the earliest forest people of the eastern Himalayas in the Darjeeling region. The tribal Lepcha groups predominantly associated with the woodlands, appeared to witness extensive technological adjustments and alien concept of conservational approach, that in turn redefined their relationship with nature and the environment. Traditional capabilities of tribal economy and forest usage rights perished and systematic exploitation strengthened over tribal regions or so called forest zones. The process of colonial notion of 'conservation' in Darjeeling was profoundly developed reshaping the ecological milieu of the region like in any other parts of the country. With the codification and implementation of forest laws; forest lands were legitimized through the state excluding the erstwhile community rights.*

**Keywords:** *colonialism, forest policy, Lepchas, conservation, tribal knowledge.*

The intensification of colonial forestry marked a crucial watershed in the forest history of India, with the emergence of timber being the staple commodity of harvest, utilization and commercialization, larger areas of forest were engulfed into colonial possession.<sup>1</sup> In this connection we may mention a remark made by Dietrich Brandis while formulating the policy "*In the wildest forest region in India we constantly came across the evidence that the land at one time had been under habitation*".<sup>2</sup> Thus when the colonial state extended its control over forest lands in India the

Forest communities too came under the sway of colonial subjection. The state's reservation of forests sharply affected the subsistence pattern of the forest communities in such a way that the fate of the forest people transcended to an extreme signs of deterioration. The process of colonial urbanization, technological change and construction of railways in particular further facilitated the process of transformation and disruption of the traditional tribal patterns of life. As railways entered along the vast stretches of unexplored forest tracts, absolute rights of the state was maintained restricting the local groups from natural access to forest resources. Such intrusion of the

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state was endorsed upon a colonial notion that illustrated the indigenous practices of forest usage as wasteful, disruptive and irrational. So prohibition was necessitated to maintain the act of conservation. But such colonial notions were later on discarded by scholars like Madhav Gadgil and Ramchandra Guha in their book *This Fissured land : An Ecological History of India*, which determined that traditional conservation was richly prevalent among the native inhabitants in pre colonial India, and signified that conservation was exercised through different forms of social practices through generations by the indigenous groups.<sup>3</sup> But interpretations made by Guha and Gadgil failed to convince scholars like Richard Grove who in his book '*Green Imperialism*' instead drew two major points differing with the previous scholars. Firstly, he detected large scale deforestation during the pre colonial period that found its continuity in later times. Secondly, in order to protect the forest lands in India, colonial forestry made a more dedicated deliverance for conservation and was not intended for resource concern. Mahesh Rangarajan on the other explained that the disparity between Guha and Grove arose because of the different periods they sought upon. While Grove emphasized on the pre colonial period, Guha derived his notations from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Rangarajan instead sensitized the core intent and purpose of environmental history rather instigating the contention pros and cons, but lunged an open understanding that colonial forestry was accountable for socio-ecological modifications in India. However, it must be understood that the evolution of the colonial forestry and the nature of its implementation was not based on uniform ecological entity and cannot be generalized as it varied from region to region. Hence, the present paper based on above interpretations and understandings attempts to unfold the consequent impact of colonial forest policy on the Lepcha tribes of Darjeeling region in the eastern Himalayas.

### **Colonial perception on tribes:**

The British foresters of the nineteenth century based their understanding on the scientific footing that knowledge gained only through systematic methodological approach in educational institutions were factual or rational and other forms of learning mechanism were simply discarded. Whereas on the contrary the tribes assimilated their knowledge of nature through daily experiences while adapting themselves in forest from generation to generation. So for the colonial administrators it was irrational to recognize age old tribal knowledge with their upheld perception that categorized tribes at a very low level of civilization as primitive and uncivilized wild groups.<sup>4</sup> As they believed that the tribals had no knowledge of their own and were superstitious and ignorant wild folks, they ought to be brought on the lines of modernity. Hence the White Men took the initiative of uplifting these tribal folks through their entrepreneurial strategies of so called '*conservation*'. In this contention it must be noted that the colonial writers, ethnographers and anthropologists deeply motivated the administrators, as they made the subjected tribes

