

Patterns of Adaptation in Sikkim

Veena Bhaisn

Department of Anthropology, University of Delhi, Delhi 110 007, India

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ABSTRACT Sikkim, a small mountainous state in the eastern Himalayas, has witnessed great changes in its political system, social structure, economic life and cultural values during the past hundred years. Sikkim is divided into numerous small valleys with an uneven distribution of population, and with inadequate communication facilities. The geographic location and politico-historical factors have resulted in the multiethnic mix. There are about fourteen ethnic groups residing in Sikkim. All these groups are characterised by special ecological adaptations, as well as by the social organisation of the region where they live. Most groups are culturally adapted to certain altitudes which has been a barrier to overall population mixture. In this paper cultural adaptation pattern of two tribes of North Sikkim - Lepchas of Dzongu and Bhutias of Lachen and Lachung has been described. The Lepchas of Dzongu live in a hilly-forest terrain; the Bhutias of Lachen-Lachung are inhabiting a high altitude environment with little vegetation and few domesticated plants. This study pursues cultural adaptation in a hilly forest environment in Dzongu - the Lepcha reserve as well as the process of change in Lachen-Lachung after the closure of border trade and re-orientation of the existing economic resources. Ecological factors are responsible for economic arrangements made by two groups. Lepchas living at lower altitude practise agriculture and Bhutias at higher altitude mixed farming and pastoralism though in varying degrees. Lepchas are the original inhabitants of Sikkim, while Bhutias of Lachen-Lachung came from Bhutan. Both the areas have remained isolated for long period. The Bhutias of Lachen-Lachung have preserved their traditional form of *Dzumsha* and *Phipun* administration. The Lachen-Lachung area has a special status with regard to land settlement, land revenue and local administration.

INTRODUCTION

Adaptation is the central concept in ecological studies, because it is the process whereby beneficial organism/environmental relationships are established. The process of adaptation takes place at three "levels": behavioural, physiological and genetic/demographic (Batson, 1963; Slobodkin, 1968; Slobodkin and Rapoport, 1974). Each level includes several adaptive domains. Behaviour is the most rapid and flexible response that an organism is capable of making, and it is based on learning rather than inherited. However, anthropologists concentrate on cultural behaviour and the adaptive responses made by individuals or group. There are still some human groups in existence with simple technologies, and such groups have little impact on, and are less influenced by ecosystem beyond their own habitats. Such populations exemplify the extent to

which human have achieved adaptations and stable environmental interaction within their different ecosystems. While ecologists give primary importance to ecological principles and consider culture as secondary, anthropologists in their preoccupation with culture, give little attention to environment. Neither the ecologists nor the anthropologists have dealt with the environment fully. Environment allows man to carry on some kind of activities and it prevent others. Steward believes that some sectors of culture are more prone to a strong, environmental relationship than other and that ecological analysis may be used to expalin cross-cultural similarities only in this "culture core". The "culture core" consists of the economic sector of society, those features that are "most closely related to subsistence activities and economic arrangements" (Steward, 1955: 37). Vayda and Rapoport (1968) criticised Steward approach as being inadequate as his study does

not include other organisms, nor does it include other human groups.

Adaptation has been viewed as a process by which man makes effective use of energy potentials in his habitat. It can also be viewed as a consequence of changes and cultural behaviour. These changes may be technological, organisational or ideological. Whenever it is claimed that a human group is adapted to its habitat, the implication is that the group has achieved a viable relationship with his habitat. Such a viable relationship is never achieved in one generation. It takes a long time and is the result of modification in the habitat through changes in the group's energy system as well as its organisation of social relations. Such an adaptation assures the group's survival and efficient functioning. Culture diffusion, of course is always there, but in view of the importance of ecological adaptation, the role of diffusion in explaining culture has been overstated. Intergroup borrowing and transmission of cultural elements is an integral feature of culture. Cultural borrowing does not occur at random or by chance.

PRESENT STUDY

The present study deals with the pattern of adaptations among two tribal groups inhabiting North-Sikkim—Lepchas of Dzongu and Bhutias of Lachen-Lachung (Fig. 1). Though situated in North-Sikkim both these areas depict sharply contrasted sets of socio-economic and cultural features because of their distinctive physical environments. The Lepchas of Dzongu live in a hilly forest terrain : the Bhutias of Lachen-Lachung are inhabiting a high altitude environment with little vegetation and few domesticated plants. Lepchas living at lower altitudes practise agriculture and Bhutias at higher altitude mixed farming and pastoralism though in varying degrees. Lepchas are the original inhabitants of Sikkim while Bhutias came from Tibet and Bhutan. The Bhutias conquered the Lepchas and established a monarchy in Sikkim. The Lepchas were animists, believing in spirits and gods of mountains and rivers while the Bhutias came with a com-

plex cultural and religious tradition. The Lepchas, during the course of history, came in contact with different races and were influenced by them in more ways than one, while the Bhutias as conquerers always remained aloof and superior.

Besides physical environment there are other factors like origin and cultural heritage of people; external forces either imposed by political events or by diffusion including contact with people of a different origin; and innovations made by people during the course of time that cause one community to differ from another.

The Lepchas and Bhutias of North Sikkim were introduced to ethnology by early travellers and officials (Dr. Campbell the Medical Superintendent 1840, 1849, 1874; J.D. Hooker, 1875; Colman Macaulay, 1885; Mainwaring, 1896, 1898; Sir Richard Temple, 1881; Waddell, 1899; John Claud White, 1909; The Earl of Ronaldshay, 1923; C. De Beauvoir Stocks, 1925; John Morris, 1938; Geoffrey Gorer, 1938). Detailed research work has been carried among Lepchas of Kalimpong and Sikkim, but no accounts of Bhutias of Lachen-Lachung exist up till now. No anthropological field work has been possible in this region after Sikkim's integration with India because of the turbulent political situation and the vulnerability of these people to outside forces. The field work for the present study was carried out from September 1981 to December 1983 in Dzongu (Fig. 2) and Lachen and Lachung (Fig. 3).

