

We Feeling of Kechopalri Lake in West Sikkim.

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Introduction

Many traditional societies all over the world value a large number of plant, species from the wild for a variety of reasons, for food, fiber, shelter or medicine. Partly, perhaps, arising out of this close human-forest linkage and partly because of animistic belief system of the forest dwelling traditional societies, the protected refugia of the natural ecosystem in a given region has existed 'sacred groves' in many societies all over the world. Along with this another sacred wings like lakes etc. have found in many societies all over the world among the different communities in general and tribal communities in particular and it has great importance to the locals.these are protected and managed by the locals, through a wide range of management practices are possible.

Conservation - a preliminary characterisation

In all change, as Aristotle remarked, something remains the same. But at the same time, something is lost, or else there would be no change. And surely, central to the project of conservation is a response to loss. But this should not be equated with resistance to change. Since change itself is both natural and inevitable, conservation must be presumed to be a response to:

- i) the degree of change
- ii) the extent of change
- iii) the pace of change, and
- iv) the nature of change.

The 'conservation interest', we might say, stakes out the claim that change can be effected well or

ill, in each of these dimensions. It might even be characterised as 'the proper management of change', except that it would be a mistake to think that all change can be managed. Often it will

be a matter of understanding and taking account of unmanageable change.

Conservation has always had to reckon with both biological and cultural systems which are constantly changing. The challenge which it faces is compounded, first, by recent institutional

changes within the conservation movement itself, which require some delicate negotiation of the

tensions between the claims of 'wildlife' and the charms of the cultured landscape. More importantly still, global environmental changes, to a considerable degree the consequence of human activity, threaten to transform biological and cultural systems in ways, and at a pace,

which are unprecedented within recent experience. Ecologists taking the long view are apt to say that massive upheavals are nothing new. But the point is unhelpful. The fact is that we do not wish to go the way of the dinosaurs.

If these factors present a challenge to the articulation and defence of conservation values, they also underscore the urgency and importance of the task. The image of conservation has been too often a negative one. Understandably, those whose immediate interests are likely to be thwarted by conservationist objections will encourage and reinforce such an image. But perhaps too, conservationists themselves have been too willing to see their role in this light - a matter simply of reacting to events, of holding the line and, where it is breached, fighting a rearguard action.

There are five types of argument for biodiversity conservation: economic, indirect economic (protection against epidemic pathogens), ecological and aesthetic/ethical (Ehrenfeld, 1988; Ehrlich and Ehrlich, 1992).

Conservation and Conservatism: Historical Backdrop

John Malcolm (1798-1830), an important shaper of polity in Western India, favored the maintenance of what he saw as appropriate hierarchies in Indian society. In a minute written while governor of Bombay, he emphasized the need to sustain hierarchies in Bhil society as much as in other parts of India, even while the policies of his administration inevitably undermined them. Following the suppression of the great uprising of 1857-58, the colonial government was more aware of the extent of its power but had developed an acute sense of the danger of upsetting established hierarchies, as represented by the princely states, landlords and the proprietor (malik) stratum of peasants, in Indian society. On the other hand, the successful extirpation of the rising in the Central India jungle seemed evidence that the forest peoples were no longer a formidable menace. If therefore, the first viceroys began with a determination to uphold the perceived status quo in the agrarian order, they also embarked more confidently, on reconstructing a supposed ecological status quo in the wild lands that abutted the sown.

The beginnings of colonial conservation have been traced in the pioneering work of Richard Grove and Mahesh Rangarajan and it is therefore unnecessary to rehearse them here. The Bombay Presidency figures prominently in the narrative and Grove shows how the environmental concerns of officialdom in Britain and India as well as anxieties about timber supply combined in 1847 in the creation of 'an establishment for the management of the forests under the Bombay Presidency at a monthly charge of 295 Rupees.' The forests were

clearly a rather low priority – far larger sums were routinely spent for other purposes; hence the conservatorship stood a better chance of survival and expansion if it could generate revenues in excess of its expenditures. The conservators were clearly aware of this: the exhibition of financial success was a constant theme running through their reports, and controls were often recommended more for their effects on the bottom line than on the tree line Gibson, the first conservator in Bombay, suggested for example that in Khandesh the best system of management would be ‘for government to have a certain fixed duty on wood brought for sale in the Bazaar – leaving to the Bheels and others their usual Dustoor (commission) on the village wood when the same is purchased or cut on the spot by others (Gibson, 1850: 72 as found in Guha, 1999: 165).