their objects of study they blindly undermined the tribal culture. Although some colonial writers acknowledged such tribal cultures as noble and note worthy, but the dominant view considered them as uncivilized and savagery.<sup>5</sup> Several theories regarding the primitiveness of the tribes were nurtured among the Europeans, like the Christian theory that considered them as the perverted groups from the mainstream civilization; Racist theory on the other illustrated that knowledge among different races varied according to their intellectual capacities and was limited. Among various such theories, the Evolutionist theory was relatively substantial which held the view that all societies have the capability to develop themselves with the progress of time, but the ideological Evolutionary theory of Charles Darwin made a different perception of approach, he solidified the conception that all species go through different stages of evolution and the most dominant species that reaches the optimum stage of advancement expects the other inferior groups to follow them.<sup>6</sup> Such constructs portrayed a negative image in a pejorative way that it rapidly pacified the opening of tribal territories and urged colonial attention to take on the responsibility towards upliftment. Following the trajectory of the British concept of tribalism even some Indian scholars accepted such view. Sociologists like Govind Sadashiv Ghurye in his book '*The Aborigines' So Called and their Future* 1943 echoed similar description of tribal societies as irrational and backward. His views on tribal societies signified the crudeness of knowledge, and justified colonial prospects of civilizing the natives as an optimistic engagement. Such trends of superficial understanding constructed through western knowledge upon unfamiliar cultures found its prominence and was encoered there on. Further, deriving this general prospect in the context of Darjeeling there are prejudiced colonial structured histories. Surveys and records made on tribes by H.H. Risley, Brain Houghton Hodgson, Joseph Dalton Hooker, A. Campbell, W.W Hunter, and R.H. Irvine among others, who visited Darjeeling in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, too represented a misconceived narrative with uttermost prejudice on the local communities. As a whole, colonial writers developed an unpleasant dehumanizing approach in conceptualizing the tribes, such negative portrayal popularized by the ethnographers, anthropologists, writers and travelers justified the colonial administrators to implement their administrative policies and arrangements there on. To the fact Colonial Forest policy in particular had no genuine concern for conservation it was solely structured for revenue generation and extensive extraction of forest resources. Say for example, Colonial denunciation of deforestation had no resemblance with the Jhum cultivation or any other tribal practices; the sparsely populated natives made sustainable usage of the forest lands simply to meet their subsistence rather than any other economic pursuits. In fact the primal cause behind ecological dislocation comprehensively accounted to the Colonial Forest Department's attempt to generate excessive economic surplus from the forest.<sup>7</sup> After all it was the white man's burden flouted by the colonial rulers who asserted their artificial responsibility and dedicated their lives to exploit the so called 'savagery races'.

