
by Shrishtee Bajpai on 16 July 2024

- *The Lachungpas in northern Sikkim and their model of governance is an example of tribal self-rule that is inclusive in nature.*
- *The sacred natural site of Chu Chowa in Lachung village stands as testimony to the local community's reverence and deification of nature and non-human beings.*
- *One of the criticisms against traditional governance systems is that they may internally compromise basic principles of equity, justice and wellbeing for all.*
- *The views in this commentary are that of the author.*

Standing beneath the towering 300-400-year-old *Tsuga dumosa*, commonly known as the Himalayan hemlock, silhouetted against the bold, black mountain range, I felt humbled to have touched that giant being. The Talung river flowed along the valley, gushing over boulders and between rocky ridges, lacing the mountainsides. Cascading down, Talung meets the mighty Teesta River.

We are at Chu Chowa, a sacred natural site of about 6 sq km in the Lachung village in north Sikkim. For the Lachungpas (also known as the Bhutia tribe), the inhabitants of the Lachung village, Chu Chowa is a guardian deity. A community conserved area, Chu Chowa boasts of silver birch, temperate silver fir, Rhododendron, and a hemlock forest

with many species of birds, wild vegetables, fruits, and medicinal plants. It is also home to mammal species like red panda and musk deer. "You are the first outsider to enter here," says Hishey Lachungpa, a river activist from the village Lachung. As I looked up at a mountain in Chu Chowa he was pointing at, I felt my soul expand.

Indigenous community living

The Lachungpas have been protecting that landscape for generations in obeisance to Chu Chowa. There are strict rules here; a total ban on cutting trees, hunting as well as trespassing. They also perform regular ceremonies to appease the guardian deity as well as numerous other deities they believe in.



A mountain in Chu Chowa, a sacred site considered the guardian deity of the Lachungpas. The community's obeisance to Chu Chowa has protected the natural site for generations. Image by Shrishtee Bajpai.

Before we enter the forest, we honour the deities of mountains and land and seek their permission to be in those lands. "Outsiders don't believe in deities and protectors of land. But they protected us and these lands for so long. We have seen what happens when we destroy their territories," says Tsewang Gyalsen Lachungpa, an elder from Lachung who retired from a government job recently.

Nestled in the north Sikkim district bordering Tibet, at a height of about 9,600 feet, Lachung village is at the confluence of tributaries of river Teesta — Lachung chu and Lachen chu. The region has an autonomous self-governing system

(<https://www.sikkimproject.org/dzumsa-way-of-life/>) believed to have been formally established in the first half of 19th century but there isn't much clarity on how old the system is as with most traditional governance

(<https://vikalpsangam.org/article/the-goba-of-ladakh-report/>) systems in India.

It received official recognition under Article 371 (F) of the Indian Constitution after Sikkim merged with India in 1975.

Primarily inhabited by the Bhutia tribal community, those high mountains have kept the centuries-old governance system of Dzumsa

(https://www.researchgate.net/publication/318580536_Institution_of_Dzumsa_in_North_Sikkim_A_Sociological_Understanding_alive_while_making_it_relevant_to_the_contemporary_world). Recognised under the Sikkim Panchayat Act of 1993, the Dzumsa represents the villages in zilla panchayats.

A Chipon (chi meaning people and pon meaning head), which later became Pison, is the head of the village governance who is supported by two assistants called Gyapans and a committee. The Pison is traditionally selected from two different regions of the village and act as a representative of the village and facilitate decision-making processes. They are selected in December based on the Tibetan calendar and have to serve for two years.

A Pison is expected to have a good knowledge of the village, must be above 45 years of age, and should be aware of traditional customs and ways of being. He is expected to resolve conflicts in the village, maintain accounts and ledgers, ensure that the functions and ceremonies are being performed according to the custom and also ensure an inclusive, consensus-based decision making.

"The Dzumsa system will continue to exist the way it is. We have a democratic system that ensures that everyone is heard. We are not political and don't take decisions based on party politics unlike in other places," explains Hishey.

Agitation against dams

I met Hishey in 2020 at a meeting organised on Rights of Rivers where he had spoken about the community's

tireless efforts in protecting river Lachung chu from dams as well as about Dzumsa that enabled them to ensure that this protection is codified in local customs and practices. In 2006, a large hydropower dam was proposed in Lachung village. Hishey and some other youth realised that the then Pipon had signed a no-objection certificate with the dam promoters.

The Lachung chu river. The Lachungpas protested dam construction on the river and preserved it in its natural form. Image by Shrishtee Bajpai.

Hishey organised a protest in Lachung, disclosing the details of the proposal and spreading awareness among the community members about the impacts of large-scale hydropower projects. "I had seen the destruction Chungthang dam caused in the villages in the lower valley. I couldn't let the dam come up in my village. It would have destroyed everything," says Hishey as we stood looking at the dam that got washed away in the floods in 2023. On October 4 that year, 1,200 MW Teesta-III hydroelectric project called the Chungthang dam on river Teesta broke, killing at least 94 people in the downstream areas of Sikkim and West Bengal. It was indeed very wise and futuristic of the people of Lachung to decide against dam construction in their region. After three years of agitation, in 2009, Dzumsa of Lachung decided to ban any hydropower projects on their

rivers. They have in fact criminalised discussing or proposing dams in any public spaces in Lachung.

