

Social Dimensions of Politics : The Case of Tribal Democracy in Sikkim

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ABSTRACT The paper discusses the tribal democracy among the Bhutias of North Sikkim and is a part of the study undertaken under the research Project entitled "Impact of Human Activities on the Ecosystems and vice-versa with reference to the Sikkim Himalayas" under MAB (Man and Biosphere) Programme, Unesco. The Bhutias inhabit the hill tracts of North Sikkim. This paper examines the traditional socio-political system of Bhutias of Lachen and Lachung in North Sikkim.

In this paper an effort has been made to record the traditional socio-political system of Bhutias of Lachen and Lachung in North Sikkim. Bhutias of Lachen and Lachung who were among the isolated Buddhist colonies whose traditional links with Tibet, have been severed by recent political events. These areas are specially 'reserved' ones where the right to settle or own land is not allowed to outsiders, irrespective of their ethnic origin. The inhabitants of these valleys do not conform to the general pattern prevalent 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. Lachen and Lachung have their own traditional political system. The provision of the 1965 Panchayat Act are not extended to these parts.

In this study, first I will be dealing with the ecological conditions in the area, since area depicts distinctive physical environment. It is reasonable to assume the geographic factors may have been major cause of their distinctiveness. Julian Steward in a number of empirical studies shows that social, political and religious patterns are most closely related to subsistence activities and economic arrangements

(Steward, 1955 : p. 87). Economic arrangements in turn are basically responsive to environmental features. The equation of cause and effect is not so straight and traditions too have their contribution to make.

Both the communities are small and here the largest political unit embraces a group of people all of whom are united to one another by ties of marriage and kinship, so that political relations are coterminous with kinship relations and the political structure and kinship organisations are completely fused. Political office carries no economic privileges or reward; for in these economically homogeneous and equalitarian communities, the attainment of wealth depends either on personal qualities or accomplishments.

Some anthropologists maintain that every political system is a governmental system while others hold that some political system are not. However, there is a fundamental difference between government, which is a process, and a government, which is a set of recognized officers. According to Fortes and Evans-Pritchard (1940) all societies do not have government; for them, only states have government and this is characterised by centralised authority, territorial administration and judicial institutions. Every society has a political system

* The field work was carried out from September 1981 to December 1983 in Sikkim.

and it operates within a territorial frame work. (Fortes and Evans-Pritchard, 1940). Radcliffe-Brown (1940) gave a functional definition of political system emphasizing, that the political system is 'that part of the total part of the total organization' (or society) 'which is concerned with the maintenance or establishment of social order, within a territorial framework, by the organized exercise of coercive authority through the use, or the possibility of the use, of physical force' (c.f. Beattie, 1964 p. 144). Lucy Mair (1962) consider a political system to be a system of rights and obligations that any society must have if it is to be society at all. Schapera rejected a definition which makes the command or use of force the sole criterion of a political system, but emphasized on organization of public activities and the taking of decisions on behalf of the whole community and also political activities. In his view they do more for the maintenance of social order than does the use of force in support of just claims. According to him every society recognizes certain roles which can be described as governmental; there are certain persons whose 'recognized and regular activity' it is 'to attend to the conduct of public affairs' (Schapera, 1956: p. 208). He defines political community—'a group of people recognized in a single unit managing its affairs independently of external control (Ibid: p. 8).

The indigenous socio-political system of the Bhutias of Lachen and Lachung has a different character. It is based on a social structure which determines the status, rights and obligations of individuals and there are institutions binding them together in mutual dependence, compelling their co-operation for the common good and regulating their interrelationships. Finally, there are social sanctions to maintain the system. Kinship, local contiguity and managing the environment for making a living are the limiting factors. In Bhutia society, the household and the *Busti* (Village) as an entity influence all aspects of social life. The whole Bhutia society is a composite of overlapping

egocentric kindreds. The diversified kinship ties bind together the households in an emergent entity—the *Busti*. The *Busti* elders though having no official status or authority have great say in *Busti* matters and play an important role as mediators during conflicts or disputes. The status of elders is a conjoint between kinship and politics. The socio-political system of Bhutias of Lachen and Lachung is capable, of maintaining law and order by settlement of disputes by arbitration and working as an administrative unit.

The Lachen and Lachung are political units in the sense that there is a consciousness of unity and interdependence rather than submission to a central authority. They are conscious of having sprung originally from a common ancestor and which are interconnected by the bands of intermarriage as well as by common practices and beliefs in such a way that they consider themselves a 'unit'. The term 'political' has been used with reference to any form of socially sanctioned behaviour which, directly or indirectly strengthens the unity of the group. "The political structure, in this sense is the sum total of all forms of sanctioned behaviour which serve directly or indirectly, intendedly or not, to integrate the political unit" (Wagner, 1940: p. 201).

To discover Bhutia's Socio-political System, we must review the ecology of area. For, the nature of Bhutia physical environment and economic arrangement has decisively influenced the planning of settlement, migration and, indirectly, the whole socio-political system of the people. The ecological conditions prevailing in the area have made people dependent on each other, and they have to be friends if they have to survive. Yet 'the necessity of friendship of itself is not enough to achieve friendship'. People quarrel over many things—land, harvest theft, women, prestige etc. Even, if they do not quarrel, they may have differences of opinion. Bhutias do have an established code of law, decisions are reached, accordingly compensation or fines are

paid. They have inheritance rules and conventional rules about right or wrong action. People are socially ostracized if there is suspicion of practicing witchcraft; if somebody is deliberately and persistently defying the established norms. The offences against the society are punished by *Pau* (Sorcerer). Bhutias are managing their affairs independently of external control.

