

Research Article

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## Indigenous Knowledge and Practices of Lepchas in Himalayan Region of West Bengal: A Qualitative Study Reconnecting Their Ecological Conservatory Approaches to Sustainable Development Goal-17

\* **Anugrah Pandi Lepcha** and \*\***Dr. Sasmita Patel**

\*Research Scholar at Department of Social Work, Visva-Bharati (A Central University), Santiniketan, West Bengal, India Email: [lezomelepcha@gmail.com](mailto:lezomelepcha@gmail.com)

\*\*Assistant Professor at Department of Social Work, Visva-Bharati (A Central University), Santiniketan, West Bengal, India Email: [sasmitavb@gmail.com](mailto:sasmitavb@gmail.com)

### Abstract

“Alone we can do so little; together we can do so much” - Helen Keller

Sustainable development looked through the lens of partnership in the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG)- 17 solidifies and promotes the idea of global partnership. This SDG-17 is holistic incorporating all walks and aspects of life from every tangible to non-tangible need. Pressing forward the vision of SDG-17 is also to improve partnership across nations and pave the way towards a sustainable approach and development. Sustainable development has three main pillars: economic, environmental, and social which are also commonly referred to as profit, planet, and people.

As we study indigenous communities and lifestyles, we find that their guiding principle is also environmental, social, and profit. Indigenous knowledge and its practices are deeply rooted in partnership and harmony between these three principles. Their practices reflect not only a sustainable approach but also a deep-rooted belief that everything around runs in harmony only when there is shared partnership and stewardship. In this paper, the authors have holistically explored the indigenous partnership views of the Lepcha community found in the Himalayan foothills of West Bengal, India. For this study, Primary data has been collected using Focused Group Discussions in ten Lepcha-dominated communities in that area. Lepchas preferred to be known as “Rong” are the indigenous tribes of the Himalayan region of Sikkim and West Bengal, India. They have deep roots in the ecology and environment around them and this branches out to their social and economic worldview. Perceived as docile, nature lovers, by many scholars they go

### Keywords

Sustainable development Goal-17, Indigenous knowledge, Lepcha, Lepcha Indigenous Knowledge

beyond that and hold a distinct identity in terms of their worldviews all deep-rooted in their sustainable belief of taking only what is enough and conscious stewardship intertwined in an active partnership between the planet, people, and profit. With this study, the authors look to understand how indigenous knowledge and practices can be explored, tapped, and utilized in not only strengthening sustainable approach but also to explore the ingrained principles of sustainable stewardship which eventually leads to sustainable development.

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## Introduction

“Our biggest challenge in this new century is to take an idea that seems abstract- sustainable development-and turn it into a reality for all the world’s people.”-Kofi Annan

Sustainable development is the overarching paradigm of the United Nations. The concept of sustainable development was described by the 1987 Brundtland Commission Report as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.” Gandhi has rightfully said, “we have enough for our needs but not for our greed” and for the longest time our actions have been that of extraction and not of replenishing. Development, an undeterred and unescapable journey of life is like a double-edged sword- life-saving yet having the power to take away the very same life. “The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, adopted by all United Nations Member States in 2015, provides a shared blueprint for peace and prosperity for people and the planet, now and into the future. At its heart are the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which are an urgent call for action by all countries - developed and developing - in a global partnership” (UN: Department of Economic and Social Affairs). Sustainable development is not only sustaining the development aspect of human evolution but also human relations, our actions, and learning to work in partnership with not just one another but also the environment we are in.

United Nations for the holistic development approach has established 17 sustainable development goals, each catering to a specific need and topic of utmost importance. Gro Harlem Brundtland (former director-general of WHO) has summed up the meaning of sustainable

development in lucid terms as – “Sustainable development is the development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”.

