



Identities, affiliations and gendered vulnerabilities in the Mid-hills of West Bengal

Chanda Gurung Goodrich^{a,*}, Chhaya Vani Namchu^b

^a International Center for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD) Kathmandu, Nepal

^b Integrated Mountain Initiative, New Delhi, India

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Darjeeling Hills

Identities

Gendered vulnerabilities

Affiliations

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the varied narratives of vulnerabilities faced by different groups of people in Hindu Kush Himalayas (HKH) region in the Darjeeling Hills, in West Bengal, shaped by their identities that are ever evolving. Identities come with deep-rooted structures of class, caste/ethnic group, history and geographic location. However, identities are not singular but multiple that continue to be influenced by both internal and external factors of development, politics and growing consumerism. Such new and changing social interactions give rise to new local level institutions, which often act as new arrangements of negotiation and agency for the communities, particularly for women and the most marginalized who do not have easy access to information, state or higher level decision-making. This study of gendered vulnerability in its different layers of identities and affiliations aims to show how such interlinkages and intersectionalities shape gendered and women's vulnerabilities and capacities in the face of climatic and socio economic changes resulting in the constant evolution of the communities in adapting/coping to climatic changes and external developments.

1. Introduction

The social and institutional dimensions of vulnerability and adaptation to climate change, with focus on social differentiations, dimensions of inclusions and exclusions, power and equity have been addressed in much detail by many research (Fussler and Klein, 2006; McLaughlin and Dietz, 2008; Smit and Wandel, 2006). Gender-climate change discourse has been enriched by including the intersectionality approach to gender, that does not homogenise women (or men) but rather considers the complex reality of multiple identities within gender categories (Arora-Jonsson, 2011; Carr and Thompson, 2014; Demetriades and Esplen, 2008; Onta and Resurreccion, 2011; Rodenberg, 2009; Tschakert, 2012). However, there remains some other factors that are gendered and are negotiated by social, cultural, institutional and economic structures and processes, which shape differentiated context specific vulnerabilities (and capacities) of women and men, but are still not much explored (Carr and Thompson, 2014; Kaijser and Kronsell, 2014; Morton, 2007; Sugden et al., 2014; Terry, 2009). Two such factors, this paper looks into are (local) identities and grassroots political affiliations and dynamics. The discourse on climate change is dominated by agreements and negotiations made at international forums, and the significance of the (local) identities, grassroots political affiliations and dynamics is often given a backseat, if not completely ignored. However, an understanding of these factors and how they influence the gender division of labour, migration patterns and decision making processes can give a more comprehensive view in understanding climate and gender from a bottom-up perspective.

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: chanda.goodrich@icimod.org (C.G. Goodrich).

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.envdev.2018.11.006>

Received 15 October 2018; Accepted 24 November 2018

2211-4645/ © 2019 The Authors. Published by Elsevier B.V. This is an open access article under the CC BY-NC-ND license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>).

The HKH is not only a hot spot for biodiversity with rich natural resources and highly vulnerable to climate change (see Chapters 1 and 2), but the region and its peoples also often find themselves in the midst of political/social/corporate/developmental conflict wherein women are under-represented in decision making and policy discourses at all levels. Political instability and marginalisation, in the backdrop of climate change, has major impacts on the extraction of natural resources and labour, which is gendered, and in its uncontrolled utilisation/commercialisation. This not only has environmental impacts but also gendered implications on the livelihood of local communities.

Darjeeling Hills has been a conundrum of agitation, with spurts of violence, particularly since the early 1980s, for the demand of Gorkhaland, separating from West Bengal. This demand for Gorkhaland for the minority Nepali Gorkha community of Darjeeling Hills in majority Bengali-dominated West Bengal is positioned as a resistance against the tyrannical control of local resources (land, water and forests) by an outsider, ethnically alien State (Ganguly, 2005). (Ethnic) Identity lie in the core of this movement, with Nepali ethnic identity used as “a powerful idea with material consequences that are fundamental to the politics of who gets what when and how” (Chhetri, 2013:7). Ideas about Nepali men and women (as well as indigenous Lepchas and Bhutias) having certain inherent characteristics to certain kinds of labour and temperaments were woven into the colonial economy (Besky, 2014). In a way it is this idea that has shaped the image and idea of the Gorkha that in the minds and hearts of the people. Affiliations to (ethnic) identity has become a sentiment amongst most. The political history of Darjeeling gives evidence of the repeated resurrection of the Gorkha identity as a political resource to negotiate, primarily with the state. All the political parties have had to orient their agenda around the attainment of Gorkhaland, “using images and language commonly attached to the imagery of the Gorkha” and even “the early pioneers of communism in Darjeeling knew what would sell in Darjeeling - not Marxism, Leninism but Gorkhalism” as it had stronger emotive potential than any other form of representation (Subba, 1992:90). In the tea estates of Darjeeling Hills, class conflates with ethnicity, and of the two identities it is ethnicity that has been chosen as the means through which to negotiate with the state for greater control over resources. In such an atmosphere, identity and affiliations play a major role in shaping vulnerabilities of people.

2. Methodology

The paper is based on secondary literature review and field research conducted from 2015 to 2017. To understand the complex processes of manifestations of gendered vulnerabilities in climate change context, various tools for gender analysis, and vulnerability and capacity, were modified and adapted to suit the objective. For collection of primary information during the field research, key informant interviews and focus group discussions (FGD) were conducted. FGDs were conducted with homogenous gender and social groups (Table 1).

The inquiry and analysis took place in three phases. The first phase was literature review and collection of gender disaggregated data – on roles, responsibilities, access and control to resources, benefit and incentives profile, and institutional constraint and opportunities. The second phase was the tabulation and analysis of information and data for each group, including literature review. The third phase was the comparative analysis of different gendered social groups to understand differential gendered vulnerability.

3. Study sites and major issues

The study was conducted in the Darjeeling hills situated between 26°31' and 27°13' N latitude and between 87°59' and 88°53' E longitude, the hills rise up from the plains for West Bengal and reaches up to more than 12,000 feet. The two field sites are Poshyor village in Kalimpong (average altitude-1250 m or 4101 ft.) and Teesta Valley tea estate in Darjeeling (average altitude-2024 m or 6700 ft.). The area falls under the Gorkhaland Territorial Administration, which is a semi-autonomous administrative body and has

Table 1
List of FGDs at the sites.

