

Ethnic Relations Among the People of Sikkim

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ABSTRACT Anthropological studies have been carried out in the field of ethnicity, ethnic relation and ethnic groups. In the traditional anthropological studies the tribe, race and ethnic groups were considered fundamental for classification of human populations which existed to distinct, integrated social units whose boundaries were clear and disdain. Later anthropological research has been carried taking into account the nature and persistence of ethnic boundaries, incorporation of ethnic populations, organization of inter ethnic relations and consequent competition of resource distribution. The present paper attempts to analyse the social relations among different ethnic groups inhabiting Sikkim state, their place in the total environment, their relations to resources and other stakeholders.

INTRODUCTION

Ethnic groups are segments of population which differ in descent, in cultural and physical traits, and in collective identity. People are usually born to an ethnic group; most marry within and remain part of the ethnic group. Members of an ethnic group also share certain feelings, ideas and behaviour. Ethnic groups are different from racial groups and social classes. However, ethnic groups and social classes, do overlap. The term 'ethnic relations' refers to the interactions between ethnic groups, relations that are abounding with intolerance, hostility and violence. Ethnic relations are rarely neutral and mostly associated with sharp inequalities in wealth and power. Ethnic relations are generally marked with prejudices, discriminations, antagonism, conflicts, tensions and racial disdain between different groups. Ethnic relations exists in different forms: assimilation; consociationalism; domination; and mixed and transient situations.

In the assimilations state, the immigrants tend to part with their original cultural practices to assimilate with the dominant groups by adopting their customs and cultural practices. They try to merge by sharing their behavioural pattern and intermarrying into the dominant group. The consociationalism means association be-

tween equals. In this state the ethnic group tries to preserve their distinct cultures, institutions and identities. The interaction between such groups is more or less on equal footing. They are socio-politically organized and are represented proportionately in key positions. This situation is what Giddens (1989) call 'Cultural Pluralism' where different sub-cultures are recognised equally. In such a situation, both ethnic differences and ethnic assimilation become a focus of conflict. In the domination state, the ethnic relations are ill-balanced. The dominant ethnic group clearly controls major share of resources, services and benefits. This economic dominance helps in controlling other ethnic groups, monopolising decision making and establishing their own culture as the prevalent one. The sub-ordinate groups become more dependent and loose the capacity to resist because of economic dependence, political subjugation and segregation. In addition to these, there are other situations where the ethnic relations do not take any specific form. The main determinant of ethnic relation is ethnicity and it crystallizes in situations when people of different backgrounds come in contact and try to claim the same economic resources, share the same social institutions or political system.

All societies are divided in two sections: the few who have and many who do not. The ethnic relations among the different groups depend on the ownership and the use pattern of natural resources (private, common, public and combination of these three ownerships). The ownership of resources is critical for defining and elaborating social relations of ethnic groups. These relations may have to operate under varied ecological / economic / social / legal / political/cultural constraints. Thus environment of any one ethnic group is also shared by various stakeholders according to their socio-economic needs. Some of the groups and communities exploit only a section of total environment, and leave rest for other groups to exploit. The multiple ramifications (ecological / social / cultural and economic) act as an incentive / disincentive for reciprocal relations.

Anthropological studies have been carried out in the field of ethnicity, ethnic relations and ethnic groups (Benedict, 1965; Kunstedter, 1967; Kuper and Smith, 1969). In the traditional anthropological studies the tribe, race and ethnic groups were considered fundamental units for classification of human populations which existed as distinct, integrated social units whose boundaries were clear and disdain. After Leach's (1954) critical view of the traditional concept of ethnic groups, anthropological research has been criticized for not taking into account the nature and persistence of ethnic boundaries, incorporation of ethnic populations, organization of inter ethnic relations and consequent competition for resource distribution. (Barth, 1956, 1964a, b, 1969a, Wallerstein 1960; Moerman 1965; Helm 1968; Vayda and Rappaport 1968; Cohen and Middleton 1970; Levine and Campbell 1972; Despres 1975). Definitions put forth by scholars communicate that specific interpretations of the ethnicity were conceived according to the population under-study. Universal conceptual framework of ethnicity is yet to emerge.

