

Gender and Cultural Significance of Kitchen gardens: a Case Study of Sikkim

Aranya Jha, Sangeeta Jha and Ajeya Jha

Department of Management Studies, Sikkim Manipal Institute of Technology, Majitar, Rangpo 737 132 East Sikkim, India

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ABSTRACT

Kitchen gardens is a worldwide phenomenon and probably is an age-old phenomenon. They play a vital role in human lives but their importance remains undervalued. Utilitarian value of kitchen gardens is relatively better recognized and well documented. Its psycho-emotional and cultural importance has, however, been less studied. Sikkim is located in the laps of Himalayas. It is a tiny Indian Himalayan state having an area approximately 7100 square kilometers. It has an immense bio-cultural diversity. Kitchen gardens have substantial cultural importance. Is this true for the State of Sikkim? Do this importance have any gender-based variations? These two questions have been investigated in this study. Kitchen gardens have a substantial cultural value for the rural people of this state. Kitchen gardens provide sacred space to undertake cultural and spiritual traditions; provide resources such as leaves, flowers, fruits and herbs for carrying out rituals; provide ingredients for cooking food having cultural meaning as also provide gift items. Study also finds significant gender differences exist with women valuing the kitchen gardens for their cultural importance much higher than man

Key words : Rural, Himalayan, Ritual space, Food-culture, Ritual resources, Giftculture

Introduction

History of kitchen gardens is perhaps as old as the history of humankind. They are a universal and eternal part of human existence and have been found throughout the history and across ethnic cultures and nationalities. Their importance, though grossly under-rated, however has been known to us. Utilitarian value of kitchen gardens is relatively better recognized and well documented. Its psycho-emotional and cultural importance has, however, been less studied. That culture is a vital human trait is commonly known. What role kitchen gardens play in this respect is an issue that needs exploration.

Sikkim is located in the laps of Himalayas. It is a

tiny Himalayan state having an area approximately 7100 square kilometers. Yet it is a paradise of bio-cultural diversity. It has a rich tradition of kitchen gardens and hence an important site to undertake this study. Altitude here changes dramatically and one can experience tropical, subtropical, temperate, subalpine to alpine climate telescoped within a insignificant area. This altitudinal variations gives rise to an unmatched bio-diversity. Sikkim is also a veritable melting pot of ethnic cultures. *Lepchas*, the original inhabitants of the state have a distinct culture. *Bhutias*, an early migrants from Tibet and Bhutan are Buddhists with a unique cultural canvass. *Nepalese*, a diverse lot also are known for a rich cultural heritage. The respective kitchen gardens of these groups have varied flora of economically im-

portant plants and these kitchen gardens have a strong cultural role to play in their lives.

Kitchen gardens in Sikkim has been studied in the context of nutritional value of produce (Jha *et al.*, 2020) and their faunal diversity (Jha *et al.*, 2020a)

Literature Review: Bond between people and place has always been a matter of importance for researchers Tuan, 1974; Relph, 1976; Proshansky *et al.*, 1983; Altman and Low, 1992; Mazumdar and Mazumdar, 1993, 2004, 2009a,b; Guiliani, 2003; Hidalgo and Hernandez, 2001; Lewicka, 2010). Places are of profound importance of human reality as these hold deep meaning and emotions (Lofland, 1998), provide a strong sense of belonging (Fullilove, 1996). and provide stability. Kitchen gardens too are places of great significance in the context of religion, rituals, culture, ecology and family (Mazumdar, 2012). The details of cultural benefits. *"Gardens have special meaning. They are powerful settings for human life, transcending time, place and culture"* (Francis and Hester, 1990). The various facets of cultural benefits of kitchen gardens have been discussed hereunder.

