

## **Chatakpur Eco Village: Conservation - Eco-Tourism Linkage and Sustainable Development**

**Terence Mukhia** is a lecturer in the Department of Philosophy, Salesian College Sonada who has co-edited works and number of articles on issues related to the region to his credit.

### **Abstract**

Terence attempts to make a case for sustainable development of an eco tourism village by bringing to light the resources of the Chatakpur village above Sonada within the Senchal Wildlife sanctuary and reserved forest in this study. He relies on the first hand information gathered from interviews and interactions with the persons who are the possible beneficiaries as well as agents of sustainable development of the area.

---

**Keywords:** Chatakpur, Ecotourism, Eco Village, Sustainable Development.

---

### **Introduction**

The United Nations convened the Brundtland Commission which was named after its chairperson G. H. Brundtland in 1983. Showing its concern over the growing deterioration of the natural resources and human environment and its impact on economic and social development it coined the terms Sustainable Development and defined it as 'a pattern of resource use, that aims to meet human needs while preserving the environment so that these needs can be met not only in the present, but also for generations to come'. The United Nations 2005 World Summit Outcome Document refers to the 'interdependent and mutually reinforcing pillars' of sustainable development as economic development, social development, and environmental protection. Keeping this in mind I focus on the interdependent relationship among the Economic development of the people of Chatakpur<sup>1</sup> and neighbouring villages, their Social Development and Senchal Wildlife Sanctuary. "Biodiversity is the degree of variation of life forms within a given ecosystem, biome or an entire planet. Biodiversity is the variation of life at all levels of biological organization. Biodiversity is a measure of the health of ecosystems. Greater biodiversity implies greater health."<sup>2</sup> Preservation of Senchal Wildlife Sanctuary therefore is of great importance which has varieties of flora and fauna in it including some rare varieties.

The article attempts to highlight the need for integrating biodiversity conservation priorities with developmental needs and prepares a strategy for eco-tourism and sustainable development that would support improved protected area management

1 Chatakpur is an eco-village situated 6 kms uphill from Sonada. It falls within the range of Sinchel Wildlife Sanctuary II, Darjeeling.

2 Terence Mukhia, "Biodiversity and Conservation," in *SCSpeaks*, Vol. 11, No. 1 (Sonada: Salesian College, June 2011), p. 9.

and livelihood needs in Chatakpur, an eco-village and its surrounding areas. Therefore the following objectives are taken into consideration:

Strengthening of conservation-eco-tourism linkages in the area; proposing a sustainable tourism development strategy in the Darjeeling Hills; encouraging private sector investment in the eco-tourism sector; and scouting the linkage between job creation and sustainable development.

### **Chatakpur Eco Village - the Background**

Nobody knows for sure when Chatakpur Forest Village was established. But we have the witnesses who remember Chatakpur of 1940 when the population of this small village was just thirty humble souls comprising of Sherpas, Chettris and Mangars. Today, Chatakpur Forest Village falls under Senchal Wild Life Sanctuary, Wild Life Division I, Darjeeling, Department of forest, Government of West Bengal. It was declared the eco-village and Chatakpur Eco-village Complex was inaugurated by Dr. P. T. Bhutia, IFS, on 15th March, 2009.<sup>3</sup> The altitude of Chatakpur is 7887 ft approximately. Sumitra Ghatak, the divisional forest officer and the former in-charge of wildlife I, had given this remark on Chatakpur: "The transformation of Chatakpur is simply unbelievable. It was a notorious village with illegal felling and timber smuggling. We had to raise a separate camp for our staff to check the felling."<sup>4</sup> The forest department had to struggle a lot to conscientize people regarding the importance of forest preservation.

Senchal Wildlife Sanctuary was set up in 1915 in the District of Darjeeling, West Bengal, India. Situated at the distance of 11 km to the southwest of Darjeeling, it is one of the oldest wildlife sanctuaries of India. It covers an area of 38.60 sq kms. The elevation ranges from 1500 to 2600 mtrs. High-altitude animals such as Barking Deer, Himalayan Black Bear, Leopard, Jungle Cat, Common Rhesus Monkey, Assam Macaque, Flying Squirrel, etc. are found in their natural habitats. The sanctuary is also rich in bird life. The two Senchal lakes supply drinking water to the town of Darjeeling.

One can enjoy beautiful sun rise and sunset from here. This place offers a very clear view of Kanchanjangha and the other mountain ranges around it. The natural beauty of the place with its rich flora and fauna makes it a unique place. Trees like Buk, Oaks, Phalant, Arkawla, Katus, Chimal, Pine, Magnolia, Rhododendron etc. The medicinal plants like Lekh Potash, Khanakpa, Chirata, Redgum. It is a haven for goat antelopes like Serow. Barking Deer, Leopards, Asiatic Black Bears, Large Indian Civet, Squirrels, Wild Pigs, Himalayan Flying Squirrels, Babbler, Shrikes, Sunbirds, Thrush, Finches, Magpies, Yellow Throated Martens reside in this sanctuary. There are over thirty species of lepidopterous family in this sanctuary. There are butterflies having

3 Interview with Binod Rai, the Caretaker of the Guest Houses, Chatakpur, October 2011 [See also the Sign Board containing these details in front of the guest houses in Chatakpur].