Sikkim, a small mountainous state, in the Eastern Himalayas with an area of 7,299 square kilometres, has witnessed great changes in its political structure, social structure, economic life and cultural values during the past hundred years. The process of change was quickened by currents from four different directions, resulting in a multiform ethnic mix. It lies between 27° and 28° N latitude and 88° and 89° E longitude. To its north, lies the Tibetan plateau; to the west the kingdom of Nepal; to the east the kingdom of Bhutan and the Chumbi valley of Tibet and to the south, the Darjeeling district of West Bengal. Sikkim has been strongly influenced by Tibet in its religious and cultural life. By virtue of being a protectorate of India until 26 April, 1975, it has been politically and economically influenced by India and became the twenty second State of India thereafter.

Before its assimilation into the Indian Union, Sikkim was an Independent Kingdom ruled by a hereditary *Maharajah*, who was assisted by large landowners, *Kajis* in the administration of the state. During the British rule, the *Maharajah* was also assisted by British Political Officers along with the hereditary *Kajis*. The *Maharajah* was a Buddhist and Buddhism flourished greatly because of the encouragement to the Lamas and setting up of monasteries. There were no Christian missionaries in the State at that time and Europeans could not enter Sikkim without a legal permit. The State was closed to outsiders because of its strategic position between Nepal, Tibet and Bhutan.

Administratively, Sikkim is divided into four districts—North, East, South and West with headquarters at Mangan, Gangtok, Namchi and Gyalshing, respectively.

The most prominent district in the map of Sikkim is the North District with an area of 4,226 square kilometres. It occupies strategic position. It is situated between Nepal to its West and, by a horse-shoe shaped boundary of Tibet to its North and East, and with the other three districts of the State touching its Southern boundary. The district is sparsely populated with a density of 6 persons per square kilometre. The district is more thinly populated towards its northern side due to geographic position and climatic rigours. More than three quarters of the entire area is totally uninhabited because the average altitude is more than 6,000 metres. Human habitation is thus confined to approximately 25 per cent of the entire area. It consists of 21 Panchayat units and 54 revenue blocks. The whole district has only one town, one police station and one fire station. There are three assembly constituencies in the district.

The two river valleys that dominate North Sikkim are Lachen and Lachung, situated on the banks of tributaries of the Tista-Lachenchu and Lachungchu, respectively. The valleys of Lachen and Lachung were the private Estates of the Queen, but later it was reported by Das that these were assigned to the Dewan. In the administrative report of 1911-12, it was mentioned that these valleys were put under the charge of Jerung Dewan of Chakung by British Political officer. As the people of Lachen and Lachung were not happy with his administration the valleys were returned under the rule of Maharaja Kumar of Sikkim (Sikkim, 1912: p.2).

Climatic Factors

Located in the southern slopes of the western half of the eastern Himalayas across 27° and 28° N latitude and 88° and 89° E longitude, it is within the temperate zone not far from

the tropics, yet the climate is influenced by the high Himalayas to the north and the Gangetic plain to the south. Sikkim itself lies within the watershed of the river Tista. Plants grow perennially as there is ample water. There are two seasons, a short dry season lasting from January through April, and a long wet season from May through December. In the Lachen and Lachung valleys the climate is cold and dry. The Lachen valley in the west is fairly wide whereas the Lachung valley in the east is rather short and steep. The Lachenchu has many tributaries of its own, and the Zemu in the west is a combination of many small streams. The area comprising these two river valleys is comparatively dry, and is in many ways different from the rest of the state. The slopes here are gradual and valleys are broader compared to other valleys. Due to the inhospitable climatic conditions and terrain the area is sparsely populated.

There is no cultivable land in and around Lachen and Lachung. As the cultivable land in the region is at about 3,000 m and far from valleys, the crops are generally rainfed. The Lachen area has not been surveyed. In Lachung though cadastral survey has been done, the results have not been finalised. Forest areas for Lachen and Lachung are not surveyed, so no details are available. On account of high altitude, terrain and little rainfall, land use is restricted. The climate is suitable for horticultural development. Cultivation is restricted to limited regions which are either below the village or much above the residential area. They grow small quantities of barley, wheat, maize and buckwheat. They raise yaks and sheep to supplement their subsistence economy.

The high valleys of North Sikkim are inhabited by groups that have retained the Tibetan language and culture. The ecological milieu of these people is determined by high altitude, comparatively less rainfall (than in other areas of Sikkim) and violent local winter winds. The steppe vegetation is characterised by small shrubs. The Tista cuts across North Sikkim

with its tributaries, namely the Lachungchu, Lachenchu and Lhanak etc. and has divided the region into separate valleys. Concentration of population is mainly restricted to the two valleys of Lachen and Lachung. The villages of Lachen and Lachung are the headquarters of their respective valleys. As the two valleys are separated by high mountain features, they lead a more or less independent existence. The presence of lush meadows in the vicinity of Lachen, facilitates pastoral activities. The highland communities of Lachen and Lachung are found at a height of nearly 3,000 metres, but these people lead a transhumant type of existence travelling from one ecological zone to another. They inhabit climate zones varying from temperate (2,000-2,700 m) to sub-Alpine (2,700-4,000 m) to Alpine (4,000-5,000 m) and very high hills with Alpine climate above 5,000 m. Lachenpas move approximately 15 kilometres upstream from Lachen to Thanggu, to their summer quarters. They have their agricultural lands at Thanggu and for grazing they come below Lachen.

On the Lachung side, the valley opens up to the pasture of Momo-Samdong and Yume-Samdong. Lachungpas follow a reverse cycle, they move upstream for grazing only and come to Khedum (below Lachung) for cultivation to their summer quarters. It must be noted that these groups, live at an altitude higher than 3,000 metres and at a latitude of 28° north which are certainly exceptional conditions.