Abruzzi's (1962) ecological approach to the analysis of ethnic differentiation and the structure of multi-ethnic societies is influenced by the work of Barth. Barth (1970) places emphasis on group organization and the maintenance of ethnic boundaries via ethnic markers. He suggests that the boundaries between ethnic groups are maintained not through isolation as suggested by Narroll (1964) but through social processes of exclusion and incorporation i.e. ethnic groups members identify themselves in terms of ethnic categories and are in turn recognized as members by outsiders. Rex (1986) has criticized Barth for not taking into account the conflict between the ethnic groups.

The present paper attempts to analyse the social relations among different ethnic groups inhabiting Sikkim state, their place in the total environment, their relations to resources and other stakeholders.

Area and Resources

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. Sikkim has been strongly influenced by Tibet in its religious and cultural life. Under British rule Sikkim had been a remote out post of British India. Although technically it had been granted sovereign status it was run much like the princely states, by a resident British political officer.

After Independence Sikkim was made a protectorate of India rather than one of its constituent states. The protectorate status meant that Sikkim retained control over its internal affairs while India was responsible for its defence and territorial integrity. 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 after that.

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. The *Kajis* were hereditary ministers. During the British rule, the *Maharajah* was also assisted by British Political Officers along with the *Kajis*. The *Maharajah* was a Buddhist and Buddhism flourished greatly because of the encouragement to the Lamas and setting up of monasteries. Sikkim state has a strategic position between Nepal, Tibet and Bhutan.

Sikkim contains within its borders a variety of non-tropical and geographic environments from the low snow-free outer hills to the high peaks with permanent snow and glaciers. Within its habitable portions, different social, religious, linguistic ethnic groups co-exist practising different types of agriculture and pastoral activities. As one moves northwards, valley floors and mountains peaks increase in altitude, the terrain becomes more rugged and the climate drier and more temperate. By virtue of being in the direct path of the monsoon, it is the wettest part of the whole area. The climate varies from sub tropical to Alpine depending upon the altitudes. Sikkim has an annual rainfall of 12.50 mm even in the dry upper valleys of Lachung and Lachen, increasing to about 3,500 mm in other districts. Sikkim state is primarily a catchment area of the Tista drainage system. Every centimeter of the run-off from precipitation or snow melt in the state is carried by the Tista river and its tributaries. The cultivated area in the state is essentially located

on a elevation ranging from a few hundred metres to 2000 metres. The terrain being hilly, with frequent occurrence of land slides, major irrigation projects cannot be undertaken.

The topographical features of the state tend to restrict the land use. The rugged harsh climate limits agriculture which is the mainstay of the economy upto 3,000 metres. The whole Sikkim state from the view of land utilization can be divided into three zones - crop growing zone (12.00 per cent); the forest zone (36.0 per cent); and alpine pasture (39.0 per cent). Forest resources include not only timber, but bamboo, fuel wood, fodder, minor forest produce, medicinal plants and wild life.

