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Assessing the potentials of eco-museum concept to enhance socio-economic scenario along protecting cultural heritage and tourism: A context based study

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Abstract

The synergy between terrain tea gardens and diverse ethnic culture has given Shamsher Nagar a unique identity. Prominent cultural landscape, high tourism value with significant historic military and ethnic community's settlement have added extra dimension to this small town of Moulvibazar district in the north-eastern region of Bangladesh. However, due to lack of proper provision and policy to diverse ethnic culture, unconsciousness about cultural and heritage value, dominant behavioral pattern of the mainstream communities toward minority ethnic communities the harmony between nature and human is decaying. In response to these issues, the concept of developing ecomuseum could strike the topic as ecomuseum incorporates sustainable development of community, environment and tourism through proper governance. The objective of this study is to assess the core criteria of ecomuseum and measure the potential of establishing ecomuseum in Shamsher Nagar, Moulvibazar district in Bangladesh. Findings show explicit potential of implementing ecomuseum principles to conserve the distinct identity of this cultural landscape as well as to ensure socio-economic and cultural sustainability not only within the study area but also throughout the similar tea cultural landscape in greater Sylhet division. Involvement of both local government and private administrative as well as business agencies at particular phases of ecomuseum development would be crucial to attain the expected outcome.

Keywords: Ecomuseum; Cultural landscape; Heritage; Cultural tourism; Community and planning

1. Introduction

1.1. What is an ecomuseum?

The term 'Ecomuseum' has been used first in the 9th international conference on museum 1979 in France by Henri Riviere together with Hugo de Varine to represent their theory on connection between heritage and nature. By that period several museum have been already introduced to build a bridge between nature and human as well as with the management body [1]. These museums used to be called Social Museum [1].

The term 'eco' in ecomuseum does not refer directly to ecology or economy rather it connects a balanced system between society and environment [2]. Riviere (1985) urged that ecomuseum provides support for natural resources as well as helps to protect natural heritage and their cultural identity [3]. An ecomuseum of a cultural landscape focuses on the whole territory as a popular museum, is population, the identity and the diversity of its landscape, tangible and intangible culture rooted over the centuries, the characteristics and values that can guide more coherent development policies [4]. The creation of ecomuseum is aimed at recovering the productivity and enhancing the cultural, economic and social resources through reconversion and promotion of environmentally friendly local identity [5]. According to Davis (2007) it is a community based museum or heritage project that supports sustainable development [6].

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Table 1 Core differences between traditional museum and ecomuseum

Criteria	Museum	Ecomuseum
Reference scope	Building	Place
Focus on interpretation	Collection	Heritage (in a Holistic sense)
Organizational Priority	Disciplinary	Interdisciplinary / Trans disciplinary
Benchmark audience	Visitors	Community
Political control	Museum & its body	Community & its body
Main aims	Conservation & education	Development of the local community

Source: Maggi and Falletti 2000, Perella et al. 2010

1.2. The context of Shamsheer Nagar

Shamsheer Nagar is a sub-urban area in Moulvibazar district, Sylhet at the north-eastern end of Bangladesh. This vicinity has a significant historic value due to the footprints of Second World War as well as the liberation war of Bangladesh in 1971. Shamsheer Nagar also has economic importance due to the century old tea industries. Besides economic significance this industries of Shamsheer Nagar are containing vivid cultural landscape abundant with diverse tangible and intangible ethnic cultural elements and playful landscape.

Due to rapid urbanization, unconsciousness about heritage and cultural identity, lack of proper management this place is losing its distinguished character. Moreover, despite having great potentials for cultural heritage tourism along the distinguished characters of this place are decaying. Moreover, despite having great potential for cultural heritage tourism along ample sightseeing spots, tourism experience is not up to the mark due to the absence of an integrated management plan that include people, culture, heritage and environment.

Hence, feasibility study to implement ecomuseum concept seems strongly relevant in this context.

2. Methodology

Since the objective of this paper is to assess the feasibilities to implement ecomuseum concepts in the context of Shamsheer Nagar, at the initial stage extensive literature studies on ecomuseum have been carried out along with case studies from different region and context to depict diverse objective and achievements of ecomuseums. After compiling the core criteria of ecomuseum from literature review, study has been developed to identify similar components in the context of Shamsheer Nagar. Goals and objectives of different ecomuseums case studies along their implementation strategies in diverse context have been studied to mark the resemblance and relevance with the area of interest.