Bhutias of Lachen and Lachung

The Bhutias of Lachen and called Ha-Pa. Like the people of Chumbi Valley in Tibet they claim descent from immigrants from Ha in Bhutan and follow a mixed agropastoral and trade economy. They claim themselves to be of the Lupon Lhumdrub caste. They are more like Tibetans than the Hlo-pa (south people of Bhutan) or other Bhutias of Sikkim. The exact date of their arrival in Sikkim is not known; though it must have been during one

of the many invasions by Bhutanese. In 1676 the Bhutanese invaded the Chumbi valley, Sikkim and the area south of Sikkim. The Lepcha chief was killed, and in retaliation the Tibetan Government arranged the invasion of Bhutan, perhaps the most powerful undertaken during the reign of the 5th Dalai Lama. At one time, the Ha-pa were amongst the richest people in Bhutan, but, as Eden relates, they took to evil ways and fell on evil times. They were living in robber caves - *Pyak che* and *Au-pyale* and used it as a base from which to issue orders to rob and terrorise peaceful merchants (c.f. White, 1887-1908: p. 113).

The Bhutias of Lachen-Lachung occupied both sides of the border between Sikkim and Tibet while carrying on their pastrol and trading activities. they were paying taxes to both sides. The Tibetan influence is stronger on these people than that of Sikkim, although territorial limits to the north are disputed now. According to local tradition, the Chumbi valley on the other side of the border, only came into the possession of the Sikkim Raja a little more than a hundred years ago as the dowry of a Tibetan wife. The people of the valley below Galing paying him no rent, but carry for him and his *Amla* free (White, 1887-1908: p. 111).

The Lachen revenue block with 234 houses, inhabited by 919 Lachenpas (474 males and 445 females) is connected to Mangan headquarters by a 58 kilometres long metallic road along the Lachenchu. The Lachung revenue block is situated on east bank of Lachungchu at 2,745 metres, with an area of 2814. 22 hectares and 328 households inhabited by 1,508 people of whom 787 are males and 721 females. This population includes institutional and household population. Out of these only 647 males and 673 females are Lachungpas, 6 males and 3 females are Nepalised Scheduled castes and the rest are government officials. Both among Lachenpas and Lachungpas, there are no groups or divisions in their society. All Lachenpas belong to one group and similarly Lachungpas to one group. There are no artisan

classes among these groups. Geographically separate, both Lachen and Lachung have separate social identities. Permanent residents identify themselves and are identified by outsiders. The distinctiveness of the *Busti* is fostered by ethnocentric prejudice and preserved by high rates of local intermarriage. The density and distribution of population among Bhutias of Lachen and Lachung are clearly related to ecological conditions which also affect the modes of livelihood. However, the mere differences in modes of livelihood do not determine differences in political structure. The economic pursuits, together with environmental conditions which impose effective limits on modes of livelihood, determine dominant values of people and strongly influence the social organisation including their political systems. The *Busti* and the household are units of social organisation that are explicitly recognised and precisely defined by Bhutias. Household is the economic unit as well as the unit of participation in all public, social and religious projects. The type of families which predominate the social scene among the Bhutias are either joint or nuclear, supplemented by some kin or widowed parent. All three types of marriages viz., monogamous, polygynous and polyandrous are prevalent among Bhutias.

The Bhutias of Lachen and Lachung have communal forest/pastures and agricultural land with family ownership of land but with strong community regulation of land usage. A strong village administration is desirable for this. The village is an important land holding unit. There is common ownership of grazing and forest land for the use of the villagers. Though, the arable land is held by individual families, but the sale of land to outsiders is forbidden by the village council (*Dzumsha*). In the whole system of distribution of land "*Sago*" the communal authority overrides any claim the state might extend on internal sovereignty or state landlordism. Control over the land is exercised in relation to the social group. A Lachenpa

and Lachungpa landowner derives rights in *Sago* land by virtue of his membership in Lachen and Lachung society. *Sago* represents a community form of land tenure. This does not mean that land under *Sago* tenure is necessarily cultivated on a communal basis. In its present form, *Sago* land is used on an individual basis, though subject to the reversionary rights of the community as a whole. Rights on *Sago* land are therefore divided between the community and individuals belonging to the community, in the sense that each individual has an unchallenged right to use plot of land. If he ceases to utilise it the community can redistribute the land. The title to land has a communal character and it is usufructuary, rather than absolute (For details see Bhasin, 1989). Thus the two underlying characteristics of *Sago* as form of communal land tenure are kinship and geographical location.

The descriptions available from travel accounts of the nineteenth century of Bhutias of Lachen and Lachung show a multifarious economy, in which animal husbandry, trading and arable farming combined to provide a wide range of income. They had a domestic industry for weaving cloth for themselves and were largely self-sufficient as far as clothing and food were concerned. Yet it is possible that despite their trading activities they were still basically a subsistence, non-cash economy, turning their profits from trade into goods before they reached the village. Their main trend in the last hundred years would seem to be predominantly pastoral. Even in the 1950s, the Bhutias could be described as being chiefly pastoral people, but this would be incorrect now. With the closure of the border in 1962, the Bhutias of Lachen-Lachung suffered most. They lost large herds of yaks and sheep, when they were on the seasonal migration under the ancient transborder pasturage usage agreements. They could no longer use pasture land in Tibet, causing heavy losses in their herds due to lack of adequate alternative pasture areas. Military encampments, supply bases,

and defence posts were set up in the Northern border area. With the closure of the entire Tibetan border, the very life-line of these people was sealed. The barter of timber, wood, dyestuffs and dairy products of Lachen-Lachung for Tibetan salt and wool had formed the basis of this trade. As long as trade was unhampered by political restrictions, it had enabled them to attain economic independence. Animal herds from Lachen spent about seven months in Tibet, and Lachung animals were sometimes in Tibet for the whole year. The loss of pasture in Tibet is going to overtax the existing resources in Lachen-Lachung. Bhutias started to shift from a pastoral and trading economy to a more settled agricultural and small scale horticulture and wage-earning economy.

