
An inside view of Kechopalri Lake in Sikkim: A sociological Study.**Hasibul Rahaman,**Professor, Department of Sociology,
Haldia Govt.College, Haldia , P.O. Debhog, District. Purba Medinipur,
West Bengal Pin 721657

Abstract: As we all aware that the kin relation of man and nature which has been observed since theological stage. The people in general and tribes in particular are dependent on the nature for their livelihood. For this perspective most of the tribal people of our country has been accepting the nature as a sacred phenomenon and this is why the tribes are practicing the animism as form of religious institution. As like as the people of Kechopalri Village of West Sikkim believed that the Lake Kechopalri is sacred one. The Bhutia, Lepcha, Nepali etc are main ethnic groups of the lake area. There are 53% people are belonging to Bhutia tribes. The lake is covered by the forest. During these days of the invention of the state of Sikkim, we are supposed to observe their kin relation with the said lake and they were economically dependent on the lake and its surroundings. The local Buddhist people are collected leafs, fibrous roots of different plants species and sold to local folk medicine practitioners. Not only that but also some of them are collected the pieces of wooden material and made Buddhist doll and selling to the pilgrims. But now a days little number of residents of the lake area are compelled to migrated to other places in Sikkim and West Bengal also mainly due to market economy, ecological degradation. As a result day by day the lake is facing the crisis of identity and the area is not in a position to attract pilgrims due to loss its sacredness. The paper is tried to explore some socio-cultural aspects of the said lake form holistic point of view. As I try to develop this paper by using sociological tools and techniques like participant observation and with the help of auto ethnography.

Key Words: Religion, Lake, Tribes, Nature, Ecological degradation etc.

Human and environment are closely connected with each other. Since time immemorial, a close linkage has been observed between nature and human society. There is a hard based interaction which we found since savagery stage and it is going on till now. From theological stage, people are entirely dependent on environment for fulfillment of their primary needs and have tried to conserve it. That constitutes a part of cultural heritage.

However, today such a harmonious relationship is under threat from various forces like modernization, market economy and vices of development. The process of development has not only resulted in a sharp onslaught on the natural environment within which people are located but also posed a serious threat to their culture, tradition and sacredness.

All sacred places are not homogeneous for a religious person. Even for a so-called non-religious man certain places have more importance and therefore considered as different from other places. But it can be said, no place has inherent qualities that set in apart from other places, it is the meaning that a believer attaches to a particular place that makes sacred or holy.

Similarly the lake is considered as sacred thing by the Buddhists of Sikkim. It is also the symbol of

totemic object. Why and how it is still bearing its sacredness and through this concept the locals can conserve the lake is the prime question of this study? Before searching its answer, we should need to define the concept of lake.

Many traditional societies through out world have institutionalized in variety of different ways large or small cultural landscapes or sacred ecosystems as a part of their belief system. In the Indian context, too cultured-linked ecosystem management is to be found in many of the societies, which have a large number of natural resource-linked institutions. The concepts of sacred lake, sacred grove, etc. represent various stages of social selection (Depommier and Ramakrishnan, 2002).

The conservation of sacred lake may be studied from ethnographic perspective. There are many sacred places in different areas of India. They also include numerous lakes, groves and shrines. People regularly visit such places without religious predispositions. Many sacred places are historically considered as religious spots. People regularly visit in order to enjoy salvation through their performing rituals over there.

Objectives of the study:

The present study has analyzed all the ethno historical aspects of sacred lakes in Sikkim with special reference to Kechopalri Lake. For this purpose the following objectives have been taken under consideration:

- Study the origin, legend and myth associated with the lake.
- Records religious functions of the lake in community context and in the hill society.
- Examine the socio-cultural setting of the lake.
- Examine the traditional knowledge practices associated to conservation of natural resources i.e. lake.
- Assess the developmental activities centering the lake and their ecological or environmental impact.

Research Methods:

The present study is exploratory in nature. It is exploratory in the sense that it has examined all the aspects of sacred lakes from ethnographic point of view. In order to understand the traditional method of conservation faced by the people living around the lake, an intensive field work has carried out.

The study has conducted mainly on Kechopalri Lake of Sikkim and its surrounding villages. This particular lake has been selected purposively taken into consideration the religious history of the place, indigenous knowledge system applied for conserving of this lake, nature of society and the socio-cultural and economic life of the people adjacent to the lake. The data collection has comprised of by applying using of several methodological tools and techniques like interview, case study, observation, Key-informants, etc. Senior lama, secretary and president of the said lake, aged person, pilgrimages and the priests have been interviewed.