Data collection to analyze diverse socio-cultural components along physical environment has been done through on-site survey and literature review.

3. Literature review

George Henri Riviere (1985) urged that ecomuseum helps to protect natural heritage and their cultural identity as well as provides support for natural resources [3].

These below mentioned studies shows that building strong affinity between human and environment enhance community participation both in development and management of intended museum area are the basic concepts of ecomuseum. Later the focus area of ecomuseum has been widened as it included sustainability as a major objective. For instance, in the last few years ecomuseum idea has adopted strategies to contribute in sustainable tourism along with using it as a tool improve local living standard. Besides, conserving culture and tradition of local communities along local structures has also been in focus of ecomuseum projects.

Table 2 Definition of ecomuseum from experts and theorists

Theorists / Expert	Year	Major principle	Orientation / focus
Georges Henri Rivière (France)	80s	-conceived and designed by publicly accountable institutions and by local inhabitants -jointly maintained -an instrument for shared interests -demonstrate the nature of the relationship between humanity and nature (Riviere, 1985:182-183)	-Social Participation -Relationship between humanity and nature
Hugo de Varine (France)	80s	-protecting and making balanced use of their environment and natural resources -protecting, transmitting and conserving, enriching, the individual and creative aspects of their cultural heritage -sustainable development (De Varine, 1985, cited in Donghai, 2008:33)	-Social Participation -Sustainable development
Pierre Mayrand (Canada)	1982	-a collective, a workshop extending over a territory (Mayrand, 1982, cited Davis, 1999:69)	-Social Participation
Sheila Stephenson	1982	-concerned with collections management -the collection being everything in the designated area (Corsane, 2005:375)	-Compatibility within environment
Rene Rivard (France)	1985	-Ecomuseum = territory + heritage + memory + population (Rivard, 1985:125)	-Social Participation -tangible and intangible heritage
Peter Davis (UK)	1999	-community-led heritage or museum project -supports sustainable development (Davis, 1999:228)	-Sustainable development
European Network of Ecomuseums	2004	-a dynamic way in which communities preserve, interpret, and manage their heritage for sustainable development -based on a community agreement (Corsane et al., 2009:3)	-Social Participation - Sustainable development
Mirela Stanciu (Romania)	2007	-a museum interested especially on the identity of a particular 1.Social Participation Place -based largely on the local contribution -aims to increase living standards and local communities (Stanciu et al., 2008:126)	-Social Participation
Su Donghai (China)	2008	-only flourish through a process of Localization -only prosper in response to its own particular surroundings and must co-exist with development endeavors -not a panacea for the protection of ancient cultures. Rather it goes hand-in-hand with the modernization of ancient cultures (Donghai, 2008:38)	-localized against their Globalization -Conservation and Development
Zahra Habibizad (Iran)	2009	-protection of the environment and cultural heritage in order to encourage tourism and economic development in rural areas (Habibizad, 2010:66)	-Tourism

Source: Mahmoodi 2015[15]

A comprehensive study [7] on ecomuseum literature review shows that, besides combining communities with social and environmental sustainability, ecomuseum provides the scopes to assess the possible contribution of heritage in sustainability issues. Nabais (1985) and Moro (1985) urged that ecomuseum plays important role in managing and

preserving archaeology and heritage as well as exploring cultural identity, pride, activities and integration of new population [8][9].

Ecomuseum can play vital role in climate change issues as well. A comprehensive study on ecomuseum & Climate change shows that ecomuseum can play active role regarding climate change and sustainability [10].

It is evident that most of the ecomuseums are located in Europe. According to Ecoheritage ecomuseum network diverse ecomuseums are promoting protection and interpretation of cultural heritage, local identity and community cohesion, gender equity, protection of the environment, socio-economic development, socio-cultural innovation and more [11].

Ecomuseums are diverse in terms of volume, context, location and objectives throughout the world. For instance, Kalyna ecomuseum in Canada covers several hundred square kilometers whereas the Hemp ecomuseum in Carmagnole, Italy covers only few square kilometers. Revitalizing tourism and traditional occupation, environmental protection etc. are also very often in focus of ecomuseum development.

