

Gender and Natural Resource Management among the Lepchas of Sikkim and Darjeeling

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Both human social and cultural categories like 'Gender' and activities like 'Resource Management' is the product of social, cultural and historical circumstances. This research paper describes the position and role of gender in an Indian Tribal society, i.e. Lepcha. At the same time it also narrates the interrelationship between gender and resource management activity. It describes how and why, in which circumstances gender became a socio-cultural category through activities and processes and practices like resource management. To investigate the structure and function of gender in the said tribal society, it also describes how gender is the part of the social system and how as part of the system it is linked to culture (here specifically references are given in relation to religion and ethnic identity). It describes how the formation of gender is strongly influenced by external forces on the communities. So, social and cultural, in this context, gender relations are always prone to change. In this socio-cultural background how gendered individuals act, is a key objective of this study. In this way resource management and economic activities became gendered as 'Nature' too. When a society interacts with its adjacent nature for various purposes like subsistence

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activity, resource management, it interacts with all its ethical understanding. In this way human activities always socialize and culturalize his/her surroundings. In this context our study focuses on the social-cultural and gendered nature of production and subsistence activity, resource management, commercialization of produces and disease management among the Lepchas of Sikkim and Darjeeling. This study also tries to explore the status and role of gender in production, distribution, consumption process. It is based on ethnographic fieldwork done in the villages of Sikkim and Darjeeling.

[**Keywords** : Gender, Identity, Ethnicity, Resource Management, Lepcha]

1. Introduction

Social and gender relations are a result of a complex array of factors that depend on social, cultural and historical circumstances. Social and gender systems are linked to religion and ethnic identity, but at the same time are strongly influenced by external forces on the communities. Thus, social and, more particularly, gender relations are frequently reinterpreted and renegotiated as traditional societies are faced with new influences and change. In any community, gender representations are not uniform; rather, there are discontinuities and contradictions. The lives and activities of individual women express how they selectively embrace, tolerate, oppose or ignore gender ideologies. In addition, individual women and men, depending on the situation, behave differently in different activities and spheres of life. Thus, the individual activities and practices of women and men demonstrate how the wider forces of change are manifested at the local level through individual lives. However, the importance of individual choice and action is frequently overlooked when highly abstracted views of society assume a homogeneous and unchanging social order that forms an idealized situation often informed primarily by male perspectives. In this context our study focuses on the social and gendered nature of production and subsistence activity, resource management, commercialization of produces and disease management among the Lepchas of Sikkim and Darjeeling. This study also tries to explore the status and role of gender in production, distribution, consumption process in the Lepcha society. And how among the Lepchas gender plays a major role like, governing resources, living with the resources and indeed is governed by resources.

2. Lepcha

Lepchas are the indigenous peoples of Sikkim and Kalimpong and are little known outside the Eastern Himalayas. Several hypotheses have been suggested regarding their place of origin: some claim Tibet (Pinn, 1986), while others have cited possible links to the Kirats of east Nepal (Chmemjong, 1966; Fonning 1987). There is no accepted theory or accurate knowledge of this. The indigenous account of the Lepchas does not contain any tradition or history of migration? they believe that they originated from the divine peaks of Mount Kanchenjunga and the valleys around them. They refer to themselves as *mutanchirongkup*, the beloved sons of the Mother Creator (Tamsang, 1983).

The Lepchas have been influenced largely by two other major ethnic groups found in the region-the Tibetans, who ruled Sikkim for about 300 years, and the Nepalis, who migrated to Sikkim and Darjeeling district in the late 18th and 19th centuries. The Tibetans were powerful then, as they were the rulers, while the Nepalis, who migrated to this area in large numbers, became socially dominant in many ways. In addition, there was the influence of the Christian missionaries, who arrived from the nearby British ruled Darjeeling area (Gorer, 1938; Siiger, 1967).



Fig. 1 : A Bird-Eye View of a Typical Lepcha Village and Agricultural Field (Fieldwork photo)

3. The Region for Lepchas in India

Sikkim is a small state of India, situated in the inner mountain ranges of the eastern Himalayas (area: 7,299 km²; elevation : 300-8580 m above sea level). Kalimpong (area : 1,056.5 km²), which was part of Sikkim before 1706, is one of the district (area: 3,281.87 km²;

elevation: 300-3,000 m above sea level) in the state of West Bengal. The two areas are adjacent to each other and fall within the eastern Himalayan agroclimatic zone. The climate of the region varies from cold temperate and alpine in the northeast to subtropical in the south. The mean annual rainfall ranges from 2,000 to 4,000 mm.

