

Ecology and Culture of the Bhutias of North Sikkim

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ABSTRACT This paper gives an account of the changes that have occurred in the Bhutias of North Sikkim especially after the Tibetan border was closed in 1962. Taking cultural ecology as the analytical method, this paper shows how the Bhutia life interacts with the environment. Although no reserve was created for them, as was the case with the Lepchas of Sikkim, they did have some degree of seclusion reinforced by political and ecological factors. Before the closure of the border, the Bhutias combined pastoralism with trading, but after 1962, their economy received a setback and underwent a number of changes, bringing them to work as labourers and looking for alternative occupations. In their ecological milieu, it is found that 'sharing' scores over the value of competition. In spite of these changes, the Bhutias have been able to maintain an identity in their cultural and social life.

Cultural ecology is a method to analyse the relation between the environment and the cultural patterns (Steward, 1955; 1968). At no place, it gives credence to the element of determination: environment does not determine the culture. What it propounds is that there are some areas of cultural living which are intimately related to the environment, and one has to begin with the resources an environment endows upon the people, and the sort of constraints with which they have to deal (Ellen, 1982). As one moves on to the other areas of cultural life, their relation with the environment becomes rather indirect. Cultural ecology states that rather than considering environment as a given (and inconsequential) entity, one has to integrate it fully in the mode of analysis, thus handling two inter-related questions. What is the impact of environment on human activities, and what is the impact of human activities on the environment (Burnham and Ellen, Eds. 1979).

The most appropriate meaning of the environment is that it bestows upon the people the required resources (Macfarlane, 1976). Quite a few of them are 'right out there': they do not require any complex technology for their exploitation (see Forde, 1934). And there are others—

the 'hidden' ones—which are only extractable when a sophisticated technology is available. In addition, the environmental resources can be used in such ways that the gains are multiplied.

Here, one may distinguish between two kinds of attitudes related to the environment; one is where the environment is treated as providing enough for basic survival and sustenance, and the other is where it is treated as a 'commodity' for maximization of gain (see Firth and Yamey, Eds. 1964). If 'survival' is pivotal to the first set of attitudes, 'profit-motive' is central to the second. Further these two attitudes are linked with the types of societies (after Weber, 1967): in simple societies of tribes and peasants, the value of survival is central to social life, and in modern industrial societies, profit motivation lies at the base.

One of the driving principles of modern industrial society is to devise a technology that may unearth and extract the hitherto hidden resources, and assimilate them in the style of living. If the people—tribals or peasants—live in areas where these resources rest, they must be shifted (or ousted); the colonization of these resource rich areas is justified in the name of scientific achievements and development. As the fear of outsiders encroaching upon the native territor-

ics increases, the inhabitants move into further interior areas. But the concept of 'inaccessible' and 'interior' zones remains only theoretically viable as nothing is left which is uncolonized by the modern developed and industrially advanced world. In a state of affairs like this, the worst sufferers are the small communities; and their interests especially in such a scenario of development have engaged the attention of both social workers and anthropologists.

Historically, fertile lands have always attracted alien groups, and most of the migrations are understandable in this format. But all these alien groups did not have profit motivation as a dominant value. They contested for those resources that were easily available with simple technology. Gradually, these alien groups were able to assimilate with the local inhabitants. The problems, however, arose when groups with explicit profit-motives were entering the local territories. These groups had either a superior technology of domination, or enjoyed the official patronage. Episodes of exploitation and negative effects of acculturation were recorded, with anthropologists unswervingly committing themselves to the problems of small communities that faced the fear of extinction lest they were 'protected' administratively.

In an earlier communication (Bhasin and Srivastava, 1990), it was argued that chiefly because of the 'tribal reserves', the Lepchas of Sikkim were able to retain their culture and economy. But reservation in itself is not a magic wand—it only administratively protects the local inhabitants from the exploitative interests of the outsiders. In a reserve the people are given every opportunity to lead a life of their own, untrampled by the outsiders. They have a right to use the available resources in the best possible ways, arbitrate their conflicts through local councils, and live without the fear of outsiders. But if their produce is not properly marketed—and here again, the outsiders enter as the brokers—there is every probability that the people will not be able to achieve what they can when their areas are protected against any exterior threat. In the

