

Debate on Approaches to the Tribes Substantiated with the Case of the Lepchas of Sikkim, India

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KEYWORDS Tribe. Lepchas. Sikkim. Reserve. Dzongu

ABSTRACT In light of the approaches that have been propounded for the tribes of India, this paper discusses the case of the Lepchas of Sikkim. Sikkim grew into a plural society because of the migrations of the Tibetan Bhutias and the Nepalese. The British occupation of Sikkim promoted an influx of the Nepali labour force, and gradually these people outnumbered the indigenous population of the Lepchas. As a consequence, the Lepchas were pushed further interior, except those who because of hypergamy and other relations adjusted with the Bhutias. For protecting the interests of the Lepchas, the Maharajah of Sikkim converted one of his private estate into a Lepcha reserve. Though legal sanctions exist for any transaction of land in Dzongu, the Lepchas have not been able to achieve what they could have done otherwise. Ignorant of cash economy and having lavish expenditures on ritual occasions the Lepchas are vulnerable to exploitation by the trading community of Marwaris. Cardamum is a cash crop, but because of the nexus of exploitation by the traders, they do not acquire the amount of cash due to them. Whatever is earned is spent on paying taxes and buying household goods. Though they have been able to retain their culture intact and have also exercised selectivity in choosing from the outsiders, their economic exploitation has continued. It is suggested that if their produce is properly marketed, removing all exploiting elements, their condition could be ameliorated. The Lepcha Dzongu is discussed in the perspective of tribal situation in Indian and the approaches that have been offered for their development.