The region has three major ethnic groups- the Bhotias (descendants of Tibetan and Bhutanese immigrants who came to Sikkim in the 16th and 17 centuries), the Lepchas (the indigenous people of Sikkim) and the Nepalis (who migrated from Nepal in the 18th and 19th centuries). In addition, others came to Sikkim as businessmen, traders, service providers and labourers. Numerous ethnic groups, with their own traditional cultures and languages, inhabit the region. However, as a result of long interaction, most of them have integrated to a considerable degree. Many practices and beliefs and even terms from different languages are now used commonly. The most evident sign of this integration is the use of the Nepali language by almost everyone, especially outside the home (Govt. of Sikkim, Sikkim : A Statistical Profile, 1993).

Agriculture is the mainstay of the region and 80 per cent of the people depend on it. Most farmers are smallholders, as per capita availability of land has been declining rapidly due to population pressure. The climate and seasons are conducive to growing a large number of high value cash crops like cardamom, ginger, potatoes and horticultural crops. In general, rice, wheat and oranges are grown at lower elevations, while crops like maize, potatoes, ginger and cardamom are grown in the higher areas. Because of the favourable climate, many people are also commercial flower producers.

Demography

Table 1: Population and Ethnicity of Lepcha Villages of Kalimpong

Sl. No.	Block	Village	H.H.	Total Population	M	F	Ethnicity
1.	Kalimpong	Tashiding	12	59	31	28	Lepcha
2	Kalimpong	Nasey	34	187	105	82	Rai and Lepcha
3.	Kalimpong	Peshore	113	549	296	253	Chhetri Brahmin, Rai and Lepcha

Table-2 : Engagement of Households in Agricultural and Non-Agricultural Activities by Lepcha People

Sl. No.	Name of Villages	Total H.H Number	Engagements in Agricultural Activities (No. of H.H.)	Engagements in Non-Agricultural Activities (No. of H.H.)
1	Tashiding	12	12	0
2	Nasey	34	28	6
3	Peshore	113	94	19

Table-3 : Agriculture as Primary and Secondary Occupation of Lepcha People

Sl. No.	Name of Villages	Total H. H. Number	Agriculture as Primary Occupation	Agriculture as Secondary Occupation	Non Involvement in Agriculture
1	Tashiding	12	9	3	0
2	Nasey	34	25	3	6
3	Peshore	113	89	5	19

The above three tables are the demographic reflection of the study region. Table-1 describes ethnicity wise population distribution among the three villages. It reveals that Tashiding is a completely Lepcha inhabited village, whereas in Nasey village Lepchas are living with Rai people. The village Peshore is inhabited by Chhetri, Rai and Lepcha people. Table 2 describes the economic activities of the village people and Table 3 talks about the role of agriculture as a central economic activity among the Lepcha people in all the three studied villages.

4. Integrating Social and Gender Analysis into Ginger Production and Marketing

Social and gender relations are a result of a complex array of factors that depend on social, cultural and historical circumstances. Social and gender systems are linked to religion and ethnic identity, but at the same time are strongly influenced by external forces on the

communities. Thus, social and, more particularly, gender relations are frequently reinterpreted and renegotiated as traditional societies are faced with new influences and symbols of change (Gurung, 1999). To understand and analyze the social and gender relations within and among the three ethnic groups in this study, it has been crucial to delve into the historical background of the region and its peoples. A dynamic and complex picture emerges from our study.

In any community, gender representations are not uniform? Rather, there are discontinuities and contradictions. The lives and activities of individual women express how they selectively embrace, tolerate, oppose or ignore gender ideologies. In addition, individual women and men, depending on the situation, behave differently in different activities and spheres of life. Thus, the individual activities and practices of women and men demonstrate how the wider forces of change are manifested at the local level through individual lives. However, the importance of individual choice and action is frequently overlooked when highly abstracted views of society assume a homogeneous and unchanging social order that forms an idealized situation often informed primarily by male perspectives (Watkins, 1996).