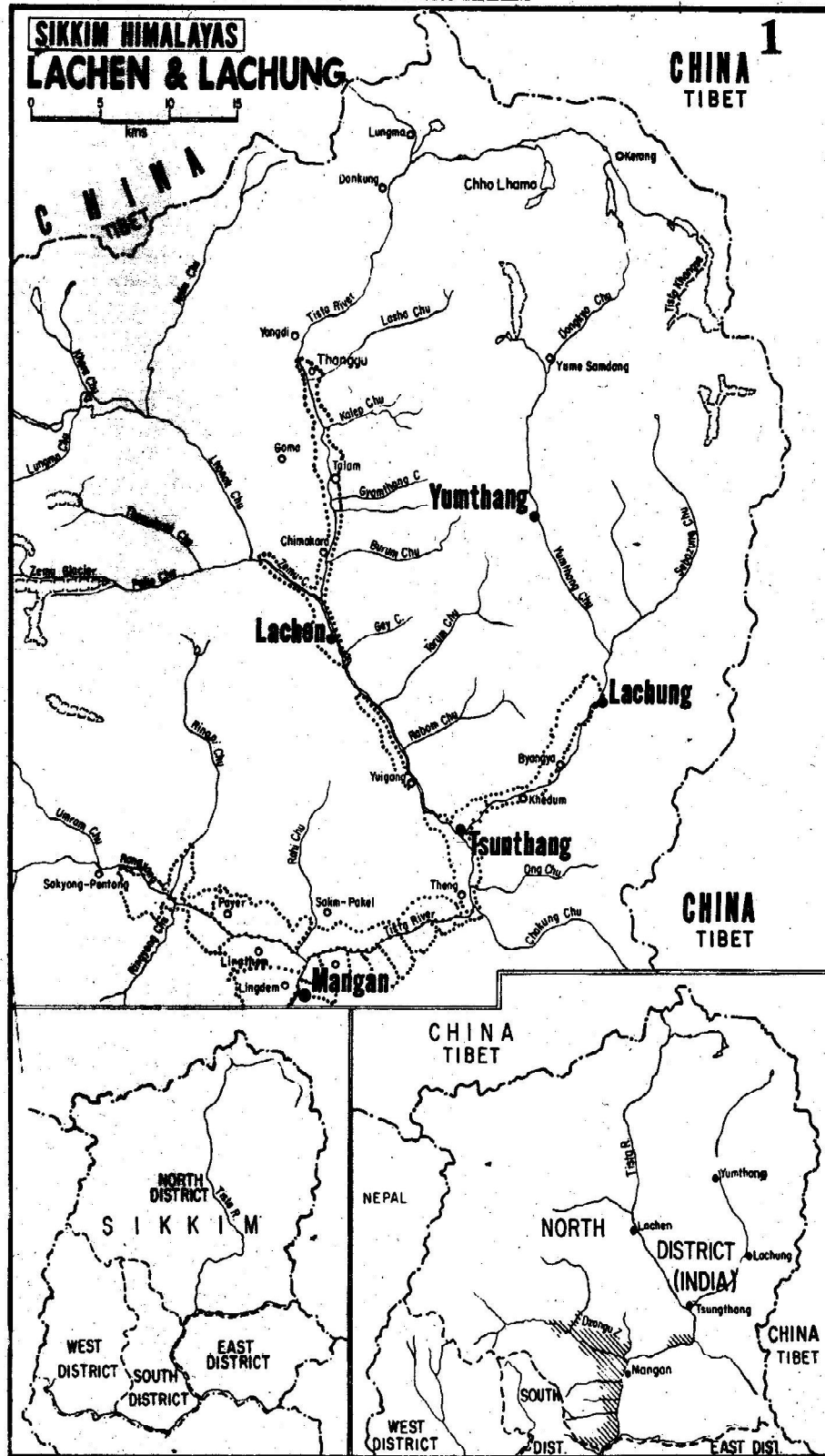
Lepcha case, it was seen that they cultivate cardamum, but in the absence of proper marketing facilities which safeguard their interests, their produce is bought by the locally settled merchant class on a much lesser price. Thus, the merchant class is able to maximize its interests, and the Lepchas remain where they were.

Here, another case is being presented. It is of the Bhutias of North Sikkim (also see Bhasin, 1989; 1990). Although, no reserve was created for these people, seclusion did enter into their area because of political and ecological factors. An analysis of the culture in light of the methodology of cultural ecology will provide an account comparable to that of the Lepchas. The Bhutia case is also interesting in another respect. No anthropological field work has been possible in this region after Sikkim's integration with India because of the turbulent political situation. The Bhutia culture is archaic in the sense that it lies outside the milieu of Hindu culture and ideology, and is different and distinct in many ways from the peasant economies. As the development plans are going on in their area, the people are becoming involved in them, but still are keeping their culture intact.