AREA AND PEOPLE

Sikkim, a small mountainous state in the eastern Himalayas has witnessed great changes in its political system, social structure, economic life and cultural values during the past hundred years. Sikkim is divided into numerous small valleys with an uneven distribution of population, and with inadequate communication facilities. The geographical location and political historical factors have resulted in the multiform ethnic mix. There are about fourteen ethnic groups residing in Sikkim. All these groups are characterised by speical ecological adaptations, as well as by the

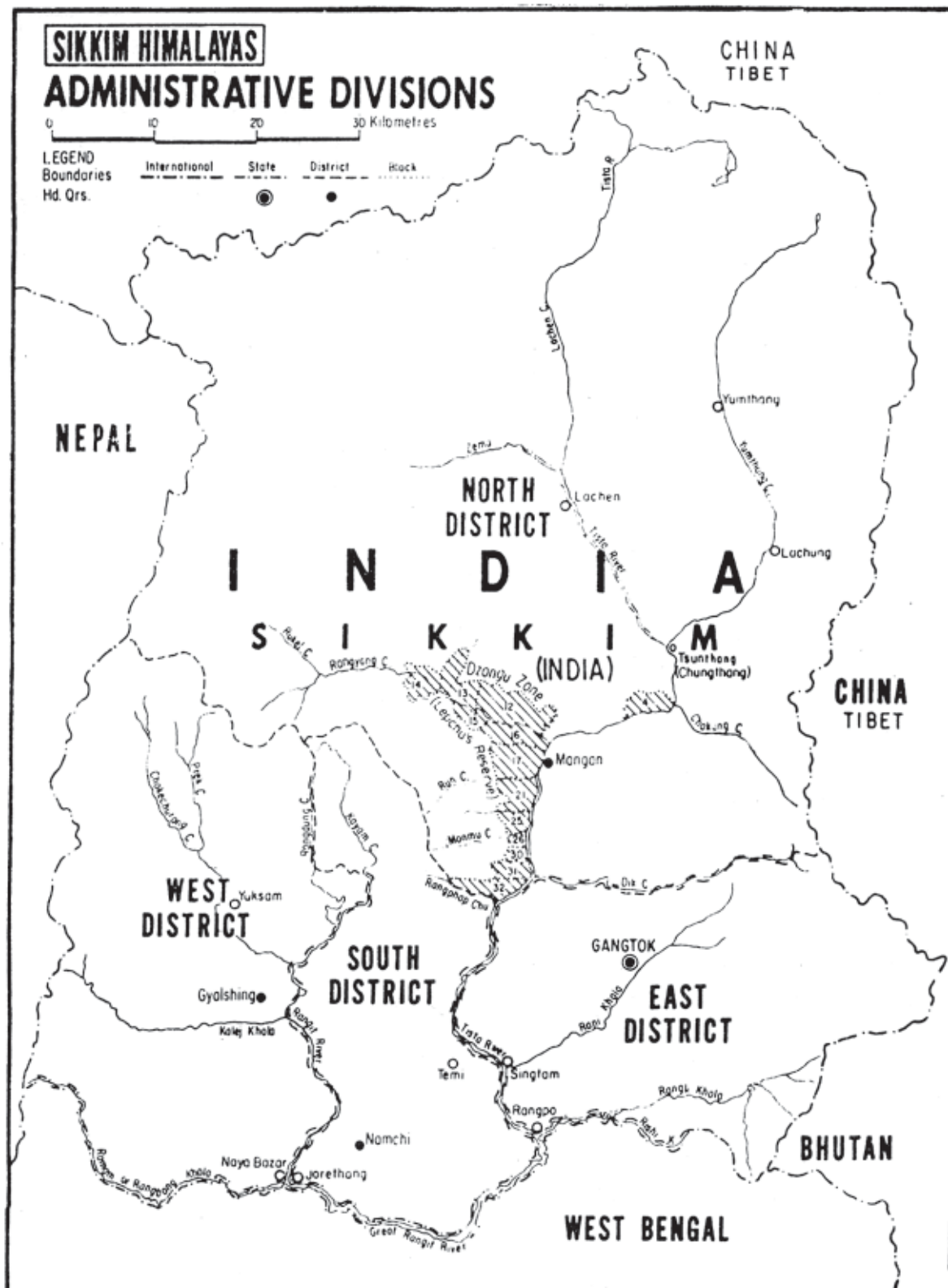


Fig. 1

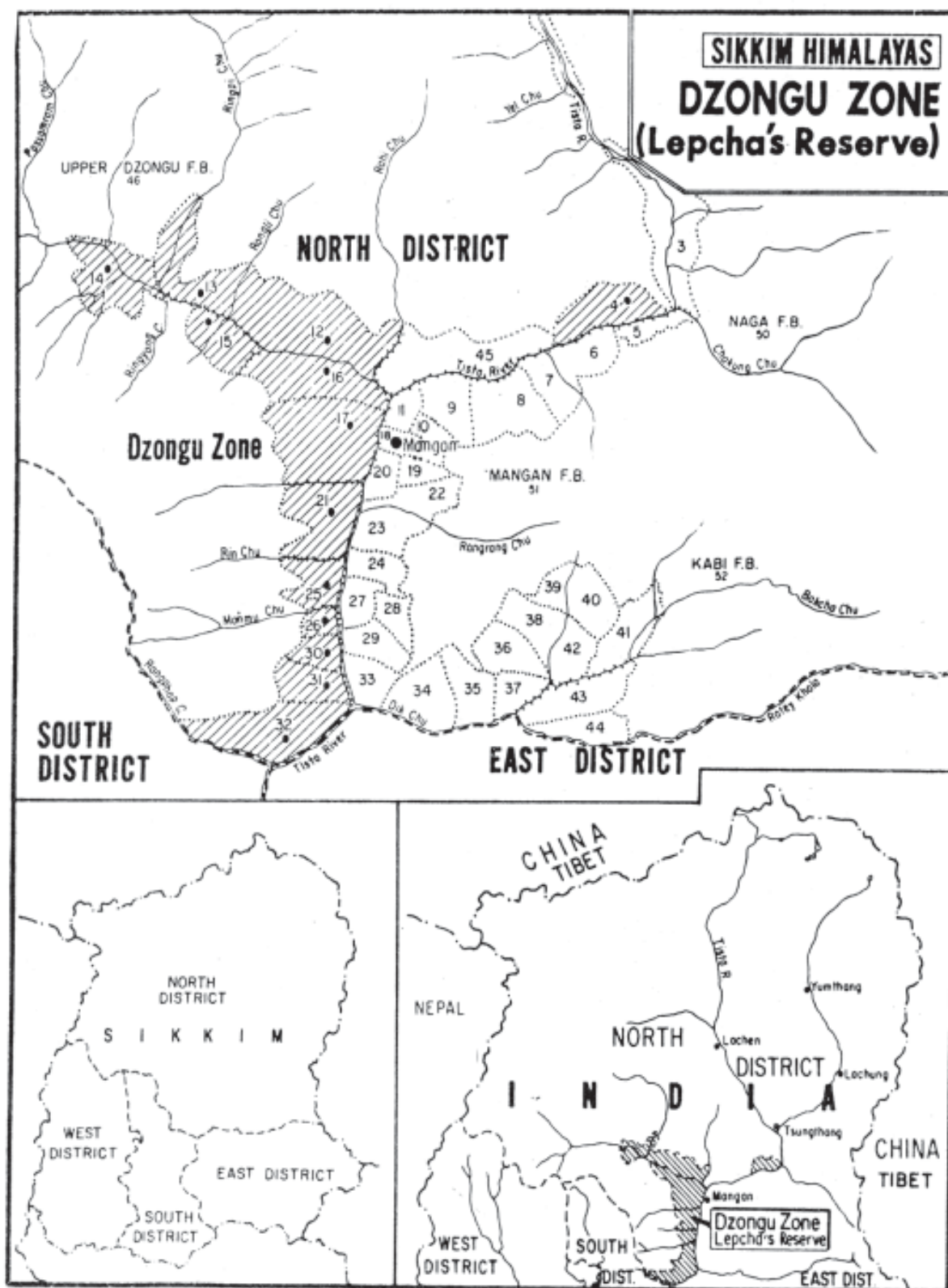


Fig. 2