With needs growing with passing time our utilization of our resources has also been rapid without the conscious collective thought of conserving them or giving them time to replenish themselves. For the longest time, we have been nurtured and nourished by our resources; with sustainable development, we are aiming to work in partnership with the resources available and have a reciprocal relationship. Sustainable Development Goal-17 carries forward this thought and aims to "strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development". To quote Maurice Strong (former Under-Secretary-General of the United Nations), "What pleases me most is that sustainable development is on almost everybody's agenda now". With every nation and every aspect of development having a discourse on holistic sustainability, a partnership is crucial for not only efficiency but also effectiveness. "Increasing support to developing countries, in particular the least developed countries, landlocked developing countries and small island developing States, is fundamental to equitable progress for all" (UNEP, Goal 17: Partnership for the goals).

Equitable progress and helping hands are crucial for achieving holistic sustainable development goals, especially one where a symbiotic partnership is envisioned. A strong partnership will not only contribute to better relationships which will eventually lead to better outputs, but it shall also pave the way to contribute to environmental protection, conservation, and a

sustainable approach to life. Sharing of knowledge, information, better resource mobilization, promoting, creating, and transferring of environmentally sound technologies, and building capacities, all can be achieved with a strong partnership. United Nations has wonderfully captured these thoughts in their following statement- "A successful

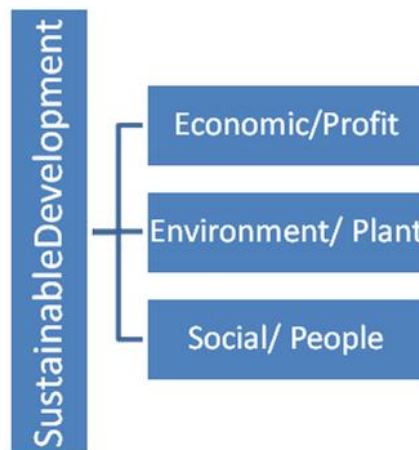
sustainable development agenda requires partnerships between governments, the private sector, and civil society. These inclusive partnerships built upon principles and values, a shared vision, and shared goals that place people and the planet at the center, are needed at the global, regional, national and local level" (SDG Tracker).



[https://wedocs.unep.org/bitstream/handle/20.500.11822/22752/17\\_Partnership%20for%20the%20goals\\_web\\_FINAL.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y](https://wedocs.unep.org/bitstream/handle/20.500.11822/22752/17_Partnership%20for%20the%20goals_web_FINAL.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y)

The definition of sustainable development and sustainable development goal-17 implies that we need to look after our planet, our resources, and our people to ensure that we live harmoniously and maintain an equilibrium. To achieve

sustainability, we must strive to balance economic/ profit, environmental/plant, and social/people factors in equilibrium. This may be illustrated with a diagram, as shown below:



These are also known as the three pillars of sustainability.

So, to achieve true sustainability we need to balance economic, social, and environmental sustainability factors in equal harmony. These may be defined as:

- ) **Environmental Sustainability:** means that we are living within the means of our natural resources and not exploiting them. To live in true environmental sustainability, one needs to ensure that we are consuming our natural resources at a sustainable rate all while giving them time to restore. Some resources are more abundant than others and some more scarce, therefore we need to consider the damage which can be caused to the environment from overutilization of these resource materials.
- ) **Economic Sustainability:** aims at a business or country using its resources efficiently and responsibly so that the economy of the country can operate sustainably. Without acting responsibly and using its resources efficiently a company will not be able to sustain itself in the long run.
- ) **Social Sustainability:** can be seen as the ability of any society, or any social system, to consistently achieve sustainable social well-being. Achieving any form of social sustainability ensures that the social well-being of a country, an organization, or a community can be sustained across time.

These three pillars of sustainable development are not only interconnected but also interdependent upon each other.

Quoting Circular Ecology, “Taking these three pillars of sustainability further if we only achieve two out of three pillars then we end up with:

- ) **Social + Economic Sustainability = Equitable**
- ) **Social + Environmental Sustainability = Bearable**
- ) **Economic + Environmental Sustainability = Viable**

Only through balancing economic + social + environmental can we achieve true sustainability.”