A DESCRIPTION OF THE AREA

The most prominent district in Sikkim is the North District. Having an area of 4226 kilometres, it holds a strategic position. It is situated between Nepal to its West and by a horse-shoe shaped boundary of Tibet to its North and East. The district is sparsely populated with a density of 6 persons per square kilometre. Towards the northern side the district is more thinly populated due to geographic and rigorous climatic factors.

The two river valleys that dominate North Sikkim are Lachen and Lachung, situated on the banks of tributaries of Tista Lachen-chu and Lachung-chu respectively (Fig. 1). These areas are by Special Orders 'reserved'. Here the right to settle or own land is not permitted to the outsiders whatever be their ethnic origin. The inhabitants of these valleys do not conform to the



general pattern prevalent elsewhere in Sikkim, even among other Bhutia communities. The Lachen and Lachung area has a special status with regard to settlement, land revenue and local administration. Both the areas also have their own traditional local government systems. The provisions of 1965 Panchayat Act are not extended to this area.

In the Lachen and Lachung valleys, the climate is cold and dry. The temperature varies with altitude and slope aspect (generally 6 to 10°C per km). The temperature decreases with an increase in the altitude. Lachen valley in the West is wider whereas Lachung valley in the east is rather short and steep. The areas comprising these two river valleys are comparatively dry, and are in many ways different from rest of the state. The slopes here are gradual and valleys are broader compared to other valleys. Due to inhospitable climatic conditions and terrain, the area is sparsely populated.

Two streams Lachen-chu and Lachung-chu are the sources of water in Lachen and Lachung respectively. These two streams join Teesta at Chungthang which arises from Zemu Glacier. There is no cultivable land in and around Lachen and Lachung, being situated at a distance from the village in both the valleys. As the cultivable land in the region is at about 3000 m, the crops are generally rainfed. The terrain being hilly, with frequent occurrences of land slides, major irrigation projects cannot be undertaken easily. There has been minimal exploitation of surface water. Apart from this, there is drainage problem in Lachen as the village is so situated that considerable amount of slush accumulates, in rainy season and when it snows. These conditions cause hygiene problems and pollute the otherwise healthy environment.

THE PEOPLE

The Bhutias of Lachen and Lachung are called Ha Pa. Claiming descent from the Ha immigrants in Bhutan, these people follow a mixed agro-pastoral and trade economy. They claim them-

selves to be of the Lupon Lhumdrub caste. They are more akin to the Tibetans than the Hlo-po (the 'South' people of Bhutan) or other Bhutias of Sikkim. Although the exact date of their arrival in Sikkim is not known, it must have been during one of the many invasions by Bhutanese in 1676. The Bhutanese invaded the Chumbi valley and the area south of Sikkim. The Lepcha chief was killed, and in retaliation the Tibetan government arranged the invasion of Bhutan, perhaps the largest undertaken during the reign of the Fifth Dalai Lama. At one time, Ha-Pa were among the richest people in Bhutan, but as it is said, 'they took to evil ways and fell on evil times'.

Bhutias of Lachen and Lachung occupied both sides of the border between Sikkim and Tibet while carrying on their pastoral and trading activities. They were paying taxes on both the sides. The Tibetan influence is much greater on these people than that of the Sikkim, although territorial limits to the north of it are now disputed. According to the local tradition, Chumbi valley on other side of the border, itself came into possession of the Sikkim Raja a little more than a hundred years ago as the dowry of a Tibetan wife.

For centuries together, the people grazed their herds in the Khama Dzong section of the Phari district in Tibet during the summer and autumn months. The northern borders are at high altitude; therefore, marginal agriculture and animal husbandry are not sufficient to sustain large population. As a result the people of Lachen and Lachung took up marginal trading activities with the Tibetans across the borders. The barter of timber, wood, dye stuff and dairy products of that region for Tibetan salt and wool formed the basis of this trade.

The people of Lachen and Lachung pursued barter with their pastoral activities. As long as trade was unhampered by political restrictions, it enabled them to attain economic independence. However, with the closing of the Tibetan border in 1962, things changed for these people. The Bhutias were deprived of their livelihood and it

had an adverse effect on their traditional crafts. As long as the Tibetan wool was imported in large quantities, weaving flourished and the Bhutias produced a variety of articles.