The Forest Department’s expensive ambitions encountered sharp resistance from (among others) those elements in rural society that understood the new techniques of petitions and protests – as it happened, chiefly landlords from the coastal districts near Bombay, who helped to create the Thana Forest Sabah in the 1880s, and succeeded in getting a Commission of Enquiry appointed in 1885. The ancient ferocity of forest peoples was invoked as a reason why conservancy should not be implemented in a petition to the commission, the inhabitants of Kolaba warned that if the principal means of livelihood of the ‘wild people’ cutting and selling wood, was stopped they might resort to ‘plundering the peaceful and armless, and therefore helpless inhabitants of the villagers.’

But a more sustained opposition comes from the Revenue Department, which engaged in a bitter turf war with the parvenu foresters, who after all, did not belong to the ranks of the heaven-born civil service and were headed by continentals to boot. In the late 19th century, the Revenue Department officials took it upon themselves to champion the cause peasants and tribals and expose the misdeeds of the Forest Department. A participant in this intramural struggle looked back on it with softly amusement in 1911, when reviewing papers connected it with the abrogation of some Bhil ‘privileges’: ‘The old codes were necessary in the middle eighties when there was bitter war between the Rev. and for officers, it is wonderful that they have listed nearly a quarter of a century.

The threat of tribal uprising was frequently invoked during this departmental turf war – so, for example, the collector of Khandesh warned that the imposition of restrictions on Bhil wood cutting would lead to widespread disturbances among the Bhils and other wild tribes.’ This was perhaps a response to conservator Shuttleworth’s ponderously sarcastic query as to ‘why the Bhils, who are an eminently lazy race, should be considered a special class of mundane being, and should be pampered and exceptionally favored. Furthermore, in most of the area under the control of the forest department it began a campaign to either turn the forest-dwellers into a service labour force, or drive them out altogether.

The feud was gradually resolved, and once inter department peace was established, forest villages were left in the sole charge of that department which rapidly whittled away whatever it had compelled to grant in 1882.

So the kings of the forest and their subjects alike became the largely quiescent serfs of the Forest Department. Looking back on this period, an anonymous forest official remarked regretfully in the 1980s, we used to be kings (of the forests), now we have to go as beggars (to persuade people to plant trees). The Department developed: this was its own version of history in order to justify the way that it functioned; this was that the forests had been quite empty until the twentieth century, when timber operations caused the setting up of labour camps, whose occupants were allowed to cultivate a little land when not otherwise employed. These camps then grew into forest villages. The object of the origin of myth was evidently to claim that the villagers existed solely by the grace and favor of the government, and could make no claims against of it.

So the forest was no longer a strategic resource for its inhabitants: and they were losing it even as an economic resource. Under colonial auspices the agrarian order finally triumphed over its jangli antagonist. The colonial (and post-colonial) period was unique not in that forest were cleared, or that forest peoples politically subjugated – both are old processes in Indian history – but that the changes now had a sweeping and irreversible character that they had never previously possessed. The diverse communities of the wood lands faced the unprecedented choice of either maintaining a presence in that delimiting habitat at the back and call for the forest department, or attempting to transform themselves into a settled peasantry. The object of the British was, at least in theory to propel all the forest peoples along the latter path. (Guha: 1994).

Objectives and Methodology

The main thrust of the present paper is to examine people's perception of lake conservation through ethical or religious beliefs and practices.

The present study is an exploratory in nature. It is exploratory in the sense that it will examine all the aspects of sacred pond from ethnographic point of view. In order to understand the traditional method of conservation faced by the people living around the lake, an intensive field work has been done. In the present study data has been collected mostly through field work and complemented with secondary data.

The study was conducted mainly on Kechopalri lake located at West district of Sikkim. This particular lake has been selected purposively taken into consideration of some important subjects like the religious history of the place, indigenous knowledge system applied for conserving of this lake nature of society and the socio-cultural and economic life of the people adjacent to the pond. The data has been collected by applying several methodological tools and techniques like interview, case study, observation etc. Aged person, Panchayet personnel and pilgrims were interviewed randomly. During fieldwork the following question were asked by me to fulfill the purpose of the method of conservation. The main question raised during data collection in the research area is that What is the people's perception to maintaining the sacredness of the pond area?