4 Avijit Sinha, "Hill Hamlet Buries Murky Past - Greek Brigade takes over Village," in *The Telegraph*, 19 May, 2011, [url.www.telegraphindia.com/1100519/jsp/.../story\\_12464616.jsp](http://www.telegraphindia.com/1100519/jsp/.../story_12464616.jsp).

the colourful wingspan from 2 cm to 20 cm! Some other winged creatures are Black Legged Apollo, Kaiser-I-Hind, Spectable Swordtail, Common Bluebottle, Common Birdwing and White Tiger. Varieties of beetles like Rhinoceros beetles, Grasshoppers and beetles from Longicora and Trictomidae family. Tiger Hill is just 8 kms away from this village. Tiger Hill is the summit of Ghoom ridge, on which the highest railway station on the Darjeeling Himalayan Railway - a UNESCO World Heritage Site is situated. It is famous for spectacular sunrise view over the Himalayas. Leveling out at 8,500 ft (2,600 mtrs), Tiger Hill is the highest hill in the immediate surroundings. The nearest villages are Rambhi, Siksing, Labdha and Mangpoo. Baggaura Airforce Base of the Indian army visible from the village is located at the distance of 3.5 kms from the place.

Initially it was totally outside the surveillance of the regular government. They had their own system of mandal (leader) who looked after the village and the land of the people as a whole. They thrived on their cultivation. Sri Teke Tamang was the first mandal of this village who supervised the village for about 20 to 25 years. As the population began to grow the village came in touch with other villages like Permanent Busty (busty means 'village'), Rajahatta Busty, Labdha Busty, Rumbhi Busty, Siksing Busty and eventually with Sonada and others places as well. The village got a pre-primary school in 1958. Gradually the village came to be supervised by the forest department (wild life sanctuary) through its Beat and Ranger Officer. At present the village is under panchayat system.

### **Visit to Chatakpur - the Present Scenario**

My interest led me to explore Chatakpur Eco Village. There are just eighteen houses in Chatakpur with 90 persons. They do not have registered land since it is a reserved land of the forest department. They are deprived of ordinary facilities and comforts of life. Agriculture and farming is the main source of livelihood and income for them. They grow raddish, carrots, cabbages, cauliflower, mushrooms and other vegetables. There are around 104 cows in the village, an average of 5 to 6 cows per house. They come all the way to Sonada, the nearest town at the distance of 6 kms to sell milk on foot and return on foot. They do not cut trees simply and they make use of eco friendly equipments. Due to bio-organic farming the vegetables of Chatakpur are in great demand. These people here have learnt not to harm animals or birds. The forest department has managed to conscientize people in this regard. The department has been helping these people to maintain eco friendly living.<sup>5</sup> There is just one primary school and two wells to site as symbols of development. There are some students who go to Sonada Higher Secondary School for education walking up and down for four hours. There is neither a dispensary nor a good grocery shop. There is just one shop where a few items are kept. Luckily electricity has reached the place. The only nearby

5 Confirmed after a survey in the month of October 2011. Data may vary today. Cfr Terence Mukhia, Chatakpur Eco Tourism and Adventure Project (CETAP): Sonada: Upper Johnson Hatta, 2011. (A proposal submitted to DGAHC)

town is Sonada at the distance of 6 kms where they trek to for marketing. Today a rough jeepable road links Chatakpur to Sonada. There is another route called Pushoke Road via 3rd Mile adjoining Lalkhutti View Point where the Britishers had erected a pillar considering it a place of interest. It seems they had a plan for the place which faded away together with their departure.

We can raise a question here: 'Though the people of Chatakpur have given up their earlier habits of environmental destruction what is the guarantee that the similar event will not recur in future'? Relapse of Chatakpur or even the possibility of new group exploiting the forest and causing environmental degradation are not beyond the range of impossibility. It has been not so pleasant an observation that people from nearby villages, extending upto Sonada town, exploiting the forest and coming back with firewood, grass, chiratah (a type of medicinal herb) and other medicinal herbs posing threat to biodiversity. There is a tendency to consume the resources without minding the consequences which in turn show no concern for the future generations. Those who exploit forest are normally poor people who depend on daily wages and petty jobs for their sustenance. Many of them cannot afford to have gas connection and they depend on forest for firewood which serves as alternative to gas and fuel. It is because people in the nearby places are still not so literate and lack awareness about land and the need of biodiversity and its conservation. The people have not been sufficiently conscientized. Regular and planned programme should be followed keeping in mind the ways to eradicate poverty of the people. However, it is good and encouraging to note that the people have refrained from killing birds and animals. At times a few children can be seen going around with catapults. It makes one search for means and methods to protect environment which includes not only the forest with its flora and fauna but also the inhabitants as well.

