

BALIPARA FOUNDATION

Assam • India

SIKKIM

RINCHENPONG, WEST SIKKIM



EASTERN HIMALAYAN
NATURENOMICS FORUM

INTELLIGENCE REPORT



Understanding Rinchenpong

Rinchenpong is a town in the Soreng sub-division of West Sikkim, India. It is situated about 123 km west of Gangtok, 47 km due south of Gyalshing, close to the village of Kaluk. It sits at an altitude of 5576 feet (1,700m). The Reesum Monastery and the popular trekking routes in the area attract tourists every year. The place also offers a ringside view of some of the highest Himalayan peaks, including Mt Kanchendzonga. The region’s local language is Nepali, Lepcha, Bhutia, Hindi and English. The area’s height is 5576 ft., and postcode is 737111.

Population

The Rinchenpong village has population of 1458 people, of which 737 are males while 721 are females, as per Population Census 2011. Population of children with age 0-6 is 139, which makes up 9.53 % of total population of village. Average Sex Ratio is 978 - higher than the Sikkim state average of 890. There are a total of 298 families residing in Rinchenpong.

Rinchenpong village has higher literacy rate compared to Sikkim. In 2011, literacy rate of Rinchenpong village was 84.23 % compared to 81.42 % of Sikkim. In Rinchenpong Male literacy stands at 89.44 % while female literacy rate was 78.65 %.

Biodiversity

The biodiversity of Rinchenpong is influenced by its location in the eastern Himalayas, which is considered a biodiversity hotspot. This region is characterized by a wide range of altitudes, from lowlands to high mountains, leading to diverse ecosystems and a variety of flora and fauna.

Flora: Rinchenpong is home to variety of plant species due to its diverse microclimates. In the lower altitudes, you can find subtropical and temperate vegetation with species like rhododendrons, magnolias, orchids, ferns, and various types of trees and shrubs. As you ascend to higher elevations, you’ll encounter coniferous forests with species like pine, fir, and spruce.

Fauna: The region’s rich biodiversity also extends to its wildlife. Some of the common animal species found in and around Rinchenpong include various species of birds like pheasants, sunbirds, and eagles. Other wildlife includes Himalayan langurs, red pandas, and various species of butterflies.

The region is also marked by a few endangered species. The Red Panda, dependent on bamboo forests for habitat, the Himalayan Monal or Impeyan Pheasant, adorned the higher elevations of the Himalayas, including parts of West Sikkim. The Snow Leopard, one of the most endangered big cat species globally, inhabited the high-altitude regions of the Himalayas, including certain areas in West Sikkim. The critically endangered Himalayan Salamander was also reported to be seen in the region. Additionally, the Assam Roofed Turtle, a critically endangered freshwater turtle, is also found in some freshwater habitats in the region. Birds of various colours and sizes are also found here including some species of migratory birds.



Indigenous communities in the region

The Lepcha community stands strong as one of the indigenous ethnic groups native to Sikkim, with a significant presence in Rinchenpong. With their unique language, vibrant culture and traditional practices rooted in the Himalayan region, the Lepcha people hold a rich heritage. Alongside them, the Bhutia community thrives, also contributing to

the village's cultural tapestry with its distinctive language and customs. The Limboo community, known for its traditional knowledge of agriculture and medicinal plants, can also be found in certain areas surrounding Rinchenpong. Additionally, the Rai community, with its own language and cultural heritage, plays a significant role in the

social fabric, often engaged in agriculture as a primary livelihood. The preservation and recognition of the rights and cultural heritage of these indigenous communities are vital for fostering sustainable development and promoting biodiversity conservation in Rinchenpong village and its neighbouring regions.

Rural Economy

Rinchenpong primarily houses an agrarian community with a rural economy centered around agriculture and related activities. The village's economy revolves around traditional farming practices and the cultivation of crops such as rice, maize, millet, fruits and vegetables. Terrace farming is prevalent in the hilly terrain, showcasing the ingenuity of the local farmers in maximizing limited land resources. In addition to agriculture, horticulture plays a significant role in Rinchenpong's rural economy. The village is known for producing various fruits, including oranges, apples, peaches, grapes and cardamom, which contribute to the region's income and livelihood opportunities.

Livestock rearing, particularly dairy farming and poultry, also contributes to the rural economy of Rinchenpong. The rearing of cattle and poultry not only provides a source of income for the local communities but also fulfills their daily consumption needs.

Moreover, Rinchenpong's rural economy benefits from tourism, as the village's scenic beauty and tranquil ambiance attract visitors seeking an escape from city life. Homestays and small guesthouses provide accommodation options for tourists, offering an additional source of income for local residents. While Rinchenpong's rural economy relies primarily on traditional agricultural practices and horticulture, there have been efforts to promote sustainable and eco-friendly practices, including organic farming and ecotourism initiatives. These endeavors aim to strike a balance between economic growth and environmental conservation, ensuring the preservation of the village's natural beauty and resources for future generations.