Ginger is the main, if not only, cash crop for many farmers in the present study area. Although cardamom and tea are also important cash crops, they require more specific conditions and relatively large areas to cultivate them commercially. Both crops, especially tea, also require processing before they reach consumers. In contrast, ginger can be grown economically on small plots in a wide range of environments. Thus, smallholders and marginal farmers can grow ginger and sell or consume the crop without any processing. Ginger is an annual and rhizomes can be harvested twice a year—the main rhizome halfway through the growing cycle and new rhizomes when the crop is fully grown. Because farmers rely so much on this crop, control and decision making in the production cycle are of great importance.

Significant changes are occurring due to commercialization. Traditionally, the Rai community was the major grower of ginger, although the Lepchas also cultivated ginger for use in religious ceremonies. Both communities practiced traditional production methods. However, as the crop became more important commercially, other communities, especially the Nepali Hindu

Brahmin Chhetris, took up its production. These communities had their own beliefs, practices, technologies and methods of cultivation, and gradually their production practices had an effect on the Lepchas and the Rais. At the same time, the commercial value of ginger increased significantly. More nontraditional areas were brought under ginger cultivation, and new techniques were introduced and practiced. Gender roles in cultivation, decision making and control over the crop also changed. These transformations led to some important changes. Over the last 15 to 20 years diseases have affected the crop resulting in a decline in the yield ratio from 1 'seed' rhizome to 8-10 harvested rhizomes to only 1 to 2-3. Many farmers have given up ginger cultivation and others are still struggling to survive because of the absence of alternative income producing crops. Incomes and living standards have declined.

As the commercial value of ginger increased, the Brahmin Chhetri communities began taking over its cultivation with their more advanced methods and new technologies, and the Rais and Lepchas lost their traditional control over the crop. Social relations between the communities began to change. The Brahmin Chhetri who migrated from Nepal has been considered more entrepreneurial as they have always been more involved in agriculture than the other two groups. With their social connections and wider exposure to new information and new agricultural technologies, they soon surpassed the Rais and Lepchas in terms of landholdings and they became the dominant group in the social structure. The Rais and Lepchas gradually began to adopt their practices and beliefs, although with some adaptations.

The Brahmin Chhetri domination of ginger cultivation meant that woman's roles in production and control over ginger declined drastically. For example, the Hindu belief in the 'impurity' of women bars them from entering agricultural fields or even touching the crops. This was compounded by the strongly defined gender roles with regard to 'outside' and 'inside' work among Hindus. They consider any form of monetary function as 'outside work' and, therefore, in the men's sphere. Thus, ginger- a major cash crop- was brought completely under the control of men.

Several research stations and projects are hoping to find solutions to ginger disease problems. Surveys concerning farmers' knowledge and perceptions of diseases and cultural practices have

been conducted. Based on the results of these surveys and research, extension messages have been developed. However, this research and extension work lacks any social and gender analysis and is strongly male biased- a serious shortcoming.



Fig. 2 : A Lepcha Farmer Managing his Field (Fieldwork photo)

5. Study Objectives and Research Questions

This study focuses on the social and gendered nature of ginger production, commercialization and disease management. The study is important for a number of people. First, for researchers to allow them to understand social and gender dynamics, and to identify the constraints and opportunities of the various social groups regarding their livelihood and the role of ginger. Second, for research station staff and extensionists to allow them to understand social and gender dynamics, and how these affect practices (especially in relation to disease management) which could help them come up with methods more acceptable to the farmers. Third, for farmers-ultimately, to help them examine their own methods and practices and come up with solutions for disease problems themselves.

The study also aims to explore strategies for involving women in the management and control of ginger production. Such strategies for addressing women's practical interests would, we hoped, lead to positive changes in their livelihoods. In particular, we set out to identify the enabling and constraining factors affecting the more disadvantaged groups in the region (women, poor, lower castes and classes) concerning control over ginger cultivation as a cash crop.

The following research questions guided the work :

1. What are the roles and responsibilities of men and women in the three ethnic groups concerning the cultivation and commercialization of ginger?
2. How does decision making take place among men and women in the three different ethnic groups concerning access and control over the key resources (land, labour, knowledge, capital)?
3. How do more general transformations in social and gender relations and in society affect the decision making process for an important activity such as ginger production?