SL	Name of the Group	Male/Female	Site/Village
1	Lepcha farmers	Male	Upper Poshyor
2	Lepcha farmers	Female	Upper Poshyor
3	Nepali farmers	Male	Poshyor
4	Nepali farmers	Female	Poshyor
5	Christians	mixed	Poshyor
6	Non-Christians	mixed	Poshyor
7	Migrants	Male	Poshyor
8	Migrants	Female	Poshyor
9	Drivers/daily wage workers	Male	Poshyor
10	Women tea pickers	Female	Teesta Valley tea estate
11	Men working in the tea factory	Male	
12	Teachers, daily wage workers	Male	Teesta Valley tea estate
13	Retired tea workers	Mixed	Teesta Valley tea estate
14	Ex-army	Male	Teesta Valley tea estate
15	Migrants	Mixed	Teesta Valley tea estate
16	Migrants	Mixed	Teesta Valley tea estate

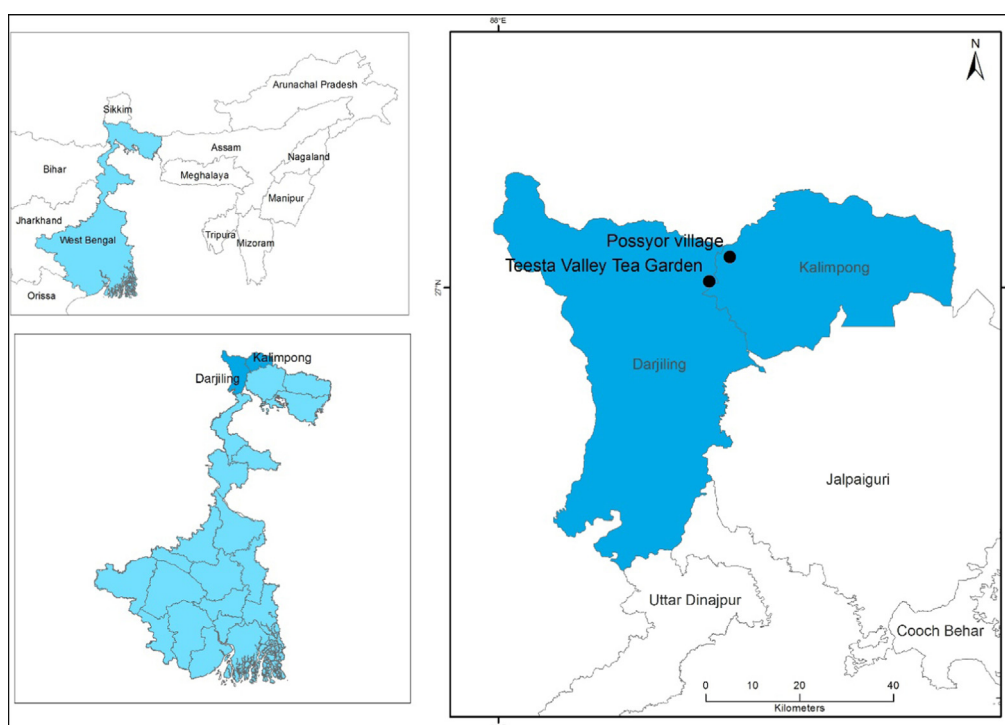


Fig. 1. Map of the study sites.

financial, administrative and executive powers but no legislative power. This form of governance is the product of long years of agitation and fight for political autonomy. Though the two sites fall in the same area, inhabited by similar ethnic groups, with a mixed population of ethnic communities such as Rai, Mangar, Subba, Chhetri, Tamang, Gurung and Lepcha, and having more or less similar socio-cultural norms and practices, but the livelihood practices are very different. Farming is the main livelihood practice in Possyor, while Teesta valley is a tea estate with almost all people relying on the tea garden and factory for their livelihood (Fig. 1, Table 2).

The area is still undergoing political turmoil disrupting livelihoods of many people. Livelihoods of the people have also been impacted by climatic changes. The farming community of Possyor complained about the rise in temperatures, which they have felt for over the last 10 years or so but more prominently since the last 5–7 years. They said it felt as if “the sun had been coming closer to the Earth”. The rising temperature and erratic rainfall has increased the hardship of the farmers as these are leading to drying of wetlands and spring sources. These factors lead to low productivity and high work load, thereby pushing the new generation away from farming into urban areas. Possyor village is bound by Chhibo village in the east, Possyor *Jhora* (stream) in the north and Tashiding forest in the south. The location of Possyor in terms of its surroundings is significant because the dominantly agriculturist population of this village are often cut off during excessive rainfall in the monsoons due to floods caused by the overflowing of the Possyor *Jhora*. If on one hand the area suffers from flooding due to excessive rainfall then on the other it ironically has also been experiencing water scarcity during winters leading to decrease in agriculture. Possyor has not seen active government interventions with regard to water and other development infrastructures since the late 1980s. This is as an effect of the political turmoil of the region which has played an important role since the *andolan* (political movement) of the late 1980s –the water pipelines and canal irrigation canals were destroyed during the *andolan* of 1986, and was never rebuilt. Health facilities are only available through community volunteers. The nearest hospital is the common town hospital, which is often an issue when the one and only bridge to and fro the area is washed away during monsoon. All these factors are leading to low productivity and high work load, increasing people’s vulnerabilities.

Teesta Valley tea estate, located across the Teesta River from Possyor in Kalimpong, has been a tea plantation since the British era. Water shortage is more critical in this area. Another very critical issue is the lack of land rights of the people working and residing here, putting them under a system of subtle bonded labour. The tea plantation workers were given very low wages and in order to

Table 2
Demographic distribution of the field sites.

Study area	Block	Name of gram Panchayat	Number of Households	Total Population
Possyor	Kalimpong	Kalimpong Khasmahal	1833	8881
Teesta Valley	Takdah Block, Darjeeling	Rongli Gram Panchayat Panchayat Office Teesta Valley	1260	6064

supplement this they were allotted plots of land, but with no tenancy rights (Chhetri, 2013). Thus, land documents to the workers and its residents have been denied for over 150 years now and making it mandatory for representative from each households to work in the tea gardens to ensure their right to shelter and livelihood. This denial of land rights has pushed the residents into the mercy of the tea estate, which are now controlled by corporate organisations, all located away from the hills. The lack of land documents and the age old system of binding labour of the residents to the tea plantation gives very little option for negotiations, and increases their vulnerability. From the time of the establishment of the tea plantations, settlements have been divided based on communities - Gurung *gaon*, Rai *gaon*, Chhetri *gaon*, Tamang *gaon* and so on, and this continues today. The tea estate has a health center/hospital in the estate which is for the service of the workers.

