

Dynamics in Economic Status of Tribal Women of Forest Villages in Darjeeling and Kalimpong, West Bengal

DIPIKA LAMA¹ & UJJWAL BHUI²

*Centre for Himalayan Studies, University of North Bengal,
Raja Rammohunpur, District Darjeeling 734013, West Bengal*

E-mail: bhui.u_sochsnbu@yahoo.co.in

E-mail: lamadipika91@yahoo.com

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ABSTRACT: Forest plays an important role in the tribal economy and has been a source of subsistence and livelihood for them since a long past. The tribal economy is largely based on forest and includes various economic activities like hunting, food gathering, shifting cultivation, settled agriculture, handicraft etc. Forest and tribals are economically interrelated and interdependent. The women in tribal society occupy an important place than their counterparts in other communities as the responsibility of looking after the family economy and management of the family largely depend on them. As the inhabitants of the forest, tribal women act as the collectors, users and sellers of different forest products. They collect fuel wood for cooking and wage earning. They collect minor forest produces for consumption as well for selling in local markets. The present paper which is written on the basis of an empirical study deals with the changing economic activities of tribal women residing in two forest villages namely Icchey and Dhotrey Forest villages in Darjeeling Himalaya. Presently, they are engaged in the profession or economic activity associated with 'homestay' which is their new vocation. The existing paper intends to discuss how the traditional economic activities of the tribal people especially of the tribal women, are affected by this new economic venture and how far it helps them to improve their status.

INTRODUCTION

Forests are the integral part of tribal society as their life revolved around the forests. Tribals and forests are interconnected and mutually dependent. Tribals have developed their life style and culture according to the forest environment as it has been fulfilling their various needs since time immemorial. Forest plays a great role in shaping the tribal economy (Dash Sharma, '97). It acts as a home for the tribals

by providing them food, clothing and shelter. Tribal economy ranges from hunting, fishing and food gathering, pastoral, shifting cultivation to permanent settled cultivation, manual laboring, handicrafts etc. In the past, tribals used to depend on hunting as it was their main economic activity as well as an important social activity. They used to hunt different types of animals for meat, skin, fur, bones etc. Food gathering has been an important economic activity for them since pre-historic time. They obtain their requirements with the help of simple equipments/tools and without any modern technological aid. Even today the economy of tribals is largely dependent on the forests.

¹ Ph.D. Research Scholar

² Associate Professor, corresponding author

Tribal women occupy an important place in the socio-economic structure of their society in comparison to their counterparts of other societies/communities in India because of the fact that the tribal women work harder since their family's economy and management largely depend on them (Chaudhary, 2015). Tribal women play a crucial role in conservation of forests because in India since ages they have the sole responsibility of looking after food, fodder and water requirements of their family and become the worst victims due to degradation of forests. The forest-based tribal economy is mostly women centered in most part of the world. Tribal women are basically involved with collection and extraction of forest resources. They have an indigenous knowledge about different forest resources and their usefulness. They are the direct users of the forest and have maintained a close relationship with them. In this way, tribal women play multifarious roles and act as collectors, users, protectors, conservers, sellers and custodians of the forest resources. Tribal women are involved in the collection, storage, processing and marketing of minor forest products. Tribal women collect different forest produces like *kendu* leaf, *mahua*, *kusum*, *palas*, *amla*, *neem*, gum, lac, bamboo, oil seeds, canes, resin etc. They also collect roots, shoots, fruits, vegetables, honey, wax etc from the forest. The collected items provide them supplementary income and are used for various purposes. They also collect dry branches of the tree for the purpose of fuel and for selling in the market. They construct their houses/huts by bamboo, wood, leaves etc which are available in the forest. They spend most of their time in carrying out these activities. The report submitted by B. K. Roy Burman Committee on Forest and Tribals (1982), (as mentioned by Nadeem Hasnain, '91:213) emphasizes the importance of forest in tribal life. Besides getting free fuel, fodder and wood for house construction the tribals also earn one third of their income from the sale of minor forest products. The collection of minor forest products still is the main economic activity of majority of the tribal people particularly tribal women. They also provide labour service in forest industries, nurseries, plantation establishment, logging and wood processing (Vaidehi, 2007).