6. Tools and Methods

Different tools were used at the various stages. Various tools were used for data collection, such as a seasonal calendar, activity profile, semi-structured interviews, group discussions, key informants and participant observation. We collected several oral testimonies. A review of secondary sources (books, journals, papers, articles) provided historical and background information. Attempts were made to collect information about when the crop was not commercially important in the area, when the crop became commercially important, when the crop began suffering from diseases, the period before the Brahmin came to the region, after the Brahmin settlement and start of ginger cultivation, and the present status. Data analysis focused broadly on social and gender roles, and relations with reference to ginger cultivation, diseases and management. We paid special attention to variables such as key stakeholders, economic relations, markets and institutional linkages.

7. Role of Ginger in the Social Life of Lepcha Tribe

The Lepchas respect ginger and give priority to the crop as it is required in all their religious rituals and also for curing diseases. All Lepcha households cultivate ginger because they are not allowed to take ginger from others for rituals. Thus, among Lepchas and Bhotias, ginger remains a relatively important crop. Like the Rais, the Lepchas observe a religious ritual before using, eating or even bringing the new ginger crop into the house. In this ritual the spirit from the river Teesta is called on and offered paddy, a red cock and some local wine along with ginger. Once the offerings are made and the chanting completed, the spirit is guided back to its original place.

It is believed that if this ritual is not observed, bad things will happen to the family and household? for instance, people will fall sick, cattle will die, or crop production will be poor.

7.1 The Lepcha Villages: Nasey, Peshore and Tashiding

These three villages in the Kalimpong area are adjacent to one another. The nearest town is Kalimpong, approximately 8 to 10 km away. As in the other villages of the area, most of the people depend on farming and are all smallholders. The main crops are rice and maize, but they also cultivate round chilli, ginger, cucumber, tomatoes and other vegetables. According to the residents, about 15 years ago 40 to 45 per cent of the total cultivated area was devoted to ginger, but ginger now is grown on less than 5 per cent. Most of the farmers now cultivate this crop for home consumption only. The main reason for this drastic reduction in ginger cultivation is disease.

7.2 Ginger Production and Commercialization in Peshore, Nasey and Tashiding

Before the farmers began large scale cultivation of ginger, the only fertilizer they used ash, which was spread over the field. The men would plough the land while the women planted the crop. They collected seed rhizomes from the current crop and stored them in pits in the field for sowing the following year. Old Lepcha farmers point out an interesting fact: previously, other communities did not buy seed from the Lepchas, Rais and Limbus because they were afraid of the spirits living in the ginger fields of these communities. They believed that if they bought ginger from them, they might catch the dewa disease.

In this area commercialization of ginger began among the Lepchas only in about 1979-80. The Lepcha farmers saw how other farmers, especially the Tamangs of Peshore village, earned a lot of money by selling ginger and began to cultivate it commercially. During the early 1980s 50 per cent of the Lepcha farmers of the area were growing ginger for sale, although most of the older farmers did not. Disease set in very soon and commercial cultivation declined rapidly. Currently, only 10 per cent of the people in this area cultivate ginger on a commercial basis.

Disease became severe in the mid 1980s. According to some farmers, one of the main reasons for its rapid spread is that when ginger cultivation started commercially there was not enough seed

and they had to bring some in from other areas. They believe that these rhizomes carried the disease. Farmers also purchased from Muslim traders who used to visit the area. The farmers also have other theories about the causes of disease problems. One is the use of fertilizers? as the farmers began to cultivate ginger on a large scale, they began to apply fertilizers to increase yield. Larger scale production meant disease problems. Second is the belief that water flowing to the village from the Durpin area, an army cantonment, is contaminated with various chemicals like soap, oil and petrol. Third is deforestation. Fourth is the short time between cultivation periods? farmers feel that soil should be given a rest every five to seven years, a practice that earlier farmers followed.

7.3 Interethnic Social Relations

Historically, the region and its people have been exposed to various external influences from historical movements of people due to conquests and wars, trade, migration and immigration. They have been confronted with a myriad of influences: the lamaist culture of Tibetan Buddhism, the caste system of Hinduism, the more 'egalitarianism' of Christianity, British colonialism and lowland traders. The process of interaction with and influence of, these external hegemonies was based on relations of inequity. Stratification on the basis of class, caste, wealth, religion and gender became the norm.