Table 3 Selected case studies of ecomuseums worldwide to show their concept and purpose

Ecomuseum	Location / Starting Year	Concept	Focus
Ecomuseo delle Case di Terra Villa Ficana	Italy /2016	“The Ecomuseum is a place of study, sharing and enhancement of the local heritage; it also promotes the contemporary and future use of raw technology in a sustainable way. It enhances the territory, the local culture and the architectural heritage in raw ground.” (https://learning.ecoheritage.eu/case-studies/ecomuseo-delle-case-di-terra-villa-ficana)	-Local heritage and identity protection -Socio-economic development -tourism & local economy
Ecomuseum of the Caicena River	Spain / 1994	“The Ecomuseum of the Caicena River is a municipal development project, of a territorial nature, which aims to research, conserve, disseminate and train in the heritage of the town of Almedinilla (Cordoba)” (https://learning.ecoheritage.eu/case-studies/ecomuseum-of-the-caicena-river)	-Cultural and architectural heritage -promote and enhance community
Corvo Ecomuseum	Portugal / 2015	“It is considered to be a museum of the territory, of its community and for their sustainable development. Its aim is to recover and preserve the island’s traditions and heritage, in all aspects (human, natural, tangible, intangible, etc.), for the present and future-generations.” (https://learning.ecoheritage.eu/case-studies/corvo-ecomuseum)	-Heritage protection -enhance tourism
Carp Valley Ecomuseum	Poland / 2014	“Carp Valley’ ecomuseum is a network of sites presenting ‘living’ natural and cultural heritage of the Carp Valley area. ...‘Carp Valley’ ecomuseum delivers broad educational offer in the field of culture, nature and history.” (https://learning.ecoheritage.eu/case-studies/carp-valley-ecomuseum)	-Education (farming and recreational) -Tourism -promote community skills
St. Lawrence Valley	Canada / 1988	“St. Lawrence Valley Natural History Society opened the Ecomuseum. It occupies 11.3 hectares (28 acres) of land on the western tip of the Island of Montreal. The Ecomuseum is home to 115 different species of animal native to the Saint Lawrence Valley in southwestern Quebec.” (https://zoocomuseum.ca/en/)	-Education (environment & wildlife) -wildlife conservation
Ak Chin Him Dak Eco Museum	Arizona, USA	“The Him-Dak Ecomuseum was established to collect, analyze, preserve, protect, promote and teach various aspects of the Ak-Chin heritage, culture and communication between generations....This museum acts as an exhibit and storage area that reflects both prehistoric and local items from families housed here.”	-Conserve ethnic culture and tradition -uphold ethnic identity

		(https://www.visitarizona.com/directory/ak-chin-him-dak-eco-museum-american-indian/)	
Tang'an Dong Ethnic Eco-museum	China / 1995	<p>"China's first ecological museum--Tang'an Dong Ethnic Eco-museum focus to the Tang 'a village and the surrounding environment in Guizhou. Tang 'an eco-museum was founded in 1995 by China and Norway. It is truly a people-centered living museum, person and event being part of the collection."</p> <p>(http://www.chinatourguide.com/guizhou/Tangan_Dong_Ethnic_Ecomuseum.html)</p>	<p>-conserve culture and tradition</p> <p>-protect ethnic identity</p>

Source: Author

According to the ecomuseum observatory database [12], 98% of the ecomuseums across the world are located in rural areas mostly focused on cultural heritage, history and identity protection as well as natural and agricultural landscape resources management. Approximately 400 ecomuseums have been established till date and nearly 350 of them are located in Europe [13].

Garlandini (2022) urged that, the mission of ecomuseums is rather to enhance the diversity of museum [14]. Diversity has also been marked as strength of museum according to the recommendations by UNESCO 2015. Instead of prioritizing conservation and exhibition of local collections many ecomuseum focus on promoting and safeguarding intangible and living heritage of particular communities as well as their living place [10]

3.1. Key factors of an ecomuseum

Studies show that community participation, compatibility with the environment, heritage protection and tourism are mostly the key components to establish and support ecomuseum [15]. To ensure the enhancement of these key factors, four key elements of community resources supposed to be utilized efficiently [16]. These are as follows:

3.1.1. Landscape resources

This includes both natural and artificial elements as well as activities and interaction of local people with the landscape. European Landscape Convention (ELC) defined landscape as "an area as perceived by people whose character is the result of the action and interaction of natural and/or human factors" [17]. It is evident that ecomuseum communicate with cultural and historic landscape and response to uphold the sense of place as well protect environmental and natural identity and pride [18].