### **Conservation-Eco-tourism Linkage and Sustainable Development in Chatakpur**

After the initial contact with the people and place and embarking upon the preliminary field study somewhat a clearer picture of Chatakpur emerged regarding what it was in the past and what it is at present as shown below:

In line with the observations made of the interdependence between the socio-economic conditions of Chatakpur Eco Village and Senchal Wildlife Sanctuary there emerged a project proposal to maintain a sustainable and prolonged interdependent relationship.

| No                               | Chatakpur's Economy   | Society of Chatakpur   | Forest : Senchal Wildlife Sanctuary  |
|----------------------------------|---|--|--|
| Case 1:<br>Chatakpur before 1958 | <b>Low Economic Stability:</b><br>Not a single person had job (neither government nor private); Depended on forest and small-scale farming for livelihood.<br>They say that the people had not seen much money.   | <b>Poor Social Condition:</b><br>Not a single school was there; People were simple but had rough behaviour; There was a lack of balanced diet; No proper communication, no road, no electricity, and no proper water supply, etc.. | <b>Threat to the Forest Resources:</b> Felling of trees; Uprooting of medicinal herbs for sale; Hunting; Killing of birds, etc.      |
| Case 2:<br>Chatakpur after 1958  | <b>Stable/Improved Economic Condition:</b><br>Active involvement of the Forest Department-job creation; Aid in vegetation and farming; Generation of revenue for the locals through small scale eco-tourism, etc. | <b>Social Upliftment:</b><br>Concern in education; Conscientization; Refined behaviour; Good communication, etc.   | <b>No threat to the Forest Resources:</b> No deforestation; No hunting of birds and animals; Controlled use of medicinal herbs; etc. |

Eco-tourism has already begun in Chatakpur in a humble way. Chatakpur has rich potentialities for Eco-Tourism, Wildlife and Adventure Opportunities. Keeping in mind the rich potentialities of Chatakpur, biodiversity conservation and the poverty of the people in and around Chatakpur, an eight points project proposal submitted to the authorities in the Darjeeling Hills under the title Chatakpur Eco-Tourism and Adventure Project (CETAP) awaits approval. The project gives importance to the eco village, its people and the forest ambient with its entire community members.

In brief the main points of the project proposal are as follows: Chatakpur-Tiger Hill Ropeway Project and its extension upto Deer Park, Kurseong; Lalkhutti Project comprising of four worship places of the four major religions (for it will eventually help the forest department to maintain the sanctity of the sound forest environment); Trekking Paths Project; The Three Points Project [the three points referred to are - Pokhri (small lake), Koiri Rock (used for rock climbing) and View Point]; Sonada to Chatakpur Road Project; Medicinal Plants Study and Research Centre with Medicinal Garden Project; Eco-village Welfare and Development Project.

## Conclusion

Conservation-Eco-tourism linkage and sustainable development of Chatakpur is a necessity. The view that linking the reserved habitat to eco-tourism will be detrimental to biodiversity conservation has not met with much justification. We have not heard of any confirmed report of eco-tourism destroying the biodiversity conservation till today. Controlled and disciplined type of linkage will foster love of nature and biodiversity conservation. The tourists from all over the world can come and learn about the need of biodiversity and conservation. Neither just the people of Chatakpur and surrounding villages nor the government or the forest department alone can achieve the end. If all co-operate well keeping concern of one another then what we are proposing will

be successful. Further private sector investment can be encouraged in keeping with proper rules and regulations without disturbing the forest ambient. Chatakpur has a rich natural heritage. Good view of sun-rise and sun-set, panoramic view of the snow peaked mountain ranges, Pokhri (small lake) with rare variety of Salamander, beautiful eco-friendly healthy atmosphere, clean and thick forest, varieties of animals, varieties of birds, varieties of insects, varieties of medicinal plants etc. provide a rich potential of Eco Tourism. The possibilities of adventures like jungle safari, trekking, rock climbing will be very interesting. Further, the entertainments like folk and cultural dances, rope way and serene prayerful holy atmosphere will be able to win the heart and soul of the visitors. This project if considered will not be a spent force and expenditure only. It will not only be a source of sustainable development for the people but a great source of revenue for the government as well. This can stabilize the economy of the people of Chatakpur and neighbouring areas and certainly bring about social development. As a result the protection of Senchal Wildlife Sanctuary and environmental protection of the area as a whole can be achieved which is a distinguished mark of sustainable development.