A study of the social relations among the three communities shows how they have influenced each other. The Rais, for whom ginger is a very important crop religiously, and who were the first to migrate to and settle the region, had close contacts with and an influence on the Lepchas. Both ethnic groups belong to the Tibeto-Burman community and share many traditional tribal beliefs and practices. Inter-marriage has reinforced exchanges. This is a major reason for the similarity in the religious rituals surrounding ginger. According to the oral testimonies of the old Lepcha farmers, they learned to do the nayako puja ritual from their daughters who were married into the Limbu ethnic group. The Limbus and the Rais belong to the Kirat group and share traditional beliefs, rituals and practices. When the Brahmin Chhetris settled in this region, their influence began to be felt by the Rais and Lepchas. As the old Lepcha farmers said, they learnt to plant ginger in beds from them. But the Brahmin Chhetris also learned ginger cultivation methods from the

Rais and the Lepchas? the practice of storing ginger underground is an example. They also began to observe the nayako puja.

Commercialization of the crop resulted in closer social relations among the various communities. The farmers began to exchange ideas and information about cultivation and to trade, buy and sell seed. Market forces deepened social relations, not only among the three main ethnic groups, but also with other groups. Traders from the lowlands represented market forces? they bought ginger and set the price. Many of the farmers also began to buy ginger seed from these Muslim tradesmen, creating a new social division: farmers (no matter to which ethnic community they belonged) versus those in control of commercialization.

However, differences remained, at least in people's perceptions. The Lepchas are considered more reticent and less sociable, while the Brahmin Chhetris are more enterprising, better agriculturists and have more knowledge. The Rais fall between these two groups. Today, social relations among all the ethnic groups continue to be dynamic with a lot of give and take and exchange of information on cultivating methods, disease management, prices, places to sell and sources of seed. However, in most cases, the parma system remains within the same ethnic community.

7-4 Current Cultivation Techniques

In the selection of land for ginger cultivation, fields where water stagnates are avoided. Farmers also believe that planting the same land every year does not produce a good crop. Chosen fields are cleared of all vegetation by burning and the ash is used as fertilizer. In Nasey, Peshore, Tashiding the land is then ploughed, dug and hoed. A second plowing occurs 15 to 18 days later. Cow dung (8-10 cm) is applied to the fields and they are plowed again to mix the manure into the soil. The terrain is too steep to plow? instead, people turn the soil by hand and hoe. Beds 20 to 25 cm high are prepared with drains between them. Just before planting, the stored ginger seed rhizomes are sorted again. Good healthy rhizomes, that are, large, shiny, free from spots or marks, and free from bud or eye injury, are selected. The rest are sold in the market.

The selected ginger rhizomes are planted in two or three zigzag rows in the beds and covered with up to 8 cm of soil. The spacing between the rhizomes should be about 15 cm. Some farmers believe

that to increase production, one can plant three or four rows in a bed. During planting the seed rhizomes are broken into pieces to ensure that each has two to four sprouts. Immediately after planting, the beds are mulched with dry leaves up to 8 to 10 cm thick. Some farmers use mulch made by putting grasses in the cowshed for a few days so that it mixes with cow urine and dung. Mulching protects the seedlings from rain, prevents weed growth, keeps the soil soft and moist, and accelerates growth. Most of the farmers practice intercropping with maize as maize plants provide shade to the ginger. Maize is planted in the drains in between the beds. The farmers prefer the improved 'NLD' variety as it is shorter and has less chance of being blown over by wind.

After about a month, the beds are weeded. Ginger shoots are still very small and the chances of damage to them are high. Weeds are uprooted and disposed of outside the bed. When the ginger plants have three or four leaves, the mau or mother rhizome is removed, although if it is too small, it is left in place. Care must be taken not to damage the roots and cause infection. The roots are immediately covered again with soil. The mau is sold wherever the farmers can get a good price for it? some sell it to traders at the nearby markets. Some farmers sell it to the cooperative society. This income is very important, as it solves financial problems during the rainy season. Fifteen days after mau extraction, manure is applied.