When wool was imported from Tibet, Lachenpas and Lachungpas wove blankets, *Bakhus* (dress) and tweeds etc. on their indigenous looms. These traditional handicrafts have suffered a great set-back. Their own herds of sheep only provide wool for self-consumption. As a result, they have to depend more on agriculture and other sources of earning money. But they cannot depend on agriculture alone, because of the scarcity of arable land in the near vicinity of permanent villages, while other environmental features restrict land use. In the past these people were self-sufficient, absorbed in their own pastoral and trading activities. At present, Lachenpas and Lachungpas have adopted mixed high altitude farming and animal husbandry. They raise yak, dzow, sheep, horses and mules. Pastoralism is still a major economic strategy. They move above and below the river valleys and exploit the grazing lands along the valleys and surrounding areas. They are trying to exploit new sources of income and job opportunities in the organised section.

The environment of the area is energy deficient and the population solves this problem by a variety of cultural means. People of the area migrate seasonally to other valleys to seek additional resources. Pastoral activities do not

usually conflict with agricultural activities. In cases where a delayed harvest or early planting causes production regimes to overlap, the extremely flexible division of labour between men and women permits the household to split up the labour force, maintaining activities simultaneously in both areas. The seasonal migration emerges as an activity organised by family and community structure.

Bhutias have subsistence economy with a rudimentary differentiation of productive labour with no machinery for the accumulation of wealth in the form of commercial or industrial capital. If wealth is accumulated it takes the form of consumption good and amenities and is used for supporting additional dependents. The regulation and consumption of money does not give rise to permanent class-division. Distribution of rank status operate independently of differences of wealth. Political office carries no economic reward or privilege.

Both Lachenpas and Lachungpas are endogamous groups. Before the closure of the Tibetan border, marriages used to take place with Tibetans also. There are no structural groupings like caste or class among the Bhutias of Lachen and Lachung. The individual households are related by unilateral consanguinal ties. The situation becomes more complex and relations overlap as the marriages within the society occur regularly. The Bhutia social structure is so adaptive and make such good use of ecological conditions where there is no need for competition, that households are integrated to form a community without any visible mediatory corporations or groups. In such a situation the village emerges as an integrated entity, and as a rule there should be no place for factions. The whole social organisation of the Bhutias is based on avoiding intergroup rivalries and disruptive competition. In all the activities there is a 'formal' emphasis on equality. On the surface, one does not see the cleavages in this equality. But through the social processes one can see inequality and contradiction in the system. The endogamous

marriages in the Bhutia society necessarily establish potential alliances, thus giving rise to factions. Though marriages are contracted randomly, the differences in family size or number of boys in a family does create latent affinal groupings. Though Bhutias emphasise that they have no preferential marriages, nevertheless preference for an only son offering a good bride price is always there. Similarly, the girl from a rich family is sought because at the time of *Yancyapshe* the bride's parents give *Bakhus* (the girl's dress) and the number of *Bakhus* increases with the status of the parents.

The so-called Bhutia equality can also be seen in the method of land distribution. In Lachung, people redistribute the fields every year by drawing lots. The richer people draw for the larger plots, and the poorer villagers for the small ones. Grazing lands are divided similarly. At the time of feasts sponsored by plaintiff and defendant or other community feasts the *Phipun* and village elders always receive preferential treatment. In all these activities, there is only a formal emphasis on equality, which works to the advantage of the rich. As such the distinction between rich and poor does exist but it is not institutionalised and there is no structured class system. Apparently, all form of conflict is avoided. However, the differences in family size and wealth does create latent affinal groupings but they are not recognised as operative groups.

Earlier, Bhutias with more sons and limited resources went in for fraternal polyandry as the dominant form of marriage. Though fraternal polyandry functioned to conserve land and labour in the family yet it managed to produce a pool of unmarried females.

At present the Bhutias are polyandrous, polygamous and monogamous. There are no hard and fast rules about it. The people who can afford to keep more than one wife are doing so. The others are giving in for monogamous marriage. Polyandrous marriages are still in vogue, but younger people are ashamed to admit it. The form of marriage

practised by the family depends on its economic condition. The younger brothers examine the relative prospects, of independent existence versus polyandrous marriage and make their decisions. The other social force for independent existence is the membership of the *Dzumsha* and the need to fulfil its obligations. *Dzumsha* membership ensure one's place in the society and allotment of cultivable land. The *Phipun* keeps a record of attendance at funerals. Each family has to be represented by an adult male. Any absentee is fined by *Phipun*.

Despite the lack of development, the age-old system of utilisation of land and herds along with the isolation of the region, the Bhutias of Lachen and Lachung have undergone substantial and fundamental changes. New economic opportunities that do not require significant investment are available. The result has been the disintegration of the traditional polyandrous family and marriage system. Apparently, these areas look traditional and undeveloped, but this superficial appearance is deceptive. Their social and economic structures are in the process of irreversible change as an indirect consequence of changes in India.

Social Network

Though the household is the smallest and most important unit of production and consumption in Bhutia society, there are activities that demand collective participation viz., roofing, marriage, birth and funeral ceremonies and communal works like repairing of paths, construction of *Gompa*, *Dzumsha* house etc. In a narrow sense the household unit might be called the economic unit, but it is not self-sufficient, and participation in a wider group is necessary. It is also clear that a household cannot take its herd for pasturing to distant places. Co-operation is found among neighbours who may or may not be kinsmen. There is also mutual assistance even when co-operation is not essential to the performance of a

task, e.g. in weeding and harvesting, for it is conventional to ask people for help, the obligation to assist being part of customary relationships. It must be understood, that all economic activities in agriculture, grazing and migrations of the community are always in a sense collective actions, for even when there is no apparent co-operation between households, the whole community passively participates in them by the dictates of the head *Dzumsha*, *Phipun* and elders who decide the dates of departure and arrival to appointed places. All the Bhutias can carry out their economic activities, because they are members of *Dzumsha* signifying their belongingness to community. The social organisation dictated by traditions and customs of the Bhutia community has potential strength for coordination and security necessary for accomplishing the functions of its productive system. All the people of the village have common economic interests. It must be emphasised that environmental conditions and transhumant way of life necessitates relations beyond the limits of a village.

