

A Comparison between Traditional and Current Livelihood Strategies of Sherpa and Tamang Communities in the Eastern Himalayas

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Abstract

The Himalayas are known for their rich biodiversity and natural landscapes comprising of a series of mountain ranges, valleys, and rivers. Geomorphology has a significant part to play in the climatic conditions of the region and profoundly shapes the livelihood and cultural practices of local indigenous populations. The landscape in the Himalayas is included in a specific bio-geographic zone having several individual elements that are entwined within local forms of knowledge and everyday life of local communities. The Sherpa, Tamang, and Bhotia communities are considered to be the native inhabitants of this region. They hold indigenous knowledge about the local flora fauna and their landscape elements. The characteristic of the bio-geographic zone has been linked to a culturally distinct indigenous knowledge system. Cultural traditions are also interlinked with ancient folklore and religious practices. This paper looks at how Sherpa and Tamang people have undergone recent changes in their ancient traditional livelihoods, customs and lifestyles. The study shows that there are residual linkages between their traditional life scape with their present way of life in each community. The complex linkages in their traditional values with the demands of the rugged landscape filter into their current icescape. The different patterns of the traditional use of landscape elements as used by Tamangs and Sherpas living in the same region have evolved new patterns of livelihoods related to their ancient livescapes. This demonstrates the importance of appreciating different traditional cultures living within the same bio-geographic region in the current context of new livelihood strategies and patterns used by different communities.

The current paper deals with the Tamangs and Sherpas who live in the High Himalayas of Nepal and those who have shifted to Darjeeling to find a more economically lucrative livelihood. Our paper shows how the different traditional lifestyle still influences the selection of new livelihood options after settling in Darjeeling over the last couple of decades.

Keywords: Traditional knowledge • Landscape • Tamang • Sherpa • Folklore • Livelihood options

Introduction

The words 'Himalaya' Sanskrit for 'abode of snow' are one of the richest hollitats of indigenous groups of people with their unique culture and traditions. The Himalayas are an oasis of diversity and beauty. Much of the Himalayan range's western portion, including India's Zaskar and Ladakh, is semi-desert, arid, and frigid. However, the eastern end contains some of the wettest regions on the planet, with annual precipitation exceeding ten metres. Those unfamiliar with the Himalaya often unfamiliar mistake the mountains for a pure wilderness. However they are home to a population of about fifty million people who are as diverse as the landscapes they live in. The three major world religions - Hinduism, Islam, and Buddhism - have developed in this region. Each Himalayan

valley's history and geography are intricately interwoven. Natural environment-based traditional knowledge comprises a substantial portion of these communities' livescape. Their traditional ways of living have strong implications on how they defined their terrain, climate gradient, and biological richness [1,2]. Due to their location in a complex ecosystem, indigenous people are embedded in an understanding of flora and fauna, ecosystem function, and the skills to manage their resources sustainably. Often their knowledge of the environment and the relationship to bioresources plays a crucial role in their sense of cultural identity [3]. For millennia, the Himalaya has served as a place of spiritual retreat and separation from the rest of the world. The Himalaya has also served as a place where people from diverse cultures met on high trails and exchanged goods and ideas for centuries. Nature untamed by humans thrives in the Himalayas: dense forests, roaring rivers, extensive forests and grassland, wild animals. Imagination and ingenuity have always been a part of mountain culture. Among the occupants of the abode of snow were kings, foreign imperialists, spiritual seekers, explorers, archaeologists, missionaries, spies, map makers, and hippies. Their stories are shrouded in the mysteries of the Himalaya Mountain range [4]. However, these myths fail to understand the complexity and richness of the cultures that have evolved there over millennia, which are as diverse as the mountains. A focus on economic exploitation led these outsiders to the region that ignored the value of indinous