### Indigenous Knowledge

Indigenous knowledge commonly referred to as knowledge passed down from one generation to another, is in truth much more than that. It reflects many generations of experience and problem-solving by various ethnic groups across the globe (Rao, 2008). Indigenous knowledge though bound by specific situations and context has the potential to be applied in diverse disciplines. Considering the sustainable development scenario of today's time, community-based knowledge helps further the bottom-up approach thereby formulating plans and strategies not only specific to the problem but the location where the problem is being faced. Taking an analogy of human anatomy to strengthen the statement, when a stone is found in the gall bladder, the approach taken is different as opposed to stone identified in the kidney. In the same way, countries around the world may be facing the same problem but for a sustainable approach to solving these problems, a location-specific approach is needed. This is where Indigenous Knowledge comes into play. The responsibility of the like-minded progressive forces should be to recognize this traditional science and technology and improve upon it with the application of suitable modern science and technologies so that sustainability at the local level can be guaranteed (Naidu, 2008).

The United Nations definition of Indigenous knowledge under Local and Indigenous Knowledge Systems (LINKS) further strengthens this discourse of how integrating indigenous knowledge systems can strengthen local sustainable development approaches and models



being built. Quoting LINKS definition, “These unique ways of knowing are important facets of the world’s cultural diversity, and provide a foundation for locally-appropriate sustainable development”.

### **Indigenous Lepcha community and their sustainable partnership approach**

The act of labeling practices, techniques or taxonomies as “traditional” or “local” can become, in certain cases, a way of othering elements or systems of knowledge that do not fit in the corpus of Western science (Lanzano, 2013). Our view of knowledge is very constrained and narrow which keeps indigenous communities and their knowledge base which are completely differently articulated as opposed to the Western knowledge base at a disadvantage. With this, we establish that as we view the sustainable indigenous approaches of the Lepcha community, we are starting the discourse at the backfoot. Keeping this in mind, the ten comprehensive and conclusive characteristics of indigenous knowledge provided by Ellen and Harris (1996) establishes that indigenous communities, their knowledge, and practices are guided by the principle of people, plant, and profit aligning perfectly in line with the three pillars of sustainable development thereby making further discourses to be had at an equal footing.

These three partnership practices are the very foundation of life and livelihood for indigenous communities thereby cementing that sustainability is a deeply rooted indigenous way of living and livelihood.

Lepchas are from eastern Nepal, the state of Sikkim, and the Darjeeling region of West Bengal in Northern India, as well as from western Bhutan. These parts of the region collectively were and are known as "Mayal Lyang" by the Lepchas. Lepchas are accepted to be the earliest inhabitants of these regions, particularly that of Sikkim and the Darjeeling hills in India. The Lepchas are an indigenous tribe of Sikkim and Darjeeling district of West Bengal who once held sway over the vast forest and hill areas of this

Region (Ghosal, 1990). The indigenous Lepchas call themselves "Rongkups" which means, “son of the snowy peak or the son of God” (Roy, 2012). Even in today’s time, Lepchas call themselves Rong or Ronmgkup within their community at large. The English name Lepcha derives from Nepali Lapce or Lapca, which originally had the derogatory connotation of “inarticulate speech”. Nowadays, the term “Lepcha” is widely used without this connotation (Plaisier, 2005). With colonization inflow of in-migration from various communities, specifically, the Nepalese community was recorded. The term Lapchay was given by these foreign communities who did not understand the Lepcha dialect, which was later anglicized to Lepcha.