Brief about the Lakes of Sikkim and Kechopalri Lake:

Sikkim is a land of lakes situated at elevation ranging from tropical to alpine. The majorities of lakes eco-systems is of glacial origin and are located in the North district, while South district has the least number. All recreational or other activities such as boating, water sports, and irrigation etc. are restricted in these locustrine systems, as a result of which the lakes of Sikkim have fared differently from the other lakes in India (Gulia, 2005:145).

Different survey report shows that there are 210 big and small lakes are situated in Sikkim. On the face of it, one would not expect to find lakes or such a rugged terrain. But surprisingly Sikkim does have lakes though not very large in size. Most lakes in Sikkim are considered sacred and are revered due to ancient mythological connection. According to governmental record that there are eleven lakes identified as sacred (Sikkim statistic, 2004-2005). Lake Khechopalri is one among them. These lakes are both spring fed as well as some river fed.

The Khechopalri mela of West Sikkim is perhaps the largest and most significant of its kind. It is held near Khechopalri Lake monastery on the occasion of 'Magh Purne' on 12th to 13th March in every year and it attracted pilgrims from all over Sikkim. It has a special gravity. The pilgrims worshiped the spiritual power and offered various food materials into the lake to appease god. They used the lake's water as 'prasad'.

Khechopalri Lake is of the sacred lakes of Sikkim and perhaps the most highly revered. Also known as the wish-fulfilling lake, pilgrims from allover come to pay homage. Again it is a place which sustain a wide range of biodiversity well over 150 species of bird like the grey-headed fishing eagle (*ichthyophaga nana*) and the yellowbellied blue magpie (*cissa flavirostris*). Mammals like the Himalayan black bear and jackal also frequently available at the adjacent forest area of the lake.

The present research work is related to natural resource preservation from community perspective and from the perspective of civilization as well. The indigenous systems of beliefs for the preservation of ecological system are well evident from sacred lakes, sacred groves and other natural objects which are considered as sacred. It is such beliefs that lead to sustained relationships between human and the nature and has been preserved both for centuries.

The Kechopalri Lake is surrounded by a board leaved mixed temperate forest, and has a catchment area of 12 kms with 75 households and 500 people living in it. The Lepcha are the main ethnic group in the Khecheopalri area. Traditional agriculture is the main livelihood and recently some households (11%) have become involved in tourism. The influx of tourists is high with visible impacts of disturbance on the lake and its watershed. Besides visitors, communities also exploit the natural resources of the lake watershed by extraction of fuel, fodder and timber, and by livestock grazing. The lake is also a resting place for trans-Himalayan migratory birds and supports commercial and recreational tourism.

Table-1.1
Distribution of population by age and sex (Lake Area)

Caste \ Community	Upto 6 years			7-15 years			16-59 years			60 years above			Total population			
	M	F	T	M	F	T	M	F	T	M	F	T	M	F	T	%
Bhutia	25	10	35	25	35	60	60	50	110	20	25	45	130	120	250	50
Lepcha	3	4	7	11	12	23	34	32	66	14	15	29	62	63	125	25
Sherpa	0	2	2	7	4	11	21	17	38	6	8	14	34	31	65	13
Mangar	1	0	1	4	5	9	10	8	18	3	4	7	18	17	35	7
Chetri	1	1	2	4	3	7	6	5	11	2	3	5	13	12	25	5
Total	30	17	47	51	59	110	131	112	243	45	55	100	257	243	500	100
%	11.67	6.99	9.4	19.84	24.27	22	50.9	46.9	48.6	17.5	18.5	20	51.4	48.6	100	

Source: Fieldwork

Table-1.2
Distribution of Workers by principal Occupation and Sex

Caste \ Community	Agriculture			Driving			Wage Labour			Other			Total			%
	M	F	T	M	F	T	M	F	T	M	F	T	M	F	T	
Bhuta	16	-	16	25	-	25	20	11	31	4	6	10	65	17	82	42.5
Lepcha	11	-	11	16	-	16	7	5	12	3	5	8	37	10	47	24.10
Sherpa	19	-	19	9	-	9	7	8	15	-	-	-	35	8	43	22.5
Mangar	8	-	8	2	-	2	1	3	4	-	-	-	11	3	14	7.19
Chetri	4	-	4	3	-	3	-	-	-	1	1	2	8	1	9	4.6
Total	58	-	58	55	-	55	35	27	62	8	12	20	156	39	195	100.00
%	37.17	-	37.17	32.25	-	32.25	22.43	69.23	31.79	5.12	30.8	10.25	80.00	20.00	100.00	100.00