Traditional type of agriculture, primitive type of technology and very low rate of per capita income

etc are some of the salient features of tribal economy. Previously, they used to refrain from using cash and practised the barter system. Their economy is largely self-reliant, unstructured and non-specialized. Herskovits ('52:11,155; cf. Vidyarthi and Rai, '76:104,115), "observes that production and distribution of products by the tribals involve little of the profit motive, and the labour is hired only in special cases in their society". The process of distribution is thus set in a non-economic environment among many tribal people which takes the form of gift and ceremonial exchange (Vidyarthi and Rai, '76). But now-a-days whatever minor forest products are collected by the tribals they sell it in the open market in return of cash. The tribal economy is dependent on forest because economic institutions like production, consumption, distribution, market, trade, labour etc are related to forest (Shrivastava, 2007:124). Anthropologist like Majumdar divides the Indian tribal economic systems as: (i) hunting and collection stage, (ii) shifting or *jhum* cultivation, (iii) settled agriculturists who keep poultry and cattle, make pottery, do spinning and weaving, and practice terrace farming (cf. Vidyarthi and Rai, '76: 104, 115). The additional occupations which most of the tribals follow in and around forests are charcoal making, collection of grass and fuel wood, providing labour for felling of trees, transport of logs and timber etc. So, tribals in contemporary India are involved in a wide variety of economic activities ranging from the most primitive form of collection of forest products to the modern form of industrial activities.

Two forest villages namely Icchey forest village and Dhotrey forest village have been selected from Kalimpong and Darjeeling districts respectively for the present study. The Icchey forest village is located at an altitude of 5800 ft whereas, the Dhotrey forest village is situated at an altitude of 8500 ft above the sea level. Both these forest villages are located in isolated places away from the hustle and bustle of the urban life. Vast majority of the population of these two forest villages belongs to tribal communities. The peaceful and fascinating environment of the forest gives the forest villagers particularly forest tribal women an additional as well as alternative opportunity to launch 'homestay' tourism for the tourists in a form of sustainable tourism as it provides livelihood

benefits to them without hampering the local environment.

The following are the objectives of the study: a) to study the changing economic perspective of tribal people living in forest villages; b) to examine the role and status of tribal women in the sampled forest villages in the context of newly introduced 'home stay' tourism; and (c) to study the initiatives taken by the government / forest department for promoting the new economic venture i.e. 'home stay' in forest villages.

METHODOLOGY

As mentioned above both the forest villages are mostly dominated by the tribal population i.e. Sherpas and Tamangs, and in lesser number are followed by few other ethnic communities also. The present study is based on Sherpa and Tamang women and a total 30 respondents from these two communities have been selected as samples /respondents by using stratified random sampling technique. Both primary and secondary data have been used for the present study. Primary data have been collected from the selected Sherpa and Tamang women (respondents) by using a semi-structured interview schedule which included both open-ended and close-ended questions. Primary data have been collected from Icchey Forest Village from Sherpa respondents on and from 9th-10th November 2017, and 8th-9th April 2018; and the primary data collected from Dhotrey Forest Village from Tamang and Sherpa respondents on and from 3rd, 4th and 5th March 2018. Door to door visit technique was applied to collect data needed for the present study. Many other relevant methods such as observation, focus-group interview etc have been used for collection of necessary data. Secondary data were collected from books, journals, newspapers, and government reports, especially reports provided by the Forest Department of Kalimpong and Darjeeling districts. It is worth mentioning that female members of the selected tribal households were questioned as women are the collectors, carriers, producers as well as conservers of the forest resources. The data collected through field work has been processed and analyzed by using qualitative and quantitative techniques. General statistical tools have been used to analyze the data collected which have been presented through tabular representations. Few case

studies have also been incorporated in the existing research work to make a qualitative presentation also.