Farmers have been experimenting with various disease management practices in different villages. Some Lepcha farmers clean all the mud from the bottom of the diseased plant and expose the roots to the sun. Rotten plant roots are scratched and ash is applied. Some believe that just exposing the roots of infected plants to the air and sun can stop further spread of disease. The farmers say that these roots or rhizomes germinate and grow well. Some farmers cultivate ginger only in sloping fields using traditional methods, that is, without much land preparation. They just scratch the soil to make a hole and plant the rhizome seed in it. Many farmers contend that red soil helps control disease. One Rai farmer planted bikphul (*Glorisa*) in a ginger field where disease had been rampant. According to him, his ginger crop was very good that year without any disease. However, he has not been able to verify or repeat the experiment because he has only a limited area for ginger cultivation. One Lepcha farmer planted some ginger on rock covered with soil. The crop here did not have disease.



**Fig. 3 : A Lepcha Farmer Pouring Water to the Field
(Fieldwork photo)**

8. Gender Roles and Ethnicity in Cultivation Practices

1. Site selection is done by the head of the family, whether male or female, of all households at the two sites at Kalimpong. Also, if a male head of household is absent for whatever reason, the wife automatically takes on the role of head of the family and is responsible for this task. However, it is mainly the male head of the family who does the site selection. Only when the male head was absent did women take on this task.
2. Land preparation is done equally by men and women. In Nasey, Peshore, and Tashiding men do the plowing while women do the hoeing and digging? where there is no plowing, both men and women are equally involved in digging and hoeing the fields. However, in cases where the families follow the parma system, it is the male who does this work as it is felt that men can work more than women. Similarly, if the households need hired labour for this work, they hire men.
3. Sowing and planting are done by both men and women. However, usually only family members are involved. The reason given for this is that hired labour will not plant with as much care as household members.
4. Manure application is done by both men and women equally.
5. Mulching is done mostly by men, although women help when required.
6. Weeding is done by both men and women, although when hired labour is required for this task, women are employed. The

wages for female labourers (INR 25) are lower than those for men (INR 40).

7. Extraction of maurhizomes is done by both men and women. However, usually only family members do this work as much care is needed to keep from damaging the plant. Farmers prefer not to employ hired labour for this.
8. Soil covering is mainly done by men, as it is heavy and strenuous work requiring physical strength.
9. Harvesting is done by both men and women equally and usually only household members are involved.
10. Seed storage is done both by both men and women.
11. Marketing is done entirely by men, except in female headed households.
12. Purchasing seed is generally done by men. However, where the head of the household is a woman or the male head of household is absent, then the female head of the family takes on this responsibility.

It is evident that in all the communities the roles of men and women at the various stages of cultivation are almost similar. The differences depend more on household and family circumstances than on ethnicity. It should be noted, however, that Brahmin Chhetri women in male headed households have less say in matters of site selection and purchase of seeds than women in the Lepcha and Rai communities. As one of the old Brahmin farmers put it, 'I do not think that women are experienced in selection of fields, so I do not trust them to do this.'

The oral testimonies of the older men gave us an historical perspective. We learned that among the Rais, men used to play a more dominant role. In most families the male head of household was completely in charge and he was the only one who entered the ginger field. Among the Lepchas, both men and women seemed to have had an equal role. As one of the old farmers explained, 'Men plowed the field and the women planted the seeds and covered them with soil.' The women did the seed selection. However, men would perform the religious rituals with women merely participating passively. The tradition among the Brahmin Chhetris was for women to cultivate ginger when the crop was grown in small quantities for household consumption. However, with commercialization and the

production of large quantities, the work was taken over by men with women merely acting as 'helpers'.

Other differences between traditional and current practices also exist. For example, not all Rais and Lepchas observe the traditional religious ritual before eating or using the new ginger crop. Those who do still observe it shorten the ritual by just offering ginger to the spirit. The Rais have discontinued the practice of not working in the fields when there is a birth in the family. The main reason given for this was that nowadays families are scattered and it is not always possible to get news on time. Farmers also said that this practice is no longer practical in the face of high labour demand and high salaries. The Rais have stopped observing saran? they think it is no longer either practical or feasible. The younger generation does not even know when saran occurs. Many Brahmin Chhetris have also abandoned the practice. Similarly, the practice of not working on Tuesdays or 'si' and 'mi' days has become less and less common, and the ban on working in the fields on the anniversary of the death of a family member is practiced by only a few farmers. However, in contrast, some of the Brahmin Chhetri farmers have started to observe the nayako puja, the ritual conducted before eating the new ginger crop.