"We are responsible for our self governance and we ensure that all are equally heard. We can't have that in a panchayat where everything is motivated by party politics," says Tsewang Gyalson. "We don't want to tunnel our ecosystems. All we have are our rivers, mountains and forests. If we destroy them, how will we survive?"

Traditional style of governance

Indigenous and other local communities across India have had traditional systems of local governance as per unwritten or sometimes written codes of conduct and decision making. These traditional systems are rooted in a region, embedded in community life, non-partisan in nature, and often challenge the modern discourse that separates human and non-human worlds. Here, even spiritual entities like Chu Chowa and related ecosystems are protected and conserved.

Chunghang dam (also called Teesta III) washed away in a glacial lake outburst flood last year. The Lachungpas do not want that to happen to their land or rivers, a reason why they protest dams. Image by Shrishtee Bajpai.

Of course not everything is perfect in these systems. Many of these traditional systems have been (<https://vikalpsangam.org/article/the-goba-of-ladakh-report/>) oppressive

towards or marginalising women and/or ethnic minorities, young people and marginalised castes.

A significant criticism against traditional systems is that they may internally compromise basic principles of equity, justice and wellbeing for all, even while remaining crucial for sustaining community life as a whole, and support sustainable relations with the surrounding natural ecosystems and resources. Hence, instead of throwing the baby out with the bathwater, we must look at the report prepared by the National Commission (<https://ncst.nic.in>) in 2001 to review the working of the Constitution (<https://india-mongabay-com.mongabay.com/wp-content/uploads/sites/30/2024/07/EMPOWERING-AND-STRENGTHENING-OF-PANCHAYATI-RAJ.pdf>) where it is suggested that respecting the traditional governance systems is a potent mode of self-governance, while also stressing that traditional practices shouldn't deny legitimate democratic rights to all sections of society.

Living one with nature

Indigenous and other nature-dependent communities are rooted in the notion that a community is not limited to only humans but includes other beings, too. They have followed governance models that respected this notion. Hence, the task of decision making does not rest on humans alone; it is often done in consultation with other beings such as spirits in the forest, guardian deities and so on.

Both Mahatma Gandhi

(<https://www.downtoearth.org.in/agriculture/gandhi-at-150-he-believed-in-natural-self-rule-67039>) and Rabindranath Tagore

(<https://ecologise.in/2018/09/20/aseem-shrivastava-re-reading-tagore-to-become-human/>) spoke about the idea of self rule as a spiritual practice for oneself, other humans and the earth. Tagore in particular drew a lot from nature and articulated how structural ecological alienation that undergirds modernity robs humanity of any freedom. An organised self-ruling community is not seeking individualistic freedom, rather it argues for autonomy with responsibility towards humans and "more-than-humans".

"You ask why we oppose this mining project. Let us assume that we, the adivasis will have to leave the forest if the mining company displaces us. Our forest spirits will have no other place to go to. Where will so many birds, animals and other species that live in these forests go?" asks Samaru Kallo, an adivasi elder from Korchi in Central

India, where the community has been resisting mining projects for the last two decades. This concern for other beings generates from a deeper understanding of the natural world by living alongside forests, rivers and mountains.

Modern minds may scoff at these views but those were the worldviews that have protected the biodiversity in this planet until now. So rather than analysing them from our rationalist worldview, let us try to understand their principles.

A valley covered with Primula flowers. In Indigenous governance models, the task of decision making does not rest on humans alone but it is often done in consultation with other beings such as spirits in the forest, guardian deities and so on. Image by Shrishtee Bajpai.

These systems assert that people must have the autonomy to decide what happens to the land and territories in their regions. Here, the decision making is place-based, rooted in the needs, rhythms and movements of a land, its mountains, forests, oceans and so on.

The governance is regional and so, it is done at a smaller scale, respecting the uniqueness of each landscape and based on the needs of respective bioregions. Being subjective to a place, this type of governance creates accessible forums of decision making that values the wisdom of local people who inhabit those ecosystems.

Most importantly, these governance models are rooted in cooperation and communal living. It might be time to revisit nature and see why primates groom each other and warn other animals of predators; why chimpanzees adopt orphans and defend others against leopards – both extremely expensive forms of altruism. Why would worker bees kill themselves to protect their hives and why Lachung communities fight to protect their rivers and forests? These systems are in fact arguing for different ways of being in the world which includes sustaining our living worlds and territories as well as communal forms of economy and justice.

The author is a researcher, writer and member of Kalpavriksh.

Banner image: An Ibisbill on the Lachung chu river. The traditional systems of governance followed by indigenous communities often challenge the modern discourse that separates human and non-human worlds. Image by Shrishtee Bajpai.

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