Source: Fieldwork

There are large numbers of plants in Kechopalri that are important for medicines which are using by local people even to cure serious diseases like sprains, cuts and fractures etc. Besides the lake the locals in general and Lepchas in particular are also taking it as symbol of totemic elements and for this, some times they are performing different religious activities inside the forest.

The lake area, in true sense, preservation of such rich nature heritage is not yet been a priority of the concerned states. Some of the monuments are preserved at the cost of their historic flavor and most of them are at a neglected state, witnessing harsh wounds of time. Other cultural products of tourism in the region include the typical forms for visual and performing arts, crafts, dress materials, fairs and festivals, folk music, oral literature, life and lifestyle, dietary habit etc. in terms of all these components the region is rich enough with greater spatial diversity.

Kechopalri Lake is set of amidst the thick and luxuriant forest cover in West Sikkim. It is

considered as one of the most sacred lakes of Sikkim, and it is believed that wishes are fulfilled when prayers are offered to the deities of the lake. Many domestic as well as foreign tourists visit this lake each year. The lake attracts many migratory ducks during the winter season. The Kechopalri monastery is situated above the lake and is half and hours walk uphill. A large number of visitors come to visit to this lake during the Kechopai Lake (Bumchu) festivals which is normally falls in the month of March.

Pilgrims and resident and non-resident visitors are on single destination trips to the Kechopalri Lake. Outside visitors to Sikkim usually undertake multiple-destination trips, which include Khecheopalri Lake. Therefore, the analysis has focused on the recreational and sacredness value of local pilgrims.

The number of visitors to Khechopalri Lake has grown rapidly from 16068 in 1997 to 18713 in 1998. In 1998, 7800 visitors arrived at the lake from Sikkim as pilgrims and the remaining 10913

were from out side of the state and included both resident and non-resident visitors. Visitors to the lake were spread through out the year, but with a pick in March- June in firs phase and in September-November in second phase. The majority of resident visitors came from the West Bengal of India and most of them are day visitors who spent 1-3 hours. Most of the non-resident visitors were and independent trekkers.

As per the record of field work, it is to be noted that the Kechopalri Lake is known as wishing lake. People are coming from different corners of India in general and Sikkim in particular and through a coin (Rs. 1/- or 2/-) in the middle part of the lake for fulfilling their internal wishes. They are willingly able to make a different vow during the thronging of coin. As we know from field data that no one is failed after wishing the lake.

Table 1.3
Month wise figure of Domestic and International Tourists visited in the Lake area in 2011.

Month	Domestic	International
January	300	D.N.A.
February	315	D.N.A.
March	1200	20
April	1400	35
May	600	05
June	D.N.A.	D.N.A.
July	D.N.A.	D.N.A.
August	153	D.N.A.
September	405	D.N.A.
October	930	16
November	800	20
December	500	04

Sourc: Fieldwork D.N.A.: Data Not Available.

Keeping in mind religious beliefs, the performers have internal faith to give religious respect of the prayer wheels. All of the prayer wheels are fully covered by cloth or paper where we observed sacred religious scripts which are written by Tibetan language. According to religious guide lines the performers have to touch the prayer drums during puja.

The Kechopalri mela in West Sikkim is perhaps the largest and most of significant of its kind. It is held near the Kechopalri Lake monastery on the occasion of ‘Maghe Purna’ from March 12th to 13th, 2011 and has attracted pilgrims from all over Sikkim. Not only Indians, but foreigners also attend and enjoy it. It has a special gravity. The pilgrims worshipped the spiritual power and offered various foods –materials into the lake to appease God. They are using the Lake’s water as a ‘Prasad’.

People of Sikkim believe that the Lake Kechopalri has her own divinity power to release the people from distress. They appease God by offering some materials. Even the temple offerings in the form of flowers, incense sticks cast into the lake’s water every day take its toll. It is observed that pilgrims offered different types of fruits, milk, raw rice, fried rice, mustered oil, dalda, biscuits, bread sugar and the like into the lake.