Fig. 4 : Lepcha Man and Woman in their Field (Fieldwork photo)

8.1 Gender Relations and Ethnicity

We looked at four aspects of gender relations: the roles of men and women in the agricultural work? access to land, labour and capital, and limitations on access? decision making and control?and image and self-esteem.

These last two are based on elements of cultural ideology, symbols and statements that explicitly devalue women and socio-cultural arrangements that exclude women from participating

in various religious activities or from holding power in society. Thus, the image and self-image of women and their confidence are influenced by gender ideologies, state ascribed roles, cultural taboos and expectations, education and exposure to the outside world, ability to earn money, roles in decision making, and their own inner sense of autonomy, identity and strength (Gurung, 1999).

8.2 Roles of Men and Women

Generally, as we described earlier, men and women do almost equal work, from land preparation to seed storage. Roles depend more on the family situation than on gender or ethnicity. Where a family has enough male members, women do not work much in the fields, whereas in families with fewer men, women worked equally side by side with them. However, ethnic socio-cultural values are strong among the Brahmin Chhetris? Brahmin Chhetri women do not participate in ginger production as actively as Rai and Lepcha women.

Overall, women's work remains undervalued compared with men's. Women are seen, by both men and women, as helpers of men and, in general, their workload and is far greater than men's. Women not only work in the fields as much as or more than men, but they also have the major role in housework and caretaking.

8.3 Access and Limitations

By and large, women have almost equal access to all inputs required for ginger cultivation (seeds, land, labour). In all the families and households interviewed, both male and female members have equal opportunity to work in the fields, as well as to collect, select and store ginger. However, there was one limiting factor for women: the Hindu belief in their 'impurity'. Menstruating Rai and Brahmin Chhetri women are not allowed to enter ginger fields or even touch ginger seeds for 12 days.

Women have equal access to income from the ginger. However, this access clearly depends on their position in the household (for example daughter, mother, newly married daughter-in-law, mother-in-law). Normally, the more senior the woman in the household the more access she has to the money. Access does not necessarily mean that women have the freedom to spend cash income any way they desire. In all cases they first have to consult the family, especially the husband, and reach an agreement. Men, on the

other hand, spend any money they receive to purchase whatever way they want (drinking, gambling, buying what they want) without consulting the family or getting approval.

A major limitation that women face concerns wages for agricultural labour. The wages of women labourers are systematically lower than those of men. This difference is based on the belief that women have less physical strength. The market is considered a male domain. Women are considered to be less knowledgeable about the market. Although this was the case in all the communities we studied, it was more evident in the Brahmin Chhetri community. However, changes are occurring. In all the communities the current generation of women is more actively involved in marketing than their mothers and grandmothers. More and more women are engaging in commercialization, either alone or along with a male member or members of their family. This trend also varies by type of household and among individuals.

8.4 Decision Making and Control

Decision making opportunities and roles of women differ, from both within households and within communities. Decision making is a complex process and is influenced by many factors. Women's input ranges from advice to recommendations and, in few cases, to actual decisions depending on her position in the family and household, and, to a certain extent, the community. Among the Lepcha and Rai communities, mothers and older daughters who are knowledgeable participate equally in selecting the site for ginger cultivation, whereas among the Brahmin Chhetri farmers women are less involved in this task. Only female heads of household make this decision alone. The decision to buy and sell ginger is mostly made by the male head of the family, with women playing only an advisory role. However, differences exist depending on the family, position of the women in the household and individual people involved. Although in general women have a minor role in decision making, there are a few examples where women are equally, if not more, involved in this sphere.