ECONOMIC TRANSFORMATION AMONG THE TRIBALS

The modern economic activities have an adverse impact on the tribal economy which is apparent from the reality of the development of some new economic vocations among them. Tribal economy is losing its primitiveness and gradually it is becoming the part of the institutional economic system. The increased control of government on forests has disturbed the tribal economy adversely which has been affecting tribal lives particularly that of women (Tripathy, 2015:147). The process of incessant deforestation has been affecting the economic activities of tribal women and forcing them to choose new means to earn their livelihood as it has reduced the production of several forest produced items. Many other factors also are responsible for their economic transformation including urbanization, industrialization, modern education, missionary activities, modernization of communication etc. With the development in transport and communication system, a large number of tribal women are being engaged in income generating activities like casual labour and other construction work. Many of the tribal women also are quick to adapt themselves to the new social and economic situation. In today's situation tribal women share abundant responsibilities and perform numerous duties to run the family affairs, maintaining the household etc. Modernization is bringing changes which affect men and women differently. Education also plays an important role to modernize the tribal life as they are moving toward urban areas for jobs in different sectors. The traditional tribal markets are now-a-days linked with big urban markets. There are exchanges of goods as tribals are buying plentiful of items of their liking by selling their products. They are shifting their focus to other economic activities also which in turn are helping them to earn profit. Now it is not easy to find a simple form of change in the tribal economy as it is changing quickly on local levels. In order to reduce economic disparity and to promote social justice there is a need for alternative economic system for different groups of the society.

The present study seeks to analyze how the tribals of Icchey and Dhotrey forest villages are adopting new alternatives as means of livelihood and how tribal women are adjusting themselves to these economic changes. Previously, the villagers of Icchey forest village were totally depended on agriculture but presently most of them are shifting their focus to other economic activities especially 'homestay' which is generating higher earnings for them without a great deal of effort. Women of Dhotrey forest village also play an important role to supervise the 'homestay' tourism. The areas which were meant for doing agricultural activities are now used for constructing buildings/houses for promoting 'homestay' tourism. Only some of the villagers are still depended on agriculture. The socio-economic scenario of the village is going through total change. Although they are busy with their new economic activities they also manage to look after their respective household chores. Higher income led to higher consumption and spends more on food, housing, health, education etc.



Figure 1: 'Homestay' in Icchey forest village

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The meanings of some concepts related with the present study are discussed below to make the study more understandable.

Tribe: Anthropologists, sociologists, economists differ in their approach to the problem of defining the term and have their own views/opinions as far as the definition of 'tribe' is concerned. Oxford Dictionary defines tribes as a group of people in a primitive or barbarous stage of development acknowledging the authority of a chief and usually

regarding themselves as having a common ancestor (Hasnain, '91: 32, 213). According to D. N. Majumdar ('61) "a tribe is a collection of families or group of families bearing a common name, members of which occupy the same territory, speak the same language and observe certain taboos regarding marriage, profession or occupation and have developed a well assigned system of reciprocity and mutuality of obligation" (cf. Rahman, 2007: 53). " 'Tribe' commonly called 'scheduled tribe' in the Indian context is an administrative and legal term to label some ethnic groups — based on their socio-economic status, religious and cultural customs — in order to give special attention to them as mandated by the Constitution. The term 'tribe' is nowhere defined in the Constitution, and in fact, there is no satisfactory definition which is agreed upon and acceptable to all. The term 'Schedule' was proposed and applied just to signify or categorize the weaker sections of our population as 'scheduled' to have a constitutional benefits.Article 342 of the Constitution further declares that the tribes are entitled to have development benefits provided they are 'Scheduled' " (Dash Sharma, 2006: Introduction, pp. xi-xii).

Economy: Economy is an important constituent of the people life and plays a deciding role in the formation of the culture and social structure of society and it occupy a large part of the life of nearly everyone. Each and every community has its own way to meet basic needs for the survival of its members. People with the same natural surroundings have developed different economic processes to meet their ends. The Hari Singh Committee (1967) on tribal economy in forest areas suggested to provide the tribals with employment in major and minor produces to save the forest from denudation (Debnath, '98:111).