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cultures. A strain between myth and reality grips the Himalaya today. These mountains have seen rapid recent changes in the lives of the traditional people living in this remote region. Their environment, with problems such as barren soil, harsh winter conditions, political instability, limited pasture, and slow-growing forest cover, is extremely challenging. The impacts of these environmental circumstances are reflected in cattle herding, limited farming, trade, and the marketing of resources [5]. These traditional groups have a variety of short- and long-term strategies to survive in this severe climate. Despite the lack of information concerning the history of these two communities, there has been a belief that they have lived in the Himalayan region for a much longer period of time than any other ethnic group [6]. They have a distinctive culture, traditions, languages, religions, and social systems in each of these communities [7]. Cultures like these, whose entire existence is dependent on the ecosystem, gather resources from the landscape in which they live. They abide by the strong traditional rules governing the use of land and cultural behaviour, influenced by their historical backgrounds linked to ancient livelihood strategies [8]. While both groups derive their livelihoods from the same resources, the resources have been used differently to enable them to devise varied lifescape strategies. A study of the role of landscape typologies in influencing the cultures and lifestyles of these communities is presented in this paper. Using the different landscape characteristics, the Tamangs and Sherpa were able to use their traditional knowledge built over many generations. According to tradition, the practices are part of a survival strategy they have developed in difficult conditions. Their cultural values have been preserved despite changes in land use, urbanization, and livelihood options. An analysis of the livelihoods adopted in the last five to six decades by families who relocated from the remote tiny habitats of Nepal to the growing tourism township of Darjeeling was studied during this survey. This shows that their traditional knowledge and livelihoods were translated into using new livelihood opportunities.

Aim and Objectives

The purpose of this study is to document links between the environment and traditional livelihood patterns of Tamang and Sherpa communities within the context of changes in their livelihoods in recent times. This has been initiated by migration from Nepal's remote highlands to lower hills around Darjeeling.

- To compare the ancient traditional knowledge and livelihood practices of Tamangs and Sherpas which has been linked to their landscapes over many generations.
- To compare the cultural differences and altered livelihood strategies between the communities now living in the two regions- the Nepal hamlets and Darjeeling township.

Study area

The scope of this study has a broader framework for observing the linkages between the traditional knowledge systems that are implemented by their environment and landscape elements in which the unique culture of these two tribes is embedded. It also shows linkages to the time frame in which rapid changes have occurred with parallels observed in the economy at the local level. The alternations in a variety of landscape elements which once characterized their homeland have influenced their new livelihood strategies.

In reviewing the findings of this study, a broader framework was developed for observing the connection between traditional knowledge systems and the current environmental and landscape elements in Darjeeling. This framework was developed to include the unique livelihood strategies of these two communities. According to this study, their traditional customs, perceptions of the environment, livelihood practices differ between these two study sites because of their isolation from other cultures in Nepal and their access to ethnic fusion through urbanization in Darjeeling.

A study was done to compare and contrast cultural changes following migration i.e., Dolakha (Nepal) and Darjeeling (India). Clearly, the two regions have vastly different cultures. One of the most significant differences between the two socioeconomically diverse regions is the degree of economic stability. As compared to the Dolakha people of the traditional area, the people who have migrated to Darjeeling have changed their lifestyles. Migrants have a wide spectrum of earning opportunities compared to the people of Dolakha irrespective of their past livelihoods.

Focus groups were: Tamang and Sherpa community.

- The difference in livelihood practices due to variations in the landscape
- Folklores, stories, rituals and practices that are still used as a part of their lifescapes.
- Role of migration in the decline of traditional knowledge.

Materials and Methods

A detailed study was carried out to collect data about the tribal lifestyles of Tamang and Sherpa their artwork, folklore, rituals and customs through reviewing and referencing research papers, books, old scriptures etc. This was to get a general framework and fundamental knowledge for the comparative study in Nepal and Darjeeling.

Study area

The Himalayan belt where these tribes resided in the same landscape was selected. Areas with population least influenced by urbanization were selected in Nepal. While the urban and peri-urban Tamang and Sherpa have lived in Darjeeling over the last odd years.

Changes in land-use patterns

A change in land-use patterns was determined through Participatory Rural Appraisals in villages using the Timeline Method. The timeline method helped in creating a historical timeline for the villages and their surroundings. This was also carried out in the urbanized setting.

Data Collection

- Expert interviews with the leaders and elderly people of the tribes
- Photographs of the instruments and tools were taken to analyze the relationship to the environment and lifescapes.
- Recordings were taken of rituals and customs during the survey after taking permission from the stakeholders.

- Folklore, songs and dance during festivals were recorded.
- Data on land-use change was collected through Participatory Rural Appraisal using timeline method in the villages.

Sampling

As it is not possible to interview every person of the tribal community, samples of the community were randomly selected to be interviewed.