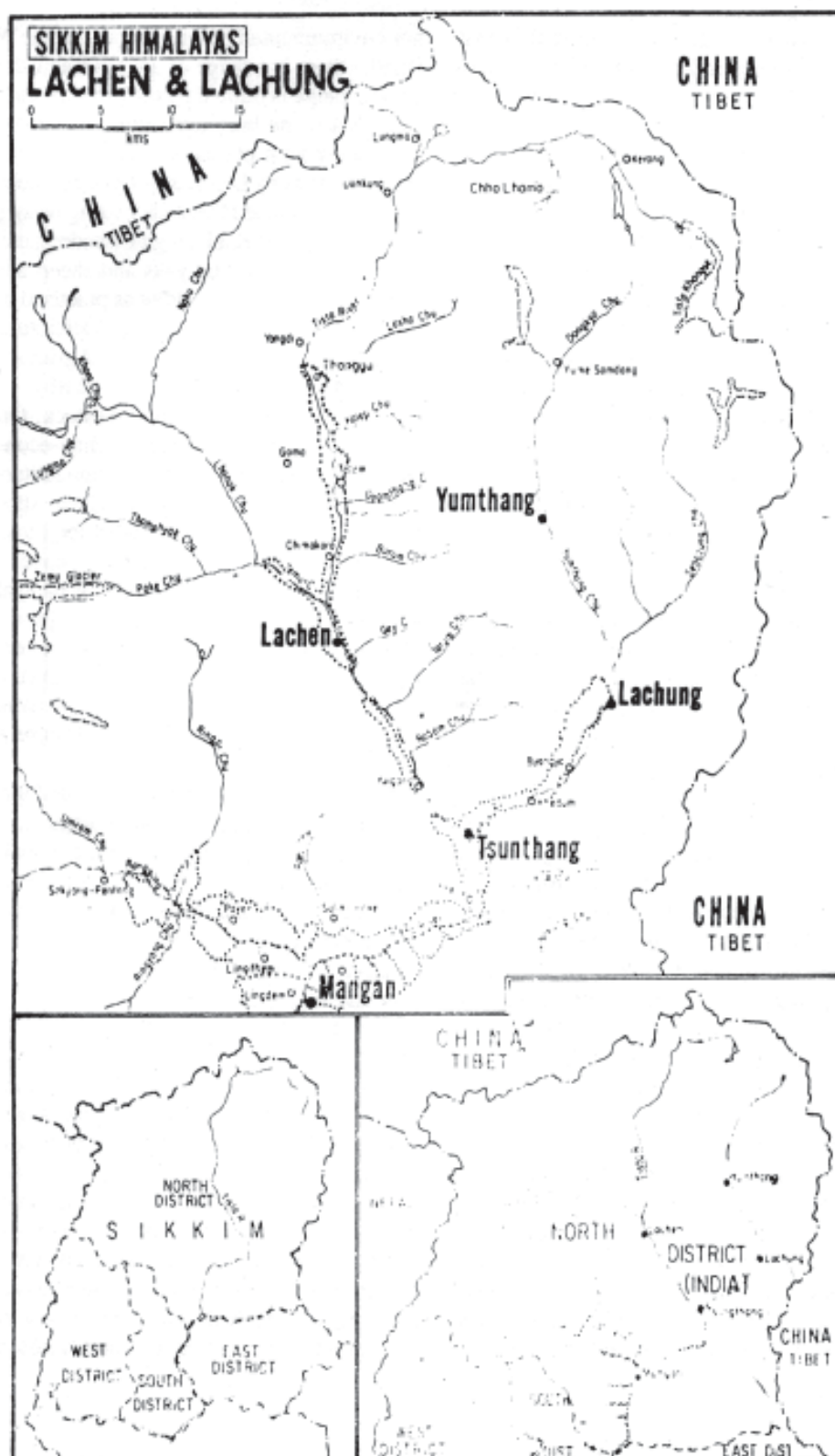


Fig. 3

social organisation of the region where they live. Most groups are culturally adapted to certain altitudes which has been a barrier to overall population mixture.

Before its assimilation into the Indian Union, Sikkim was an independent kingdom ruled by a hereditary Maharajah, who was assisted by large landowners, *Kazis*, in the administration of the states. The *Kazis* were hereditary ministers. During the British rule, the *Maharajah* was also assisted by British Political Officers along with the hereditary *Kazis*. The *Maharajah* was a Buddhist and Buddhism flourished greatly because of the encouragement to the Lamas and setting up of monasteries.