Forest Village: The origin of forest village (FV) begins from the days of British rule. The Indian Forest Act, 1878 provided for the constitution of forest village to be established within the forest itself for the purpose of obtaining daily labourers required to work in the forest (Shangpliang, 2013: 8-9). The objective behind the establishment of forest villages inside the forest or in the fringe areas was to solve the problem of labour requirement for various forestry works like plantation, protection works and other various forest related activities. In the beginning the

forest labourers were treated as serfs by the government and were forced to provide free service to them. Later on the situation changed slowly as these labourers were provided homestead for their service. By 1904, a large numbers of forest villages were established and were allowed to settle in the forests. Initially there were no such rules for the forest villagers as how much amount of land they should own or number of cattle they might be allowed to keep. In 1912, rules were made regarding the possession of land and cattle for the forest villagers residing in hills and plains. In plains area 2.5 acres, and in hills 1.5 acres of land was provided per family and each family was allowed to keep not more than 2 plough cattle, 4 calves and 2 milch cows.

Homestay: A 'Home-Stay', i.e. 'home' and 'stay' the two words combined, simplified as 'homestay' means 'staying in some one's home as a paying guest for a short duration'. Such guests are provided accommodation and services by individual family and community too. They are provided homely atmosphere by the owner of respective homestay and shows them the rural way of life. It seeks to draw tourists away from posh and crowded urban areas to the rural localities which are full of splendid natural surroundings. The 'homestay' owner provides them clean, comfortable and budget friendly accommodation and food. It gives them the opportunity to spend some with the host family observing their customs, values and culture which gives them the opportunity to feel the taste of rural life (Bhan, 2014:1).

DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

Primary field data have been collected by doing fieldwork, as mentioned above, from two forest villages selected from Darjeeling and Kalimpong districts, one village from each district.

TABLE 1
Ethnic composition of the respondents

Ethnic groups	Number of respondents	Percentage
Sherpa	22	73.33
Tamang	8	26.67

The Table 1 indicates the ethnic group membership of the respondents who were selected

from two forest villages as respondents. 73.33% and 26.67% of the respondents belong to Sherpa women and Tamang women respectively.

TABLE 2
Type of family among the respondents

Family structure	Number of respondents	Percentage
Nuclear	20	66.67
Joint	10	33.33

It is observable that majority (66.67%) of the respondents have nuclear family whereas 33.33% of the respondents are members of joint family.

TABLE 3
Occupational structure of the respondents

S. No.	Primary occupation	Secondary occupation
1	Homestay	Agriculture
2	Homestay	Agriculture
3	Agriculture	Homestay
4	Homestay	Agriculture
5	Homestay	Agriculture
6	Homestay	Agriculture
7	Homestay/ ICDS helper	Agriculture
8	Homestay	Agriculture
9	Agriculture/ livestock	Homestay
10	Homestay	Agriculture
11	Homestay	Agriculture
12	Homestay/ ICDS Worker	Agriculture
13	Agriculture	Homestay
14	Homestay	Agriculture/livestock
15	Homestay	-
16	Homestay	Agriculture
17	Agriculture/ livestock	Homestay
18	Agriculture/ livestock	Land given in lease for construction of homestay
19	Homestay	Land given in lease for construction of homestay/ agriculture
20	Agriculture/ livestock	Homestay
21	Agriculture/ livestock	Forest department lodge
22	Agriculture/ livestock	Forest department lodge
23	Agriculture/ livestock	Forest department lodge
24	Agriculture	Forest department lodge
25	Agriculture	Forest department lodge
26	ICDS worker	Forest department lodge
27	Grocery shop	Forest department lodge
28	Homestay	-
29	Homestay	-
30	Daily wage worker	Forest Department Lodge

The above Table 3 shows the primary and secondary occupation of the respondents. It is evident that the respondents in some way or the other way are associated with new economic venture i.e. 'homestay', and gradually many of them are leaving agricultural practices as their primary economic activities. Majority (53.33%) of the respondents are engaged in the 'homestay' tourism which is their primary / main economic activity at present whereas 36.67% of the respondents' primary occupation is agriculture.

TABLE 4

Monthly income of the respondents of the forest villages

Income (₹)	Number of respondents	Percentage
< 3000	11	36.67
3001-6000	13	43.33
6001-9000	3	10.0
9001-12000	3	10.0
> 12000	—	—

The Table 4 shows monthly income of the respondents from all sources. Majority (43.33%) of the respondents has a monthly income ranging from ₹ 3001 to ₹ 6000 whereas 10.0% respondents' monthly income ranges from ₹ 6001 to ₹ 9000 and ₹ 9001 to ₹ 12000 respectively. 36.67% of the respondents' monthly income is less than ₹ 3000.

