

# Gender Relationships and Agrobiodiversity Management Practices among the Lepchas of Sikkim: Relationship and Effects

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## Introduction

Agrobiodiversity occurs at three levels: the agroecosystem level, the species level, and the genetic level. The patterns of gender relationships in a community are reflected at all these levels in the classification of agroecosystems and crop species, in the division of roles and knowledge, as well as in the value and importance ascribed to all these. Therefore, the sex roles and patterns of gender relationships will affect agrobiodiversity management practices.

This paper shows how gender relationships are reflected in the agriculture and agrobiodiversity management practices of Lepcha communities of Sikkim, a state of India. The Lepchas are the indigenous people of this area, and now form a minority group of 7-10%<sup>1</sup> of the total population (Government of Sikkim 1994).

## Historical Background

Traditionally, gender relationships among the Lepchas were based on their cultural beliefs and origin myths<sup>2</sup> that men were the active providers and women the caretakers and nurturers. The division of labour during this period conformed to this belief: women were completely in charge of agriculture, a crude type of slash and burn cultivation that raised dry rice, millet, and maize<sup>3</sup>, while men were in charge of hunting. Men had only a minor role in agriculture, focused on physically heavy tasks such as felling trees and big branches (Gorer 1938). Thus each sex had complete control over its own sphere. The Lepchas practiced a mixed form of patriarchal and matriarchal patterns in which the mothers' family name and property descended to the daughters and the fathers' to the sons (Fonning 1987).

The Tibetans, who ruled Sikkim for approximately 300 years, came in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, and later the Nepalis arrived in the 19<sup>th</sup>. The introduction of new value systems, beliefs, and practices influenced the Lepchas. To this was added the influence of Christian missionaries and later 'modernisation'. The Lepcha lifestyle accordingly transformed in religious, social, cultural, economic, and political spheres, and gender relationships transformed as well. Gender relationships came to be based completely on a patriarchal system, and men came to be regarded as more powerful providers.

## Gender Relationships and Agrobiodiversity

Today, agriculture is the main livelihood practice of the Lepchas; hunting was abandoned years ago. The Lepchas practice two forms of agriculture - settled and 'swidden' (slash

<sup>1</sup>Nepalis form about 70%, the Bhotias about 15%, and the remainder are plains people

<sup>2</sup>For origin myths of the Lepchas see Fonning (1987)

<sup>3</sup>The Lepchas believe that the gods gave these three crops to them

and burn). The transformed gender relationships are based on the belief that men are more powerful. Consequently, agriculture is now under men's control and women are considered only as helpers without any control over it, although they still perform the major share of agricultural work.

Agricultural activities and knowledge have been classified into separate men's and women's spheres, and the value assigned to different knowledge and activities is based on this division.

### ***Agroecosystem level***

The Lepchas classify cultivation areas into four major agroecosystems. 'Punzok' are cultivated areas in the forests or where agroforestry is practiced; cardamom, the major cash crop, is cultivated here. 'Sadlium' refers to the areas where swidden (slash and burn) is practised; crops cultivated here are dry rice, maize, millet, and buckwheat. 'Leeden shing', the cultivated land near the homestead, is planted with vegetables, tubers, and other minor crops. Finally, 'ari' or 'yong' are terraced fields located at lower elevations where wet rice is cultivated.

These various agroecosystems are divided between male and female domains based on gender relationships and the different crops cultivated.

Punzok is considered a male domain. Traditionally, when the men were in charge of hunting, this area (i.e., the forests) was their domain, so present thinking is a natural extension of this traditional domain. Second, and probably more important, the crop cultivated is cardamom, a major cash crop, which is associated with men. Men do all the work here - planting, weeding, harvesting, curing, and marketing; women only help when required.

Sadlium areas were once completely under the control of women, but now are considered as a 'joint domain' of both men and women. Work in these areas is considered 'outside' work, which would be within the men's sphere, but the crops cultivated here are minor and traditional crops, which are associated with women. Thus, this agroecosystem is regarded as a joint domain. Due to transformed gender relationships, women have lost their control over this sphere of agriculture.

Leeden shing areas are considered women's domain, as they are usually small and the crops cultivated are minor subsistence crops. Women do all the work here, with men helping very rarely. A diversity of crop species and varieties is maintained in these areas, because women as the caretakers and nurturers are responsible for feeding the family. The emphasis in these areas is on cultivating subsistence crops for family consumption.

Ari or yong areas are considered men's sphere despite the fact that women do more work in them. The main reason for this classification is that wet rice, a major crop, is cultivated here.

### ***Species level***

Crop species are 'gendered' among the Lepchas. As mentioned above, traditionally women were completely in control of agriculture, and all crops cultivated were therefore associated

with them. However, once gender relationships transformed into ones based on patriarchal patterns, the crops too became associated with men or women on the basis of their importance and commercial and status value. Crops like wet rice, wheat, and cardamom<sup>1</sup>, which were all introduced relatively late by the Nepalis (Gorer 1938; Siiger 1967), came not only to be regarded as major crops, but also to be associated with men. Traditional crops began to lose their value, and consequently the varieties of those crops too began to decline as people stopped cultivating them. Previously 27 varieties of dry rice were commonly cultivated, whereas now there are only two, and these are cultivated only in some very remote areas of swidden land (Gurung 1998). Similarly, the 12 varieties of millet that were cultivated (Siiger 1967) have been reduced to only four varieties (Gurung 2000). Among the traditional crops, only millet is considered a major crop because of the cultural and religious values attached to it. The other traditional crops are now considered minor crops and are associated with women. Vegetables are considered minor crops, as they are only subsistence crops.

Looking at this classification of crops, it is evident that the women's sphere includes a much larger diversity of crop species and varieties than the men's. Although women are the primary maintainers of agrobiodiversity in the true sense, the way gender relationships are constructed does not give value or recognition to this fact.

### ***Genetic level***

At the genetic level, the women, particularly the old, do the actual seed selection and storage for all crops, except for cardamom, the cash crop. This role of women is legitimised by the culture and gender relationships, as women are considered the symbols of fertility as well as nurturers and caretakers. Thus, women are the knowledge holders of genetic management, which is crucial not only for conserving agrobiodiversity but also for the people's very livelihoods. However, neither the men nor the women themselves recognise the importance and value of this knowledge. The reason is that this type of work is done while sitting around, and because such work does not require women to go out, it is considered 'inside' work.

However, when this role gets changed due to particular circumstances and a man takes it over, the value and importance immediately increase, and his status in society rises. In one case in which a man had taken up this work because he was physically too weak for heavy work, he came to be considered as the seed expert not only in his village but also in the neighbouring villages.

The dynamics and complexities of gender-segregated power relationships within households and communities, which in turn are influenced by the conditioning processes of cultural values, influence the systems and practices of agrobiodiversity management. This is reflected in the management practices of communities. Therefore, one cannot discuss management of agrobiodiversity or agriculture, or for that matter any other natural resource,

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<sup>1</sup> There are two versions of the origin of cardamom - scholars like Gorer (1938) state that the Nepali introduced this crop when they migrated to Sikkim, whereas Sharma and Sundriyal (1998) state that this is a native crop of Sikkim.

without understanding and considering social relationships, of which gender relationships are some of the most important.

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