4. Identities and affiliations in the region

Identities and identity-based affiliations play a significant role in people's vulnerabilities and adaptation capacities. Hence, it becomes important to trace the historical timeline of events that has had social, cultural, political and in turn ecological impacts on communities dependent on their natural resources. The historical background of the Darjeeling Hills is crucial to understanding the role of institutions, development and cultural assimilation. In 1835 the English East India Company annexed Darjeeling (Dorjeling) from the kingdom of Sikkim, as it was seen as a refuge from the hot plains for the British soldiers and settlers (Kenny, 1995). The British acquired further economic control over the area with the introduction of tea plantations (Besky, 2014). Following this, Kalimpong, home to the indigenous Lepchas, was significant historically as a part of the ancient silk/wool route to Tibet/China, and was acquired by the British in 1865 (Subba, 1992).

During and over the nineteenth century Darjeeling and Kalimpong towns were made into a hill-station healing and relaxing leisure resorts for the British and European elites, based on the "medical advocacy of periodic temperate recuperation for white races temporarily living outside of Europe" (Sharma, 2016:87). Given this advocacy for the towns to be recuperation centres, considerable amounts of public funds were invested here for more than a century (Ramasubban, 1988; Arnold, 1993). The British officials had thought that the natives from Sikkim would be eager to work for them for wages, but did not happen for two major reasons – firstly, these people were very few in number and secondly the majority of these people were cultivators who already made adequate earnings from forests and commons, so did not need the money. Therefore, workers and laborers from the plains and from the nearby kingdom of Nepal were brought, and gradually there was a growing pool of laborers from marginal mountainous areas of eastern Nepal, Sikkim, Bhutan, and Tibet (Childs, 2012). Apart from attracting labour, these towns due to their location along the trade routes also drew numerous people belonging to other Asian and Himalayan ethnicities, and thus brought in Marwaris, Tibetans, Nepalis and Chinese traders by 1872 (Sharma, 2016; Subba, 2008). Out of the various groups, the Nepali origin people were in the majority – in the 1870s, 34.1% of the Darjeeling district's population was reported to be of Nepali origin (Hunter, 1876: 85). This was a consequence of Rana-rule in Nepal; the people who found themselves oppressed and landless moved eastwards to escape the oppressive situation (Hutt, 1998). From the 1850s, Campbell's labour mobilization received further impetus to this trend with the successful introduction of a tea plantation enterprise (Fielder, 1868; Campbell, 1873).

By the turn of the 20th century, Nepalis (often with Tibetans, Bhutias, and Lepchas) began forming social and political associations, representing themselves alternately as "Nepalis," as "Hillmen," and as "Gorkhas" as against the plains-people who were dominantly Bengalis. The first call for administrative recognition of Gorkhas was officially lodged in 1907 by the Hillmen's Association (Rhodes and Rhodes, 2006). Pre-independence movements for Gorkha recognition gave way to post-independence movements to break away the region from Bengal. In 1947, trade union leaders used Gorkhas' sense of shared identity and their concerns about deteriorating working conditions to initiate the first calls for a separate state of "Gorkhastan" (Subba, 1992). But the calls failed and the Darjeeling district became a part of the Indian state of West Bengal. However, the identity aspirations of the Gorkhas kept evolving over the decades with calls for separation from West Bengal, in different forms and under different leaderships. "Ethnic solidarity (was) reinforced by the perceived exploitation of the subordinate group by the superordinate" (Nielsen, 1985:133) as the shared disadvantages of belonging to the hills, of being the minority in the larger state with little say in political decision-making and control over resources became key to collective political action. Thus, ethnic differences, between people from the hills (predominantly Nepali ethnic groups, Lepchas and Bhutias) and the plains (predominantly Bengalis) "form(ed) the basis for collective action by members of the peripheral communities against the core community because ethnic identity cannot be detached from one's economic and political interests within the system" (Mason, 2002:577). Such politics based on ethnic identity "frames ethnic identity as a tool used by the politically less powerful to oppose the status quo" and "affirm their threatened identities and to assert their claims for material resources and political clout" and thus "change the prevailing political system and related social and economic arrangements" (Leach et al., 2008:759).

Ethnic identity in the region is based on the interaction/instrumental approach developed by Brumfiel (2003) (cited in Delgado, 2011) in which

"usually a collective group or community defines themselves based on the presumption of shared criteria, such as: common ancestry, shared cultural inheritance and history, or even archaeological representations of the past. There can be cultural and class differences between the members within the community, however what is important for them is the conviction that they belong to a community of people who are culturally unique, therefore sharing some kind of common bond. Important in this approach, is that individuals use ethnic affiliations (and loyalty) as a tool for obtaining a desired end. The ethnic group provides a coalition, a group of allies, that individuals use to compete more effectively against others (individuals or groups) to accesses and control resources, like land, water, forest, etc." (Delgado, 2011, p.16)

For tea workers, who are Nepali ethnic groups, Gorkhaland was not only a struggle for autonomy over political processes and

broader resources a means of also a struggle for their own rights to land, better working conditions and wages. Workers were well aware of the problems of plantation monoculture. The tea estate represents a capitalist mode of production. The tea workers are one of the lowest paid groups, they relied on the mercy and goodwill of the managers as they could be evicted anytime and under any trivial pretext. The lack of land tenure and ownership constrained the freedom and movement of the laborers and was thus the invisible shackles that bound them to the plantation (Chhetri, 2013:124). Furthermore, and there was/is segregation based on class, which also corresponds to difference in racial and ethnic attributes. Previously, managers and assistants were Europeans and Anglo-Indians, skilled workers were Bengalis and unskilled workers were either tribals from Jharkhand or different ethnic groups from eastern Nepal. Such racial hierarchy was not only visible in the administrative structure but was also strictly enforced (Xaxa, 1985:1659). At present, managers are usually people from the plains while the workers are Nepali people, as in the Teesta valley, or the tribals from Dooars and Jharkhand in the other foothill tea plantations. Thus, in the tea estates of Darjeeling, class combines with ethnicity and of the two identities, ethnicity has become the means through which to negotiate with the state for greater control over resources, particularly land (Subba, 1992). Even the recent *bandh* of 2017 was most effective in the tea plantation areas because the fight for statehood and political autonomy is correlated to grant of land rights by the residents here.