TABLE 5

Monthly family income of the respondents of forest villages

Monthly income ₹	Number of family	Percentage
< 5000	1	3.33
5001-9000	11	36.67
9001-13000	10	33.33
13001-17000	6	20.0
17001-21000	1	3.33
> 21000	1	3.33

The Table 5 shows the monthly income of the family of the respondents. 36.67% of the respondents' monthly family income ranges between ₹ 5001 to ₹ 9000, whereas 33.33% of the respondents' monthly family income is ₹ 9001 to ₹ 13000.

It is observable from the Table 6 that 73.33% of the respondents has semi-pucca house, whereas

TABLE 6

Form or type of housing in forest villages of respondents

Types of housing	Number of respondents	Percentage
Kutchha	5	16.67
Pucca	3	10.0
Semi-pucca	22	73.33

16.67% and 10% of the respondents have kutchha house (made of wood and tin) and pucca house (made of cement, sand and brick) respectively.

TABLE 7

Possession of modern household articles/amenities in respondents' houses

Possession of modern household articles	Number of respondents	Percentage
Yes	28	93.33
No	2	6.67

Table 7 shows the possession of modern household articles by the families of the respondents. 93.33% of the respondents possess modern household articles/gadgets such as mobile, television set, steel almirah, LPG connection etc whereas, 6.67% of the respondents do not possess even a few of the above mentioned modern amenities. A few of the respondents own four wheelers for transportation of the tourists as and when needed.

TABLE 8

Management of 'homestay' tourism

Management of 'homestay' by	Number of respondent	Percentage
Females	10	33.33
Males & females	20	66.67

The above Table 8 discusses the management of 'homestay tourism' is done by family members sex-wise. It is observable that 66.67% of the respondents mentioned that the management of their 'homestay' is done by them together with their male counterparts, or male family members, whereas 33.33% of the respondents opined that the management of their homestay is done by them single-handedly.

TABLE 9
Role of women in managing 'homestay tourism'

Role of women	Number of respondents	Percentage
Cooking / house keeping	15	50.0
Cooking/housekeeping/ finance	10	33.33
Others activities	5	16.67

Table 9 shows the role played by the women respondents to manage their 'homestay tourism'. 33.33% of the respondents are involved in cooking/housekeeping and financial management whereas, 50.0% of the respondents are involved only in cooking and housekeeping. The remaining 16.67% of the respondents apart from doing the above mentioned activities do other works also such as to make contact with the tourists with the help of social media.

TABLE 10
Whether they get tourists throughout the year?

Do tourists visit throughout the year?	Number of respondents	Percentage
Yes	10	33.33
No	20	66.67

Table 10 shows whether tourist visit all the year round or not. 66.67% of the respondents said that tourist visit their places during the favourable season / particular months whereas 33.33% of the respondents informed that they used to get tourists throughout the year.

TABLE 11
Initiatives taken by government /forest department to improve in the tourist places

Initiative from government/ forest department	Number of respondent	Percentage
Yes	10	33.33
No	20	66.67

Table 11 reveals respondents' opinion regarding whether government or forest department takes initiative to promote 'homestay tourism' in their forest villages. In this context, 66.67% of the respondents stated the no initiative taken by government and the remaining 33.33% of the respondents approved the

fact that the government / forest department provide adequate help to encourage 'homestay tourism' in their forest village.

CASE STUDIES

Two case studies, one from the Icchey forest village and other from the Dhotrey forest village, are also being provided here for a holistic understanding of the present research study. Two tribal women, one each from Sherpa and Tamang ethnic community, have been chosen for case studies owing to their vast experiences in management of forest village and homestay tourism. Detailed and in-depth information have been collected from these two tribal women forest villagers which corroborate to the findings of the present study based on primary and secondary data sources.