### **Tribal Forest culture of the Lepchas :**

Darjeeling Himalaya with its unique landscapes comprised variety of the floras and faunas inhabited by numerous tribal groups viz. Lepchas, Limboos, Kirats, Murmis and Bhutias.<sup>8</sup> As the Lepchas were unanimously considered to be the aborigines of the region along with the other tribes being sparsely populated, they represented to be the predominant group particularly associated with the woodlands at that point of time, so the most distraught of the colonial penetration was landed on them. The Lepchas were a simple tribal folks who called themselves as “Mu Tanchi Rongkup”<sup>9</sup> inhabited in the entire hills of Darjeeling, Sikkim and also to some parts of Nepal and Bhutan.<sup>10</sup> They regarded the entire hills spread from Kanchenjunga in the north to Titaliya (now in Bangladesh) in the south, in the east from Ha province of Bhutan to Arun river of Nepal in the west as their religious sacred country “Myael Lyang”.<sup>11</sup> Their sacred country had no specific boundaries in particular but it was within these territories that they inhabited and wandered from time to time. Since time immemorial the Lepchas were traditional forest people and were exclusively concentrated in dense forest areas. Their primary mode of subsistence was hunting and gathering while cultivation was not so developed among the Lepchas.<sup>12</sup> Hence collection was done on daily basis and in the dry season when food supply was scarce, gathering was conducted even in large scale. As they possessed a highly sophisticated traditional knowledge of the forest habitat they were well versed in detecting edible properties in such environment. Generally they were omnivorous and ate all kinds of foods, their principle diet mainly comprised of forest products like bamboo shoots, honey, wild roots, mushroom, seeds, wild berries, small mammals, birds and so on. Another important food resource relied upon was the trees, plants, ferns and shrubs, as the early British records mentions that trees covered from top to bottom of the hills.<sup>13</sup> The abundance of trees like Katus (*castanopsis hystrix*), Walnut (*juglans regia*), Singari Katus (*quercus pachyphylla*), Malido (*eleagus latifolia*), Amala (*emblica officinalis*), Nebara (*ficus hookeri*), Lapchae phal (*machilus edulis*), etc.<sup>14</sup> substantiated the articles of food. The skills of collecting these wild fruits and their knowledge on edible properties protected them in periods of scarcity. Wood was one of the primary product used extensively as a raw material for housing, furniture, agricultural tools, musical instruments and numerous other household implements, hence it can be assumed that the necessity of wood was greater than that of any other material. In addition other gathered items like wild bulbs, leaves and grass which furnished useful nutrients were extensively used as energy resource. As the Lepchas were very fond of fermented and spirituous liquors they collected flowers and grains to prepared a kind of liquor and drank this at frequent intervals and on long journeys.<sup>15</sup> The tribal way of life in the hilly terrain was extremely challenging and during their working condition the people often obtained cuts sores and fractures, but expertise on several plants and herbs of its medicinal properties completely rejuvenated their strength and healthy recovery. This sort of tribal ideas and practices is also very much relevant with that of Ayurvedic traditions.

Apart from fruits and roots other food resources included fishing, Lepchas had expert knowledge of fishing and often did it with leisure, they caught it through several methods, with fishing rods made up of bamboo, by trapping them in bamboo baskets and for large catch numerous parasitical plants like *Hoya* and *Chaulmoogra* combined with ferns were used to intoxicate fish.<sup>16</sup> Hunting was an important source for food and was often said to be increased in times of scarcity. Small mammals like rodents, rabbit, monkeys, and birds was more often killed by using bows and arrows but there are mentions made by A.Campbell that even elephants and rhinoceros were also consumed by the Lepchas.<sup>17</sup> Though the standard of agriculture was rudimentary, cultivable land was prepared by clearing a plot of forest area with their huts for two to three years,<sup>18</sup> and cultivated rice, paddy, millet, corn, murwa and few vegetables.

In absence of any scientific knowledge they totally relied upon the signs of nature to notice seasonal change, directions or weather forecast and so on, hence every slightest change in nature was observed consciously to perceive a meaningful approach for future, there are some instances like "*Tuk-Po Pot Boor*" or peach blossom indicated the arrival of new year, similarly cherry blossom "*Kon Kee Boor*" informed them to initiate the work of cultivation. Likewise, the flight of migratory birds "*Kurngok*" along the sky during starry nights indicated the cultivation of cucumber, pumpkin and other seeds, etc.<sup>19</sup> dependency upon the natural environment revealed their knowledge and harmonious relation with nature. One of the most outstanding feature of the Lepcha tribal culture was the synchronization of religious beliefs with nature like in any other tribes in India. They were animists and regarded "*Kangchen Konghlo*"<sup>20</sup> popularly known as mount Kanchenjunga as their mother goddess, or their guardian deity. Apart from that every natural object like the sun, moon, stars, rivers, trees and animals were sacred to them.<sup>21</sup> Dietrich Brandis remarked that he found sacred groves numerous existing all over India in the tribal societies and consisted variety of trees but were never touched by the axe, except when wood was necessitated for religious purposes.<sup>22</sup> Such idea of sacred groves was also prevalent in the Lepcha society and formed an essential part of their culture.<sup>23</sup> As the entire social and cultural practices were based on religious beliefs with wide range of natural object being worshipped, they acknowledged the presence of supernatural beings in several places like caves, groves, hills or other such natural objects, they notified the specific territory regarding it as sacred. Where no human activities like hunting or collecting any kind of food items was allowed. The place was so sacred for them that even the slightest of misdeeds practiced in and around the vicinity would pollute the entire area. Therefore it must be understood that sacred groves was only to inculcate fear and respect among their off springs and unknowns. In the hindsight, it was also a voluntary and costless deterrence of conservational practice. The so called the watershed management of the British rulers had been actually the crucial element of day to day socio-religious practices among the Lepchas. Such unique methods of conservationism as practiced can be assumed as a beautiful combination of *spiritualism*,