Despite this pan-Gorkha identity, the population of the Darjeeling Hills are divided by ethnicity, class, caste, religion and political affiliations. Apart from the Nepali speaking ethnic groups, who form the Gorkha group, there are the Lepchas, Bhutias, Sherpas, and other plains' people such as Marwaris, Bengalis and Biharis. Even amongst the Nepali speaking groups, there are numerous ethnic groups, such as Tamangs, Gurungs, Limbus, Rais, Newars, Chhetris, Brahmins, etc. A reason for all these numerous groups rallying under a pan-Gorkha identity can be explained as: "Participating in a socially validated group gives a sense of belonging" and "active membership in and identification (that) can protect individuals from collective threats, such as physical attack or political exclusion, and enable them to take collective action" (Leach et al., 2008:761). At the same time, such a pan-Gorkha identity has also given rise to a feeling of 'other' among the other groups and has "inadvertently galvanize(d) the ethnic identity politics of subordinate groups" (Leach et al., 2008:764). Consequently, there has emerged another layer of identity and affiliations based on the 'smaller' ethnic identities, which are often fanned by the political parties. Many of these ethnic communities fall in the Other Backward Class (OBC) as specified under the State Government. Based on this the State Government has established development boards for almost all such ethnic groups giving financial as well as in-kind support. Furthermore, (ethnic) identity is intertwined with political affiliations in the area, and one cannot discuss about one without the other. The reason for this is "identities – particularly group identities – are not something (that) develop(s) *independently* of politics and then (brought) fully formed into the political arena but, rather, are constructed precisely in and through politics" (Ackelsberg, 1996:98). The movement for a separate state based on the Gorkha identity has led to political strategies from all parties and sides involved – the State and the various political parties, among which Gorkha Jan Mutki Morcha (GJMM), Gorkha National Liberation Front (GNLF) are the major players. Often the different ethnic groups align with these different political parties and players, with the general tendency being Gorkha's aligning with either GJMM, GNLF or other political parties that show support to the cause in different levels and through different strategies, versus the State mostly represented by the ruling political party, Trinamool Congress. This gets further entangled with inter-ethnic identity affiliations colouring such political affiliations.

5. Gender identity

Gender is a social construct and refers to the concept of social differences between women and men based on stereotypes arising out of beliefs and mannerisms associated with masculine and feminine identities. Gender and gender roles affect the relationship between women and men in the family and society, and relates to the distribution of power, position, class and responsibility. Thus, gender is an organising principle of social life that creates and orders relations between people in a hierarchical manner, and at the same time it legitimizes this social power relations (Harding, 1986 cited in Zwartveen, 2008:33). Perceptions of gender are deeply rooted, and vary widely both within and between cultures, and change over time. But in all cultures, gender is associated with power and control over resources that are different for women and men. Based on this concept of gender, the home and the responsibilities concerning reproduction and the family are traditionally associated with women as they are considered more nurturing than men, hence prescribing nurturing behaviour towards all women. This behaviour is seen as a full time responsibility of all women towards their homes and their communities. Similarly, men are seen as the head of the households and leaders in their communities based on their sex alone (Kanter, 1977). Furthermore, to this gender division of roles and responsibilities is attached the access to, and control over, resources – tangible (land, livestock, etc.) and intangible (information, knowledge, networking, etc.) by women and men as is also their mobility. Such a gendered roles, responsibilities and access opportunities ultimately determine the level of their women and men's vulnerability.

5.1. Gender roles

The conventional division of gender roles between women and men is evidenced across both the study sites despite differences in the livelihood practices of the communities set in these areas. In Possyor women are responsible for all household and care work, while men are responsible for outside work, are considered as breadwinners for the family and are the head of the households. However, with the climatic and socio-economic changes, roles of women are extending. The main livelihood here is farming, where a more integrated farming practice with a mix of subsistence and commercial farming along with livestock rearing is practiced. In this scenario, women are taking on more farming work, often surpassing men because men are involved in commercial farming only, but women are fully in charge of subsistence farming and at the same time also work alongside men in the farming of commercial crops as

also tending livestock. In the Teesta Valley too women are responsible for all household and care work, but since the primary livelihood source is wages from working in the tea gardens and factory, women also become wage earner as tea pickers to secure the right to residency for their families. The gender division of roles is very clearly defined here – women work as tea pickers with less wages while men work in the factory earning more wages. This is based on gender stereotyping whereby women are perceived as having nimble figures who can pluck the tender leaves with care and caution but weaker to wield the machines. Such “current stereotypes of women and men have been influenced by historical views of women and men” (Brannon, 2002:183). The hierarchy of workers in the tea plantation puts women as tea pickers on the lowest rung.

5.2. Access and control of resources

Access and control over resources is defined and shaped by the gendered roles of women as caretakers and men as primary providers and heads of the households. As providers, the role of men is naturally associated with ownership over productive resources. Any resource worth monetary income is controlled by men across both study sites. Women are involved in taking care of these but the control of income and decision making is exercised by the male heads of the households. The age or seniority of the male head of the household is not necessarily a factor in determining his position of control as is the case with women. In the absence of father figure in the household, the son takes charge, or sometimes even brother-in-law.

Land is the primary resource at Possyor and it is always under the ownership of a man. If not the husband or son, control is monitored by father-in-law, brother or brother-in-law. Exceptions are there only in case of the complete absence of male family members. This control over land further gives men more authority and participation in public activities and decision making. For instance, men are seen to take control in meetings organized on local policies, livestock insurance, agriculture and water management and trainings.

Similarly, men in Teesta Valley are the heads of their households with control over all major resources like cash, livestock, etc., despite women forming the larger part of the labour force. Although women are earning cash income as tea pickers, their incomes are controlled by the men. Furthermore, men control their labour too, as they are sent out to work by the men. Unlike men, women usually do not have the right to make a choice of not joining the tea picking work force. Thus, women are placed at the lowest rung of the hierarchy in the tea estate structure with no control over any resources, including their own labour.