Icchey Forest Village Case Study

Lalita Sherpa originally hails from Algarah near Kalimpong (district). She migrated to Icchey forest village after marriage. She has been residing in the forest village for more than 15 years. She has studied at Pranami School, Kalimpong, and has completed her higher secondary level education. Her husband is educated up to primary level. They have one son who studies in class VI. Her husband is a carpenter by profession and most of the time works outside the village. She is an ICDS (Integrated Child Development Services) worker and gets a monthly salary of ₹ 4500. Her husband does not have a fixed monthly income however, his income ranges between ₹ 5000 to ₹ 6000 per month. Both of them are also engaged in agricultural activities. They grow cardamom, maize, ginger, vegetables etc. Since she is an ICDS worker she moves from one village to other villages to create awareness on health related issues among the villagers particularly among the pregnant women, children etc. She is also aware of family planning and takes the preventive measures for birth control. Every month she goes to Halpu (near Kalimpong) for distributing polio vaccine as it is the main polio centre of the region. She is also organizing awareness programme on different health issues in her village and in other villages also. Her family expenses are mostly done on food, in imparting education to the children, and to observe festivals and

social ceremonies. In spite of all of these expenses she saves a portion of her income in bank. Both of them, she and her husband, take decisions on her family's social and economic matters. They have a semi-pucca house and they also have applied to the Sherpa Development Board for a grant to build a house. They do not face water problem as water supply facility is provided by the Forest Department. She cooks food using both LPG and firewood. She herself goes to forest to collect firewood. It is 5 years to 6 years past since when her family's traditional economic activities have been transformed and replaced gradually by the new economic venture i.e. 'homestay tourism'. As it is a seasonal economic activity so during the rest of the year they usually are engaged in doing agricultural activities. They have named their homestay as 'Pankashari Homestay'. Both of them are engaged in the management of the 'homestay'. She mainly does the cooking and house-keeping and related activities whereas her husband manages the financial matters of the 'homestay'. She also provides information to the tourist guests regarding the Homestay by using social apps like Whatsapp, Facebook etc. The introduction of the homestay tourism not only has improved their economic condition but also made them aware about the virtues of cleanliness in life as well as it has made them smarter in handling various issues concerning their life. They charge ₹ 700 per person per day and have advertised their homestay through online and even provide visiting cards. She is very busy and she does not have interest in politics. She was also one of the members of a Self-Help Group (SHG) which is at present inactive. As she is residing in the forest village since a long past she has a good knowledge of environmental conservation. She uses medicinal plants available in the forest to cure the family members. She has planted beautiful flower plants to beautify her homestay.

Dhotrey Forest Village Case Study

Paru Tamang is a resident of the Dhotrey forest village. She got married when she was 20 year old. Her marriage was an arranged marriage. She has one son and two daughters. She studied up to class VIII. Her husband studied up to class IV. He is driver by profession but also engages himself as a contractor.

She runs a grocery shop and also takes up agricultural activities. They grow peas, carrot and turnip etc. They send these products to Darjeeling for selling as it is the nearest market. They have a pucca house situated near the road side. There is no school, hospital, bank, post-office in the forest village. Forest villagers mostly visit Darjeeling, Bijanbari, Sukhia, Rimbick for schooling, for getting medical treatment, and for financial transactions in the banks and post office. She either goes to Bijanbari or Darjeeling for accessing health centre/hospital for treatment. She earns a monthly income ranging from ₹ 3000 to ₹ 6000. Her husband earns approximately ₹ 9000 to ₹ 10000 per month. She is not economically dependent on her husband. Family expenses are mostly done on food, medicine, festivals etc. After managing all these expenses, she also manages to save money in a bank situated at Sukhia. Dhotrey forest village has now become a famous hub for the tourists as it has become a famed trekking zone. There are many personally owned Homestays and Forest Department Lodge for the convenience of tourists. She is a member of a Self-Help Group. The members of self-help groups (SHG) are employed to look after the lodge owned and provided by the forest department. The members do all the activities like cooking, housekeeping, finance management etc. The members of the SHG conduct meetings with the officials of the forest department regarding the maintenance of the lodge efficiently so that tourists can get quality tourist services. Whatever amount is collected they give half portion of the amount to the forest department. She is not dependent on firewood for cooking meals as she has LPG connection in her house. She does not go to the forest to collect firewood, in case if she needs firewood she then purchases that from others. She is also a member of the Forest Protection Committee (FPC). As a member the committee she attends the meeting/s called by the Forest Department. She never places her views in the meeting as the proceedings of the meetings are generally conducted by the male members. Most of the official works related to the FPC are done by the male members only. Sometimes she gets busy in her household chores due to which she rarely gets time to attend those meetings. She is not interested in politics and does not attend any political meeting. As she is residing in forest village

for a long time so she is aware about the environment conservation. She is a thoughtful citizen and plants trees provided by the forest department every year on 5th June which is the World Environment Day.

CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

The present study deals with the changing economic perspective of tribal women especially Sherpa and Tamang women living in the forest villages of Darjeeling hills. From the above data analysis and interpretation it is evident that there is a change in economic activities of the forest villagers especially tribal women from traditional to modern form which help them to improve their economic as well as their social status. All the villagers especially the tribal women in one or the other way are involved in the new venture i.e. 'homestay' which is now playing an important role in their economy and have brought changes in their life style for a better future.

From the above discussion, it is evident that the position of tribal women living in Icchey and Dhotrey forest villages has improved a lot in comparison to other tribal women of other forest villages owing to the practice of new economic venture *i.e.* homestay. Their economy has changed immensely and accordingly their living standard has also improved a lot. Now they are not so much interested to do agriculture and forest related activities. In both of the villages especially in Icchey, 'homestay' has become one of the primary or the main economic activity. Majority of the respondents live in semi-pucca houses with toilet facility provided by the forest department. Now-a-days houses in Darjeeling hills are mostly provided by the State government sponsored Development Boards. Majority of the houses in Icchey forest village have been provided by the Sherpa Development Board (see Figure 2), and many of these houses have been modified as 'homestays'.

They are now economically sound and self-dependent. Majority of the respondent possess modern amenities. Vehicles are used for carrying out tourists from one place to other places. They also saving money which they deposit in banks, post offices etc. At present, they admit that their children are studying in good schools and colleges. One of the school teacher of Icchey forest village stated that she



Figure 2: Sherpa Development Board sponsored house modified into 'homestay'

has been teaching in the primary school (Sishu Shiksha Kendra, established in 2000) of Icchey forest village for more than 10 years, and she has been seeing a drastic change in the attitude of the villagers particularly women regarding imparting education to their children. They send their children to good schools situated outside the village irrespective of the fact that the village has a primary school, and now no one is interested to educate their children in the village school. The condition of primary school located in Icchey forest village is deteriorating as the number of student is decreasing day by day. Apart from managing their households the tribal women are also looking after their 'homestay'. Before the new economic activity has started people of Icchey forest village were mostly depended on agriculture and on daily wage works. Majority of the male members used to work outside the village as casual workers. Now they grow cardamom, ginger, maize etc. Still people are growing all these agricultural products but not in a huge quantity. The concept/idea of the 'homestay' in Icchey forest village was given by one Sebastian Pradhan. The villagers consider him as the 'Father of Eco-tourism and Homestay Tourism'. He is the founder of Old Silk Route, Zaluk, Nathang Valley, Mai Mai Chu Lake (East Sikkim), Sillary Gaon, Ramdhura and Raniban Wildlife Tourism.

It has been 5 to 6 years that the forest villagers are involved in this new economic venture. The Forest Department has started the new economic venture and even some of the villagers have constructed their own 'homestay' in Dhotrey forest village. Tourism Department has played an important role in making