The snowball sampling technique was used to find respondents for the research. In this method, participants or informants with whom the contact was already made used their kin and acquaintances to refer the researcher to other people who could potentially participate in or contribute to the study.

Analysis

The data collected determined the linkages of culture and traditional knowledge with environmental issues such as landscape elements that are used, for collection of natural resources, agricultural practices and rituals.

Results

The graph shows the number of stakeholders from each community interviewed in both the study area (Table 1).

Sample size (n)=120

Tamang (n)= 60

Sherpa (n)= 60

In the past the Tamangs were generally shepherds, merchants and ranchers. In more recent time the merchants and shepherds changed over to daily wagers, govt workers and business men. The Sherpas were predominantly shepherds and traders of goods in the high mountains that recently became involved in the travel industry as guides and posters (Tables 2 and 3) (Figures 1 and 2).

Discussion

Based on the results from the survey, it is clear that there are differences between the traditional livelihood strategies of these two communities. It also shows the decline of their indigenous knowledge in each consecutive generation in which migration has had a major role to play. Local traditions believe that Tamangs and Sherpas are both originally from the land of Tibet, though the migration of the Tamang community is believed to have started earlier than the Sherpa community. This also explains their settlement patterns. Tamangs who came first settled in the more hospitable lower regions of the Himalayas. The Sherpa communities, who migrated much later, had to settle in the higher mountains of the Himalayan range [9]. Though none of the participants of the study knew precisely as to when the migration had taken place, interactions during the survey and literature review, suggest it occurred perhaps have occurred 3000 years ago. It was observed that the responders from the Darjeeling region had a lower perception of their origin and culture when compared to the people from the same community still living in Nepal.

Table 1. The graph shows the number of stakeholders from each community interviewed in both the study area.

Study Area	Community	Stakeholders Interviewed
Dolakha (Nepal)	Tamang	30
	Sherpa	30
Darjeeling (India)	Tamang	30
	Sherpa	30
Total		120

Table 2. Livelihoods in Nepal and Darjeeling.

Answer	Nepal (Dolakha)		India (Darjeeling)	
	Tamang	Sherpa	Tamang	Sherpa
Past Livelihoods				
Traders	50%	33%	56%	30%
Framers	30%	14%	24%	13%
Shepherds	20%	53%	20%	57%
Present Livelihoods				
Business	20%	7%	40%	20%
Tourism	27%	13%	3%	17%
Daily Wagers	26%	13%	7%	10%
Govt Jobs	17%	20%	30%	26%
Mountaineering	7%	27%	0%	20%
Farmers	3%	20%	20%	7%

Table 3. In the past the Tamangs were generally shepherds, merchants and ranchers. In more recent time the merchants and shepherds changed over to daily wagers, govt workers and business men. The Sherpa's, were predominantly shepherds and traders of goods in the high mountains that recently became involved in the travel industry as guides and posters.

	Dholaka (Nepal)	Darjeeling(India)
Tamang	Farmers, pack animal traders (Knowledge of market)	Traders and other jobs (Knowledge of market)
Sherpa	Salt transporters, Shepherds (Knowledge of the mountains)	Mountaineering, tourism (Knowledge of the mountains)