Socio-economic profiling of Rinchenpong Village

The Balipara Foundation undertook an in-depth survey to gather on-ground data, carefully selecting a representative sample for a controlled group study. The purpose of it is to capture key indicators that illustrate the profound relationship between nature and the economic and cultural sustenance of

the indigenous and rural communities.

Through a series of Focus Group Discussions, the survey aimed to examine the evolving dynamics of the community's relationship with nature, including changes in attitudes and the well-being of indigenous farmers and

local forest authorities. The study also delved into the interconnectedness of social, economic, and cultural well-being with the ecological aspects, thereby encompassing the overall human satisfaction and well-being of Arungo village.



Governance and Administration:	Rinchenpong falls under the administrative jurisdiction of the Sikkim state government. The village is governed by local elected representatives, including the Panchayat (village council) system, which plays a crucial role in local governance and decision-making.
Cultural Diversity	Rinchenpong is home to various indigenous communities, including the Lepcha, Bhutia, Limboo, Rai and others. Each community has its unique cultural heritage, traditions and social practices, contributing to the village's cultural diversity and social fabric.
Agrarian Economy	The village's socio-political context is significantly influenced by its agrarian economy. Agriculture remains the primary occupation, and decisions regarding agricultural practices, land use, and water resources management often have implications on the community's well-being and livelihoods.
Social Structure	The social structure of Rinchenpong is characterized by a close-knit community where families and extended kinship ties play a vital role. Respect for elders, traditional customs and community gatherings are integral to the social fabric.
Infrastructure and Development	The village has witnessed efforts to improve basic amenities such as healthcare, education, road connectivity and access to clean water and sanitation. However, elaborate construction activities in the area has resulted in increased air pollution and disappearance of natural water streams.
Conservation and Environment	The resident communities of the region enjoy a close relationship with nature and have been involved in local conservation efforts to protect their natural surroundings and promote sustainable practices.
Socio-Political Participation	The villagers actively participate in the socio-political processes, including local elections and community meetings, to voice their concerns and contribute to decision-making that impacts their lives.

Language and Dialect

Nepali is the official language of the state of Sikkim and is widely used for communication, education, and official purposes.

In addition to Nepali, the village is home to several indigenous communities, each with its own distinct language and dialect. Some of the indigenous

communities residing in and around Rinchenpong, such as the Lepcha, Bhutia, Limboo, Rai, and Tamang, have their own languages that are part of the larger Tibeto-Burman language family.

These indigenous languages, while not as widely spoken as Nepali, are an integral part

of the cultural heritage of the respective communities. They play a crucial role in preserving traditional knowledge, customs, and oral histories that have been passed down through generations.



Discussant topics and key findings

Income and Livelihood

Agriculture serves as the backbone of the village's economy, providing sustenance and livelihood opportunities for a significant portion of the population. Approximately 80% of the village's labor force is engaged in farming. The hilly terrain showcases the community's expertise in terrace farming, optimizing limited land resources for agricultural purposes.

Around ten percent of the local communities are also involved in associated occupations, including weaving of carpets, which offer additional sources of income. Weaving is a traditional skill passed down through generations, and the production of carpets and handicrafts contributes not only to the village's economy but also to the preservation of its cultural heritage. A smaller percentage of the workforce is engaged in sales and other business-related jobs. These ventures cater to local needs and contribute to the economic diversity of the village. Women make up approximately 40% of the village's labor force and play crucial roles in various sectors. The income and livelihood patterns of Rinchenpong village are deeply intertwined with its rural setting and cultural diversity. The community's reliance on agriculture and traditional skills, combined with the active participation of women, create a unique economic landscape that reflects the rich tapestry of this Himalayan village.

Relationship with nature

The indigenous communities residing in Rinchenpong have a deep and interconnected bond with their forests and natural resources. They depend on a diverse range of natural assets for their daily needs. These include sourcing water from springs for irrigation in their fields, collecting firewood and timber, harvesting fruits, vegetables, and mushrooms, and gathering medicinal plants and herbs from the forest. Their intimate relationship with nature sustains their livelihood and cultural practices, fostering a harmonious coexistence with their environment.

Deforestation Patterns

The traditional agricultural practices in Rinchenpong village involve slash and burn or shifting cultivation methods, which have resulted in the significant depletion of forested lands. The consequences of these practices are evident, as seen through soil nutrient degradation, declining groundwater levels, loss of biodiversity, and adverse impacts on the overall health of both communities and animals reliant on these forests. Deforestation is further exacerbated by infrastructure development, mining activities,



illegal logging, and the conversion of forested areas for alternative uses. These factors collectively contribute to the ongoing deforestation challenges faced by Rinchenpong and underscore the need for sustainable land-use practices and conservation efforts.