a. Kitchen Gardens provide resources for rituals: Kitchen garden providing resources for rituals is a common phenomenon. Kitchen gardens maintained by different ethnic communities have differing character in terms of plants their sizes as also their placements. This is because of the divergent cuisine they have evolved but also because of the ritualistic traditions they practice. For the sake of convenience these find important place in their respective kitchen gardens. Literature provides ample evidence of flowers as rituals (McDaniel, (2004). Shoemaker *et al.*, 1990; tree as rituals: Chauhan and Chauhan, (2019); Fowler-Smith, (2018); Fruits as rituals (Singh, 2019); Gadhe and Mathur, (2018). Rice for rituals (Singanusong and Mingyai, (2019); Pham, 2017).

b. Kitchen gardens are backdrop to observe rituals: Hindus and Buddhist have traditionally been known for personal and private communion with divinity. Hence more than a congregation in a common community platform they perform rituals alone and in private. Apart from having their home temples even gardens they have are useful for them in this respect. These are also the places for a sacred space as well as for social religious meetings. Kitchen gardens are considered sacred spaces because these provide access to nature and which in turn is beneficial both mentally and physically

(Frumkin 20013); facilitates recovery from illnesses and injuries (Ulrich, 1984) is stress reducing (Wells and Evans, 2003) and for thinking and introspection (Shibata and Suzuki, 2002). Hence sacredness associated with kitchen gardens is functional and not just notional.

c. Kitchen gardens promote local food culture: Food culture has been known to be a powerful phenomenon. Diverse evolution of various ethnic communities across globe in highly varying geographical, climatic and resource conditions have enriched the food landscape beyond imagination. A person is most comfortable with the cuisine he has lived with and hence ethnic food carries highly emotional value for individuals and is known to have a calming effect on them. These food-cultures also hold hope for future food security by providing immense possibilities and options in face of looming climate change as well as political and military crisis. These provide options to survive even if the exceptional connectivity we have created dies out temporarily. Evidence of kitchen gardens as a resource of food culture in literature is abundant (Sthapit *et al.*, 2006); Klindienst, (2006); Richards-Greaves, (2013); Nix, (2016)

d. Kitchen garden products have gift-value: Gift-giving again is an important cultural practice that is universal as well as eternal in human context. Gifts could be utilitarian or symbolic. Kitchen gardens produce are an excellent utilitarian gift as they cater to one of the most fundamental needs of men. Gift-giving is known to be as important for the giver as it is for the receivers. It is known to build bonds between elders and youngsters, siblings, spouses, friends, neighbors and community as a whole. Indeed most festivals are built around gift-giving rituals. Scores of scholars have studied gift-giving rituals in the context of home-grown food (Shahu, 2019); Clouse and Brause, 2016; Irina, 2018).

From the literature review we find that kitchen gardens have substantial cultural importance. Is this true for the State of Sikkim? Do this importance have any gender-based variations? These two questions are the bed-rock of this study.

Methodology

The study is primarily exploratory in nature and has two distinct objectives: (a) to explore the cultural significance of kitchen gardens in the state and (b) to determine gender-based views in this respect and to

quantify the differences. Cultural significance has four indicators (a) place to observe rituals, (b) resources for rituals, (c) food-culture and (d) gift-giving rituals.

The survey entailed visiting 67 kitchen garden (32 in tropical and subtropical regions, 21 in temperate regions and 14 in sub-alpine regions). To fulfill the first objective a survey was undertaken whereby qualitative information of kitchen gardens from their respective owners has been collected. Questions were open-ended. For the second objective an interview schedule was framed with the four variables and which were to be quantified in terms of significance (on a continuous scale of 1 to 10 with 1 showing least importance and 10 reflecting highest level of importance) by the respondents who owned the kitchen gardens visited under this survey. The second part of the study is conclusive as gender-difference has been measured statistically. As this is just a case study, the conclusions made are suggestive. In order to arrive at more robust conclusions which is generalizable, other studies with research designs, high on validity should be undertaken.

To establish the significance of gender-differences t-test (at 95% CL) has been conducted. P-value below 0.001 are taken as 0.