Concept of Sacred in an Ecological Context

Stretching into the pre-historic times, the concept of sacred grove in India has its roots in antiquity, even before the Vedic age, the Vedas representing the only recorded remains of thoughts of ancient Aryans who migrated into this sub-continent. In their migration from their steppes of the Central Asia through Balkh in Khorassan to the Indian sub-continent, the ancient Vedic people of pre-historic items assimilated new environmental values; they also incorporated into their value system the concept of 'sacred grove' from the original inhabitants of the Indian sub-continent. Though sacredness attached to species is perhaps more recent, being part of the post Vedic Hindu ritualism. Thus the already existing ecosystem level concept of the 'sacred grove' of the original pre-Vedic inhabitants of India was extended by the Vedic migrants down to the 'species' level on one extreme of the scale and to the level of the 'landscape' on the other extreme (Ramakrishnan:1998).⁵

Buddhism and Jainism initially branching out as revivalist religious off-shoots of Hinduism lead to revivalism of conservation practices too. On the one extreme it lead to a sect of Jains, the 'Digambar Jains', set dead against killing of living organisms; at the other spectrum is the sacred landscape of the Sikkimese Buddhists based on a holistic ecological philosophy. Here we will try to look at the conceptual framework determining the evolution of the sacred in the Indian context, using the example of sacred landscape.

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) Khachodpalri Pemachen Tsho (K Khachodpalri 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 which has the outline profile of human 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.

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 here Khechopalri is one of the. Khechopalri symbolizes that 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. At present they follow Buddhism and animism are not common. But still they have the strong ties 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 Padmasambhava 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 a 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 Khechoplari. 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 Khechpalri. 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 it 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 worship the lake.

Ecology of Lake Kechopalri

In the Bhutia language, 'Khecho' means 'in the middle' and 'Palri' means 'lotus' or 'place' thus Kechopalri means 'in the middle of the lotus'. The lotus is one of the eight auspicious symbols in Buddhism and symbolizes the eight minds, which rises immaculate out of the muck of egotism and ignorance. Kachori is also the heavenly realm or 'pure land of Dakin and may relate to the lake name Kechopalri is located in West Sikkim an elevation of 6,100 – 6,500 feet. The Lake is surrounded by dense jungle which is the home of wide variety of birds, mammals, insects and flora.

Ecological Degradation: The Kechopalri Lake

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 loopings with leaves from the surroundings for temporary construction which 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 is also 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 way of pollution loading of the lake Kechopalri. Hence, the Lake Kechopalri is faced with slow and certain pollutions.

Conservation: Indigenous techniques

There are number of approaches and local techniques for the conservation of the natural items and among these the kechopalri lake is an important one in this case. The field study claim that the people of the lake area are primarily occupied by Buddhist mythology. They are followed their fore fathers tradition who are practicing animism and this is why they are depend on the nature in general and lake in particular so that we found the ethical approach to conserve the originality of the lake and it is considered as one of the important indigenous method for the conservation of the Kechopalri Lake as well.

Ethical approaches to nature and the environment have a long history in human society: animals and plants must not be destroyed because they are part of a larger spiritual web. This has a strong historical association with food taboos, making vegetarianism a prestigious behaviour in south Asian society, for example. More general, however, has been the extension of ethical precepts developed to apply human culture to non-human entities. Just as human rights have been extended over time to slaves and to children, the argument is that they should extended to animals and even the environment as a whole. From this perspective, we have no right to destroy the lake for future generations the opportunity to experience and interact with them. Ethical arguments have a strong emotional appeal but remain extremely culture-bound: presenting such a case to someone who does not accept their cultural presuppositions will only be rewarded with more destroying faces of the said lake.

The term conservation, preservation is considered as the wing of the ethical or religious prescription rather religious taboos. As like as other sacred places it is also treat as sacred so that it has some taboos for conserved its sacredness which has close linkage with nature conservation. The most observed taboos are as follows:

(i) Women are strictly prohibited from entering the sacred area of the lake due to the belief that they are impure (menstrual cycle being the most commonly cited cause).

(ii) The people who are in Napak (impure) situation are not permitted to take water from the lake.

(iii) The visitors are clearly directed that they are not allowed to throw the plastic and material in the pond.

(iv) Fetching fodder or fuel wood is strictly prohibited because the myth prevails that the use of such kind of materials over the sacred pond will hurt the sentiments of the Goddess Tara Jestum Dolma .

(v) The villagers are not allowed to use the water of the pond for the purpose of domestic animals or for sanitation.

(vi) The villagers and tourists are strictly prohibited to catch fish from the Kechopalri lake etc.

Conclusion

Hence, from above analysis it is undoubtedly said that the lake is considered as the rich cultural heritage of Sikimese in general and Buddhist tribes of West Sikkim in special and also they can express their own cultural identity to the others. Not only that but the lake has also associated with their daily livelihood pattern as because the kechopalri lake is also known as tourist destination over the Sikkim.

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