3.1.2. Cultural resources

Tangible i.e. structure, people, geography and intangible i.e. art, skill, values elements those comprises human living environment are included. Ecomuseum is explicitly linked with cultural and anthropological aspects of that vicinity. Ecomuseum also plays vital role to manage and conserve archaeology and heritage [19] as well as cultural identity [20]. Ecomuseum can play a vital role to perceive ethnographic prominence along concrete understanding of culture. Buildings, people and costume are three indicators of this resource.

3.1.3. Life Style resources

Spaces and facilities are included in this category of resource. Daily life of the inhabitants, \their activities along with the convenience and quality of living are considered. Community facilities, community industries and daily life are three indicators of this resource.

3.1.4. Human resources

People's participation and involvement in community development and activities are the focal aspect of human resource as ecomuseum element. Collective behavior, people quantity and quality are the three indicators of human resource.

4. Impact of ecomuseums in different context of the world

Contribution of ecomuseums in different contexts can be summarized into four major aspects namely- economic aspect, socio-cultural aspect, environmental aspect and tourism aspect.

Table 4 Major contribution of existing ecomuseums across the world in different aspects

Economic	Socio-cultural	Environmental	Tourism
-Infrastructure development -promote and sell local product -visitors as customers -fair, trade and exhibition events -fund rising	-culture and heritage protection and promotion -safeguard human rights -social inclusion and integration -knowledge sharing -training and education -ethnic identity protection	-use and promote sustainable materials -protect natural areas -animal aided initiatives -promote farming and agriculture -promote eco-friendly product -encourage green infrastructure -respond to climate change	-enhance cultural heritage tourism -scope of interpretation and presentation -educational tourism

Source: Author

5. Highlights on potential of implementing ecomuseum concept in Shamsheer Nagar, Moulvibazar

5.1. Shamsheer Nagar in greater scale

The north-eastern region of Bangladesh namely the Sylhet region is a historically rich place in terms of natural and manmade resources. Diversity in ethnicity and culture is a prominent feature of this land. Tea estates, reserve forest and national park, lakes inside the tea gardens, waterfalls etc. have always ranked this region as a top choice for the tourists.