However, the inherent need for cooperation is less evident but in case of need, standing groups larger than the households yet smaller than the village are available. These are *ad hoc* gatherings of relatives and friends permanently united to assist a person in whose interest the group carries out a defined job. *Chuchi* the mutual aid group consists almost entirely of groups of neighbours, kinsmen related in one way or another to the persons concerned. People from *Daro* (friendship) group, also supplement labour in case of need. The help extended by friends at marriages, funerals etc. is called *Thogram*. It is with such close neighbours that Bhutias have friendship and constant interaction. These groups may contain friends, near relatives or distant ones. These groups are based on inter-family relations and its pattern keeps on changing as there are no institutionalized cognatic groups or segmentary system based on nestling principle. Some neighbours may be excluded from this group

not for any stigma or status factors but because they just do not fall in the customary line of relation formation. All families of the group are obliged to give each other gifts of foodstuffs, and personal labour at times of festivity or need. Help is needed at the time of house building or repairing, at various times of the agricultural cycle, and in the preparation and serving of large scale hospitality. They give money and grains as contributions to each other's hospitality expenses at times of marriage, birth, illness and death. They may also be called upon for help or contributions in unusual situations of need. Contingent expenditure, contributions of gifts and labour are seen as investments and are fully reciprocal over time.

If a person abrogate such reciprocal obligations without a valid reason he may be taken to *Dzumsha*. *Thung Chuchi* is an informal group, violation of its rules may lead it to formal level. However, this rarely happens, as it is considered bad to create ill-will in such a small community. Thus we may say that among Lachenpas and Lachungpas, these are customary "quasi" groups - mutual aid groups based on reciprocity, bigger than the household and smaller than the village which emerge at the time of need or some exigency. The environmental conditions and pastoral pursuits cause modes of dispersal and concentration and this seasonal movement causes wide interdependence, which is met within these customary quasi-groups, creating a sense of community and preparedness to co-operate.

These quasi-groups operate at the time of marriage, funeral, house building and repairing and agricultural activities. All families of these groups are obliged to give gifts, *Khadass* (white scarves) and bottles of liquor. These relationships are somewhat asymmetrical to the economically autonomous nuclear family. Although family units are private property holding units, yet the production from that property has an important collective dimension involving the labour of neighbours, kin and friends.

Besides these quasi-group involvements each family is involved in *Busti* reciprocity with a wider group - the members of the *Dzumsha* with whom one has obligations of token exchange. Participation in this wider network, as well as the smaller group is basic to full membership in the community. The *Busti* reciprocity emerges at the time of death. It is compulsory for the members of the *Dzumsha* to be represented at the *Thurey* (cremation grounds) with their essential contributions of wood, grain and butter. The *Busti* people do not give personal labour to one another on reciprocatory basis. If one needs labour beyond his *Chuchi*, one has to hire people from the *Busti*, who are ready to work for money or food. The boundaries of the *Chuchi* effectively mark the limits of one's reciprocal aid-relationship.

Apart from the above, special friends are part of a co-operative enterprise. These persons may or may not be from the same neighbourhood. A certain degree of intimacy is the basis of *Daro* (friendship) relationship and involves the giving of help, including material items and services, as well as psychological support.

It is important to note that these mutual aid groups are not based on kinship in general, but on residential and customary lines. Kin are special people, who can be relied upon but mutual aid groups are more important in the working of society. Bhutias include relatives on both sides as their kinsmen. Close relatives like mother's brother, father's sister or father's brother are invited by *Dompo* (invitation).

In addition to these *Chuchi* and *Dzumsha* membership relationship, each family contributes money and labour to those *Busti* enterprises and institutions that operate for the general welfare of the people. *Rubthi* is collective work for community welfare like path clearing, log-bridge making, inter-*Busti* path clearing, *Gompa* path clearing or the construction of *Gompa* and *Balwaris* etc. *Rubthi* are organised by the *Phipun* and the

village official *Gyapon* are responsible for informing people about the details of the work. Fines are levied on absconders.

Each family contributes to the ceremonies performed at *Busti Gampa*. Compulsory work and contributions are expected when festivals and ritual are performed to ward off epidemics and natural calamities.

These various obligations to one's aid group, to *Busti*, to the public institution and the *Gampa* are the primary force that connect family units of the village to larger network relationships with one another. In case of illness in the family, when *Pau* services are invited, it is also the time for eating and drinking. Serving food and drinker is the main ritual of the secular social relations. The general way of keeping a relationship alive consists in the exchange of gifts and visits between the people and in the participation of common feasts by all people who form a social group. Common feasts, serve to maintain the feeling of unity within the community and thus law and custom in a general way. These feasts also function as opportunities for conducting social transactions. In a subsistence economy like that of Bhutias, there is no need for social exchange. However, this giving and receiving of gifts and feasts creates a communal atmosphere.

The interrelation between social groups larger than the nuclear family and importance given to communal eating and drinking makes *Busti* a level of Bhutia social organization. *Busti* as an institution in the form of *Dzumsha* is an administrative and jural unit.

Socio-Political System of Bhutias of Lachen-Lachung

Bhutias of Lachen and Lachung show characteristics of what Sahlins (1958: pp. 2-3) calls "kinship societies" as opposed to "market dominated societies". The differentiation of status and attribution of power are associated with the principles of seniority, corporate group members and principle of descent. Individual

effort and enterprise are important on some occasions. However, a power structure based on private wealth, or subordination and superordination based on relationship between owners and landless labourers are absent at present, though at one time the social stratification of Sikkim was in part defined by ethnic origin and kinship. The most important families were descendants of a group of brothers descended from the Tibetan king, who settled in Sikkim in the 16th century. Their descendants formed fourteen *Rus* (clans) to one of which belonged the king and the families of local chiefs - *Kazis*. For purpose of local administration, the state was divided into sections placed under the rule of *Kazis* for revenue collection and maintenance of law and order under their jurisdiction.