Table: 1.4

Percentage wise distribution of Domestic and International tourists by Occupation

Domestic Tourists		International Tourists	
Occupation	Percentage (%)	Occupation	Percentage (%)
Doctor	0.4%	Doctor	D.N.A.
Teacher/Researcher	36%	Teacher/Researcher	7%
Business	30%	Business	D.N.A.
Agriculture	5%	Student	D.N.A.
Student	10%	Other	D.N.A.
Other	15%		

Source: Fieldwork

More over them released many bamboo-boats with burning dalda and Khadas (sacred scarves). This is the very recent phenomena by the pilgrims. Animals, especially dogs (ferals) have seen relishing the proteinous offerings. Many officials including police and military personnel are also observed typing khadas to the offerings. Very peculiar observation is that of some pilgrims offering these materials to the water body and other consuming lake’s water at the same time for their

good health at this spot. Some washed hands unnoticed by the pilgrims who consumed the water.

As field view, it is undoubtedly say that lake water is considered most sacred material to other Buddhist in general and Buddhist in particular. There is strictly prohibition to throw the row materials inside the lake. This is why visitors are not allowed to throw plastics, stones etc. but they are allowed to keep a bottle of water for life long peace of their respective families. Through

religious activities the local are trying to conserve its sacredness.

The trial and important component of the sacred complex is sacred specialist. Generally, all tribal groups have a priest or a group of sacred specialists, who are limited two or three in number. Membership to the office is usually hereditary. They are called by different names in different tribal groups (Srivastav, 2007:329). In other word 'sacred specialists' are the priests associated with different centres and help of the worshippers and pilgrims in the sacred performances.

The Kechopalri village is the land of tribal people where 97.34% villagers are enjoying the tribal status. They are not keeping forefather's religion that is totemic religion as such. The oral historicity support that the inhabitants of the lake area are considered as Buddhist tribe. Hence, they are following the Buddhist tradition.

The role that monasteries play in the conservation of nature and natural resources in Sikkim should not be underestimated. The Buddhist Sangha is not simply a religious institution but historically one of social and political clout too. There are 330 monasteries in Sikkim and they have been widely instrumental in imparting environmental knowledge of protections and sustainable use to there followers.

The Kechopalri monastery is situated beside the lake and lama is considered as a religious supremo and he has a sole responsibility to look after the lake and performing puja. The lama is giving instruction about the does and don'ts inside the lake. He has no demands to the visitors for performing religious activates but visitors are willing to pay him accordingly. He is only one sacred specialist in the lake area and he has residing beside the monastery. The local tribal are giving full respect to him and sometime rushed to him when they facing various problems like – disease.

As we can say based on field work source that the visitors of the lake makes a vow through performing puija with the help of the present lama of the lake. The visitors are bringing all sorts of item for puja purpose and they are strictly follows the lama's advice over the lake area. All the visitors are normally directed to follow the Buddhist norms during the prayer in the lake but they are free to make a vow of their own style. The lama has no particular fees for performing puja but visitors are usually pays him little amount of rupees or kinds as their own level of capacity.

The conservation of water, lake and associated forest has integrated. The communities had rules that ensured that conservation of all sources of water and the associated forest cover. The springs, in particular were protected shrines and the forests

covering springs area not interfered with this ensured that water loss through evaporation was reduced.

The communities also valued lake as important sources of water and fish and as lot of emphasis was put on their management. In Kechopalri lake area communities had strong rules to protect forests associated with lake, which they considered as shrines. Nobody could take any water well without the permission of the lamas of the local gomphas.

The communities thus observed certain practices in the management of water which protected water courses as well as wetlands and ensured sustainable utilization of water sources including rivers and lakes Many of the practices were based on taboos and prohibitions. For instance in lake area people have warned not to urinate in the lake. If they did their kettle would give birth in a lake and the newborn (calfs) would drown and they would therefore end (upliving) poor since cattle are a symbol of wealth. This belief protected water sources from contamination.

One of the important features of this community is the functioning of a number of social groups to make certain decisions regarding sharing and utilization of their natural resources. The Bhotija Society did understand the manifestations of their natural resource system in terms of the myriad opportunities and constraint for the community's survival. Their community organizations such as the village council (gram panchayat) forest Council (Van panchayat) water council (Pani Panchayat) youth forum (yuva dal) and woman organization (mohila Mangal dal) have evolved norms and practices to regulate individual and collective behaviour (Vis-à-vis nature).