Over the years the population of Lepchas has reduced and they have become a minority in their land. Irrespective of their rich history, culture, and heritage, over the years the Lepcha community has been side-lined, marginalized and to quote D.T. Tamlong (2015), “*to add to the misery, the growth of Lepcha population has not been at the same pace with those of other communities*”. The population of Lepchas is 42,901 in Sikkim & 33,962 in Darjeeling and Kalimpong district of West Bengal which makes them from just 2% of the total population in Darjeeling and Kalimpong district combined (Census, 2011). A.R.Fonning a prominent Lepcha literary personal has titled his book, “Lepcha My Vanishing Tribe” to reiterate the dwindling Lepcha population which has further led to the vanishing of the indigenous communities knowledge, culture, history, and identity at large. The fact that so much effort is now being invested in understanding the basis for indigenous natural resources management indicates that the negative attitudes commonly held about indigenous knowledge during the colonial era have begun to change (Rao, 2008). This paper, based on primary research with an exploratory design where FGD has been used as the tool for data collection is also a step in the direction of this positive change.

## Methodology

This paper is majorly based on primary research with an exploratory design where FGD has been used as the technique and FGD guide as a tool for data collection. Darjeeling and Kalimpong district in the Himalayan region of West Bengal, India was the area of study for this research. where 10 Lepcha indigenous communities with a population of a minimum of 80% Lepcha ethnicity were selected across these two districts. Ten FGDs were conducted where the criteria for the respondents were a heterogeneous group of both men and women from the age group of a minimum of 22 years and the maximum would vary across villages depending upon the eldest elder in the community. Transcriptive descriptive analysis was used for analyzing the data collected. The researchers have also used secondary sources like published and unpublished books, journal articles, reports, etc. on the subject for a better understanding of the Lepcha indigenous lifestyle, socio-cultural practices, and approaches that correlate with Sustainable Development Goal- 17.

## Objectives

This study is based upon the following three objectives

- ) To understand the sustainable lifestyle of the Lepcha indigenous community in Darjeeling and Kalimpong district in the Himalayan region of West Bengal.
- ) To discuss the approaches taken by the Lepcha indigenous communities stemming out of their indigenous beliefs and merging with the present-day partnership sustainable development approach.
- ) To derive the reconnection of Lepcha indigenous knowledge and practices to Sustainable Development Goal-17.

## I. Sustainable partnership in Lepcha lifestyle: their indigenous knowledge and practices

### a. Lepcha Traditional House

The Lepcha traditional home is known as, “*Ka-den-mo-lee*” which when broken down and translated ‘*KAA*’ means we, ‘*DEN*’ means where we spend our childhood learning the basics, ‘*MO*’ means center or main, and ‘*LEE*’ means home. Putting it together, *Ka-den-mo-lee* translated in English means, “the main home where we spend our childhood learning the basics”.

The traditional Architecture in Sikkim is a natural response to the availability of local material and local tools, guided by the local knowledge system of geography, harsh climatic conditions, and deeply embedded cultural practices as well as construction techniques of the region. The architecture that has evolved over long periods demonstrates local resources, constraints, etc. (Lathiya, 2021). Indigenous community and their knowledge are molded not only by traditions, customs but also by geographic location, climatic conditions, natural disasters prone to the area, and also the ecology they belong to. The Lepcha traditional house has been designed in a fashion that not only suits the high altitude and the natural disasters they are prone to but also built in a sustainable manner where every part of the ecology-human, flora, and fauna are in equilibrium. Quoting a respondent, “*To better understand these architectural structures one must also keep in mind the landscapes around it. The mountains that the Lepchas adore dearly not only offer them protection geographically and spiritually, it also comes with other repercussions. The young fold mountain range stops the monsoon winds from passing through, which gives the region some of the highest rainfalls in the subcontinent. Rain accompanied by landslides and flash floods sweeps away lives and slop failures*” Lepchas with their deep-rooted belief that they being the children of God are called to not only enjoy nature but also to be stewards of its keep. This principle is the foundation of every activity they undertake for life and livelihood.

*Ka-den-mo-lee* is also traditionally known as “*Dokemo Lee*”, *Doke* meaning “sitting on top” and *Lee* meaning “house, hence literally translated into English it means a house sitting on top.