5.3. Mobility

Similar to access and control over resources, mobility is closely linked to gender roles. With women being assigned the responsibility of the care sector, their space is regulated within the home, while men are free to access spaces beyond their homes to explore better livelihood options. This holds true in both the sites. In Possyor where women take on the additional work in farming, their mobility is curtailed between the home and the farm, while in Teesta Valley where women work as tea pickers, they are bound within the house and the tea estate. With women taking care of all the household responsibilities, men are freer to move about, and with this mobility comes more options of earning livelihood as well as the freedom to participate in more activities of decision and money making. Hence, begins the association of men with services, politics and information. Men's freedom of mobility is seen in the professions they choose, such as, teaching, army, business, and politics.

6. Ethnic identity(ties), affiliations and vulnerabilities

The combination of ethnic identity and political affiliation, is a basis for vulnerabilities of different groups of people in the area, especially in the face of climate change and variability. Not only this, the ethnic identity and political affiliations are closely linked as ethnic identity politics is predominant, looming over every aspect of life. The pan-Gorkha community's shared disadvantages mentioned above, whether perceived or real, as against the majority ethnic and political party of the state, automatically makes them more vulnerable, particularly due to the low representation in policy making. This is reflected in the limited infrastructure and service facilities present in the area, whether it is education, health, employment or transport and communication. Thus, backwardness of the area in terms of socio-economy, politics and infrastructural facilities put the people in a position where their capacity is not strengthened, thereby increasing their vulnerability (Khawas, 2002). People in both sites said that they suffer from lack of adequate services in all spheres and also lack opportunities for employment, higher education and training, making them more vulnerable during times of disasters and hazards. The main reason for this as cited by them is ethnic identity politics.

Vulnerabilities due to the effects of the ethnic identity based political turmoil of the region are reflected in various ways in the study sites. A critical one as cited by all the people of Possyor is the complete absence of government interventions in regard to water and other development infrastructures. Due to heavy rains during the monsoon, the only bridge that connects the village to the rest of the area gets washed away every year. However, the government has never made any attempt to build a bridge that would last, the bridges built so far are by the local people. Water pipelines and canal irrigation in the area had been destroyed during the uprising of 1986, and there has been no governmental interventions to reconstruct/repair these. This has made the people more vulnerable as there is scarcity of water that is affecting the agricultural productivity. Not only this, the absence of the bridge during monsoon makes the people vulnerable as it is almost impossible to cross the fast flowing stream that turns into a raging river. An example reported by the people was the death of a pregnant woman because she could not be taken to the hospital in time due to the bridge being swept away. Since there are no health centres, high schools or other public services in the village, the vulnerability increase for the villagers. Furthermore, Possyor is a landslide prone area and people reported there is an increase of landslides due to various reasons, including

climate variability, deforestation, etc.

Apart from the one common “Gorkha” identity, the people are also aligned in smaller groups based on their immediate ethnic groups. The state government seems to be furthering this division by establishing separate development boards for each of the ethnic groups who are classified as schedule tribes, such as the Lepchas; OBC, such as Tamangs, Gurungs, etc., and schedule castes, and providing financial support, special funds and various types of schemes for education, employment, housing, etc. Such initiatives and support have benefited certain households to avail of extra benefits and help in reducing their vulnerabilities as compared to other communities who do not fall under such ‘marginalized’ groups.

In Poshyor the most prominent among them is the Lepcha group, which works under a traditional body called Mayel Lyang Lepcha Development Board (MLLDB), in collaboration with the West Bengal state department. Belonging to the Lepcha community gives them better chances in getting financial aid as well as other support mentioned above. As the Lepcha people said, the support from the MLLDB is important for them as it has helped them in many ways, such as building better houses, getting employment.

Nepali ethnic groups too have organized themselves into smaller communal groups to provide support to each other and act in collectives in times of need, particularly by providing voluntarily human resources as well as other in-kind support. This helps in reducing both financial and work burden of the households. As the men of these various ethnic groups said “Our *samaj* makes it much easier for us during stressful times. Even for laying pipes or digging canals we come together as a community and this makes our work not only less difficult but it also makes it enjoyable.” They further reported that when they have to go out of the village for employment or other work, they feel safer leaving their families behind as they know the formal *samaj* is there to help in times of need.

Most of the Lepcha households in Poshyor are Christians and as a result, this area receives much support from the Church, such as, in education, social work and employment, hence creating more opportunities for the rural farming community. For instance, the GLEN foundation has supported the Lepcha households with water supply and establishment of toilet facilities. Similarly, World Vision has helped them by distributing piglets, goat lambs and ginger seeds, and also sponsors outstanding students of the village for their higher studies. Along with the Lepcha community, other communities too irrespective of religion, have had access to Christian schools and music classes through the opening of the Christian institutes around the area in the 1990s as they provide support to several households with the education of their children. This has created many employment opportunities for the younger generation. The Gandhi Ashram, which is located not very far from the village, often recruits men from the village for daily labour at Rs 150 per day and women labour at Rs 100 per day. The Lepcha men have benefited more as the Church and Christian schools have given many men opportunities for employment as teachers, priests and church helpers.

In the Teesta valley, the denial of land rights and documents by the tea plantation to the local workers and residents, makes local residents very vulnerable. The pre-independence British structure of households settlement based on ethnic distribution exists to this day in the plantation area, thus there are clusters based on ethnicity, such as Gurung Gaon, Chettri Gaon, Tamang Gaon, Magar Gaon, Rai Gaon, etc. Although originally this was established to reinforce caste and ethnic division, today this has helped in organising unofficial ethnic community associations for the various groups. As in Poshyor, these community-based associations act as support for the people and households in different ways in times of need. This is important in the area as most households on their own would not have been able to organise social functions due to low incomes. As in Poshyor, the OBC communities here too get official support through the ethnicity based development boards. Thus these communities are relatively less vulnerable than those groups who do not have such development boards.