The indigenous systems of prestige and power in these two societies are based on relative egalitarianism, as these societies are largely unstratified. These systems differ from "kinship societies" as well as there are no divisive characteristics of a kinship system overpowering the socio-political system. There are no social classes, and the whole population carries out the same kind of economic activities. Normally there is no hereditary political authority, rank or status. It is largely open to any man to advance himself socially by his own merit and charismatic qualities. Here is a case of society where social and political systems overlap and the political system has strains of democratic republic.

Bhutias socio-political system still conforms to the age-old system of community organisation. Both communities are governed by headmen (*Phipun*), by the council of village elders and by an assembly of all the people. Though, it may appear that the office of *Phipun* has a coercive authority, in actuality, *Phipun* leadership has been diffusely exercised by a number of prestigious and influential men within the community. These elder men have distinguished themselves by their industry, wealth, generosity, oratory and wise counsel.

Although their advice may be persuasive, but it is never coercive. Through informal and sustained conversations people continue to solve problems, air their differences, and arrive at collective decisions, which on occasions receives public enunciation in a formally convened meeting at the *Dzumsha* house *Mong-khyim*.

Dzumsha (Village Council)

Lachenpas and Lachungpas have their own local government organisation. *Dzumsha*, an assembly composed of the heads of the separate households. All these heads have a voting right to select two *Phipun*. Membership and affiliation in *Dzumsha* is founded on the formal recognition of both descent and residence rules. A person is allowed to sit in the *Dzumsha* assembly, if he has fulfilled his duties as a member of the society. This assembly meets in a public hall - *Mong-khyim*. Special community events are celebrated here and it serves as a focal meeting place for people. The *Dzumsha* election takes place yearly. It elects two *Phipuns* (headmen), two *Gyapons*, who act as constables, messengers and odd job men and two *Chepa*, who act as store-keeper assistants. The *Chepa* are recent addition to village administration, as no previous accounts are available about these. Village elders *Gen-me* (*Gen*-elder, *Me*-men) and *Genthi-Lenge* (respectively known among Lachenpas and Lachungpas) assist *Phipun* in the effective working of village administration. Their number varies from three to five. Previously there were eighteen elders among Lachenpas.

Dzumsha Ghar or Mong-khyim

Dzumsha Ghar or *Mong-khyim* is a place where Lachungpas meet to discuss their problems, to hear the authorities, to elect a *Phipun* and to take important decisions.

It is a square, roofless structure with one entrance. In the centre, there is a long pole with a white religious flag, *Tharzo*. The seat

of the *Phipun* - *Youttee* is right opposite to the entrance. The people sit on concrete platforms about 10 feet wide built along the walls of the *Mong-khyim*. This area is tin roofed. Right behind the *Phipun's* seat is a kitchen and store house, used at the time of festivals, feasts or during long trials. The *Misey* (public) sit in the middle ground as well as under tin roofs. Generally the '*Zomkha*' (meetings) are followed by tea and snacks, which are brought by those attending the meetings.

Phipun Keshe (election) - In this democratic form of government, the public elect *Phipun* by voting (*Damto*), in December after the Lama dance. The whole assembly consisting of all the heads of the households is divided into four *Kha* (parts) or *Chuchi* (among Lachenpas). Each *Kha* will elect one *Meshok* (a candidate for *Phipunship*) separately, but this selection is not from their own part but from the whole group. The people discuss the candidature among themselves and then select one *Meshok* from each *Kha*. The person elected from more than one *Kha* will be elected as *Phipun*. If two persons get selected from the same *Kha*, then both will become *Phipun*, senior and junior, depending on their age.

If there is no consensus on any candidate and all four *Khas* nominate four different *Meshoks*, then the whole house is again divided into eight *Kha* and new nominations are called for, whosoever is elected again getting more votes becomes *Phipun*. If all eight *Kha* nominate four different persons (each nominated by two *Kha*) then the four names are written on pieces of paper and a *Phipun* is elected by *Gyen* (lottery). Two pieces of paper are picked up and these two are elected as *Phipun*. Both *Phipun* are equally powerful and are complementary to each other. The other two *Meshok* nominated but not selected are kept on an *ad-hoc* panel for the next year's elections.

In Lachung, as there are three *Busties*, one *Phipun* looks after *Shertchu* and *Singring Busties* and the other is the administrative head

of Beechu *Busti*. Because of the topography of the revenue block and distances between *Busties*, two *Phipuns* are essential for better administration. Moreover, the migration of Lachungpa to Khedum, Leema and Lothen, for agriculture can be better looked after by *Phipun*. Both the *Phipun* take care of their respective *Busti* problems during migration and non-migration periods.

In Lachen also, there are two *Phipuns*, selected as described above.

Phipun is the administrative head. There are no official members in the *Phipun* system. However, each *Phipun* is assisted by one *Gyapan* who acts as constable, messengers and odd job man. *Gyapon* are selected by *Phipun*. *Chepa* are selected by the public by lottery system. *Phipun lochee* (tenure) is for eleven months. In this short period he has to prove his calibre. The tenure has been reduced from three years to eleven months, as the post of *Phipun* does not carry any remuneration and a person has to sacrifice his own work in favour of public work. The post carries a lot of prestige, but no economic privileges, though the possession of greater than average wealth may be a criterion of the qualities or status required for *Phipunship*, for in this economically homogeneous egalitarian society, accumulation of wealth depends on personal qualities. The elders who assist *Phipun* are ex-*Phipun*, one *Ajopao* (shaman or sorcerer) and one Lama.

After his selection, the *Phipun* takes his seat, and people offer him *Khada* (scarves) etc. then he addresses the whole assembly promising them good administration and care of the cultural heritage of the community.