When one views a traditional Lepcha house it is always raised and sitting on a platform. “*The Lepcha house is built using huge flat stones on which pillars are erected and then the house is built atop*” this statement further elaborates on the meaning of the name “*Dokemolee*”. *Ka-den-mo-lee* and *Dokemolee* are Lepcha terms but over the years Lepcha’s traditional home has got a new nomenclature of “a house without any nails”. “*The whole structure is built usually only using an ax to cut the trees and shape the wood. No nails are used to join the wooden panels and pillars rather all the pieces are put together like a puzzle*”. Community elders share that in the olden times, people looked for a location that had huge stones and trees. When an ideal spot was identified *ka-den-mo-lee* would be built as per the availability of resources around them and keeping in mind to not overuse the resources at disposal.

The stones are chiseled into desired shape and size and then laid down as a foundation known as *Kaden long*, on top of which the *Kao-dampuor* wooden pillars were placed. This helps raise the main structure above the ground. When asked why the houses were built on a raised platform the response was, “*It acts as a defense mechanism to avoid encounters with wild animals. Also, this helped them house their domestic animals under the house ensuring protection and safety*”. Upon further discussion on the structure of the house being built in this fashion, the elders shared, “*this concept of building a house upon a rock ensured that the houses did not topple down during earthquakes, for the stone itself is the foundation of the house. The gap between the house and the ground ensured that if ever there was a landslide, there was a space for soil run-off. This gap also helped during the heavy rains by allowing the free flow of water and preventing damage to the house*”.

When we look into these explanations get to realize that there is much science and thought behind these houses being built. There is a strong partnership between the community, people, the nature around them, and even the cost or profit being involved in the construction of the house. Great harmony is reflected which brings an equilibrium of not only receiving from the ecology around but also giving back and conserving as conscious stewards. Sustainable development is all about this. Sustainability and partnership in a sustainable approach can only be brought about if and when we collaborate with the communities we are working with. The indigenous knowledge base through wrapped up in religious beliefs, traditions, customs, and sometimes even superstitions, if carefully peeled open and understood has strong scientific reasoning behind it. As V. Sudarsen and S. Sumathi have shared, “technologically it is considered inferior. It is also considered functionally inferior”. Our approach to this indigenous information and knowledge set begins from the point of contention. Further quoting V. Sundarsen and S. Sumathi, “our submission is that we have no right to sit in their seat of judgment and decide by proxy the relevance or otherwise of a live knowledge system”.

Further on with the change in altitude and climate the materials used in *ka-den-mo-lee* differs. Quoting a respondent, “*The architectural design change with the change in altitude as a mode of coping with the environment. The ka-den-mo-lee of Sikkim use a bamboo roof since it is cold, sometimes to endure snowfalls, in contrast to the Kalimpong ka-den-mo-lee, which is made of thatch grass as the climate is moderately warmer. The grass acts as a perfect insulator, which ventilates smoke and air in and out of the house*”. This statement further cements the discourse that indigenous knowledge is not unique to the place but also sustainable and fine-tuned in partnership with both the social and natural ecology.



With the evolution and changing circumstances, change is inevitable. The traditional methods have been replaced by modern construction methods and a modern touch can be found in the Lepcha houses being built in today's time. *"The Kao dampu has been replaced by concrete pillars, wooden floors replaced with cemented flooring, and those who can afford to opt for tiles and marbled floorings. The bamboo or thatch roof has been replaced by tin sheets. The hearth has been replaced by stoves run on LPG or just succumbed to being a nostalgia, a reminder of the past"*.

A young Lepcha youth beautifully summed up, *"Those that remain are an amalgamation of both*

*tradition and modernity, which can be neither categorized as a modern house nor a traditional one. But we can surely put them under a different evolving category since they are still under a process of change. Some are stuck frozen in time forever, abandoned- just reminiscent of the past, used only for storage and by researchers like myself to understand the past and the state of transition in-between"*. This is where a partnership between modern information, knowledge can merge with the existing traditional knowledge, information and practice to formulate a partnership that is in its complete sense holistically sustainable.