Sikkim is divided into numerous small valleys with an uneven distribution of population, and with inadequate communication facilities. Agricultural land is limited to narrow, rugged mountain valleys. The settlement pattern consists of dispersed hamlets on the lower slopes above the agricultural lands. The lower Himalayas region is more thickly populated as compared to the higher areas. The high hills are inhabited by transhumant population. The lower hills, bordering the plains, have more diverse economic activities. The fields are invariably terraced. The principal crops of Sikkim are maize, cardamum, paddy, wheat, barley and potatoes. Other crops like soyabean, oranges, apples, ginger and beans are raised in small areas.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The population of Sikkim state is composed of three ethnic groups the Lepchas, the Bhutias and the Nepalis who settled in the state at different times. The Lepchas and few Kirati tribemen are considered the original inhabitants of the state while the Bhutias and Nepalis are immigrants. In 1891 when Sikkim was an independent country, the total population was 30,458 of which 5,762 were Lepchas, 4,894 were Bhutias and the rest were Nepalis, including minor groups of Limbu, Gurung, Murmi etc. (Gazetter of Sikkim, 1894). According to the Census of India, 1931, total population of Sikkim increased to 109,808 of which 13,060 were Lepchas and 11,955 Bhutias. In 1951, the Census of India showed a further increase in Sikkim's population to 137,725. Out of which 39,397 were reported as Buddhists against 97,863 as Hindus. As ethnic groups as such were not mentioned, it can be assumed that

the Buddhist population represents Lepchas and Bhutias and the Hindus as Nepalis. At present the balance is still more to the disadvantage of the Lepchas. Some of the major groups in Sikkim are found throughout the state, while Scheduled Tribes like Lepchas, Bhutias, Sherpas and Doptaps are found in limited areas. All these groups are characterized by specific ecological adaptations, as well as 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.

Many languages and dialects are spoken in Sikkim. The three main languages of the state are Nepali spoken by about 90% of the population, Bhutia about 28% and the Lepchas about 10%. Various other dialects of ancient Nepali tribes which are in use are Gurung, Limbu, Kharabu, Mangari and Murmi. The Lepchas and Bhutia speak their own language though many of them can understand and speak Nepali since all agricultural labourers and helpers are Nepali. Hindi is generally understood by a majority of the people.

Lamaism, Hinduism and Animism are practised by different ethnic groups, but it is very difficult to classify them accurately. Some Nepalis are Hindus and others are Buddhist. Lepchas are animists and Buddhist. Bhutias are Buddhists and the religion of the Scheduled Castes is uncertain. The red sect Lamaism of Tibetan Buddhism is the official religion of the State with thirty eight major monasteries and several small *maney*s. The monks of this sect enjoy the privilege of marriage.

The Lepchas are considered the original inhabitants of the state. The Lepchas call themselves "Rong" which means "ravine folk" or "Mutanchi" or Monri, but are referred by non-Tibetan speaking as Lepchas. Once the sole inhabitants of Sikkim hills, they managed their environment for making a living effortlessly. The lands were abundant and forests were rich. They were nomadic and subsisted mainly on the collection of roots, tubers, leaves, fruits, grasses, fishing and hunting and practised a primitive shifting cultivation with poor and simple technology. They were animists and believed in many gods and spirits of land, water and trees, the natural outcome of their surroundings. Environment played a great role in shaping their culture and society.

The Lepchas or Rong were organized by one Turve, who was given the title of Panu or King. Turve Panu was killed during one of his

frequent encounters with Kirats. He was followed by three *Panus*. With the death of the last king, the Lepcha kingship came to an end. Gradually local chiefs were elected, who also performed the duties of religious priests. With no strong organisation and cultural tradition behind them, they were ill prepared for outside contact.

The majority of the Bhutia inhabitants are descendants of immigrants from Tibet and Bhutan in the 17th century who played an important role in establishing the kingdom of Sikkim. The majority included traders, peasants and Buddhist monks as well as aristocrats who helped in the formation of kingdom and Tibetization of the Lepchas. The Lepchas were shy and peace loving people who avoided aggression in any form. Tibetan Bhutias were attracted to Sikkim's vast empty land, green valleys, rich forests, ample water supply and good climate in comparison to cold climate, their bare and inhospitable mountain plateaus. Valleys of South Sikkim are favourable for the cultivation of rice. Tibetans who migrated into Sikkim in the thirteenth century started amalgamating with the indigenous population of Lepchas and practically assimilated in the course of time. The Lepchas who were animists were attracted by the rich Buddhist religion and cultural tradition of Bhutias. As the area was resource rich and Lepchas were less apprehensive of being dispossessed. Inter-marriages of Lepcha - Bhutia resulted in the formation of Sikkimese Bhutia.