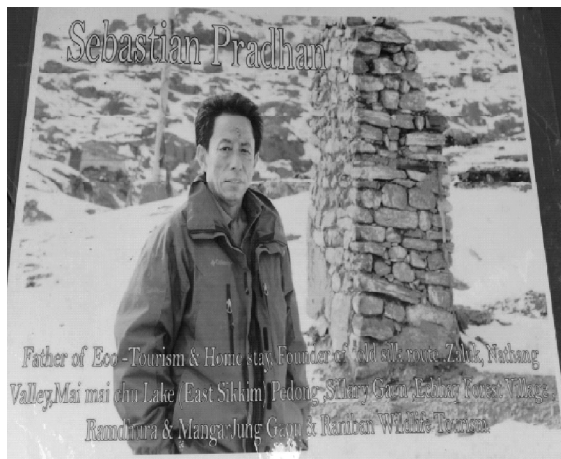


Figure 3: Eco-tourism and 'homestay' in Darjeeling and Sikkim Himalaya

Dhotrey a model village. Dhotrey forest village has become a famous trekking centre from where tourists trek to Tonglu, Sandakphu, Srikhola and many other places. Inhabitants of this forest village particularly males, are doing the jobs of guiding tourists and as porters. Tribal women play an important role in Dhotrey for the maintenance of the Forest Lodge through a Self-Help Group. Thus both the males and the females are playing important roles for managing the 'homestay'. Women basically are assigned in cooking and housekeeping activities. Many of them are now dealing with financial matters of 'homestay', when male members remain outside for job purpose. Tribal women also work as porters. They keep contact with the tourists who are willing to enjoy the 'homestay' tourism through social media like Whatsapp, Facebook etc. But it is also a fact that tourists do not come throughout the year to enjoy the stay there and to enjoy 'homestay tourism' because of unfavorable weather during some seasons. The best time to stay in the 'homestay' and to visit the beautiful surrounding localities is between the months of March to May, and September to January. But it is not good for 'homestay' tourism when local people who are involved in this profession do not get desired and adequate help from the Government/Forest Department to promote this type of eco-tourism in the region. A government initiative through the forest department is a must as 'homestay' tourism, and for the betterment of the economy of the dwellers in forest

villages. The government help in this direction will enhance the socio-economic status of the forest villagers which ultimately will led to peace and prosperity to these tribal people.

To conclude it can be stated that 'homestay tourism' in forest villages of Darjeeling hills is booming day by day which has both positive and negative impact on those forest villages. Most of the forest tribal women who are engaged in 'homestay tourism' stated that the new economic venture has brought a lot of opportunities for them. It has brought an economic growth for the forest villages in general, and to many of the forest villagers economic prosperity. The tribal women who are engaged with this new economic endeavour are becoming more aware of their social and economic prospects. Now they are in touch with modern amenities especially with smart phones and they are using different social apps to know the world and to gain economic success in their life by doing this economic pursuit. Though they are not much educated but the villagers by interacting with other community people who come to their village for staying with them in a natural environment, and to enjoy their paid hospitality, they have gained a lot of experience and have become much smarter now. It is a very common experience that most of the people living in Darjeeling hills are not fluent to speak in Hindi language. But the forest villagers mostly of whom are tribals are isolated from the rest of the world due to geographical factors now can interact with the outside world with their broken Hindi. It is observed in this research study that the tribal forest villagers especially tribal women engaged in 'homestay tourism' of these two forest villages are now trying hard to interact with the tourists by using Hindi language. Their interaction with the tourists is providing them social and economic opportunities which are a new experience to them.

RECOMMENDATIONS SUGGESTED

Homestay tourism in the two selected forest villages in Darjeeling Himalaya is mostly run by the tribal women belonging to Sherpa and Tamang communities. Generally tribal people particularly tribal women are conserver, protector of the environment. Maybe many of them are unlettered or less educated but in the context of environmental

conservation they are more knowledgeable than the common urban people who can get a good knowledge on the subject of environment and its protection during their staying with the forest villagers and enjoying in their 'homestay'. The pleasant staying of the tourists in the homestay provides the tribal women a good amount of earning as well as an understanding of the modern way of life. In this way both the groups i.e. the tribal women and the tourists are engaged in a meaningful exchange relationship which benefits both the parties in a favourable way. So the government authority should encourage the 'homestay tourism' which will ultimately empower, both socially and economically, the tribal women of the forest villages.

Some of the recommendations suggested are as follows:

- i) Forest Department/Government must play an important role in developing the forest villages. They must assist the forest villagers with financial aids to develop common infrastructural facilities in the villages as well as to upgrade the existing facilities relating to 'homestay' like providing comfortable beds, renovation of rooms and bathrooms, cleanliness of the premises etc.
- ii) The authorities must create awareness and counseling programmes both for the tourists and forest villagers particularly to those who are engaged in 'homestay tourism' to promote it as a sustainable tourism development programme.
- iii) The tribal women who are engaged in 'homestay tourism' must be given training on management and hospitality care so that they

can provide quality services to the tourists of Indian and foreign origin.

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