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 being situated between Nepal to its west and by Tibet to its north and east. 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 quarter of the entire area is totally uninhabited because the average altitude is more than 6,000 metres.

The principal communities inhabiting the area are scheduled tribes namely Lepchas, Bhutias, Sherpas, Doptapas and others. Lepchas are mostly found in the Dzongu area. Bhutias are spread throughout the district. Apart from these, Nepali labourers also reside in the area. Strict restrictions are imposed on immigrant Nepali labour wanting to settle permanently in the area, so as to maintain ethnic balance. Though they have lived in this area for a long time, they are not allowed to purchase land.

Due to the strategic position of the district and military settlements, the district is traversed by a well maintained motorable road (high way) which passes through Mangan, Chungthang, Lachen, Lachung and Yumthang. The many suspension bridges on the highway are maintained by General Reserve Engineer Force. The areas not lying on the highway, still have poor transport facilities. North Sikkim is neither culturally

nor environmentally homogenous. In the North District there is a range of adaptive adjustments but this range is limited by the physical environment. Slash and burn agriculture is being practised along with permanent cultivation of food and cash crops by Lepchas of Dzongu; sedentary farming with limited livestock rearing being practised by people of Kabi-Tingda, Phodong etc. and transhumance based on yaks and sheep with an equal emphasis on agriculture as practised by the people of Lachen and Lachung. Agriculture and pastoral areas lie close together. Agriculture is practised on valley slopes and nearby forests which serves as pastures for livestock. Once a group has made a particular techno-economic adaptation, there still remain a certain latitude for socio-cultural variation. In a given situation nuclear families or joint extended families, polyandry/polygyny or monogamy have their respective advantages. Hierarchical or egalitarian social system may be equally adaptive. It is reasonable to suggest that there are fewer ecological adaptations possible in any given environment than there are behavioural patterns that can develop in response to each of these adaptations.

Both the areas have remained isolated for long periods. This isolation was not complete. Isolation of a region, community or individual promotes self-sufficiency. It is equally true that self-sufficiency can promote isolation by making it unnecessary to seek elsewhere for goods or assistance. Lepchas were shy, Bhutias preferred cool and high places; isolation was thus a feature of environment, political subjugation and a matter of choice based on these considerations.

Regional isolation is today largely a matter of choice, although this attitude has probably arisen as the result of the self-sufficiency that was once required. The earlier isolation of the region was primarily due to terrain, inaccessibility and lack of motivation for travels. Occasionally travellers and traders passed through the areas with little influence on local population. These areas are still reserves, but nonetheless are sites of new development schemes and have responded differently

to external forces.

DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE

15845.95 hectares of Dzongu are sparsely populated with 7,745 people (4,331 Lepchas and 3,414 seasonal labourers). It is divided into thirteen revenue blocks (shown in Fig. 2 shaded area with location code numbers). Lachen revenue block is inhabited by 919 Lachenpas, out of which 474 are males and 445 females. There are 15 Sichepa (Tibetan refugees) staying in Lachen. Lachung revenue block with an area of 2814.22 hectares is inhabited by 1,508 people of whom 787 are males and 721 females. The Lachung revenue block is divided into three *busties* Shretchu, Singrig and Beechchu. This population includes institutional and household population. Out of these 647 males and 673 females are Lachungpas, 6 males and 3 females are Nepali scheduled castes, and the rest are government officials. There are no groups or divisions in Lachen and Lachung population.

The Lepchas of Dzongu have low sex ratio of 834 while Bhutias of Lachen-Lachung have 965 (Table 1) as compared to Kerala's sex ratio of 1032 and India's 933. Among both the groups high fertility is valued and the position of women is high. They have a system of bride price, where a female child is a valuable commodity and their labour is an important part of the fiscal system. The reason for low sex-ratio cannot be ascribed to the undercaring of women. It could be a chance occurrence. Among Bhutias, low sex ratio could be high altitude and rigours of terrain.

Masculinity proportion among Lepchas of Dzongu is 54.52 and Bhutia is 50.88 (Table 1) which is high as compared to India's 51.73 and Kerala's 49.21. Since the sex-ratio is low, the masculinity proportion is above 50.

The population structure of Lepchas and Bhutias is young and developing as the percentage of population in the age-group of 0-14 is 44.92 (46.11 among females and 43.48 among males) and 42.48 (43.91 among males and 40.99 among females) among Lepchas of Dzongu and Bhutias of Lachen-Lachung (Table 1). This is clear indic-

ator of high fertility. As opposed to the population in the 0-14 age-groups, that in the 65 and above is low- 2.26 per cent (2.59 males and 1.86 females) among Lepchas and 5.31 (6.09 among males and 4.50 among females) among Bhutias. This indicates a high mortality, or low survival to old age.

As the population is young, Young Age Dependency (YAD) among Lepchas and Bhutias is 85.02 and 81.36, respectively. When the population in the 0-14 age group is so high, the YAD tends to be high because the population in the working ages of 15-65 reduces. The Old Age Dependency (OAD) is low as the population in the age-group of 65 and above is low. The survival to old age is not high in both the groups. The problems of aging population are almost non-existent. Index of aging is 5.03 among Lepchas and 12.50 among Bhutias (Table 1).

The main occupation of the Lepchas and Bhutias in North Sikkim is farming, 60.34 and 68.42 per cent, respectively for men. Even among the women of North Sikkim, the occupation is farming (96.49 and 81.5 per cent, respectively among the Lepchas and Bhutias). The Crude Activity Rate (CAR) and General Activity Rate (GAR) are quite low in these populations, CAR being 28.81 and 29.42 and GAR being 54.55 and 56.36 among Lepchas and Bhutias of North Sikkim. In both the communities, most of the women work irrespective of their economic position (Table 1). High rate of female illiteracy 87.72 and 86.84 among Lepchas and Bhutias and lack of employment opportunities, restrict the working of women outside the house. They share more or less equal responsibility with men in the house farming and other economic activities.