The Bhutias of Lachen and Lachung were sufferers in another way when the border was closed. Many of their yak and sheep herds were seized by the Chinese in 1962 when the Bhutias were on their seasonal migration under the ancient transborder pasturing usage arrangement. The partial transformation of their economy has led to many changes in the Bhutia society. Political events outside their control have changed their traditional economic system, forcing them to reorient it. The external factors influencing the economic strategy of these people are markets, traders, employment opportunities outside the traditional sources and government sponsored programmes.

Very few ethnographic accounts of this area are available and they too are generally travel accounts. Negotiations between the British government and Tibet took place for the construction of a road through this area to facilitate trade. The proposal was unacceptable to the Tibetans, so the project never materialised. However, after the occupation of Tibet by China in 1962, this sensitive frontier area became highly important. Invasion of Northern regions by Chinese forces induced the Government of India to improve the transportation and communication in this area. Army units were established in Lachung valley. A fair weather road joining the state capital Gangtok with Lachen and Lachung was built. Build up of defence brought about significant changes in the economic and social climate of the area. The stationing of many civil servants as well as military units has also increased the demands on the natural resources of the area. Though this area is still reserved, factors of change have entered through different agencies. But these changes are few and people are still continuing their age old life style, unobserved and uninfluenced by the outsiders. As said earlier, this area, though visited by a few scholars, remained unmapped and unexplored.

HABITAT AND ECONOMY

The people of Lachen and Lachung have agro-pastoral economy. In the arable areas, agriculture and pastoral lands are close together. Agriculture is carried out in the valley areas while the mountains supply pastures for the yaks and sheep. The nearby forest fulfils the fuel needs of the people. It is well known that in agro-pastoral economy, technology involves an adaptation to different climate and biotic belts, agricultural techniques and settlement.

Because of high altitude, terrain and less rainfall, the land use is restricted. The climate of the area is more suitable for horticultural development. Cultivation is restricted to limited regions which are either below the village or much above the residential area. People grow small quantities of barley, wheat, maize, and buckwheat. They raise yaks and sheep to supplement their subsistence economy. They have adapted their agricultural and pastoral activities to the demands of their natural environment. In a hostile environment, Bhutias have limited means to conduct their agricultural activities, therefore they are forced to depend on pastoral activities. The vast open spaces between 4483 and 5824 metres are used for raising the yak. The yaks are robust animals requiring little care and are perfectly adapted to high altitude. The yaks provide their owners with milk, meat and wool (for saddle padding, blanket making) and transportation.

Lachen and Lachung present an interesting contrast as far as the movement for agricultural activity is concerned while both have more or less the same agricultural production. The movements though vertical in both cases are in opposite directions. They are controlled by the presence of arable land at different elevations and at different places. The people of Lachen move upwards in order to cultivate land of Yakthang, Samdong, Tallom and Kalep villages along the tributaries of Lachenchu at altitude of 3500m. They stay here from May to July and move further upwards to Thangga area to Byamzay, Toga, Tseuk, Chopta and Diri Thong villages at

a height of 4000 m and stay from August to November.

On the other hand, the people of Lachung have their apple trees and gardens near their houses and arable land at lower altitude towards Chungthang at Khedum, Leema and Lothen at about 4600 m. In December-January, they come to prepare the fields for the cultivation of maize and harvesting of wheat and barley sown earlier. In April they return to Lachung *Busti* for apple harvesting. In May-June they start moving up with their herds and go upto Yumthang and Yume-Samdong. In August-September, they come back to Khedum, Leema, Lothen for harvesting the previous crops of maize. While harvesting is going on, the animal herds graze in the nearby pastures; people cut grass, collect firewood and apply fertilizers in the fields for sowing wheat and barley in November-December. Wheat and barley is harvested in March.

The Bhutias of Lachung are on the move for the whole year. They do not move along with their families as the Lachenpas do. Their families are dispersed, fulfilling their allotted duties. The interesting offshoot of this is that their movement for fuel and grazing is also in an opposite direction—Lachenpas going down and Lachungpas going upward (Fig.2)

LOCAL ADMINISTRATION

Lachen and Lachung have their own traditional local government system. Under this system, a Pipon (headman) is annually elected by a general vote of the villagers. The Pipon is responsible for the collection of land tax from each family in his village, based upon a rent roll which specifies the quantity of production under the shifting method of cultivation. The headman also functions as the government's agent in other aspects including judicial and police duties. It is customary to have Kyomee (Mandal), Chupon, Dingpon and Pyon as local officers. They have communal pastures and agricultural land; with a strong village administration, the allotment and maintenance of farming and pasture areas is

looked after. Though there is family ownership of land there is a strong community regulation of land usage. The village forbids its sale to outsiders as also the opening of new cultivation land without the permission of Dzumsha, the village council. Harvesting of crops takes place at one time for the whole village, so that the fallow land can be used as a common pasture.