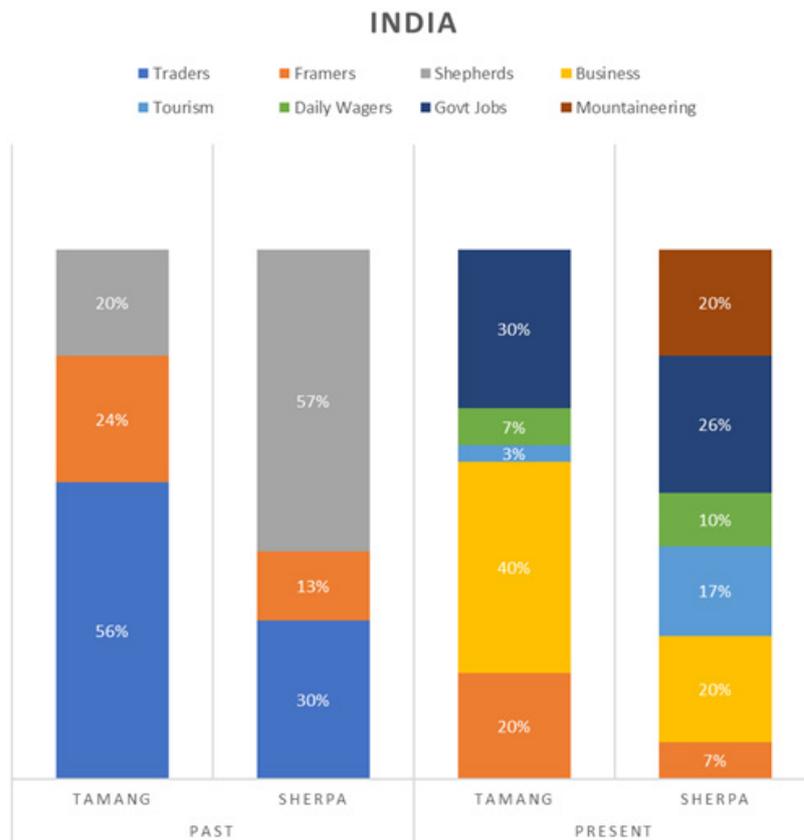


Figure 1. Livelihoods in India.

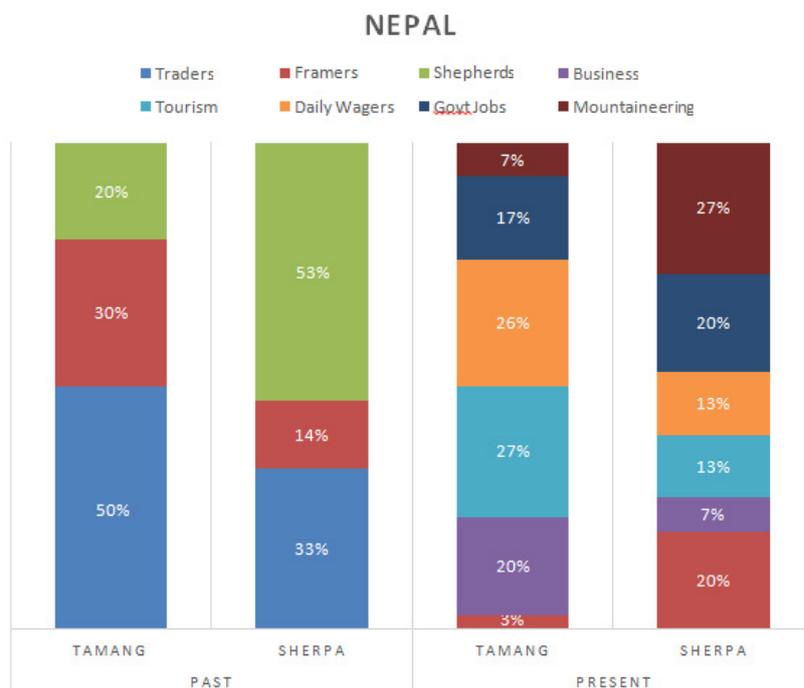


Figure 2. Livelihood in Nepal.

From the literature review and survey, we know that the Tamang community were horse traders and traded across the high Himalayas passes. This led to settlements of these communities in the foothills of the mountains. However, their origin is still an issue as there is confusion as to which part of the Himalayas the Tamang community came from. The Sherpas believe they have moved into the Himalayas after the dispute between China and Tibet. They came to be known as Sherpas as they belong to the eastern side of Tibet. Traditionally over

several generations, these two communities have used the same landscape. It ranges from the foothills of the Shivaliks, Darjeeling town, and its surroundings extending upwards through the passes of the Himalayas deep into the highlands of Nepal.

While both Sherpas and Tamang developed mixed villages, their cultures remain distinctly different. Both had different animistic religions as well as practiced Buddhism, however, their livelihood

strategies as a part of their cultural identity varied sharply. The Sherpa were traditionally trade specialists who used their pack animals to take goods to and from the lowlands into the remote mountain villages of Nepal on mules and yaks. They knew the routes and high passes and the peaks. They also knew about risks [10]. Tamang were holders of small farms and were livestock owners of yak, sheep, and goats. The influx of external influences which began with the urbanization of Darjeeling altered their way of life. Transport, tourism, education, and business ventures significantly altered the two communities in different ways. The adaptations in lifestyles matched their original occupations to produce newer cultures. New ways of income generation was rapidly altering their lifestyles. The Tamang became more farm-oriented and altered their traditional livelihood practices. In the Darjeeling area, the increase in tourism encouraged them to start small business ventures, while the remote Tamang communities retained several aspects of their earlier lifestyle [11].

