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Sikkim's ecological fragments

BY URBASHI PRADHAN

8 DECEMBER 2014

The significant environmental and livelihood benefits of forest fragments are recognised by people but not in policy.

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*A view of Dzongu, Sikkim from Tholung monastery.
Photo: Flickr / buddhatripper*

During my first visit to Sikkim in the winter of 2010, I went to a place called Dzongu – a land which is revered and considered sacred by the indigenous Rong, or Lepcha, people. It was dark, and I was outside taking in the fresh, cold mountain air. As I looked around, I could faintly see three lights far apart from each other shining dimly at a much higher elevation. Too distant to be able to make out easily, I asked my host in the village, Lakpa daju (elder brother), a middle-aged man with a default smile and zeal to do something for Dzongu and the Lepcha people, “What are those lights in the darkness on the other side of the hill?” This was my first trip to Dzongu, and I had reached at night. Somehow in the darkness of night, I had the impression that this house was at one extreme of the hill and nothing lay beyond it. Lakpa came out curiously, looked in the direction I was pointing

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- Arif Hasan
Urban Resource Centre, Karachi

Looking up beyond the Lakpa came out suddenly, looked in the direction I was pointing and said, "Oh those? Lights from the houses..." He went in promptly, perhaps because of the biting cold outside.

I stayed out for a while, trying to enjoy the dark silhouette of the mountains and valleys nearby, but it was very cold and I had started to shiver, so I went in looking for some warmth in Lakpa's wood-fire kitchen. After taking a sip of *raksi* (rice wine) he said, "Those are newly built houses, they were not there earlier. But soon there will be many more." He went on to explain his understanding of village expansion: "People got married; now they cannot live together with the family. Nuclear family is the reason; everyone wants to build their own house." The property, mostly land, in the hills of Sikkim gets distributed among the siblings. Many people use it when they want to build a new house, while some prefer to save it for the future. Five children for a family can translate to five more houses in the near future for which they would likely have to use a patch of land that was earlier designated for agriculture. Lakpa started counting the probable number of houses he expected would be built on that hillside in the next year. He reminisced about seeing *bharal*, or Himalayan blue sheep, every time he would go down to the river, and tried to recall the last time he had seen a musk deer near the village. He then promised to show me around the following day.

I got up early the next morning and walked to the hilltop to get a better view of the landscape with Lakpa. I was introduced to some of the villagers and also to my local guide Pema, a man in his early thirties who had finished his bachelor's degree and had to return to the village because of family responsibilities. After some formal exchanges, the villagers responded to my interest and started talking about the reasons for forest fragmentation and depletion. According to them, the increased demand for land related to various purposes such as building houses, agriculture and road building, along with natural disasters like earthquakes and landslides had resulted in the fragmentation of forest areas. Nearly 50 percent of Sikkim is covered with forest, most of which lies outside protected areas, in a highly dynamic, human-dominated landscape in the form of *Khasmal*, *Gaucharan*, reserve forest and private forest. In *Khasmal* forests, local people have free access to procure required timber and firewood after obtaining formal permission from the Forest Department, while *Gaucharan* areas allow for animal grazing and collection of deadwood and fodder. However, in the case of Sikkim, grazing is not permitted except for a few sites.

Human and ecosystem benefits

While highlighting the value of forest fragments, the villagers explained that even building materials for construction – planks, building poles, bamboo, etc. – come from forest areas, both private and government controlled, with prior approval from the concerned department for extraction. People depend heavily upon these forest patches in deriving materials for their daily needs such as fuel wood, fodder, food, medicines, and dry leaves to mix with cow dung to make manure, among other things. Some people even collect and sell non-timber forest products (NTFP) including vegetables like ferns, mushrooms, bamboo shoots, and fruits like wild avocado, *lapsi* (Nepali hog plum), and acorns from the forest patches for their sustenance. Apart from these direct benefits, many forest patches contribute valuable ecosystem services such as providing drinking water sources and pollination and dispersal to cash crops, while wild plants help to regulate an area's micro-climate and at the same time enhance the aesthetic quality.

Pema recalled his stay in the town during his Bachelor's degree study and said, "I felt like it was the end of the world when I had to buy drinking water in town; I missed my village so much." Considering villagers to be hardier than townspeople, he added, "It is because



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MEDIA METER



Kishore Dave, the bureau chief of the Gujarati newspaper *Jai Hind*, was stabbed to death at the newspaper's office in Gujarat's Junagadh district. According to a Press Trust of India report, the Superintendent of Police at the local police station said Dave (53) was attacked by unknown assailants at around 9:30 PM on 22 August 2016. *Aaj Tak*, the Indian television channel, reported that personal enmity prompted the murder.

ONLINE STORE



of these trees and greenery around us that we are much healthier. We get fresh air, water from natural springs, fresh fruits and vegetables from our own gardens. If there was no forest then this land would have been too dry to support any cultivation; natural springs would have dried too.” Others nodded their heads in concurrence. Showing me a large cardamom field Pema told me, “Large cardamom is dying and in its last stage, people will not be able to make money from this. We all are looking for alternatives and trying oranges.” It is unfortunate to know how farmers themselves have started to lose hope, as well as a very important source of income.

In the previous decade, researchers working in Sikkim reported that the production of large cardamom had decreased dramatically as a result of ‘pollen theft’ by honeybees combined with a decline in the population of bumblebees, the only pollinator of the plant that had been identified. I later learned that fungal or viral diseases have also negatively affected the plant. When I mentioned the bumblebee and its connection to large cardamom to the villagers, it did not take them long to recall how they used to go to the cardamom fields and nearby forest patches and “would come across many bumblebee hives, while now they are missing even during the flowering season”. They are curious to know if this is also the case with Sikkim’s mandarin oranges considering the decline in production in recent years. Unfortunately, I had no answer as there is a lack of studies on this issue.

URBASHI PRADHAN

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Lhadup says:

11 December 2014 at 6:19 pm

Very informative write up Urbashi. This article should serve as an alarm to all of us and the authorities, who know what is happening but not doing enough to right the wrong. And while the authorities notice this and start planning grand schemes and solutions, perhaps they can distribute tree saplings on regular intervals to the villagers and encourage them to plant two for every tree that goes down. The saplings will keep growing and the villagers more will be more aware and proactive by the time the schemes are implemented. Just my thoughts.

bishal says:

9 December 2014 at 4:23 pm

Properly planned resource utilisation, keeping long term consequences in mind, has to be the goal of everyone concerned. The locals deserve not only a life of their own choice but better living conditions too. A perfectly balanced system is hard to reach but is quite worth the (joint) effort.

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J. Blue, 10 February 2017

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Lakbir Mahajan, 06 November 2016

Hi Sumana,

I am a person who struggles with words and so my praise will not do justice to your writing style.

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Literary sandbox

bhumo, 04 November 2016

Bhuchung, why is late Dawa Norbu not mentioned here? His works are immensely read and applauded