*science* and *education*. Sacred grove was 'spiritualism' not to disturb the nature was 'science' and enlightening the off springs about such practices was 'education'. They were so well versed with such concepts that it indulged each and every member of the community and was unanimously respected by the entire tribe. Such pleasant and harmonious relationship with the environment affirmed their indigenous tribal qualities which makes them primordial environmentalist of the Eastern Himalayas. The way in which the Lepchas preserved their self interest and environment provides a classic model of ecological wisdom, which can really present a useful strategy to the entire global community as a policy of conservation and sustainable resource management. Rituals imbibed on the sacred groves not only conserved their forest lands and its resource but also enriched their cultural continuity passed on from generation to generation, which further affirmed their unique tribal ethos and identity. Whatever may be the colonial western understanding of their tribal ethics, keeping in view of time and environment provided there can be no denial of the fact that the traditional wisdom, culture and the practices illustrated a unique composure of rational human - nature relationship. Such forest culture adopted by the Lepchas enabled them to sustain in the wildest woods for centuries and denies being gauged simply from a blind primitive point of view.

### **Ruptures of Colonial Forest Policy on the Lepchas of Darjeeling:**

The colonial takeover of natural resources were based on the enforcement of forest laws that had no hesitation even if it was required to introduce the elements of exclusion on the groups erstwhile dwelling on the forest. The eastern Himalayas of Darjeeling also experience such exclusive policies that profoundly reshaped the ecology of the region.<sup>24</sup> As the region signified a dense coverage of forest area, it was soon realized as a potential resource base to serve the requirements of the colonial state. But such initiatives based on commercial intent significantly affected the livelihood pattern with the severe magnitude on the forest dwellers like the Lepcha groups of the region.<sup>25</sup> Although the Lepchas had previously been under the subjection of alien rulers like the rulers of Sikkim ever since 1642 and Bhutan in 1707 in the Damsang area,<sup>26</sup> one of the major changes that distinguish the British rule from the previous rulers was their policy of direct intervention through absolute control over the forest lands, restricting the traditional usage rights. Never before had the Lepchas experienced such patterns of state restriction. The pre colonial rulers though exercised their authority over them by declaring them as people under the State's control and appointing a local chief such as "Kazis and Ramzams" to keep them under the administrative control,<sup>27</sup> but never asserted the control over their socio-economic practices, nor were the forest and its resources considered as the sole property of the rulers or their subordinates. It was completely upon the Lepchas who vested absolute liberty over the forest and its monopolistic utilization. But with the British occupation of Darjeeling in 1835, process of the alienation of the Lepchas from