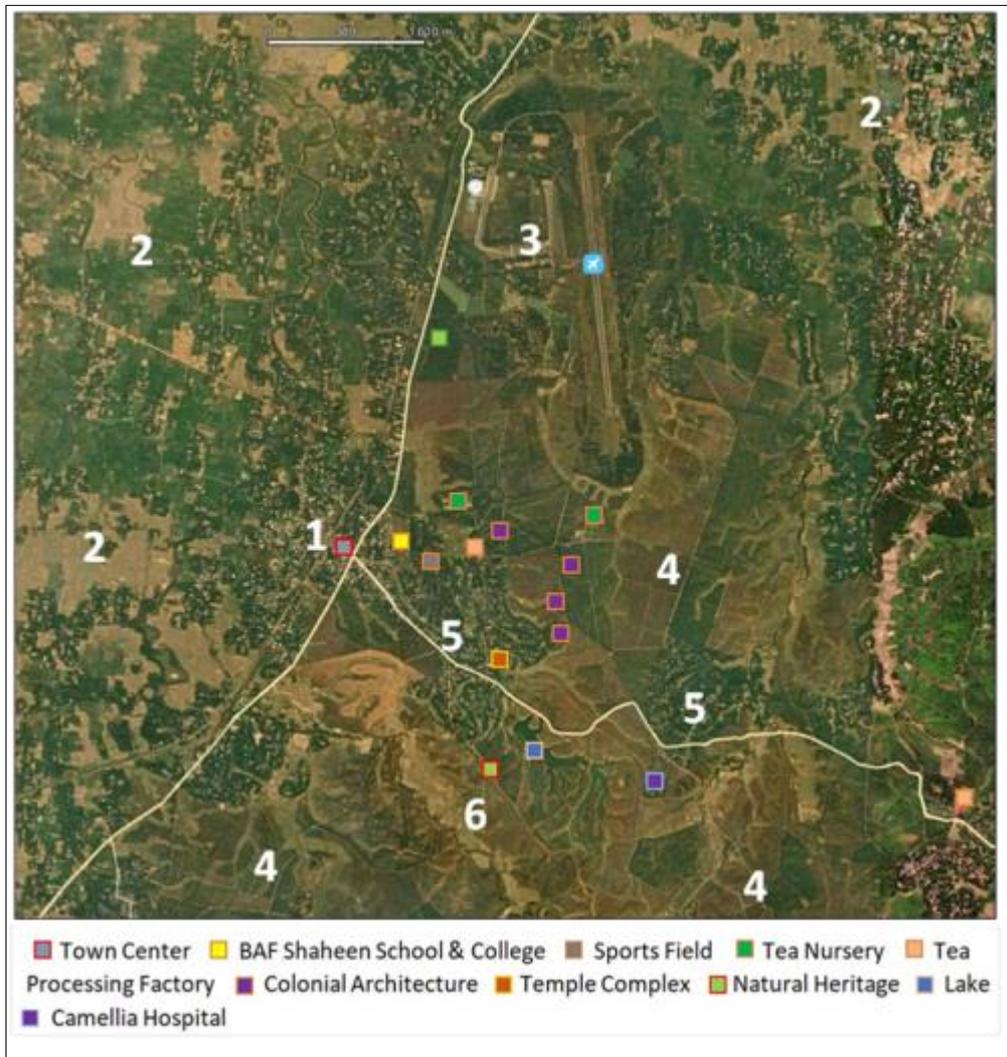


Source: Google satellite view edited by Author

Figure 1 Shamsheer Nagar in greater scale of surrounding with the locations of notable features: 1- Shamsheer Nagar town, 2- Komolgonj Upazilla, 3- Lawachora national park and forest, 4- Sreemangal Upazilla, 5- Madhobpur lake, 6- Terrain tea gardens, 7- Humhum waterfall

5.2. Shamsher Nagar in local scale

The richness of ethnic, cultural and spiritual diversity and identity of greater sylhet region is firmly present in Shamsher Nagar. Besides being the home of diverse natural and cultural resources, Shamsher Nagar is also a noteworthy place as it was a hub for the 'Over the Hump' military mission during world war II, though major part of these infrastructure has been lost due to new development and ignorance about history. Moreover, architecture of Tea estates buildings of the colonial period, sports activities and production of special plum fruit has enhanced the distinct identity of this place.



Source: Google satellite view labeling added by the Author

Figure 2 Settlement pattern and topographic condition of Shamsher Nagar 1. Central area of the town 2. Flat farmland and villages 3. Airbase of Bangladesh Air Force 4. Terrain tea garden area 5. Ethnic community villages 6. Golf Course

6. Assessing the key factors founded from literature review and Corsane (2006) key elements in the context of Shamsher Nagar

6.1. Protection of nature and heritage

Both local and greater scale Shamsher Nagar is full of natural and manmade heritage. Although terrain tea garden along distinguished architectural heritage of tea administration and production industries are well maintained by the tea estate authority, heritage values of the tea workers settlement & culture have always been ignored. In some cases, structures having significant historic value have been demolished or not getting proper attention. Ecomuseum can draw attention of people to protect and maintain heritage.



Source: Author

Figure 3 Old Banyan Tree with high spiritual value



Source: Author

Figure 4 A religious gathering space called 'Nachghar' in a Durga Temple

6.2. Community participation

Community attachment is an inseparable part especially in the tea industries which are the home of diverse culture of different ethnic tea worker communities. These Tea industries engage the ethnic communities for cultivation and commercial production of tea. In addition, tea cultural landscape is popular for sports and tourism. It is noteworthy that, enhancing community participation among majority Bengali and ethnic tea worker communities would help to improve the self-esteem of the socio-economically marginalized ethnic tea worker people. Ecomuseum idea can play a vital role in this regard concurrently influencing the perspective of majority Bengali people toward the tea worker people.



Source: <https://www.bangladeshpost.net/posts/no-holidaysfor->

Figure 5 Ethnic tea workers at their workplace



Source: Author

Figure 6 Annual Sports event

6.3. Compatibility with the environment

Hilly landscape, Water body, vast green tea estate managed to maintain and protect especially the production area have high value of provisioning services of the ecosystem along rich bio diversity. Ecomuseum approach can increase the consciousness of visitors and local people about the environmental heritage as well as its uniqueness of this vicinity.