SOCIAL ORGANIZATION

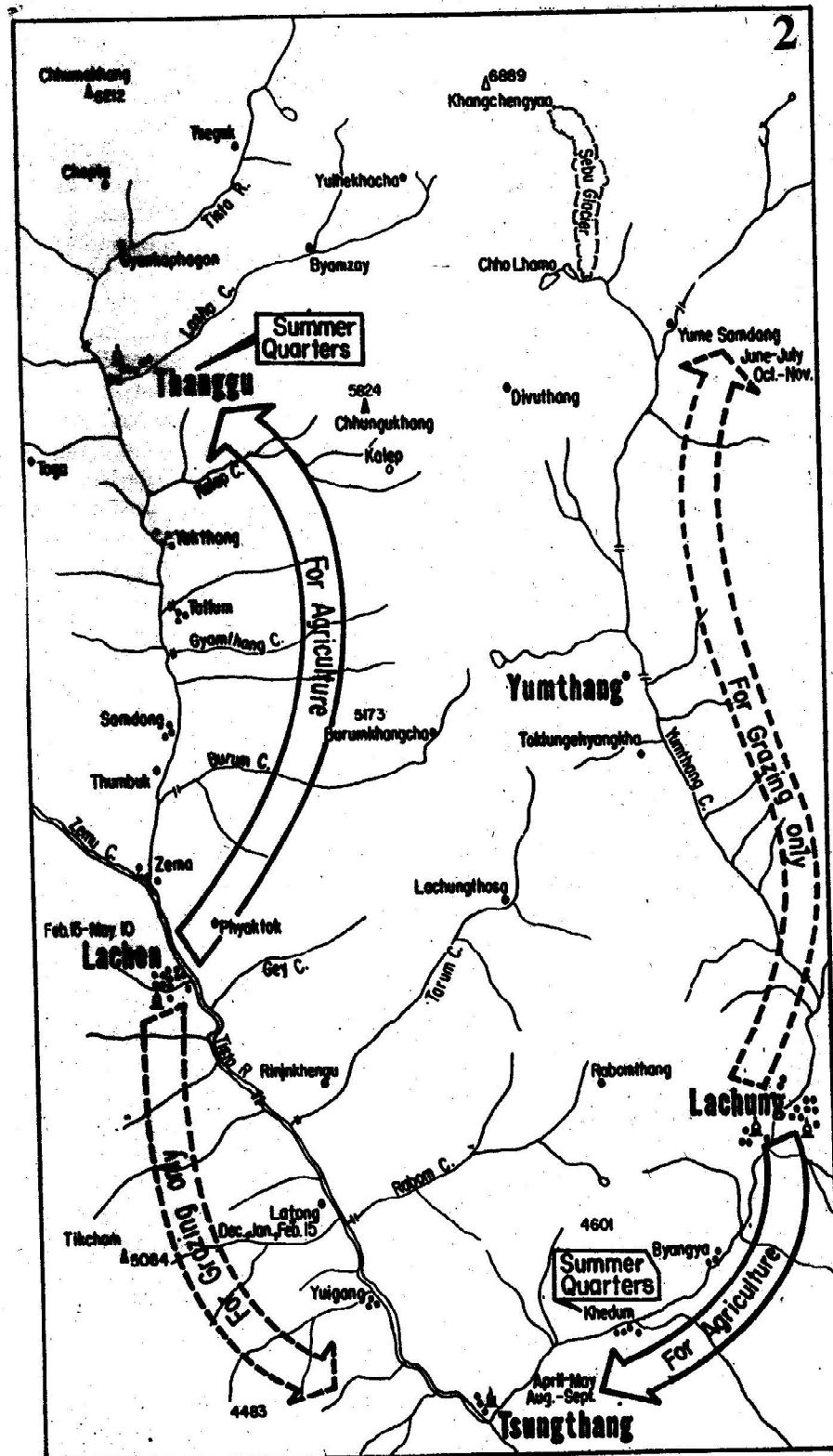
There is no social hierarchy among the Lachen-Lachung Bhutias. There is no artisan class as such. Previously, the Tibetan refugees, Sichepa, were making utensils and agricultural implements with raw materials exported from Tibet. But now, the utensils and agricultural implements are available in Mangan market.