Dzumsha meetings are called to conduct public business. The most important decisions regarding the economic strategies are taken by the *Dzumsha*, such as division of cultivable land at different places, grazing facilities, seasonal migrations of communities and other social matters. The *Dzumsha* is the perfect form of democratic government, wherein all decisions are taken by the consent of the people

of the community. The *Gen-me* are also elected. *Phipun*, with the assistance of *Gyanpon* collects government levies such as land revenue and forest tax, and is the representative of the community in government dealings. Now-a-days, *Phipun* has also to regulate the collection of *Jatamanshi* and *Kutki* (minor forest produce). From the last ten to twelve years all start on the same day. Previously, people were not bothered with the minor economic activity because other sources of income were sufficient for subsistence.

Gyapon informs the people about the *Dzumsha* meeting, by shouting *Dzom-nyo* (all of you, come here for a meeting) at different crossings. Everybody must attend the meeting. A *Megho chokse* (attendance register) is kept and roll-call is taken. The absentees are fined. The fine is deposited in a public fund and *Chee-Dep* (account register of public fund) is maintained. When *Phipun* finishes his term, he hands over the charge to new *Chepa*. At *Cheen-Chete* (handing over the charge), one maund of rice, meat, tea etc., are provided by old *Phipun* from the public fund to arrange a farewell feast. The balance is handed over to the new *Phipun* and his aides. On each occasion, all the members of the *Dzumsha* meet at *Mong-khyim*, and settle whatever is brought up, from choosing of their headman to other small matters. Disputes, arising chiefly from the theft of garden crops, animals and women i.e. adultery and related offences are settled by *Phipun* and village elders. They always try to solve disputes at this level.

If it cannot be solved at this level, then the case is officially brought to *Mong-khyim*. A rupee and *Khada* is paid as a court fee by both parties. Even here, a committee is formed and mediation is tried to reach a compromise. If the settlement is not agreeable to both the parties, then the official procedure takes its course. *Trimptons* or a Jury of ten persons including two *Phipuns* are selected; one of the *Trimptons* is head Lama (*Chutimpa*) and another the sorcerer - *Ajopao*. They all come

to *Mong-khyim* with their beddings, as they are not allowed to move out during the proceedings which may last from two to ten days. All will take oath from the *Chutimpa* and *Ajopao*. The house is divided into two groups for and against. Both parties plead their case and the trial is held inside the *Mong-khyim*. If an agreement is reached the guilty party is fined. If the agreement is not acceptable to him he can apply to the Deputy Commissioner through *Phipun*, but this rarely happens. *Phipun* has a seal and he can forward the sealed papers of the proceedings of the case of the Deputy Commissioner at *Mangan*.

Traditionally, *Dzumsha* also functioned for regulating each man's share in *U-lag* (transportation service). The men giving *U-lag* used to receive small sums of money which was deposited was *Dzumsha* for a community feast. The rich people were exempted from *U-lag* by paying a yearly contribution to *Dzumsha*. But now *U-lag* has been abolished from the area. Another duty of the assembly is that of assigning who is going to join *Gompa* to become a monk.

Powers, Authority and Duties of Phipun

The *Phipun* and its Council still administer the affairs of their community, though in other parts of Sikkim the Supreme political and judicial authority is the government administration. Nevertheless, the *Phipun* as head of its people, is always treated by his subjects with a good deal of outward respect. He can decide upon community policy and make regulations binding upon his subjects. However, *Phipun* is more concerned in maintaining the existing laws than to alter them. He determines upon and arranges for the execution of all important public works. Much of his time is spent in the *Dzumsha* house, where he listens to news, petitions and complaints from people, and gives orders for whatever action may be necessary. He must protect the rights of his subjects, provide justice for the oppressed and punish wrong doers. He

controls the distribution and use of the tribal land, organises large collective feasts, regulates grazing timings and those for sowing and harvesting crops. With the extension of the Indian Penal Code, the *Phipun's* administrative duties have greatly increased. He is responsible to the administration for maintaining law and order, preventing crime and collecting revenue. He must carry out all orders and instructions issued to him, and render any assistance required from him, by officers of the government; he is expected to co-operate with the District Commissioner and other members of the administration in all sorts of economic, social and educational schemes and developments. His formerly undivided control over every aspect of public life has thus been divided among various governmental departments with superior authority. To meet the individual expenditure of his own visits to Gangtok or *Mangan*, he has to spend from his own pocket. However, during the visits of V.I.Ps. or senior government officials, feasts are arranged from the public fund. People contribute to this fund in the hope that *Phipun* will persuade officials to provide for more developmental schemes and subsidies. Besides contributing money to this fund, people help in arranging the feast, erecting welcome arches, burning of "*Dhup*" and presenting scarves etc. In this way people show their faith in *Phipun's* and the elders.

Phipun has to generate funds by other means also. Every year, during *Lhosar* festival in the month of December Lamas perform rituals and *Pooja* (prayer) for the community welfare. Everybody in the village participates in this by contributing one *Phe* (a measure) of rice, *Churrah* (parched cereals), *Chaang* (local drink), *Ghee* (purified butter), vegetable, meat etc. to the *Gompa*. *Phipun* and his family have to look after the people and the arrangements for the feast. The contributions are utilised for food and rituals, and what remains is auctioned. The *Dak* (auction) takes place at *Mong-khyim* after the completion of *Pooja* and other celebrations, the highest bidder gets the things

and the money raised through *Dak* is deposited in the same public fund.

Collection of taxes is another duty of *Phipun*. There is no prescribed schedule or rules for the imposing taxes. It is at the discretion of the *Phipun*. He has to deposit a lump-sum of money as revenue to authorities. People have faith in *Phipun*, that whatever he demands is fair. Similarly, while imposing grazing taxes it is at *Phipun's* discretion. The people who do not want to migrate with their animals to the winter place, have to seek permission of the *Phipun* and pay extra money for the grass, as the grass belongs to the community. People have to start moving for grazing on the date fixed by *Phipun*. Whosoever breaks the rule is fined by the *Phipun* depending on the number of animals he possesses.