Climatic conditions of the region

The region experiences a temperate Himalayan climate with four distinct seasons. Summers are mild and pleasant, with temperatures ranging from 15°C to 25°C. The monsoon season, from July to September, brings moderate to heavy rainfall that nourishes the lush greenery but often lead to moderate to heavy landslides. Autumn offers a comfortable climate with temperatures between 10°C to 20°C, attracting tourists to the picturesque landscapes. Winters are chilly, with temperatures ranging from 2°C to 15°C, and occasional snowfall in higher elevations. Rinchenpong's climate showcases the beauty of the Himalayan region throughout the year.

Establishing agricultural intervention models that are particular to the village's location and climate becomes imperative, to maximise yields and improve crop production. These models should be created based on comprehensive research assessments.

Climate Vulnerabilities

Rinchenpong, like many other regions, faces several climate vulnerabilities that impact its environment and communities. The hilly terrain makes it susceptible to landslides and soil erosion during the monsoon season, posing risks to infrastructure and livelihoods. While the monsoon brings abundant rainfall, water scarcity can become a concern during the dry season, affecting agricultural practices and daily water needs. Deforestation and habitat degradation contribute to biodiversity loss, disrupting the delicate ecological balance and affecting local flora and fauna. Extreme weather events, such as floods or flash floods, can cause damage to the village. Changes in climate patterns also impact agricultural productivity, leading to crop failures and potential food security challenges. Additionally, climate variability can affect human health and may exacerbate existing health issues. Rinchenpong's tourism sector, being dependent on weather conditions and natural beauty, can also be sensitive to climate variability. To address these vulnerabilities, sustainable land-use practices, biodiversity conservation, and climate-resilient infrastructure are crucial for building resilience and adapting to the changing climate. It is essential to consider these vulnerabilities and implement appropriate measures to safeguard the well-being of Rinchenpong and its residents.

Transport and communication

Rinchenpong is accessible by road, and there are well-maintained motorable roads that connect the village to nearby towns and cities. The nearest major town is Geyzing, which is approximately 10 kilometers away, and Gangtok, the capital of Sikkim, is approximately 70 kilometers away. Regular bus services and shared taxis operate on these routes, providing transportation options for both locals and tourists.

The nearest airport to Rinchenpong is Bagdogra Airport in West Bengal, which is approximately 150 kilometers away. From Bagdogra, one can hire taxis or use pre-arranged transportation services to reach Rinchenpong.

The nearest major railway station to Rinchenpong is New Jalpaiguri Railway Station (NJP), located in Siliguri, West Bengal. taxis or shared vehicles are readily available at the railway station. The journey from NJP to Rinchenpong takes approximately 3 to 4 hours, depending on the road and weather conditions.



Community Case Story

The efforts under the Dhara Vikas initiative, focused on enhancing water supply from catchment areas, have been hindered as the trenches filled with sediment, causing a decline in the benefits observed in local water sources. As a result, the initiative has been halted, leading to a lack of oversight for development projects and significant financial implications. Factors like increasing temperatures, natural disasters such as earthquakes, and tunneling linked to power projects have further exacerbated the drying up of dhara (springs) and kuwas (small ponds), resulting in a considerable 60% decrease in available water sources.

A resident from Rinchenpong shares concerns about water scarcity, noting that although there is water supply infrastructure in place with multiple tanks, they remain empty due to controlled water supply under the Jal Jeevan Mission (JJM), which is deemed ineffective. Additionally, challenges arise from certain individuals blocking water supply pipelines, and water distribution is disrupted due to landslides.





Community Case Story

J Chetry
Women farmer,
Rinchenpong

J Chetry, a dedicated farmer in Rinchenpong, has emerged as a beacon of innovation in the face of severe water scarcity affecting her agriculture. Recognizing the challenges posed by limited water resources, she devised an ingenious solution by cultivating crops that demand minimal irrigation. Today, her plot of land adjacent to her house thrives with ginger cultivation, showcasing the viability of water-efficient farming practices.

Not only does J Chetry's success benefit her own agricultural endeavors, but she has also become an inspiration to others in the community. Encouraging her fellow farmers to explore alternative crops that require less water, she is fostering a movement towards sustainable and resilient agriculture.

With the right support in terms of funds and technology, J Chetry's potential for impact extends far beyond her individual efforts. If empowered with adequate resources, she can further expand her agricultural ventures and contribute significantly to her community's prosperity. By promoting water-efficient farming methods, she can play a pivotal role in ensuring food security and environmental conservation in Rinchenpong.



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