Results and Discussion

Cultural functions of kitchen gardens appears important for the people of the state. Our findings in this respect are unexpected and deserve a more exhaustive study in future. Following are the excerpts from this study:

Kitchen Gardens provide resources for rituals: Sikkim is dominated by Hindus and Buddhist and who unlike their Christian and Muslim counterparts prefer a private and personal relationship with divinity, rather than a collective offering of prayers. Each home has a small place to perform worship with pictures of respective gods and goddesses. Every kitchen garden has a flowers and fruits which are offered to the divine on daily basis. Nepalese exchange young grass shoots to each other on *Dasaia* festival observed in early autumn. Lepchas of Sikkim are nature worshippers and have worshipped mountains and rivers, forests and trees. Modernism has made them city dwellers and hence their gardens have now become the site of their religious and spiritual offerings.

Kitchen gardens are backdrop to observe rituals: Lepchas of Sikkim are nature worshippers and have worshipped mountains and rivers, forests and trees. Modernism has made them city dwellers and hence their gardens have now become the site of their religious and spiritual offerings. Nepalese people of Sikkim too perform certain pujas outside their home but in their private spaces which often happen to be kitchen gardens. A tiny temple in some of the Nepalese homes is located in their kitchen gardens. This could be because forest worship has been a strong tradition of Hindus. Gardens with or without temples also serve as a place for meditation – as essential eastern practice common to India, China, Japan and other Buddhist nations. Nepalese worship *Tulsi* plant regularly and this plant is an essential part of their kitchen gardens. Both Lepchas, Bhutias and Nepalese have cultural habits of offering food to the birds and as birds are found in kitchen gardens, these assume importance in this respect too. Kitchen gardens, therefore, are a natural and strong extensions of the domestic religious life in Sikkim. *Mangars* have a culture of marrying the daughter to a tree. Concept of auspicious and non-auspicious is highly distinct in most cultures. Buddhist consider lotus as highly auspicious and hence wherever possible these flowers abound kitchen gardens. Hibiscus is sacred for Kali puja for Nepalese. Flower buds of *Makhmaliphool (Gomphernaglobasa)* are offered by sisters to their brothers on the last day of Tihar for the brother's protections. In same ceremony fruits of *Jungles regiato* are offered to the brothers. Culture is a multi-sensory experience and encompasses sound, sight smell, touch and taste. A kitchen garden serves all these purpose and in the process assumes a sacred atmosphere through worshipping rituals, prayers, meditation and presence of auspicious objects. At times temporary altars and shrines are erected for specific puja or rituals and are thereafter respectfully offered in river water, so as to preserve their sacred character. Kitchen gardens are also site to perform marriage ceremony under a *mandap*. Marriage is a deeply religious ritual and is performed around fire (as the prime witness) and woods of *Ficus benjamina* are used for burning the fire. Even death rituals begin from the garden where the dead is respectfully laid to rest. Dead bodies are carried on stretcher made of bamboos. Again bamboos are an essential part of kitchen gardens.

Lepcha funeral ceremony is also performed just outside the home and which happens to be garden.

During the Occasion, *Bung thing* the Lepcha priest convenes the spirit of the dead to join him for an excursion of Nye Mael, the Lepcha country. He recites the rhymed narration of the supreme beauty of Sikkim, its snowcapped mountains, the abode of perpetual snow, mystic blue hilly terrain, buoyant rivers, tranquil lakes, lush green jungles, fields, birds, butterflies and the lonely dwellings of man. The spirit of the deceased is also conducted along the Rung Nyet (Teesta River), to the Indian plains, to the oceans and finally back to the house from where it started, where the A pil dwells In the shape of a shadow.

It is obvious that this last journey through the Lepcha country, pointing out all its charms and beauty is a tribute paid to the Goddess Na ZongNyo, to whom the origin of life is ascribed. Once the last journey of the dead is over the mother Goddess herself comes to receive and take it back to the Nye-Ma-Yel her enchanting abode at Kanchenjunga, here all the spirits of the dead dwell happily forever under her eternal care.