A bureaucratic kingdom was established by the immigrant Bhutias with the help of local chiefs. For administrative purpose, Sikkim was divided into 12 *Dzongs* (districts). Each *Dzong* had a Lepcha *Dzongpan* (governor), with a council of 12 ministers. For the purpose of revenue collection, the whole state was divided into 104 estates, of these 15 estates form the private estate of the *Maharajah* and 5 estates were used for the upkeep of five big monasteries of Sikkim.

The Bhutia rule gave rise to a new social class called the *Kazis* who were barons with fifty to hundred villages and large tracts of forest under their administration. The *Kazi* collected the taxes and in turn paid a fixed sum calculated at a certain rate per acre to the king, the rate varying according to the condition of the estate. Even the *Kazi* had no proprietary right in the land, though he had a kind of hereditary title to his office. The *Kazi* or the

landlord appointed a village (*Busti*) head man or *Mondol* who could rent out the arable land to the individual households. The political system of Sikkim was laid down following the system of Tibet - a kind of centralized feudal bureaucracy. Through the development of the power of the royal family, Bhutia aristocracy was taking form. There were 14 major Bhutia families of high rank grouped into two different descent groups (Gazetteer of Sikkim, 1894), to one belonged the group of royal family.

The initial clashes and conflicts between Lepcha-Bhutia disappeared almost completely due to cultural and social integration through inter-marriages and ritual blood brotherhood with Lepcha chiefs. The Lepchas, though numerically dominant group was no threat to Bhutia's domination. Lepchas were no competitors for the resources as Bhutias preferred higher elevations in north and north eastern part while Lepchas were forest dwellers practicing shifting cultivation along with hunting and gathering. The immigrant Bhutias were mostly traders, herdsmen, peasants and monks. As Lepchas were practising shifting cultivation, they were not particularly interested in owning land. In case of permanent settlers, the right of farmers on land, although similar were less transitory and allowed for alienation. Edgar has mentioned in his report, "there is a kind of tenant right, however, under which cultivators are enabled to dispose of inexhausted improvements. Thus, it was explained to me, a man who has terraced a piece of hill side could not sell the land, but is allowed to sell the right of using the terraces. The custom is acknowledged not to be an absolutely right, but more of the nature of an indulgence on the part of the *Raja*, by whom it was allowed to grow up for the sake of convenience" (Edgar c.f. Pedro Carraso: 53). After the establishment of Bhutia beurocracy the ownership of the cultivable land came under the control of mainly Bhutia landlords and aristocracy in the name of the *Maharajah*. As most of the Lepchas were tenant cultivators, the monopoly over the land resources shifted hands from the Lepchas to the Bhutias. Even then, any one could open-up new land without any official permission. Edgar has mentioned, "the cultivators have no title to the soil, and a man may settle down on it and cultivate any land he may find unoccupied without going through any formality whatever and once he has occupied the land, no one except the *Raja* can turn him out. But the *Raja* can

ject him at any time, and if he should cease to occupy the land he would not retain any lien upon it (Edgar, c.f. Temple 1977, p.15). Lepchas continued to practice shifting cultivation till the immigration of Nepalis. As the area was resource rich there was no confrontation between Bhutia and Lepcha over resources. However, along with establishment of kingdom spread of Tibetan-Buddhism was of equal significance. At the time of establishment of monarchy in Sikkim, the first king was given the title of *Chogyal* (*Dharam Raja* or religious king) by the Lamas, so that in theory he had two fold powers, spiritual and temporal, which is somewhat different from Dalai Lama in Tibet. The *gompas* were established as the part of the political scheme of the establishment. "All monasteries in Sikkim have been centralized under the secular power of the king, and are not religious organization independent of the political system" (Chie-Nakane, 1966, p.219). Lamaism or Tibetan Buddhism ousted the Poi (Bön), usually identified with Taoism, and the earlier demon and fairy worship of the Lepchas. Numerous traces of the both of these primitive faiths are found embedded in Sikkim Lamaism, which possesses special features of both the faiths.