What was evident was that allegiance to ethnic communities and so to development boards ensures better opportunities for some, who are quick to take advantage of such opportunities as both a survival and adaptive strategy, thus reducing their vulnerability in times of climate induced stress. Since the ethnicity based development boards are politically induced and are state funded, what is seen in the sites is that often people of a particular ethnic group, who align with the ruling political party get access to various support, either financially or in kind, and opportunities through the state established development boards that make them less vulnerable than others.

Affiliations to political parties is another important factor in the daily lives of the people, which has implications for their vulnerabilities and capacities. Such affiliations is especially relevant in the distribution of government schemes as the political institutes have direct impact on scheme and policy distribution and implementation. The most glaring example of this is seen in case of the distribution of schemes under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) or the 100 days scheme, which is distributed to the unskilled labour force. Distribution of these schemes and also the employment under these schemes are done by local political leaders, who favour people who are affiliated their political party. Minor construction contracts, teaching contracts and so on are also distributed by local political heads and governments. As the people reported, non-affiliation to the political party and non-participation the party's activities could create obstacles in accessing these schemes and contracts, and often this is the only source of income for several households. Hence, households, and often ethnicity based institutions too, declare their allegiance and affiliation to the dominant political party in the area to get these schemes. The role of political affiliations and its connections to the MGNREGA and other contracts is yet again significant to Teesta Valley as this gives the locals (especially men) employment. Due to the system of corporate governance and the denial of basic rights to the residents, the local political parties act as a safety net for the people. The residents are aware of the insecurity that comes with having no land documents and are hence highly politically active in supporting the political movement for “Gorkhaland” because the fight for statehood and political autonomy is correlated to grant of land rights by the residents here. People here said that they would get not only get better wages but also land rights once Gorkhaland becomes a reality, thus aligning with the ethnic identity based political movement is critical for them.

What comes out clearly from the focus group discussions and interviews in both areas was that in the absence of government and state interventions, affiliations and show of allegiance are important to the residents for basic livelihood as political parties, which are closely intertwined with ethnic identities, determine the allocation of jobs, schemes and even aid in times of disasters. Thus, “Ethnic

identity is used as “resource as well as a tool” “in political negotiation with the state” and local parties to get access to resources that is necessary for help in reducing vulnerabilities (Chhetri, 2013:7). Ethnic identities and political affiliations hence become crucial for survival for the communities in these sites who have been marginalized in decision making but are most affected by climate variability, disasters, infrastructural changes and growing expenses in these marginalized areas.

7. Gender identity and women’s vulnerability

In a scenario of multifaceted and multi-layered identities and affiliations, what is most glaringly ignored is the gender differentials. No one talks of it, for in a situation where the stake is about identity of the entire community, to raise issues of gender discrimination, particularly by women, is not condoned or welcome. As aptly put by Ackelsberg (1996:90) “such movementsis founded on the assumption that there (is) one ‘true’ analysis of oppression, with its source in one ‘basic’ factor (in this case ethnicity) and the belief that effective resistance to oppression (requires) everyone to accept that single analysis as true and be willing to subordinate his or her other ‘personal issues’ to a supposedly more comprehensive analysis of the politics that arose from it”. In such a situation, the study findings show that the gender identity forms a major source for women’s increased vulnerability. In both sites, the roles of care and reproductive labour and its association with women is common, despite differences in the livelihood of the communities. Due to climatic and socio-economic changes, women’s responsibility of reproductive and care labour extends beyond the home and into farming and daily wage tea picking.

In Possyor, water is a major problem, either scarcity or excess, leading to lower productivity, resulting in the men either taking on more off-farm work outside the villages or trying out more integrated farming that includes commercial farming, subsistence farming and livestock. This has meant more work for women in all types of farming - in the subsistence farming, in the cultivation of cash crop that men have sole control over, and for some, more involvement as their menfolk are more engaged in off-farm work. Furthermore, the water sources, which were hitherto looked after by the community, is now relegated to women since they stay back, so now the duty of water source and pipe repairing and maintenance falls onto the women. In the Teesta valley 700 out of the 1100 workers are women, where they are involved in tea picking all day. Women have always formed the bulk of the tea pickers across all tea plantations in India, while men are employed in the factories, and a major reason for this is to cheapen wages as women are paid much less (Sharma, 2016). Since these women are at the lowest rung as tea pickers, they are in no position to negotiate and claim better rights and work conditions for themselves. The women also said that their actions may have direct implications on the livelihood and rehabilitation of their families, so they are even afraid to take leave even when they are not well, as this could mean not having a house. Thus, their responsibility of providing compulsory (and almost bound) labour to the tea estate, while also looking after the household chores, pushes the women into extreme vulnerability. The heightened water scarcity has added more burden to the women as they have to fetch water from longer distances than before, which means more time for this chore. The women reported that often it requires them collecting water as early as 2 a.m., particularly during dry seasons, so as not to miss their other household chores and tea picking work. Under the prevalent gender structure based on the patriarchal system of the household, the women in both sites lack of control over major resources like land, cash and even their own labour, making them completely dependent on their menfolk. As mentioned above because of the material ownership, men also take control in meetings organized on local policies, livestock insurance, agriculture, water management and trainings. Consequently, women are left out of such opportunities to contribute in decision making, getting new skills, or even to generate awareness at all. During focus group discussions, many women from Possyor complained of being left out of meetings on farming and livestock insurances although they were the ones who are more involved in this work. Such gendered situation has increased women’s vulnerability as their work burden has expanded, but with no control over resources and decision-making, leaving them with hardly any rest or leisure time, or to engage or invest in activities that improve their skills and knowledge or to earn them (extra) income. Such work burden has numerous implications e.g. negative health impacts, low self-esteem, etc.

Christianity promotes the participation of women especially in public spaces and meetings, therefore, in both sites, such church activities have led to an increase in women’s skill in public speaking, and their mobility and socialisation as they are able to interact with other Christians and church members outside their area. However, women’s participation in church leadership roles are not at par to that of men as leadership roles in the church are restricted to men. Women form leadership roles only within a separate women’s group and not within an overall general body. As the women reported “we are allowed to lead only women’s groups, as soon as it is the wider group, it is the men who are the leaders”. In terms of employment in the Church and religious institutions, men are employed in higher positions of authority than women. However, due to church activities, Christian women have, comparatively, more opportunities than other women in the villages.