the forest came into existence. However, in the early stages of the colonial administration there seemed little interest over forest conservation, but soon with the introduction of tea plantation industry by 1856 the forests of the region received the maximum wrath.<sup>28</sup> Eventually with the formation of the Imperial Forest Department of India in 1864 and following the Act of 1865, the entire hills of Darjeeling was brought under the Reserve category that exclusively curtailed the rights of indigenous communities.<sup>29</sup> This was the only District in Bengal to have been branded as the Reserve Forest. Forest officers were assigned to survey and prohibit the locals from entering into the forest belts that came under this category. Such exclusion of the Lepchas had a severe impact on their subsistence pattern with only a marginal claim on forest produce. Hunting, gathering and shifting cultivation that comprised as their sole and only means of subsistence were totally banned. Meanwhile by introduction of another Forest Act of 1878, further inclusion of more forest areas into the Reserve category and more systematic arrangements in administration were looked upon.<sup>30</sup> As the foresters characterized 'jhum' or the shifting cultivation practiced by the Lepchas as unscientific and against the concept of conservation. Soon it was noticed that a considerable number of valuable trees were being felled by the locals for fuel in the hills of Sinchal and Jalpahar of Darjeeling, and to safeguard such engagements the government ordered the Lepchas to evacuate from the Reserve forest and made alternative arrangements for settlements in the south west part of the District, in the area between the Relli and the plains.<sup>31</sup> Such persuasive migrations completely shatter the homogeneity and integrity of the tribe. The forests which had been their sacred homes over centuries were demarcated under codified laws and people became mere expatriates.<sup>32</sup> When Mr Leeds joined as the first full time Conservator of Forest of Bengal in 1867, he introduced some proposals to provide the forest dwellers with some minor usage rights and suggested for the formation of *open forest* within the reserved tracts. The concept of an *open forest* signified that instead of marking the whole tract as reserve, only some useful areas of the forest could be brought into this category, leaving the minor forest products for local consumption, and the entire forest authority under the state control. But after some prolonged discussions and failing to reach any unanimous bureaucratic conclusions, the idea could not be implemented.<sup>33</sup> Since forest products gained considerable amount of market value, huge number of European entrepreneurs, retired servicemen and also native people from plains engaged themselves in the forest affairs through procuring permit from the Government, but this set of new permit holders largely worked autonomously outside the preview of the Forest Department while operating their business. As theoretical working plans did not accord with the biological realities of the forest there were professional instincts of profit making that became prominent and recklessly crossed limits of exploitation.<sup>34</sup> The colonial method of scientific forestry further brought variety of hardships on the Lepchas, the mass clearing of natural mixed vegetation and burning of savanna grass around the forest largely affected in their daily patterns of livelihood. As the natural mixed varieties of

trees and shrubs provided them with ample of food items and materials ranging from hut construction to household implements, the commercially valuable trees like Sal, Teak and Panisaj regenerated under scientific forestry did not fulfilled their subsistence requirements. Brandis made visits to Northern Bengal both in plains and hills several times in 1879 and made radical changes by introducing scientific forestry to maximize the value through monoculture of hardwood timber.<sup>35</sup> The focus on monoculture of species and securing their growth discounted both ecology and local knowledge; few selected species like sal, teak and panisaj were intensively given importance. Many valuable trees like mahua (*bassia latifolia*), kendu and various non timber trees were extracted. During 1926-1939 most forests were brought under scientific forestry and uniform sal plantation was conducted. An indigenous system known as '*Taungya*' was brought into practiced by the foresters, this was a system where a small plot of area within a dense forest coverage was cleared by felling and burning to create a clear space for agriculture.<sup>36</sup> Similarly the foresters replicated this native practice of *taungya* in a massive scale not for subsistence farming but for economic regeneration of selected valuable trees denuding extensive areas of forestland, but such practices proved disastrous and produced grave results, the natural mixed vegetative composure of rare valuable trees, medicinal plants and shrubs were wiped out from the forest belts. Another important factor that dislodged the Lepchas was the arrival another group of populace, this new group of people came in the form of labourers and workers connected with the public works such as construction of roads and other several development works. With the flourishing of tea industry in the region, huge amount of labour force was required in order to expand the production; hence the Colonial Government further encouraged mass migration of workers from the eastern hills of Nepal.<sup>37</sup> In this regard demographic fluctuations in the region can be simply understood by the figures that the population in 1850 was 10000, similariy in 1869 it showed 22000 and, sequentially in the 1881 census the population stood 92141 followed by 150311 in 1891 census.<sup>38</sup> whereas on the other, early records during the initial stages of British occupation of Darjeeling that referred the Lepchas to be two thirds out of the total population which in 1941 decreased to 4.6 percent compared to that of 5.4 percent Bhutias and 90 percent Nepalis, such enormous increase of labourers came at the cost of marginalized Lepchas. As the pre colonial situation being essentially non competitive and subsistence oriented, there was no thrust competitive sharing of resources, but the arrival of much advance Nepali groups really gave a set back to the Lepchas. The former unlike the latter were well versed in settle agriculture and the Government too favoured such methods of terrace farming and provided them with the waste lands for cultivation, gradually with the increasing population and extension of settled agriculture the aboriginal Lepchas lost their ownership of land to the new settlers.<sup>39</sup> This passing out of lands of the Lepchas was ignored by the local administrators they instead argued that the influx of the outsiders would civilize and assist to transform the ignorant Lepchas into an advance and