By and large, women do not have much control over important assets like land. In most cases land is inherited by sons, leaving women without this important source of collateral for obtaining credit from formal institutions. Although equal inheritance rights are given to sons and daughters by the law under the 1956 Hindu

Succession Act, custom still views men as the breadwinner and head of the family. Women do not seem to have much control over their own labour, as their wages are based on the male dominated perception of women not being able to do as much work as men. Women's control of the money earned from ginger sales depends on their position in the household. The higher her position, the more control she has over this money, although the control is never complete because she must often spend it not how she pleases, but rather in response to the demands of her husband and family.

8.5 Image and Self-esteem

Our study shows that strong elements and symbols of cultural ideology explicitly or implicitly devalue women among the Rais and the Brahmin Chhetri communities. Women are considered impure and unclean because of their childbearing role. These communities consider menstruating women 'impure' and do not allow them to enter agricultural fields. Similarly, after giving birth a woman is considered 'impure' for at least seven days? during this period the whole household is considered 'unclean' and no one is allowed to work in the fields.

Women's image in these communities is one of inferiority. This is reinforced by the socio-cultural taboo against women performing ginger rituals among the Rais, which has been adopted by the Lepcha and Brahmin Chhetrias well as by other communities. The self-image of woman varies considerably. In general, younger women tend to have a better self-image than older ones. Young women have more self-confidence because of their greater exposure to the outside world and greater mobility. Most of the younger women think they are as good as men in every sense, including marketing of ginger. Older women tend to support and justify the existing male domination and their subservient roles as part of their cultural tradition, while the younger women are more aware of their rights and the inequity of their status. Their self-esteem varies from family to family, and ethnicity seems less a factor. In all cases, the situation at the household and family level has a major influence on women's image and self-esteem.

In summary, our analysis of gender relations in the region provides a complex web of confusing and sometimes contradictory evidence. There is evidence of the almost universal subjugation of women, but there are also signs that more equitable relations

between men and women are emerging. Gender relations are not uniform in all households of a community and they differ between communities. They vary depending on individual men and women, and how they react and behave in various situations. Rai, Lepcha and Bhotia women have more autonomy, freedom of movement and opportunities to engage in entrepreneurial activities, assert their opinions, and influence important household and community decisions. At the same time, younger women in all the communities are taking a much more active role? they participate not only in the work but also in decision making and marketing. These changes are shaped by such factors as education, exposure to modern ideas, greater mobility, increased awareness of the outside world and increased political awareness. We found that younger women have much more confidence, a better self-image and more self-esteem than the older generation.



Fig. 5 : A Bird's Eye View of Lepcha Agricultural Field
(Fieldwork photo)

9. Conclusion

The future of ginger production and commercialization is characterized by both constraints and opportunities. We conclude by describing some of those faced by women and by poor farmers. The major constraint women face is the lack of ownership of land? in all cases it is the male head of the family who legally owns the land. This leads to another major problem for women: they have limited access to credit, especially from formal institutions like banks, as land is the most common collateral. Most women are overburdened with work

as they undertake all household chores, shoulder the family responsibility of bringing food to the table, look after livestock, and work alongside men in the cultivation of crops. Most women have no time to take an active part in the marketing of ginger. Consequently, this limits their opportunities to control cash income. Socio-culturally, it is not acceptable for women to be active and 'loud', especially in regard to marketing or other 'outside' activities? thus, they cannot take an active role in decision making and control.

In terms of opportunities (younger) Rai and Brahmin Chhetri women especially are exploring new avenues. Many of them are self-confident and have high self-esteem. Rai women are demonstrating entrepreneurship, while Brahmin Chhetri women have opportunities to participate in politics, particularly at the village level. They have become more aware of their rights. Many younger women are very much aware of things happening at the national and international levels. Rai women at Kharka Sangsay said that they believed that the price of the ginger depends on international demand and markets, especially in Arab countries where demand for ginger is high. They expressed worry about the recent Iraq war as this might have a negative impact on the price of ginger.

Poor farmers have a limited amount of land and cannot cultivate much ginger as they require all available land to grow subsistence crops for their families. They also cannot afford to conduct experiments like those with more land. In Central Pandam poor farmers are usually migrants from Nepal and do not own any land legally. They cultivate land on a sharecropping basis or by leasing it. In addition, they do not have a right or access to the many facilities given to the farmers of that area by the state government. Poor farmers often learn cultivation and disease management practices from the farmers for whom they work as wage labourers, and this often helps them. Future action research could focus on ways to support them better.

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