Amongst Buddhist also death carries deep meaning for the dead as well survivors. It is a critical moment of transformation for the one who dies. Buddhist believe in rebirth and which means the dead is to be reborn again. How, where and how he is born is a function of all the *karmic* forces the dead person accumulated through his actions when alive. This activation determines the future life prospects. For others it is a significant reminder of impermanence – another vital Buddhist belief. Others also get an opportunity to assist the dead for a smooth transition. Gardens are an important setting for all this to happen. Funeral ceremonies last 49 days and again the gardens remain the setting for the ongoing rituals.

For Bhutias also kitchen gardens are a site of great cultural and religious value. A facet that they share with other communities of the state is *Ethics of care*. Buddhist belief are known for *Ahimsa* or *Non-violence*. A kitchen garden is a place to practice and teach care and compassion to young children. Killing, hurting or neglecting any creature over here is considered sinful. Trees and plants are not disturbed at night as these *may be sleeping*. Even birds nest are not pointed at as the gesture may harm the eggs and bird-babies. Trees and plants are protected and cared for. Presence of other insignificant and significant creatures is considered a blessings. Birds are fed regularly. Meditation in garden assumes greater

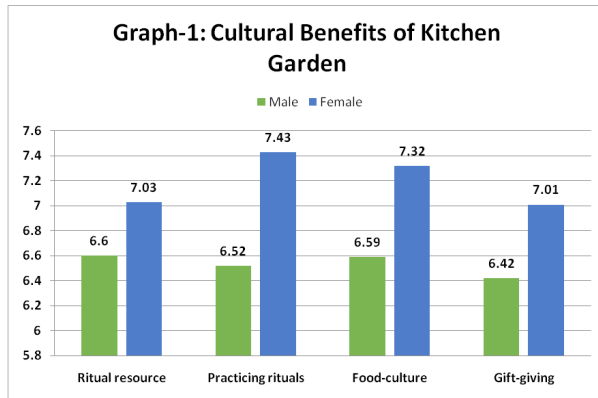
value as presence of trees and plants is considered divine.

We, therefore, find religious and cultural life of people of Sikkim is inseparable from their kitchen gardens. This perhaps has been the least understood but a vital function served by kitchen gardens.

Kitchen gardens promote local food culture: *Our tastes are a product of the culture we are born with.* As *Sonam Bhutia* a house wife from Lachung explains. When she first tasted *Pasta*, somewhere in Delhi a few years back she found it awful and avoided it thereafter till a few months back when someone offered *Pasta* made with local Sikkimese spices and now she loves it. Our experiences are similar. Sakit, a Lepcha girl now settled in Australia while visiting her parents in Sikkim narrates how she needs to have at least one ethnic meal a day to remain sane. According to her non-Sikkimese cuisine is stressful to her. Yet again we find our own experiences echoing the same emotions. Each culture promotes food depending on availability of resources, nutritional needs, climatic conditions and cultural values. Fresh food carries immense value in hot valleys of Sikkim, where food is quickly spoilt during summers, but has not much significance in ethnic cultures spread at high altitude areas where food is not spoilt, at times for months together. It is suggested that Industrial revolution succeeded in United Kingdom because of bread. Cultural values prevailing in 17th century over there promoted simple life, hard work, amassing wealth and personal success. Sensual pleasures such as good food was considered sinful. Bread symbolized simplicity and permitted extra time (Hardly any cooking time needed) and was cheap and hence people adopted it in no time. Traditional food is also inseparable from social interactions and festivities. Each occasion has a distinct cuisine and which helps the host and the guest to feel as one. It is possible that cuisine has a strong health-related ramification. Pregnant women are prescribed special cuisine. So is a breast-feeding mother. Old people also differ in their diet from the younger people. Cuisine also differ as per seasons. The cultural aspects of food of Sikkim need further exploration

Graph 1 provides an understanding of the cultural value as felt by the people of Sikkim in the context of kitchen gardens. We find that women hold it in greater appreciation than their male counterparts. Kitchen gardens as space for performing rituals emerge as a surprise top cultural benefit. For men

kitchen garden as a place for ritual resource is more important. This could be because providing ritual resources could be a male task and practicing ritual could be more a female oriented activity. Most important cultural function is of kitchen gardens as a space to undertake rituals.