These traditional institution take decisions regarding the regulation of resource sharing and utilization and maintenance of their resources like that forest grazing land and water springs. Similarly, they also fake decisions regarding the collective labour required for the protection and conservation of these resources. This traditional instructions created traditionally by the community are still functional to a great extent, and are respected by the community their decisions are regarded and obeyed and has social binding. The evolution of such institutions in this society is and indication of their traditional vision to respond appropriately to their biophysical circumstances. The traditional understanding of their biophysical environment has helped in adapting community needs to resources rather than over extracting to meet unrestrained demands. Thus in the past, the community could strike a balance between their ecosystem and social system.

The traditional institutions of the Bhotiya community have build up their practices bared on close proximity and functional knowledge of

resource use and hence have a strong sense of conservation ingrained in their traditions. The general attitude of thus people towards their ecosystems is quite respectful; their sense of belongingness to their natural is also reflected by their behaviour. The Bhotiya society remained largely isolated from the mainstream market forces due to their remoteness and inaccessibility and hence, depended totally on their local resource base for its food and health. As a result of this the social survival, welfare strategies were totally focused on their local diverse and fragile resource base.

Hence, there emerged a system, which individually or jointly strengthened the ecosystem – social system links and contributed to the natural resource friendly management systems. This contributed to the high collective stake in protection and regeneration of local natural resource. The closer proximity of this society to their resource lease contributed to the letter understanding of the limitations and potential of their resources. However, the local control over the local resources and the greater autonomy, due to absence of external impositions led to the adoption of social responses tuned to minimize the pressure on resources through social and institutional sanctions.

The most important and popular conservation strategy being the praying and tying up of white and red pieces of cloth on few medium size plants and bushes, usually on the roadsides and other such common places more susceptible to destruction by human and which are man palatable. Those plants and trees which are worshiped and have pieces of cloth teal on them are not out by the community for any other purpose. As a result, they have preserved a number of species of different plants and trees at different locations in and around their villages. Similarly few trees due to their landmark location and which also provides shelter to a large number of birds insects gats and primates are also assigned religious sanctity for their conservation irrespective of species, like the trees of all species of genus fiews are protected in many parts of the world. These conservation techniques are utilized to save trees, which becomes quite rare especially in the villages around the timber-line. Such plants and bushes are neither harvested nor cut for any purpose, on their path are way to their grazing lands, way to anther village a number of such bushes and trees can be seen on the side (Farooquee et al, 2004: 37-39).

The sacredness of so many of the natural features was Sikkim has greatly contributed to nature conservation in the region. However, some problems persist. Water pollution is an issue and a recent threat to the Gumpa forest is the amplified cultivation of cardamom on forest floors to generate revenue for the monasteries. A rise in tourism and related problems is also cause for concern.

The lake is likely to be remote and has number of problems facing by the tourists. The data shows its tourism potentiality from tourist's point of view. There are 20% respondents says that they need lodging facilities so that they will stay there at least one week. Similarly 15% of respondents are eagerly felt like good quality of restaurant which is essential for the tourist attraction.

Most of the ecotourism activities in Sikkim are either in protected areas or cultural sites. Protected areas are the State Properties where ownership, control and management of resource and claims rest with the government. Rights for tourism purpose are with a variety of users including local entrepreneurs, communities' commercial tour operators and government agencies such as the Forest and Tourism Departments. Permits are often issued by the Tourism and Forest Departments of the State Government with the intention of generating revenue and regulating visitor flow. Cultural sites of tourism interest such as monasteries and their sacred forests are under the control of local institutions. There is a unique and only one example of Kechopalri sacred lake where the legal rights lie with the State Government but the operational rights seem to be with a local institution, like Kechopalri holy Lake Welfare Committee.

As concern grows over the loss of natural heritage in the area, it appears this is an ideal time to facilitate ecologically and socially responsible tourism (including religious prilgrimage) at key destination to conserve the biological diversity of the area. Therefore a collaborative project is much more needed to protect the Lake environment, etc. The waste management system has to be set up with environmental concern and at the same time the attention should be given to the higene and proper sanitation facilities during the festivals for both of the local inhabitants as well as for the prilgims, tourists, etc

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