In political participation, the prevailing conventional assumptions about women and men’s roles in the public and private spheres determine as to who is perceived and considered as the appropriate person to be involved in politics (Celis et al., 2013:7). Since politics remain a public domain it is accessible to men and not as much to women. Evidence show that the movement for Gorkhaland “was mainly dominated by men and participants were restricted with the male members’ of respective party organisation” (Rai, 2015 p.82). In both the sites, it was very clear that women’s participation in politics and political activities is “determined partly by gender socialisation, which influences women’s interest, knowledge, and ambition regarding politics, and partly (by the broader) social structures” that give more freedom to men (Paxton et al., 2007: 266). Hence, women dominate the labour force while men dominate politics and the decisions that affect the work and livelihood of the women. With the politics of ethnic identity dominating the region, large numbers of women are seen participating actively in political rallies and meetings, and there are numerous women’s wings (*nari morcha*) that have been operating under the banner of the Gorkhaland movement, with some women representatives in leadership position. Many women implied that they are often “thrown” into joining these political activities without any choice, especially

during peak times of the movement. However, women's participation is merely to show in numbers and men still make the decisions and most educated women stay away from political activities as there exists stigmas and question on respectability of women (Joshi, 2014). Women's participation is more as members and in rallies, while men are the ones who are the leaders and decision makers and "the women members are directed to implement the plans and the programs of the movement" (Rai, 2015, p.95). The renewed wave of Gorkhaland movement saw the rise of women in the political landscape. But the role of women or the *Nari Morcha* was primarily to reach out to people in crisis and ensure the provision of food and other basic needs. There were no significant difference among the women who joined the *Morcha* as every women member of the household was a de-facto member of the *Nari Morcha* (Joshi, 2014). Similarly, for some chosen as leaders by the leader were not even aware about their own roles within the broader political party (Lama, 2014).

The close association of men with politics and decision making is also reflected in the distribution of, and access to, MGNREGA schemes and other government contracts. Since the distribution of these schemes and other contracts are highly politicised and has local level parties controlling these, in both sites, all these are provided to men due to their active participation in local politics and close proximity to the local leaders. The connection between politics, men's space and decision making is crucial to women's agency, particularly in the tea plantations. As shown above from the field evidences men occupy space in the politics –both in numbers and in decision-making, while women are the ones who form the bulk of the workers, more so in the tea plantations, but with no voice in decisions. This was most significantly seen in the last agitation from June to September 2017, wherein all businesses, offices, schools, including the tea plantations were completely shut down. For women in the Teesta valley, this meant no wages, driving them to extreme vulnerability based on decisions made by the men and political parties.

8. Conclusion

The dynamics of ethnic identities, political affiliations, institutions and gender relations in the two sites give nuanced differences in narratives of gendered vulnerabilities of the various groups in the face of climatic and socio-economic changes. Ethnic identity (identities) is one of the major attributes that is used to access resources for improving the groups' lot through political negotiation, and one which is being used by the state also. Therefore, it can be said "Ethnic identity is one of the primary forms of identity that determine life chances of groups and individuals" (Chettri, 2013:3).

Across the sites the gender identity that determine women and men's position and responsibilities, play a dominant role in shaping their vulnerabilities and capacities. Women in the two sites have various intersections based on ethnicity, age, religious affiliations, migration and political connections. Despite these differences, a responsibility that binds all women together is the duty of care labour, which extends beyond the home into farming and daily wage tea picking, making all matters of the home, land and food, the responsibility of women. Market, money making, mobility and political participation are co-related and are associated with men. Although both men and women access ethnic and religious institutions, and also participate in politics and political activities, it is the men who control and make decisions due to their access of these very institutions. The decisions taken by the men in these political discourses and negotiations have direct impacts on the lives of the women who have to undergo changes in their private spaces, public identities and locations, throwing many of these women off guard into new circumstances and roles.

The configuration between ethnic identities, political affiliations, religion affiliations and overarching gender identity is evident in the study sites. In the milieu of identities, gender identity is clearly the one that is most ignored or taken for granted, but this identity is the one that makes women more vulnerable than men. For the communities in these sites, who have been marginalized in decision making but are most affected by climate variability, disasters, infrastructural changes and growing expenses, ethnic identities and political affiliations become crucial to survival and fending off vulnerabilities, as political parties, which are closely intertwined with ethnic identities, determine the allocation of jobs, schemes and even aid in times of disasters. Thus, in these areas where local government and traditional structures are all important and all defining for people's social, institutional, physical as well as their natural capitals (particularly natural resources), alliances are formed by men based on ethnic identities with political parties to negotiate for employment and development in the face of low productivity, low wages, low incomes, lack of public services, disasters and hazards.

References

- Ackelsberg, Martha A., 1996. Identity politics, political identities: thoughts towards a multicultural politics. *Frontiers* XVI (1), 87–99.
- Arora-Jonsson, S., 2011. Virtue and vulnerability: discourses on women, gender and climate change. *Glob. Environ. Change* 21, 744–751.
- Arnold, David, 1993. *Colonizing the Body: State Medicine and Epidemic Disease in Nineteenth-Century India*. University of California Press, Berkeley.
- Besky, Sarah, 2014. *The Darjeeling Distinction: Labor and Justice on Fair-Trade Tea Plantations in India*. University of California Press, Berkeley.
- Brannon, Linda, 2002. Gender stereotypes: masculinity and femininity. *Psychol. Perspect.* 159–185.
- Brumfiel, Elizabeth, 2003. *The Archaeology of Ethnicity in America. Courses-modules Syllabus*. Indiana University Bloomington, USA.
- Campbell, Archibald, 1873. Indian teas, and the importance of extending their adoption in the home market. *Soc. Arts J.* 22, 173–177.
- Carr, E.R., Thompson, M.C., 2014. Gender and climate change adaptation in agrarian settings: current thinking, new directions, and research frontiers. *Geogr. Compass* 8, 182–197.
- Celis, K., Kantola, J., Waylen, G., Weldon, S., 2013. Introduction: gender and politics: a gendered world, a gendered discipline. In: *The Oxford Handbook of Gender and Politics*. Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Chettri, Mona, 2013. *Ethnic Politics in the Nepali Public Sphere: Three Cases from the Eastern Himalaya* (Ph.D. thesis). SOAS, University of London, London.
- Childs, Geoff, 2012. Trans-Himalayan migrations as processes, not events: towards a theoretical framework. In: Huber, Toni, Blackburn, Stuart (Eds.), *Origins and Migrations in the Extended Eastern Himalayas*. Brill, Leiden-Boston.
- Delgado, Juana Rosa Vera, 2011. *The Ethno-politics of Water Security: Contestations of ethnicity and gender in strategies to control water in the Andes of Peru* (Thesis). Wageningen University, Wageningen, NL.