Crude Birth Rate (CBR) among Lepchas is 28.25, which is higher than Kerala's 22.9 but lower than India's 33.9 in 1984 (Table 1), Bhutia's CBR is 22.12 which is almost equal to Kerala but lower than India. The CBR is moderate in the sample. This is quite contrary to what can be expected from the observation of population composition measures. The most probable reason seems to be that in such small sample it is left to chance as to how many births have

Table 1: Demographic variables of Lepchas and Bhutias of North Sikkim

Variables	North Sikkim	
	Lepchas	Bhutias
1. Sex Ratio	834	965
2. Masculinity Proportion	54.52	50.88
3. Age Specific Distribution		
0-14 (Male)	46.11	43.91
(Female)	43.48	40.99
15-64 (Male)	51.30	50.00
(Female)	54.66	54.50
65+ (Male)	2.59	6.09
(Female)	1.86	4.50
4. Dependency Ratios		
(i) Young Age Dependency Ratio (YAD)	85.02	81.36
(ii) Old Age Dependency Ratio (OAD)	4.27	10.17
(iii) Total Dependency Ratio (TDR)	89.29	91.53
5. Index of Aging	5.03	12.50
6. Age at Menarche	15.81	15.49
7. Age at Menopause	46.67	40.50
8. Reproductive Span	30.86	25.01
9. Age at Marriage		
(i) Female	18.16	19.20
(ii) Male	22.50	23.15
10. Activity Rate-Crude	28.81	29.42
-General	54.55	56.36
11. Literacy Rate		
Illiterate-Male	43.10	62.27
-Female	87.72	86.84
Literate-Male	56.90	37.33
-Female	12.28	13.36
12. Estimates in Fertility		
(i) Crude Birth Rate (CBR)	28.85	22.12
(ii) General Fertility Rate (GFR)	128.21	97.09
(iii) General Marital Fertility Rate (GMFR)	196.08	164.10
(iv) Total Fertility Rate (TFR)	4273.74	3908.70
(v) Age Specific Fertility Rate (ASFR)		
15-19	71.43	—
20-24	66.66	166.67
25-29	133.33	166.67
30-34	250.00	250.00
35-39	111.11	222.22
40-44	222.22	—
45-49	—	—
13. Mean Age of Child Bearing	32.93	31.03
14. Numbers of Children Born in		
-Nuclear Family	5.2	5.0
-Joint Family	4.9	3.4
15. Estimates of Mortality (For Buddhist-Total)		
(i) Infant Mortality Rate (IMR)		177.8
(ii) Neonatal Mortality Rate (NMR)		66.7
(iii) Perinatal Mortality Rate		111.1
(iv) Fetal Death Rate		88.9
(v) Crude Death Rate		22.2
		19.8

occured in that year.

General Fertility Rate (GFR) also does not indicate a definite pattern, except that though the CBR is moderate, the GFR is high 128.21 and 97.09 among Lepchas and Bhutias, respectively (Table 1). This indicates that number of women in 15-49 age group is less compared to the total population, but fertility is high. In both the communities, the GFR is higher than Kerala's 83.6 and less than India's 145.2.

A more refined measure is General Marital Fertility Rate (GMFR), which takes in to account the number of married women in child bearing age. GMFR for Lepchas and Bhutias is 196.08 and 104.1, respectively (Table 1), as compared to India's GMFR of 137.0.

Age Specific Fertility Rate (ASFR) among the Lepchas and Bhutias shows that it is highest in the age group 30-34, 250.00 per thousand females. Among Lepchas fertility starts early as can be seen in the age group 15-19 which shows 71.43 and remains high till age group 40-44 which shows 222.22. Bhutia's fertility starts late in the age-group of 20-24 and continues up to the age-group of 35-39. Mean age at child bearing among Lepchas and Bhutias is 32.93 and 31.03, respectively (Table 1).

Total Fertility Rate (TFR) among Lepchas and Bhutias is 4273.74 and 3908.70, respectively (Table 1). Human fertility is influenced by a host of biological, sociological and economic factors. The influence of all these factors on fertility has not been examined for Lepchas and Bhutias due to paucity of relevant and reliable data.

In most societies marriage is an important factor in fertility because begetting a progeny is socially accepted only after marriage. Age at marriage among Lepcha male and female is 22.50 and 18.16, while among Bhutias, it is slightly higher being 23.15 and 19.20, respectively. However in many societies fertility is more valued and a pregnant girl has more chances of marriage since she has proved her capability as a fertile woman. Among Lepchas and Bhutias, marriage is not a prerequisite for having an offspring. Though marriage is an important institution, it can take place even after living together for many

years and having children. Generally couple postpone the main wedding ceremony for economic reasons though they generally have the consent of their kinsmen prior to it. It is indeed economically problematic for the parents to lose their children's labour, give them their share of property and to finance their wedding. A family is affected emotionally as well as economically by the boy's marriage, so it can be assumed that there is resistance from the parent's side. Therefore age at marriage does not have a bearing on fertility in these communities. It is not only the timing and tempo of the first marriage but also the extent of the broken marriages such as widowhood, divorce and separation which constitute significant intermediate variables affecting the time span of the reproductive process and indirectly fertility behaviour. But these factors do not have a bearing on fertility of these populations. Among the Lepchas and Bhutias the instability of marriages does not affect fertility patterns as women's economic ability and consequent social position has resulted in special institutional privileges that are bestowed on them.

LEPCHAS OF DZONGU (RESERVE) ZONE

Lepchas have adapted culturally to diverse natural land scapes and have designed production activities suited to the region. Three major biogeographical provinces of human land use can be identified in the area;

- (i) The upper slopes of the hills;
- (ii) The lower and temperate zone of minor valleys; and
- (iii) The valley floor, peripheral valley bottom.

The land holdings of a family is divided into a number of fields, some permanent and others temporary, used after a fallowing of seven or eight years. The permanent fields are rice terraces (*Pani-khet* or *Checkboo*) cardamum fields (*Elaichi Bari* or *Aanyu*) and house garden (*Aangan Bari* or *Sing*). The temporary fields or dry fields (*Sukha Bari* or *Sudyom*) are cultivated for two years successfully and then abandoned

for seven or eight year. The area being damp, excessive rainfall helps in regeneration of secondary forest growth, which is cut and burnt after seven years permitting cultivation to be started again.