**Lepcha House, Lingsay, Kalimpong. / Photo: Praveen Chettri**



### ***b. Lepcha cultural and social festivals***

Lepcha cultural and social festivals are rooted in their religious, cultural and social life where the *Mun* and *Bongthing* (Priestess and priest) play the central role in these celebrations. Their festivities are a testament to their partnership with the planet, people, and profit. *“We come together to celebrate as a community the planet and the blessings of work which our goddess has blessed us with”*, quoting a respondent when asked about the celebrations. Following are some cultural and social festivals that the traditional Lepcha community celebrates. Their beliefs are rooted in folklore, religious faith, and their stewardship with the ecology they belong to, but it reflects a strong partnership with the society, environment, and economy they belong to.

### ***c. Muk-Zik-Ding-Rum-Faat***

The Lepchas of the Darjeeling and Sikkim Himalayan region are bearers of rich tradition and culture deeply rooted in their reverence to nature. *Muk-Zik-Ding-Rum-Faat* is celebrated by the community to honor and celebrate the partnership between the community people, their biodiversity, ecology, and their relationship with nature at

large. This festival of celebration of man and nature happens in February when the community collectively comes together and worships nature with thanksgiving. The word *Muk* in Lepcha language means greenery or the nature we are surrounded by; *Zek-Ding* means sprouting of grass or vegetation; *Rum* means God and *Faat* means offering, prayer, worship, or invocation. Hence, *MukZik Ding Rum Faat* means offering prayer or worship to God for the nature and vegetation she has blessed us with. The *Bongthing* or the Lepcha priest heads the offering and the community offers their prayers to *Itbumoo*, the mother of creation. Quoting a *Bongthing* *“The festival is celebrated during the dry spell of winter so that healthy plants, trees, shrubs may grow in plenty so that there is enough for both faunas in the environment and man”*. *Bongthing* further explained that *“the festival is celebrated to offer prayers to seek protection from natural calamities like landslides, famine, diseases, and also to request for good harvest”*. Lepchas are an agrarian society and their livelihood depends upon the harvest hence this festival is crucial for them to welcome spring and along with it the blessings of flowers, fruits, cereals, food, shade, shelter, and economy.



#### **d. Lyang Rum Faat**

This festival of offering and worship or *Faat* is followed by *Lyang Rum Faat* which means prayer for rain. This takes place in April to pray for sufficient rain for agricultural practice and to overcome the dryness of drought. The Lepcha community grows cereals specifically rice and millets during the rainy season and this becomes a source of income and food for them for the year. Rain is crucial and so is their belief of respectfully requesting nature for the same. "*Lyang, which means land is sacred for the Lepchas. They worship the land-God so that they can have a prosperous harvest and timely rain for agriculture*".

All the villagers gather near a river and offer *Chi* (Lepcha alcohol), eggs, rice, fish, fruits, etc to Rum the benevolent spirit, praying for rain. The day is celebrated like a picnic, contributing collectively (Lepcha, 2021). The day is celebrated by singing, dancing, and eating together by the community as one entity. These *Faats* have very strong ecological implications.

#### **e. Chu Rum Faat**

*Chu Rum Faat* means offering prayer and invocation to the Himalayas. It is celebrated when fresh snow starts falling on the Himalayan mountains. Lepchas believe that they are the children of the mountains and hold great reverence for the Himalayas. *Chu Rum Faat* is the time when the community collectively comes together and worships the mountains, they call home. *Itubmoo* the goddess of creation, in the beginning, taking a ball of fresh snow from the

summit of *Kongchen Kongchlo*, *Itubmoo* created the first man, Fudonthing, the most powerful one. Mother Creator remained unsatisfied. She decided to give Fudonthing, her pet creation, a companion. So, she took a bit of *a-yong* from Fudonthing's bones and created the first woman, Nazong Nyu, the ever-fortunate one, as his sister. Later, both became chief deities of the Rongs or Lepchas (Doma, 2010).