The Bhutia society may be divided into two levels: the *Busti* and the household. the household is the smallest and the most important unit of social organization. It is the economic unit as well as the unit of participation in all public, social and religious projects. All three types of marriages, monogamy, polygyny and polyandry, are prevalent among them. The environmental conditions and transhumant way of life necessitates relations beyond the household as well as the village boundary. There are ad-hoc gatherings of relatives and friends impermanently united to assist a person in need; for example, *chuchi* is the mutual aid group consisting of neighbours and kinsmen related in one way or another to persons concerned. People from *dazo* (friendship) group, also supplement labour in case of need.

RELIGION

The Bhutias of Lachen-Lachung are Buddhists and believe in the basic principles of merit and sin. They also believe in a vast array of gods and spirits who must be propitiated at appropriate time for the general welfare of the society. The Bhutias of Lachen-Lachung place great emphasis on coercive rites of exorcising and destroying

LACHEN LACHUNG - Transhumance Pattern



demons. The performance of the rituals is in the hands of trained specialists—Pau, Nejothum and Lamas. There are frequent services in Busty Gompa, conducted by local Lamas on a variety of ritual occasions at specified times throughout the year. Losar is the biggest festival, when the Lama dance takes place. In Bhutia religion, exorcism rites are highly popular. In addition to being held annually, however, exorcism is also connected with funerals, personal and public problems.

BASIC AMENITIES

There are two primary schools and one adult education centre in Lachung. Because of the migratory nature of Lachenpas, education poses a big problem. A mobile school system has been introduced in the area. The school also migrates in two stages—first to Yakthang and then to Thanggu area. Government Cottage Industry Centres have been started in Lachen-Lachung. There are no shops and marketing facilities in this area. The nearest market is at Mangan. The transportation of apples (fruit cultivation was introduced by Claude White during 1897-1908) to the market poses great difficulties.

For medical purposes there is one Child Welfare Centre and one Primary Health Centre. There is no doctor and medicines are not available. The Bhutias consult the traditional diviners like, the Pau or Lama and adhere to propitiation and exorcism.

CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

Culture is an adaptive strategy. It is devised according to the constraints and limitations posed by the environment. With it are associated the political factors. The Bhutias have been dependent upon the people of Tibet for their economic and cultural needs. But once the border was closed in 1962, it was really shocking for the people. They bore the problems that thus emerged. With an end of the barter relations that earlier obtained between them and the Tibetans, they have looked for alternative occupations.

Changes have been introduced, especially with installation of the development programmes, but the people have retained their socio-cultural system and the communal form of government.

Agricultural potentiality of the area is less. Poor soil, steep slopes, hilly terrains in the absence of proper irrigation facilities make agriculture a difficult proposition. With the simple technology of the people, an intensification of crops is also difficult, and yields are low. As a result of the limited potential for energy extraction, the people have adjusted to the harsh and rigid environment by seasonally migrating to different altitudes at different times of the year. For centuries, these people have not only had to extract their own subsistence, but have to produce surplus to maintain the large religious complex and community organization. In small societies, high consumption levels on ritual and other social occasions produce the levelling effects.

The landscape has been modified by the settlement of military personnel in this area but it has not been altogether transformed. These are natural limits set to human intervention. To utilize the natural resources, which are meagre, the people have devised institutions based on sharing instead of competition. Perhaps in situations having harsh environmental effects, the values of competition are minimized by the processes of social selection. The people make out their livelihood by combining various forms of traditional economy. Non-traditional sources of income have come in the form of road labour, transportation of goods on the yaks, and the jobs and opportunities provided by the Government Cottage Industries Centre.

Lack of resources is threatening the traditional occupations. For instance, most of the Bhutia houses have looms, but shortage of wool—it was actually imported from Tibet—has almost paralyzed the household industry. The women, who were working on their looms in spare time are now working as labourers on daily wages. The ancient techniques and evidences of their workmanship are on the verge of extinction. Here, it

may be added that there is an urgent need to retrieve them lest they are lost forever.

The Bhutias did lead a life of seclusion, which, as said earlier, was a result of both ecological and political factors, although no reserve was formed for them as it was for the Lepchas. Their main occupation of trading received a setback after the border closed. The economic alternatives that were available did not quite fulfil their basic existence, and they had no option but to enter the modern system in some marginal occupations, mainly of labourers.

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