The different fields of a family are at different places at varying altitudes. The temporary dry fields are on upper slopes of the hill, where barley, buckwheat and millet are grown. The house garden at lower level has wheat, maize and vegetable cultivation. The valley floor is used for paddy cultivation. The cardamum fields are always under the shady trees. On the hill slopes tapioca cultivation is practised.

Lepchas lay great emphasis on individual achievement and initiative. There are no restraints, human, cultural or supernatural which cannot be overcome. Lepcha individualism is rooted in group functioning; they emphasize communal or collective co-operation and achievement. This communal individualism of Lepchas can be traced further by analysing the traditional social pattern and the influence of their nucleated residential pattern. The ideal of co-operation is illustrated in Lobo-groups, Ing-zone (special friends) and other work groups at different levels.

Dzongu has been a Lepchas reserve for long, and its cultural borrowings and assimilation had been going on since the advent of Bhutias and before the British and Nepali intrusions. Lepchas of Dzongu have been most willing to accept the changes resulting from different contacts.

Prior to the Tibetan invasion, Lepchas were the original inhabitants of Sikkim. They were nomads and subsisted mainly on gathering of roots, tubers, fishing and hunting and practising a rudimentary form of shifting cultivation with a few crude implements. Though they were at a comparatively low technological level, their knowledge of their natural resources, plants, herbs, roots, tubers, animals etc. was tremendous. They inhabited dense forests and their social organisation was simple. They were animistic in belief according to their Bon and Mayel religion.

With the advent of Tibetans, the monarchy of Phuntsog Namgyal was established. This resulted in a mass migration of Tibetans to Sikkim, the

dominance of a ruling class and subjugation of Lepchas. The conversion of Lepchas to Buddhism and replacement of their scriptures followed.

Intermarriage with Tibetans resulted in the new generation of Sikkimese Bhutias. New Tibetan ideas infiltrated into Lepcha culture and this whole period shows the dominance of Tibetans over the Lepchas in all spheres of their life and culture.

Next they came in contact with Bhutanese and Nepalese. Their territorial rights were threatened, they lost much of their land to Bhutanese and Nepalese. This contact with Bhutanese and Nepalese again brought in new ideas which led to the destruction of the Lepcha culture. Intermarriage with Bhutanese and Nepalese increased.

British help was sought for the protection of their territory against frequent Nepalese attacks. The British brought a new type of administration and certain measures to reduce their exploitation were introduced. A reserve for Lepchas was created, forests were reserved and taxes were imposed. With this began a settled life and new sources of income were opened up to them. Cultivation of wet rice and cardamum was introduced. Lepchas readily accepted this along with Nepalese rituals and labour for cardamum cultivation.

In the post-Independence era, the integration of Sikkim into the Indian Union has resulted in further changes, brought about by development programmes. The Panchayat was introduced to replace the Mandal type of administration. Lepchas have readily accepted the Panchayat system, as under it they do not have to work for the Mandal and *Kazi*, free of charge. Free service for the ruling class has been totally abolished. Till very recently, the whole Dzongu area belonged to the Royal family as their private estate. When this was abolished, Lepchas lost no time in exploiting the economic opportunities offered by better roads, markets and availability of machine-made consumer goods through their earnings from cardamum. However, socialisation of children and co-operation between families still remains largely as before.

Innovations among the Lepcha are self-sponsored. For example, the government opened schools and managed them, but the Lepchas formed work groups and built *Balwaris* and schools themselves; they are part of their own community effort and provide an example of community achievement.

The Lepchas are looked down upon by other ethnic groups because of their ability to do all sorts of work and to eat all types of food. No work is considered demeaning and no food is taboo.

The adaptive nature can be explained by insecurity of food, the poverty of the soil and docile nature of the Lepchas. Lepcha agriculture is still primitive; it is still a hoe culture and farming is a way of life rather than a business proposition. This change from shifting cultivation to wet rice and cardamum cultivation is a rational economic decision and shows a preference for a system which promises better rewards.

Lepchas in contact with outsiders show a tendency to select those cultural traits which can easily be reconciled with their own existing cultural pattern. The greater the number of alternatives, the greater the freedom of choice. This is true of the Lepcha case and helps to explain the apparent paradox that Lepchas have probably changed the least while changing the most. The nature of the contact situation has made it possible for Lepchas to accept certain innovations, modify certain elements of their social, religious, economic and political structure in order to accommodate the changes, and retain their basic pattern of community structure and co-operative character. The flexibility of their social structure and the co-operative nature of their society, makes it possible for them to select when they are in a contact situation.

BHUTIAS OF LACHEN AND LACHUNG

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 cloths 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 blanket, *Bakhus* (dress) and tweeds etc. on their indigenous looms. These traditional handicrafts have suffered a great setback. 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, and other environmental features restricting 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.

The Bhutias of Lachen and Lachung like the Lepchas have adopted culturally to diverse land scapes and established settlement patterns and production activities tailored to the limitations imposed by the region. On account of high altitudes, terrain and little rainfall, land-use is restricted to limited regions which are either below the villages or much above the residential areas, people grow small quantities of barley, wheat, maize and buckwheat. They raise yaks and sheep to supplement their subsistence economy. The yak provides its owner with milk, meat, wool and transportation. The vast open spaces between 4,483 and 3,824 metres altitude are used for raising yaks, robust animals that require little care and are perfectly adapted to high altitudes.

Lachen and Lachung present an interesting contrast as far as movement for agricultural activity is concerned while both have more or less the same products. The movement though vertical in both cases are in opposite directions and is controlled by the fact that they have arable land at

different elevations at different places. The people of Lachen move upwards in order to cultivate land at Yakthang, Samdong, Tallum and Kalep. These are the villages along the tributaries of the Lachenchu at altitude of 3,355 metres. They stay here from May to July and move further upwards to Byamzay, Toga, Tseuk, Chopta and Divu-Thang villages at a height of 3,965 metres in the Thanggu area, where they stay from August to November.

On the other hand, people of three Busties -(Shertchu, Beechchu and Singrig) of Lachung have their apple fields and grow vegetable near their houses. They have their arable land at lower altitudes towards Chungthang at Khedum, Leema and Lothen at about 1,525 metres (Fig. 4).