The creation story of the Lepchas begins and also ends in the mountains. The Lepchas firmly believe in their origin from the Himalayas and specifically Kanchenjunga who has been their guardian deity, protector, and giver of life for generations.

The *Faat* is conducted by the *Bongthing* with offerings brought in front of a replica of Kanchanjunga which usually consists of erected stones. A raised bamboo platform that faces towards the Himalayas is where the offerings and prayers take place. *Chu Rum Faat* reminds each Lepcha of his original identity that he/ she is *Mutanchi Rum Kup* or *Rong Kup*, a child of God or a child of Rong. It reminds the Lepcha that they are originated from the Himalayas and that finally when they die, they return to the Himalayas (Tamsang, 2002).

From cradle to coffin, the Lepcha life rests on the bosom of mother nature. Every Lepcha has one's spirit- Chyu and Daa- one of the peaks and the lake of the neighboring range from here he/she comes and must go after death (Roy, 2012). This festival of worship is in reverence and gratitude for their existence, life, protection, and nurture from their mother nature and ancestors.



Source: Jenny Bentley

These festivals and *Faats* as they are known, though rooted in nature and their religious belief help the community to live in a partnership with people, planet, and profit or social, environmental, and economic partnership which further strengthens sustainability in the livelihood pattern of the Lepcha indigenous community.

## II. Sustainable partnership and Lepcha Approaches in Conservation of Ecology

### a. Movement Against Hydropower Projects

“The indigenous tribal community of Sikkim regards their land and the rivers Teesta and Rangeet as sacred and integral to their civilizations heritage. However, the industrialization efforts have not only displaced and marginalized this community from the development plans within their ecologically and culturally protected area” (Lepcha, 2018).

Nature has always been an integral part of the Lepcha community’s ethos and rivers have been the bloodline of this indigenous community. Much of the folklores, traditions, religious beliefs and ways of life all stem out of their belief in nature. Lepchas hold their river ecosystem as sacred for the river is home to various ecological systems, inhabited by rich and diverse flora and fauna, and also a source of livelihood. Apart from this, “*rivers help the Lepchas reach their chu*” as stated by the *Bongthing*, meaning for the Lepchas rivers are one of the means of reaching the afterlife and being one with their ancestors. Songs, poems, ballads, folklore, all honor rivers.

With development capitalization and the capitalist model of creating large industrial infrastructures have reached the Himalayan foothills and the development projects have been zeroed on hydroelectric projects. Even though the topography is hazardous and prone to earthquakes, along with massive irreversible damage to the ecology, projects have been carried



out with the promise of employment, development, and economy. This ostensibly win-win situation has proved to be a myth and the common resources of people like forests, cultivable agricultural lands and water are now in the sole custody of the rich and well-heeled (Lepcha, 2018). With the endangerment of their land, nature, community, and means of livelihood the Lepcha indigenous youths came up with protests against the building of hydro projects in the fragile topography, giving voice to the

depleting and hurting ecology around. This protest gave birth to Affected Citizens of Teesta (ACT) which is the collective voice of the community in distress. Quoting one of the founders, *“We strive to not only save, conserve and give voice to these concerns because they are sacred to us, but because it is affecting our land, region, and environment negatively. The repercussion of this will be faced by the people in the hills and also the plains. What are we leaving behind for our children?”*.



Source: <http://www.actsikkim.com/action.html>

Formally launched in July 2004, ACT is the registered name of the Joint Action Committee which was founded in the year July 2002. The movement which started as a “Lepcha movement” has now been embraced by the community at large in the Sikkim and Darjeeling region. The movement has over the years become an active activist movement led by young Lepcha youths. They have been addressing issues of river rights, environmental rights, conservation, and indigenous rights.