6.4. Tourism

Sylhet region is a top choice for the visitors and tourists since decades. Numbers of local and national tourist spots are available across this region. Lawachora Reserved Forest, tea estates, lakes, waterfall, liberation war memorial, architectural heritage of the colonial period, ethnic settlements are the major attraction. Amidst this context, Shamsher Nagar is a distinguished place of Moulvibazar district due to its historic significant establishment i.e. the Airbase of the 'Over the Hump' mission during World War II which is currently under the jurisdiction of Bangladesh Air force, Cultural landscape and heritage of the tea industries, popular sports events and educational organization.



Source: Author

Figure 7 Camellia Lake inside Duncun Brothers Tea Estate, Shamsher Nagar



Officers of 61st Air Service Group, 10th Army Air Force
Shamsher Nagar Air Base, India, August 1945

Source: <https://flickr.com/photos/franksplanet/1775362062>

Figure 8 A historic glimpse of the 61st Air Service Group of the Allied powers during World War-II at Shamsher Nagar

6.5. Cultural resources

Diverse ethnic culture amidst natural and manmade heritage has added significant value to the local amicable culture. Natural landmarks, religious structures and relevant practices, diversity of ethnic languages have expanded the dimension of the overall cultural aspect of this region.



Source: Author

Figure 9 Small temple in an ethnic neighborhood under old Banyan tree



Source: Author

Figure 10 Idols in open nature

6.6. Lifestyle resources

The vast tea garden area of Shamsher Nagar is the home of diverse ethnic tea worker communities. Therefore, explicit spiritual and religious essence is present throughout the region. These ethnic people lead a very simple form of life in a close contact with nature and domestic animals. Mud houses with very simple composition of forms depict the simplicity of their life.



Source: Author

Figure 11 Cattle grazing time



Source: Author

Figure 12 Mud House beside a small temple in the neighborhood of ethnic tea workers

6.7. Human resources

Total thirty eight number of different ethnicity has been recorded among the tea worker communities throughout the tea estates in Bangladesh [21]. Despite having issues to be integrated with the mainstream Bengali people, ethnic tea communities maintain strong social bond among themselves. Moreover, Shamsher Nagar is an important center for local business, Air force training station, educational organizations.

7. Socio-economic aspect of Shamsher Nagar

Scrutinizing the socio-economic condition of Shamsher Nagar reveals that, there is notable gap between the majority Bengali people and ethnic tea workers communities in social aspects. Economic disrepair has always been present among the ethnic communities since century. Due to marginal living standard, the cultural identities are fading away. Implementing ecomuseum concept can play an important role to change the perspective of the society toward cultural value and assets as well as can raise consciousness about cultural identity. In addition this approach can uplift the poor level of self-esteem of the ethnic tea worker people. Thus, conservation of local tangible and intangible heritage can be encouraged; living standard and economy would be benefited

8. Conclusion

Ecomuseum strategies would bring significant result on not only showcasing and protecting natural and cultural heritage of Shamsher Nagar but also can contribute in socio-economic development of the local inhabitants. Although, ecomuseum initiatives are not new in the European countries, no active initiatives are visible in the other regions of Bangladesh even not in the Indian subcontinent. This study is an attempt to shed light on potential of establishing ecomuseum in this region particularly in the tea cultural landscape. Extensive studies on this aspect may draw the attention of the local citizens as well as the local authority to take initiatives for further consideration and policy development to assess and implement appropriate strategies.

Recommendations

Studies on similar interest might demark specific scopes if consultation with the local government agencies, tea estates owners and tourism agencies is done. An inclusive model should be developed combining all stakeholders to show how the resources can be managed and utilized to run the ecomuseum to get expected outcomes. Role of the participants with respective policies should be developed and analyzed to provide guidelines for proper governance.

Critical issues

As the tea estates are under private ownership, tourism initiatives might confront challenges to promote cultural heritage tourism inside tea garden areas. The focus group of this study is the ethnic tea worker communities and their culture which are homed at the same place. Moreover, this focus group is unaware of the cultural value of their

community due to marginal living standard. Studies on first generation ecomuseums from China [22], which includes local communities of similar conditions shows that, ecomuseum initiatives might fail if it does not address the suffering and true need of the local community. The government does not interfere on this issue directly as has always been considered as an internal issue of the tea industry.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

There is no conflict of interest.

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