The Sherpa transition from high altitude transporters of goods helped them change to their livelihood to the growing mountaineering and trekking business [12]. They were ideally suited for the new occupation as they knew their traditional high altitude passes and had the ability to reach high elevations of the snow-clad peaks of Nepal. Legendary Sherpa mountaineer guides from the 1940s-to the 50s gave importance to the internationally well-known mountaineer Tenzing Norgay and Bachendi Pal, the first lady to scale Mt. Everest. Their skill in mountaineering is a tribute to their traditional knowledge and their approach to generations of knowledge holders. They were able to avoid mountaineering risks that Sherpas have known from their forefathers. Their respect for the mountains, stories, and myths is passed down to current generations by their elders.

The Tamang of Darjeeling now finds their original way of life too difficult and unsustainable [13]. The change to a settled urban lifestyle is a new part of their existence. However, certain traditions have remained intact and their stories, myths, and celebrations are included as a part of their current lifestyles.

Thus, the adaptations that have taken place in both these communities whose establishment in the region took place a few generations ago are linked in many ways to their ancient traditional ways of life. They used the landscape from its high glacial snow peaks, the deep rugged slopes, passes gorges and the lower ranges of hills. The valley flood plains are used for agriculture in different ways as learned from their forefathers. Interestingly their newer adapted livelihood strategies maintained their linkages to the landscape elements that they had used in ancient times.

Landscape features

The landscape of both these communities essentially consists of nearly the same elements. However, their traditional livelihood has been altered in different ways which is linked to their original traditional occupations. The Sherpas have retained their traditional knowledge of the mountains to become expert mountaineers and high-altitude guides who use their ancestral knowledge as traders through Himalayan pass. Tamang are still either agro-pastoralists of Nepal, or have significantly linked their livelihoods to the urbanized tourism and small-time trade in the lower hills of Darjeeling.

The Dolakha district in Nepal is still undergoing gradual changes and is yet to feel the full force of tourism and urbanization, whereas

the Darjeeling District in West Bengal India is already a fervent torch bearer of tourism in the region. The migration of these communities was studied to see how traditional knowledge has been lost over time. The movement of these tribes in search of a better life led to questioning them about their traditional culture and their relationship with nature.

The Tamang community which originated from Nepal contradicts the finding observed through a literature review, which suggests that their origin could well be from Tibet. It was seen that the older segment of the community (age 45 and above) are the banks of Tibetan Traditional Knowledge. As the age of responders decreases, we observed that the trend in the loss of knowledge about the traditions and culture is evident. The stakeholders below 18 years have been influenced by modernization and hence have lost their traditions and cultural attributes. The change in the Himalayan and sub- Himalayan landscape over the years was recorded as the primary factor for change in the land use and alteration of the traditional livelihood practices. The occupation of these mountain people shows a drastic change as earlier shepherds, traders and farmers have taken up business and/or tourism as a new way of life.

This paper shows how both spatial and temporal aspects must be carefully assessed. This requires a transdisciplinary approach to uncover aspects that are cryptic and not accounted for in studies dealing with heterogeneous traditional cultures.

Conclusion

Our paper has demonstrated how in the past traditional communities living in the same environment partitioned their livelihood strategies. The Tamang as farmer and traders of farm produce. The Sherpa as transporters across high Himalayan passes with their livestock and knowledge of mountains. Both these communities in the recent past have had a significant part of their people migrating to the environs of Darjeeling and its surrounds. While this has led to several modifications in their lifestyles they have used their traditional occupational knowledge to their advantage in their new homeland around the township of Darjeeling.

The Tamang as farmers who traded their farm goods in the past have retained their ability to trade as small business catering to the people of Darjeeling and its tourists or become job seekers in Government and private business. The Sherpa with their traditional deep knowledge of remote mountains are today's great mountaineers using traditional skills that they use in the mountain tourism book entered from Darjeeling. The retention of residual traditional knowledge is related to how people can continue to use it after they migrate to a new location.

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