As a part of their social action movement ACT in the year, 2008 went on a recorded 96 days hunger strike in Gangtok, Sikkim. This was called off on 15<sup>th</sup> June 2008 due to the Government of Sikkim notification No 102/GOS/E-88?05-06-1391 dated 12.06.08. By this notification, the Department of

Energy and Power, Government of Sikkim announced to stop construction of four planned projects in Dzongu areas. These projects are Ringpi HEP on Ringpi Chu, Lingza HEP on Ringpi Chu, Rakhel HEP on Rakhel Chu and Rangyong HEP on Rangyong Chu (Roy, 2012).

After almost ten years the organization is still actively running in its activism to protect, conserve and strive for environmental rights for all. *“If we will not conserve what is ours then who will?”* is the motto behind their relentless efforts diligently put forward for a better tomorrow. This effort put forward with their roots based on indigenous knowledge goes on to show that a partnership between modern science, knowledge, information and indigenous knowledge and

practices can help formulate location specific sustainable development approach.

### ***b. Mayel Crafts***

Mayel crafts with their tagline, “Straight from the Himalayas” is a homegrown sustainable initiative taken up by young Lepcha indigenous youths of Kalimpong, India. In their own words, “*Mayel Crafts has taken a humble effort to start a manufacturing industry in the hills to revive the lost heritage and adopt village sustainability model around Kalimpong, Darjeeling, and Sikkim*”. Mayel Crafts builds upon the already existing indigenous art and craft practices in the

community and gives it a platform for commercialization of the same. Indigenous methods of art and craft have always been sustainably utilizing the available resources. The utilization of bamboo is very common in Lepcha practices but, “*for every bamboo cut, the Lepcha plants two bamboos*”. Mayel craft has three broad products types, bamboo, wood, and handloom fabrics. Their products are locally sourced, locally produced, locally manufactured, and provide employment to the indigenous community at large. Every purchase from Mayel Crafts goes on to conserve and revive the lost heritage of art and craft along with adopting a village sustainability model in and around Kalimpong and Darjeeling.



What Mayel Crafts has done is take the already existing indigenous knowledge and information and blended it with the current information and knowledge of sustainable development and approach building a partnership between the two and walking a step closer to sustainability. “*Zero waste, Minimalism, Minimal waste, all are nothing but different names for attaining sustainability which is the goal of all these Sustainable Development Goals*”, this was shared by an organization head in Darjeeling who works extensively on sustainable development. Indigenous products are minimal, minimum waste if not completely zero waste, and also help reduce carbon footing. A partnership in these upcoming ventures of sustainable business with indigenous knowledge, information, and practice can help attain a sustainable lifestyle.

### **Conclusion**

The responsibility of the like-minded progressive forces should be to recognize these traditional science and technology and improve upon them with the application of suitable modern science and technologies so that sustainability at the local level can be guaranteed (Naidu, 2008). A sustainable approach is not a one size fits all approach, rather it should be an approach that is tailor-made not just according to the situation but also location. Incorporation of this indigenous knowledge spilled out in the practices of the indigenous communities in the mainstream knowledge base can offer a holistic sustainable solution. SDG-17 calls for a partnership but a partnership that isn't respectfully inclusive of all communities especially indigenous minority communities cannot achieve a holistic sustainable partnership approach. Recognition of indigenous

knowledge and information as valid and not just folklore is the first step to this collaborative partnership between Western science and indigenous knowledge which can thereafter help navigate towards an inclusive and holistic sustainable development approach.

Sustainable Development Goal (SGD)-17, Partnership for the goals works towards strengthening the means of implementation and revitalizing the global partnership for sustainable development. This cannot take place without collaboration. A collaboration between indigenous knowledge without refuting its validity with modern science, technology, and approaches can help us work towards a holistic, inclusive sustainable development approach. As 1 Corinthians chapter 12; 21-26 says “*The eye cannot say to the hand, “I don’t need you!” And the head cannot say to the feet, “I don’t need you!” On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, .... But God has put the body together, giving greater honor to the parts that lacked it, so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it*” in the same manner this practice of integrative partnership which includes the indigenous minority groups will not only lead to sustainable approach and development but harmony and stewardship among all in the long run.

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