industrious race.<sup>40</sup> As the Lepchas kept themselves confined into deep denser forest areas and engaged themselves in their own traditional patterns of life they penetrated even more further to unreserved forest of the adjoining areas. In this connection evidences can be substantiated of alienation and forced rehabilitation in the Kalimpong subdivision, through records which reveals that in 1920 the Governor decided to clear 999 acres of forest land in Lolegoan reserve of Kalimpong division, in order to develop Kalimpong as a hill station, Another occurrence of deforestation and land alienation could be observed when an attempt of extending tea plantation in Kalimpong was envisaged. A village comprising 34 houses that included seven Lepcha houses substantially depending on forest was resettled to the north of Kalimpong. In such situation the head of the Lepchas, Tendook Palgar requested the Deputy Commissioner about their pathetic condition. Hence A.A Wace, the then Deputy Commissioner made a provision to resettle them to the north of Kalimpong. Such misconceived act of colonial oppression upon the Lepchas can be simply estimated through this letter of A.A. Wace to the commissioner of Rajashahi.

*“Anxious as I am to secure permanently the interest of Lepchas in this district, I cannot shut my eyes to the fact that, as they exist in our unsettled tract, they are an obstacle to all improvement in cultivation or increase of revenue as regards the Lepchas on the tract under reference. I would give them the option of building on 15 or 20 acres each where they now are, securing their interest by giving them one of our Kalimpong leases, or moving to the Lepcha blocks north of Kalimpong on payments by planter of a liberal compensation for removal”.*<sup>41</sup>

In other words there were subverting effects of the colonial rule curtailing the customary rights of the Lepchas and ultimately dislocating them from their pre colonial tribal societies. According to colonel Waddle, a British explorer who wrote the comprehensive book *“Among the Himalayas”* remarked that the main reason for their disappearance from the Darjeeling was the Forest Department’s conservational measures which extensively limited their food resources and forced them to migrate into the unreserved forest of Bhutan and Nepal. W.W. Hunter too accounted similar descriptions for the diminishment of the Lepchas.<sup>42</sup> According to him the land alienation and dislocation was primarily due to the extending tea plantation and conservational arrangements of the Forest Department.

Although laws to conserve forest largely annihilated tribal behavior and social relation concerning livelihood requirements, but on the other close affinity between human and nature as seen among the lepchas of the region also cannot be concretized by affirming them as ecological conscious conservators of forest. What can be strongly assumed is that Lepchas majorly functioned and developed a sustainable land and resources usage pattern given on the basis of the topography and environment provided.

Generalized colonial notion that recounted codification of forest laws encouraged settled agriculture that led to cultivational progress in India, but such prospects in Darjeeling had no empirical footing in respect to agrarian progress, some way or other one may perceive a dominant imperial interest dictating agrarian pursuits. Hence it may be speculated that in the historical process had the Colonial masters who initially destroyed the forest and became self styled conservationists determined a regulatory protectionist governance would had been a different narrative of discourse on the ecological history of the region. The primary factor that brought Darjeeling in the colonial map was the region's vibrant environment bearing resourceful vegetation and climatic hospitality. Forest management and the impositions in Darjeeling and Lepchas in particular revealed blindness and utter insensitivity of the colonial Government. Apart from immediate ecological ruptures various other disruptive insignia found its continuity throughout the colonial period and beyond. The colonial forest policy in the region not only disrupted their sustainable economy and livelihood patterns but also instigated a transcending negative impact on their tribal ethos, culture, political entity and identity. There would be no ambiguity in the fact that the new structure of power based on insular and irrational ideologies of the British rulers jeopardized them to such an extent that within the passage of few decades, they became groups of marginalized denizens sparsely inhabited only in Kalimpong, Sikkim, parts of Nepal and Bhutan.<sup>43</sup> completely devoid of their language, religion, culture, identity and above all political authority in their own sacred lands in which they thrived and exhibited a unique example of sustainable human - nature existence at some point of time.

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