December-January they come to prepare the fields for 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 up to Yumthang and Yume Samdong. In August-September, they come back to Khedum, Leema Lothen for harvesting the previous crop of maize while harvesting is going on, side by side animal herds graze in the nearby pasture, people cut grass, collect firewood and apply fertilizers in the fields for sowing of wheat and barley in November-December. Harvesting of wheat and barley takes place in March.

This movement is necessitated by the fact that there is no arable land available in Lachen and Lachung. Out of 2817.22 hectares of Lachung, 666.36 is unirrigated land available for cultivation and 2150.86 hectares is not available for cultivation. The opposite directions of movement also explain some of the differences in the agricultural produce and harvesting times of the two areas under study. The Lachung people 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 the opposite direction - Lachenpas going down and Lachungpas going upward.

Even the season for each crop varies with alti-

LACHEN LACHUNG - Transhumance Pattern

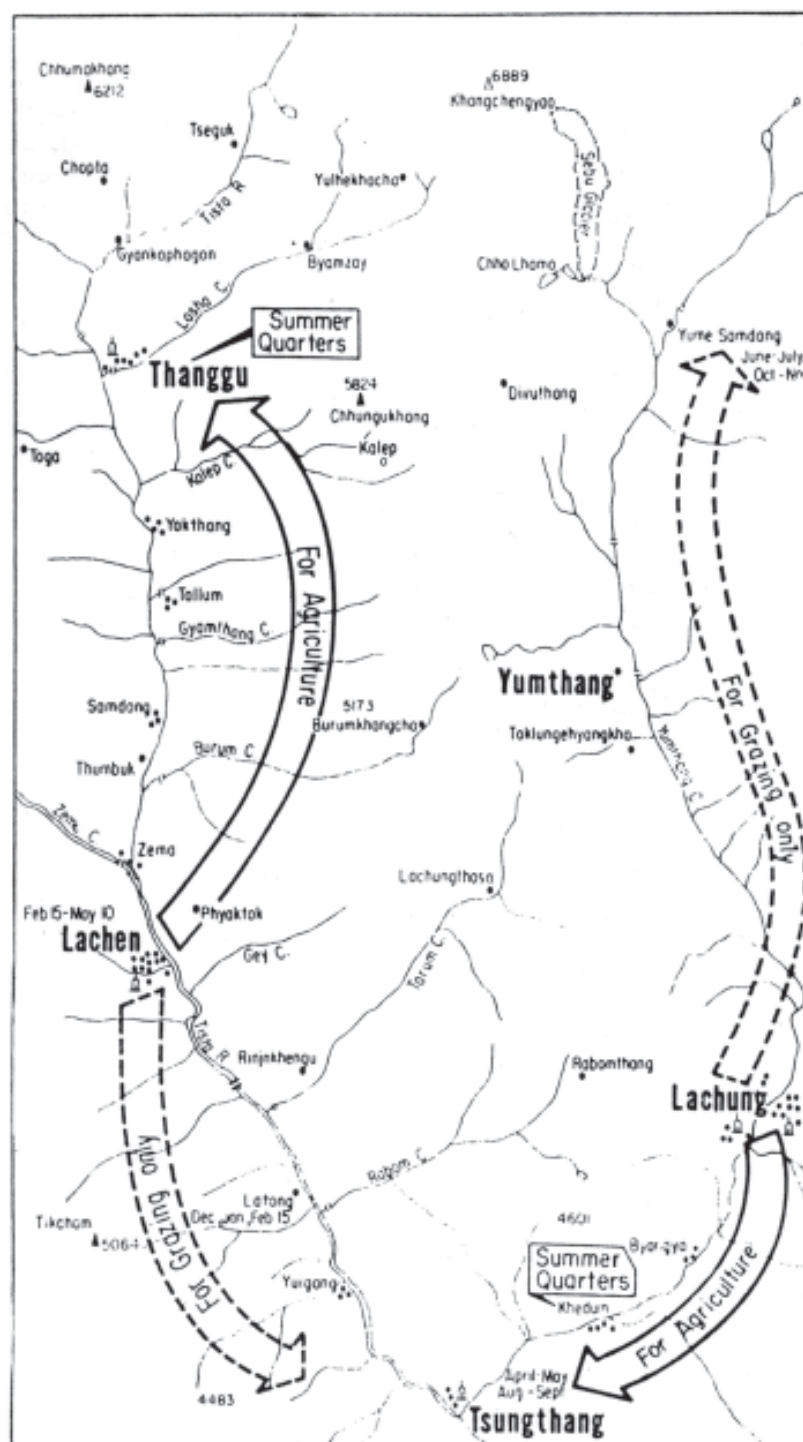


Fig. 4

tude, soil, temperature and rainfall. Potato is harvested in September in the high zones of Lachen valley, while it is harvested in the valley of Lachung only in July. Crop rotation is another feature of the Lachung valley which is absent in Lachen. In winter, the Lachen valley has practically no agricultural production, but in Lachung, maize is followed by barley and buckwheat as winter crops. Due to low temperatures both the crops cannot be harvested within a complete year. They take more than 15 months to mature, and after two crops the land is kept fallow for a few months.

Though Bhutaneses in origin, they were much influenced by the Tibetan culture. However, they have preserved their traditional form of *Dzumsha* and *Phipun* administration. The Lachen-Lachung area has a special status with regard to settlement, land revenue and local administration. Lachen-Lachung have their own traditional local government system and the provisions of the 1965 Panchayat Act have not been extended to this area.

Bhutias of Lachen-Lachung have communal forest/pasture and agricultural land with family ownership of land but with strong community regulation of land usage. The village is an important land holding unit and is administered by the *Dzumsha* (village council). The land distribution pattern among Bhutias of Lachen-Lachung has influenced effective land use. Among Lachungpas, the land is redistributed and reallocated after every three years. People do not try to improve the condition of land by using chemical fertilizers or making terraces etc. No water channels have been cut, in a sense, they do not own land but are using it for a limited time. This system of redistribution was intended to avoid unequal distribution of good and bad land. But it has resulted in neglected fields with poor yields (for details see Bhasin, 1989).