Phipun plays an important role in negotiating the compensation. Money due to villagers from the government on acquiring land of villagers for the road construction.

Phipun also plays a crucial role in taking action against those who violates the law of their society. He has the authority to fine from Rs. 20 to Rs. 5000 or 100 strokes of the cane. The *Hepo* depends on the nature of the crime. The *Chepo* is to be deposited in public fund. If a person refused to pay fine, he is advised by *Phipun* and advisors to act properly and honour their system. People appreciate *Phipun's* service and honour him by offering gifts - "*Chang-Ring*" like scarves, *Chaang* and money. This gesture from the villagers puts *Phipun* in good spirits.

People who pay no heed to the *Dzumsha* are threatened by social boycott and removal of their names from the *Dzumsha* roll-call. Social boycott is a disaster in these areas, where the prominence of *Dzumsha* is supreme. This type of socio-political system derive from the cultural fact that all decisions, to a greater or lesser extent, involve people who are bound to each other in a network of common obligations and cultural goals. Law, as a social

phenomenon, cannot be easily separated from its cultural matrix.

Kyarzhoo Dentuk (Impeachment of Phipun and Selection of New One)

Though the *Phipun* is an executive head, and has a lot of power and authority, he is not the supreme authority. To check him, the village elders are always there. If he tries to misuse his power or is corrupt, a vote of no confidence is passed and he is removed from office. In this regard village elders are more powerful than the *Phipun*. If people are not satisfied with the *Phipun's* administration, *Dzumsha* is called by village elders, and the *Phipun* is asked to appear. Each member of the *Dzumsha* has the right to vent his feelings against the *Phipun*, and place these grievances before the assembly. If the accusation proves right, the *Phipun* is removed from his post and a new one is selected, there and then. This process of impeachment is called *Pikshe* and election of a new *Phipun* before the completion of the term of old one is called *Kyarzhoo Dentuk*.

Apart from legal recourse which people take against offenders, more serious offenders move Bhutias to employ the services of the *Pau* (Sorcerer) to discover by divination and punish the guilty party. *Pau* performs *Cho-chapshe*, which is considered a very powerful weapon, the curse of which is believed to affect nine generations. *Cho-chapshe* is performed wherever an individual or group is accused of crimes against society which have to be punished by the devils. The crimes could be embezzling of public funds, disobeying of *Phipun's* order, a big theft in the area or abduction of an engaged girl by somebody not engaged to him. *Cho-chapshe* can be employed against the *Phipun* also, if he betrays his people or is guilty of fraud or nepotism.

Cho-chapshe is performed by writing the name of the person, if known, on a piece of

paper *Khe chik* while *Pau* invokes all the *Pholhas* (devils). People gather at the junction of three streams or rivers and place three stones (*Gheepoo*) on which *Zama* (earthen pot) is placed. The *Khe-chik* is placed in the *Zama* and the *Pau* invokes all the devils by chanting verses. The verses ask them to come and see the person who has betrayed the confidence of the people and pray to god for his destruction. A fire is lit under the *Zama* and all present stone it. Nobody touches the broken *Zama*. They clap hands thrice (twice is a bad omen). Then all those present go to the *Gompa* to worship *Sungma* (goddess like *Kali*).

Confronted with extraordinary or continually repeated offences, the villagers act as a corporate group and exact penalties, otherwise most transgressions are viewed simply as acts against individuals, which compel the person concerned to rally the support of his friends and close kinsmen, to a *Dzumsha* meeting for the mediation of *Phipun* and elders. The *Phipun* and elders regulate current affairs and act as judges. The elders, advise the *Phipun* and guide him in his office, conduct public ceremonies and arbitrate any differences between headmen and the people. Bhutias have *Gompa* society, to look after ritual offences.

Intravillage violence, if not negligible, is restricted. Village elders and kinsmen exert informal influence upon both parties to exchange tokens of goodwill and cease hostilities. The parties, under the force of public opinion and village morality often suspend hostilities on their own. The coherence, integrity and solidarity of the village is preserved as there are no intra-village groups and there are no institutions to give rise to rivalries. As there are no competitive groups, individual antagonists have no group backing. But in contrast, loyalty to the community takes precedence over any issue in which it is involved. To understand the organisation of Bhutia society, the central role of individual household in the conduction of daily life must be appreciated. A caste and/or class system has not

developed as there are no cultural and economic divergences.

Mechanism which lead to Settlement

Underlying these customary laws, which put pressure on the parties to settle a dispute, is the constant pressure of common residence. For common residence implies a necessity to co-operate in maintaining peace, and that peace involves some recognition of the demands of law and morality. It also involves mutual tolerance. These demands are backed by constant intermarriages which go on in a limited area. The Bhutias are linked in a web of kinship ties and new meshes are constantly being woven in this web with each marriage. These webs of ties, unite members to form groups. Local groups have common local interests.

These common local interest are reciprocated by category of arbitrators who may be called on to help settle disputes. The arbitrators are village elders. Though they have no forceful power of coercion, but related by kinship and common interests. The agreement is generally and easily reached and compensation paid or promised. The kinship status of "elders" is the conjoint between kinship and politics.

Conflicts are a part of social life and custom appears to exacerbate these conflicts : but in doing so customs also restrain the conflicts from destroying the whole social order (Gluckman, 1960: p.2). Smaller societies have such well established and well known codes of morals and laws, of convention and ritual.

Mechanism which lead to settlement of conflicts are the ecological necessities which force people to co-operate; the narrow limits of economy which force them to work in groups for the production of food; common residence and; code of conduct. On the one hand they have customary law and code of conduct and on the other their socio-political system has characteristic of a Democratic Republic where impeachment of the *Phipun* is passible, if his work is not satisfactory.

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