

ABSTRACT

Tribals are the original inhabitants of the forest and are known by different names such as Vanyajati (forest communities) and Vanavasi (inhabitants of forests). Tribals depend on the forests for food, fuelwood, timber, material for crafts, fodder, and medicinal plants, and it is often the tribal women who collect these resources. They are also known as the “Sentinels or Custodians” of forest and its natural resources. Since time immemorial these people living in the forests have developed a cordial relationship with the forest and have vast knowledge about different plant species and other forest products used for different purposes. Women are the worst victims of environmental degradation as they are solely dependent on natural resources for their livelihood. Women all over the world share a special relationship with the environment and tend to be more concerned about the availability and access to natural resources. The knowledge that the tribal women possess is generally transmitted from generation to generation and it plays an important role in the conservation and uses of forest resources. This in turn helps in alleviating the problems at the local level and it will not further lead to the conflicting situation. Various researches all over the world show that both environmental and ecological security risks affect women more than the men. The traditional concept of security focuses on the protection of state from external military threats but now it is replaced by concepts such as economic security, food security, health security, environmental security, energy security, cyber security and human security. At present non-traditional security concepts are challenges to the survival and well being of people all over the world. The present study tries to show how the tribal women residing in the forest villages of the Eastern Himalayas play a significant role in protecting the forest environment as their livelihood revolves around it. On the other hand, these women play an important role in the family and society and help contribute to the overall development of society. With this background, the present study tries to investigate the role and status of Sherpa and Tamang women residing in the forest villages of Darjeeling Hills with the help of various indicators on socio-economic factors, historical background and the Sherpa and Tamang women's relationship with the forest and the various roles played by them in the conservation of the environment.

The present study is conducted in the forest villages situated in the three subdivisions of Darjeeling Hills namely Darjeeling, Kurseong, and Kalimpong (presently Kalimpong

subdivision is converted into a district). Darjeeling Hills is located in the northernmost part of West Bengal comprising both plains and the hills. Fifteen forest villages have been selected from Darjeeling subdivision, Kurseong subdivision and Kalimpong subdivision. From each subdivision five forest villages have been selected. Tribal communities such as Sherpas, Tamangs, Lepchas, and Bhutias are found in the study area. However, the tribal communities such as Sherpas and Tamangs are in maximum number and are found in a majority of the forest villages. So, women respondents from the Sherpa and Tamang communities have been selected for the present study. For the selection of the respondents stratified random sampling techniques have been used from the area under study. A total of 300 respondents have been selected. 150 each from Sherpa and Tamang women have been selected since it is based on the comparative study. From each subdivision, 100 respondents were interviewed and from each forest village, 20 respondents were selected. Primary and secondary techniques have been used for the collection of data. Primary data have been collected through intensive field surveys, face-to-face interaction, and observation, with the help of a semi-structured open-ended interview schedule. Whereas, secondary data is mostly collected from books, journals, newspapers, internet sources, census reports, and government reports provided by the panchayat office and the forest department.

Different parameters were taken into consideration to understand the role and status of the Sherpa and Tamang women in the forest villages of Darjeeling Hills. The forest villages' geographical isolation makes them more vulnerable to initiating better economic activities for the villagers. Selected forest villages are located in different geographical settings. The majority of the forest villages are located in the hilly areas and other forest villages are located in the foothills. Since agriculture is the main occupation of the respondents, they grow different types of vegetables according to their geographical conditions. The entire agricultural operations such as seed selection, weeding, sowing, watering, and storing are performed by the women. Other economic activities include livestock rearing, daily wage workers, and other miscellaneous activities. At present, Sherpas residing in the forest villages are trying new avenues i.e. homestays and are making good profit out of it. They economically contribute to their families' well-being which automatically enhances their status in the family and society. The role played by Sherpa and Tamang women for their family and society is commendable and their decision is crucial for the overall development of the society. Apart from these, their role in the protection of

the environment is significant as they are very much concerned about the forest environment and are devoted to combating environmental degradation. Various governmental and non-governmental agencies provided various facilities to these respondents which helped them in uplifting their status.

The present study is divided into seven chapters and makes a modest attempt to study the Sherpa and Tamang communities in detail. The findings of the study will surely provide insight into the Sherpa and Tamang women who have been residing in the forest villages of Darjeeling Hills. Therefore, this study aims to delve into a deeper understanding of these tribal women residing in the Eastern Himalayas.