- Demetriades, J., Esplen, E., 2008. The gender dimensions of poverty and climate change adaptation. *IDS Bull.* 39, 24–29.
- Fielder, C.H., 1868. On tea cultivation in India. *Soc. Arts J.* 17, 291–292.
- Fussler, Hans-Martin, Klein, Richard J.T., 2006. Climate change vulnerability assessments: an evolution of conceptual thinking. *Clim. Change* 75 (3), 301–329.
- Ganguly, R., 2005. Poverty, malgovernance and ethno-political mobilization: Gorkha nationalism and the Gorkhaland agitation in India. *Natl. Ethn. Polit.* 11 (4), 467–502.
- Hunter, William Wilson, 1876. *A Statistical Account of Bengal: Districts of Darjiling and Jalpaiguri, and State of Kuch Behar.* Trübner & Co, London.
- Hutt, Michael, 1998. Going to Mugalan: Nepali literary representations of migration to India and Bhutan. *South Asia Res.* 18 (2), 195–214.
- Joshi, D., 2014. Feminist solidarity? Women's engagement in politics and the implications for water management in the Darjeeling Himalaya. *Mt. Res. Dev.* 34 (3), 243–254.
- Kanter, Rosabeth M., 1977. *Men and Women of the Corporation.* Basic Books, New York.
- Kaijser, A., Kronsell, A., 2014. Climate change through the lens of intersectionality. *Environ. Polit.* 23, 417–433.
- Kenny, Judith T., 1995. Climate, race, and imperial authority: the symbolic landscape of the British Hill Station in India. *Ann. Assoc. Am. Geogr.* 85 (4), 694–714.
- Khawas, Vimal, 2002. Environment and rural development in Darjeeling Himalaya: issues and concerns. *Himal. Voices.*
- Lama, Sanjeeb, 2014. Role of women in Gorkhaland Movement: assessing the issue of power sharing. *Int. J. Gender Women's Stud.* 2 (2), 75–85.
- Leach, Colin Wayne, Brown, Lisa M., Worden, Ross E., 2008. Ethnicity and identity politics. In: Kurtz, Lester (Ed.), Vol. [1] of *Encyclopedia of Violence, Peace, & Conflict*, 3 vols. Elsevier, Oxford, pp. [758–768].
- Mason, T. David, 2002. Ethnicity and politics. In: Hawkesworth, Mary, Kogan (Eds.), *Maurice Encyclopedia of Government and Politics Vol. I.* Taylor & Francis e-Library, Oxford, pp. 568–586.
- McLaughlin, P., Dietz, T., 2008. Structure, agency and environment: toward an integrated perspective on vulnerability. *Glob. Environ. Change* 18, 99–111.
- Morton, John F., 2007. The impact of climate change on smallholder and subsistence agriculture. *PNAS* 104 (5), 19680–19685.
- Nielsen, F., 1985. Toward a theory of ethnic solidarity in modern societies. *Am. Sociol. Rev.* 50, 133–149.
- Onta, N., Resurreccion, B.P., 2011. The role of gender and caste in climate adaptation strategies in Nepal. *Mt. Res. Dev.* 31, 351–356.
- Paxton, Pamela, Kunovich, Sheri, Hughes, Melanie M., 2007. Gender in politics. *Annu. Rev. Sociol.* 33, 263–284.
- Rai, Ashlesha, 2015. *Women in Gorkhaland Movement A Sociological Study.* Dissertation Submitted to Sikkim University in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirement for the Award of the Degree of Master of Philosophy. Sikkim University, Gangtok, Sikkim.
- Ramasubban, R., 1988. Imperial health in British India, 1857–1900. In: Macleod, Roy, Lewis, Milton (Eds.), *Disease, Medicine, and Empire: Perspectives on Western Medicine and the Experience of European Expansion.* Routledge, London.
- Rhodes, Nicholas, Rhodes, Deki, 2006. *A Man of the Frontier: S.W. Laden La (1876–1936). His Life and Times in Darjeeling and Tibet.* Library of Numismatic Studies, Calcutta.
- Rodenberg, B., 2009. *Climate Change Adaptation from a Gender Perspective.* German Development Institute, Bonn.
- Sharma, Jayeeta, 2016. Producing Himalayan Darjeeling: mobile people and mountain encounters. *Himalaya J. Assoc. Nepal Himal. Stud.* 35 (2), 87–101 (Article 12).
- Smit, Barry, Wandel, Johanna, 2006. Adaptation, adaptive capacity and vulnerability. *Glob. Environ. Change* 16 (3), 282–292.
- Subba, Tanka B., 1992. *Ethnicity, State and Development: A Case Study of Gorkhaland Movement in Darjeeling.* Har-Anand Publications in Association with Vikas Publishing House, New Delhi.
- Subba, Tanka, 2008. Living the Nepali Diaspora: an Autobiographical Essay. *Z. für Ethnol.* 133 (2), 213–232 (2008).
- Sugden, F., de Silva, S., Clement, F., Maskey-Amatya, N., Ramesh, V., Philip, A., Bharati, L., 2014. *A framework to understand gender and structural vulnerability to climate change in the Ganges River Basin: lessons from Bangladesh, India and Nepal.* Colombo, Sri Lanka: International Water Management Institute (IWMI). (IWMI Working Paper 159), 50p.
- Terry, G., 2009. No climate justice without gender justice: an overview of the issues. *Gend. Dev.* 17, 5–18.
- Tschakert, P., 2012. From impacts to embodied experiences: tracing political ecology in climate change research. *Dan. J. Geogr.* 112, 144–158.
- Xaxa, Virginius, 1985. Colonial capitalism and underdevelopment in North Bengal. *Econ. Political Wkly.* 20 (39), 1659–1665.
- Zwarteveen, M.Z., 2008. Men, masculinities and water powers in irrigation. *Water Altern.* 1 (1), 111–130.