In order to understand if the gender differences are statistically significant, a t-test has been carried out. Before conducting t-test, it is important to establish that the data follows normal distribution. Skewness and kurtosis values determine the normal distribution character of data. Traditionally values of these two measures within ± 1 are accepted for establishment of normal distribution of data. From Table 1 it is noted that values of skewness and kurtosis for all the four variables range between 0.029 to -0.818 and are within ± 1 . The data, therefore, in all cases is found to follow normal distribution. It confirms that

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics

Skewness	Kurtosis	
	Statistic	Statistic
Ritualresource	.029	-.538
Ritualpractice	-.184	-.353
Foodculture	-.071	-.818
Giftculture	-.194	-.199

Table 2. t-test Gender

Gender		Mean	Std. Deviation	t-value	p-value	Null Hypothesis
Ritualresource	Male	6.59	1.41	1.977	0.049	Rejected
	Female	7.03	1.10			
Ritualpractice	Male	6.52	1.42	4.01	0	Rejected
	Female	7.43	1.20			
Foodculture	Male	6.60	1.35	3.33	0.001	Rejected
	Female	7.33	1.19			
Giftculture	Male	6.42	1.37	2.8	0.006	Rejected
	Female	7.01	1.08			

data may be subjected to a t-test. Results of test has been presented in Table 2.

It has already been mentioned that significance of difference is linked to t-value (1.96) and corresponding p-value (0.05). Null hypothesis is accepted when t-values are below 1.96 and p-values above 0.05. In our case we find t-values range between 1.977 to 4.01 and thus are above 1.96. The corresponding p-values are below 0.05 and therefore null hypothesis has to be rejected and it is concluded that significant, albeit weak, gender differences exist in this respect for all the four variables.

How can we explain this gender difference? It is generally known that traditionally women are more involved in observing cultural rituals. This is all the more true for Indian women (Pearson, 1996). Sikkim also has similar approach to observing traditions. Even food gathering, cooking and serving food are traditionally feminine tasks (Ember, 1973 and Szabo, 2014). Even gift-giving traditionally has been a feminine preserve. Sinardet and Mortelmans, (2009) report that *women are chiefly in-charge for gift selection and gift giving and invest more time in selecting the appropriate gifts for kin*. They further state that *women also demonstrate greater satisfaction with the gift-giving process, which they feel has symbolic value*. Cheal, (1987) also conclude that *women are far more active in gift-giving than men*. When taken this into account it is natural that that cultural aspects hold greater value for women than for their male counterparts. As kitchen gardens have been found to have close association with cultural aspects, it is not unexpected that women accord it greater value.

Conclusion

We undertook this study to understand the cultural significance of kitchen gardens of Sikkim. The study is survey-based. From the evidence gathered it appears kitchen gardens have substantial cultural

value for the rural people of this state. Kitchen gardens provide sacred space to undertake cultural and spiritual traditions; provide resources such as leaves, flowers, fruits and herbs for carrying out rituals; provide ingredients for cooking food having cultural meaning as also provide gift-giving materials. The utilitarian value of kitchen gardens has been understood and explored far and wide, but their cultural importance is yet to be recognized fully. Neglect of this aspect of kitchen gardens deprive them of their psycho-emotional contributions. It has to be emphasized that human being, over and above their economic entity, are emotional beings also. The implications for this study are for the government agencies of the state, who should take this aspect into account while promoting kitchen gardens in the state. The second part of study explored the gender difference in valuation of cultural contribution of kitchen garden. It is obvious that significant gender differences exist with women valuing the kitchen gardens for their cultural importance much higher than man. This is understandable as women in this region, like their counterparts elsewhere, are more involved with observing cultural rituals, food-culture and gift-giving rituals. Implications for the state authorities again is to involve more number of women into their programs for encouraging kitchen gardens in the State. This study is indicative and a wider and deeper survey can still reveal much more in this context.

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