Both Lachenpas and Lachungpas are endogamous groups. Before the closure of the Tibetan border, marriages used to take place also with Tibetans. There are no structural groupings like Lepcha's Putso or caste-class among Bhutias of Lachen-Lachung; the individual households are

related by unilateral consanguinal ties. The situation becomes more complex and relations are now overlapping as marriages within the society occur regularly.

Among both the communities, Lepchas as well as the Bhutias, the household is the smallest and most important unit of production and consumption. However, in cases of need, existing group structures larger than the household and smaller than the *Busti* are available. These are ad-hoc gatherings of relatives and friends coming together to assist a person in whose interest the group carries out a defined job. *Lobo* among the Lepchas and *Chuchi* among the Bhutias, the mutual aid group consists almost entirely of groups of neighbours and/or kinsmen related in one way or another to the person concerned. It is important to note that these mutual aid-groups are not based on kinship in general, but on residential and customary lines. *Ochhom* among the Lepchas and *Doro* among the Bhutias are friendship groups which supplement labour, cattle and fields in case of need. These friendship groups are distinguished from other co-operative networks because no reciprocal obligations are involved. This work-exchange system among the Lepchas and the Bhutias rests on the fact that different economic activities require more labour than the family alone can provide.

In addition to these *Chuchi* and *Dzumsha* membership relationships, each family contributes money and labour to those *Busti* enterprises and institutions that operate for the general welfare of the people. In the same way as the Lepcha contribute *Ohlok*, Bhutias contribute *Rubti* for similar purposes. Fines are levied on absconders and defaulters.

As in the case of the Lepchas, each family contributes to the ceremonies performed at the *Busti Gumpa*. Compulsory work and contributions are expected when festivals are held and rituals performed to ward off evil spirits and natural calamities.

The conclusion drawn regarding the interrelationships between social groups larger than the nuclear family and importance given to eating and drinking are similar in both the cases.

DISCUSSION

The socio-political systems of the Lepcha and the Bhutia have certain features in common, though at a glance they look strikingly different. In contrast to the Lepcha's acceptance of the Panchayat organisation, the Bhutias still conform to the age-old system of community organisation - *Dzumsha*. Both the Bhutia communities (Lachenpas and Lachungpas) are governed by a headman (*Phipun*) the council of village elders *Gen-me* and *Ganthe-Lenge* among Lachenpas and Lachungpas, respectively and by the assembly of all the people. Though Lepchas have accepted the panchayat, this shift is not a break with tradition, because the Busti-elder's council had long been a feature of Lepcha-Busti life. Rather the somewhat informal elder council is strengthened, democratically elected and formally given the charge of the Busti administration. The socio-political set-up of the Lepchas is close to that of the Bhutias of Lachen-Lachung. The Lepcha's *Mandal* corresponds to Bhutia's *Phipun* and Lepcha's *Lyang-ganbu* (elders) to *Gen-me* and *Genethi-Lenge* of Lachen and Lachung. In both areas there are several *Gyapon* under the Busti headman. In spite of the differences in ecology, economy and ethnic origins between the two areas, they both probably present a similar basic pattern of *Busti* organisation. The indigenous systems of prestige and power in these two communities are based on relative egalitarianism, as these communities are largely unstratified. This type of socio-political system derives 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.

Again the similarities in religious rituals and beliefs are interesting among the Lepchas and the Bhutias. The main function of religion in these societies is to help people to cope with the problem of suffering and provide relief from it. That which cannot be explained pragmatically is considered the action of supernaturals and the people's

inability to cope with such acts forms the basis of the religious system. Both Lepchas and Bhutias perform healing and purification rites, and maintain similar beliefs about the supernatural and man's responsibility to it. Rituals in both communities are social events with supernatural overtones. The Lepchas have accepted the rank hierarchy of Lamas according to the Hinayana Buddhism only for religious purpose, but it has no meaning in their secular life. Their society remains basically egalitarian. Lepchas have not incorporated the ethics of the adopted religion in their life, except that Lamas do not sacrifice animals.

However, like most other tribes which have increasingly adapted to and adopted modern culture, technology and education, the Lachenpas and Lachungpas still, by and large, zealously cling to their traditional mores. But this does not mean that these people have not felt the thrust of Indian society at all. Changes can be seen in a number of Bhutia houses. One sees people walking to the nearby co-operative store to buy things.

The most encouraging change in the Bhutia way of life is the new enthusiasm for education in the young. At the turn of the century when a school was opened by Swiss missionaries, people were afraid to send their children to school. They vehemently resisted for fear that the children would learn English and forget their own language and culture.

Resistance to formal education has not completely died down, but a great many Bhutias have come to realise its benefits, and have accepted it as part of a new reality. Bilingual schools, subsidised by the Indian government, with Bhutia teachers have been established, so that they can be integrated into their culture.

Education has given them choices. Before they had access to education, they were pretty much relegated to occupations that already existed like animal husbandry, trading, marginal farming and crafts. But education has opened up new fields for them. In Lachen alone, there are forty government officials.

There is still a keen tussle between the con-

servatives and the progressives among the Bhutias. While the traditionalists insist on keeping the old ways intact, the progressives emphasise that the only way they can survive in today's world is to move with the times, and imbibe and integrate change into their culture without losing their individuality.

It is generally believed that the progressive will have the last word: Bhutias are witnessing the advantages of contact with the outside world. And what is most encouraging is the fact that even when educated Bhutias work outside their homeland, they retain their roots and are proud of their cultural heritage.

They enjoy complete internal autonomy, and liaison with the State government is maintained by the *Phipun*. Bhutias think that their own system of deciding problems and issues is more democratic. The traditional way of settling issues is to discuss matters until public opinion has crystallised out one solution or the other.

In substance, a comparison of the changes that have occurred in the two communities show that Bhutias have remained primarily in touch with the Tibetans and have only changed their life style in a limited economic sense. The Lepchas who have been in contact with various communities have incorporated in their life style the rituals and other customs of the people with whom they have been in contact.

The opportunities as far as government sponsored programmes are concerned have been offered equally to both the groups. However only one group has taken any meaningful advantage of new inputs. The Bhutias placed they are in an ecological setting where new inputs were not viable are obviously in a disadvantaged position. The Lepchas have selectively taken on new opportunities that have been offered by the government.

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