The third largest ethnic group in Sikkim is Nepalis. Among the castes of Nepalese origin present in Sikkim are Brahman, Thakur and Chhetris as well as service castes like Kami, Sarki, Damai and Manjhi. These service castes have been recognized as scheduled castes. Besides Lepchas and Limbu, there are other Kirati tribes, Mangar, Gurung, Rai, Sherpa and Tamangs who speak their own languages but for inter-ethnic communication Nepali is spoken. Lamaism, Hinduism and Animism are practised by different ethnic groups but it is very difficult to classify them accurately. In spite of their cultural and religious diversity, common language, dress code and way of life has united them into a strong community. In view of their socio-cultural position as immigrants vis-a-vis Lepcha-Bhutia original inhabitant position provides them with a sense of unity.

Historically, the colonization of Nepalis in Sikkim was stimulated by the weakening of the political power of the Sikkim against Nepal during the later part of the 15th century, and the strengthening of British political power in Sikkim since the 19th century. British favoured

the opening up of the waste land of Sikkim to Nepali settlers. Nepalis immigration was encouraged as labour was needed for construction of roads and extension of agriculture. The ethnic scene of Sikkim changed rapidly with the multiplication of the number of Nepalis. By 1981, the Nepalese had multiplied to 51% of the total population, thus reducing the Lepchas and the Bhutias to nineteen and sixteen per cent, respectively. The Nepali immigrants settled in Western and Southern part of Sikkim, as Nepali immigrants were prohibited by Sir Ashley Eden (in response to ruling Bhutia's plea) to settle on land in possession of Bhutia and Lepcha. They could only open up uninhabited waste lands in parts of west and south Sikkim. They were not allowed to become headman and obtain any power as officers, which should always be entrusted to either Lepcha or Bhutia (Namgyal 1908: 49). By second half of the nineteenth century, the Sikkim court was losing its authority and Nepali immigration was allowed in a big way. In 1888, the first British Political Officer, J.C. White modified lease system of land tenure which resulted into emergence of some early Nepali settlers as lessee land lords known as *Thikkedars*. Among them were Newar or Pradhan families who worked as contractual landlords, miners and minters for the Sikkim court. These traders mainly settled in urban areas and were divided into two groups, Hindus and Buddhists but practised and performed rituals of both the religions. They had good relations with *Kazis* as well as with British Colonial administrators. They speak their own language Newari at home but otherwise use Nepali the *lingua franca* of the State. At present, Newars or Pradhans are a rich influential group whose members are educationally advanced and hold good positions in the administrative and public life.

The Sikkimese Identity

The Sikkimese identity came into existence particularly after the *Durbar* (during the regime of *Chogyal*) recognised the earlier settlers as legal settlers who had been given the status of subjects of Sikkim which referred to as Sikkimese by Sikkim Subject Regulations, 1961 (Rao, 1978: 20 - 21). The Sikkim Ruling Durbar (12) maintained a register of all such legal settlers who were recognised as Sikkim subjects. A plot of land played a positive role for Nepalese to become eligible for State

subjectship. This regulation excluded 70 per cent of the Nepalese residing in the State, and included Lepcha, Bhutia and Tsongs (Limbus) as subjects of Sikkim state. The main purpose of this regulation was to preserve the economical and political interests of ruling elites and monopolize the resources. The act was modified from 16th Jan, 1962, where in all reference to the communities was deleted from the Regulation (ibid). Even then, the recognition of the Lepcha, the Bhutia and the Limbu as the citizen was automatic by virtue of being earlier settlers. But it was not easy for the early Nepali settlers to prove this. However, it was recognised in course of time and they were granted Sikkimese status. There were other discriminations regarding the land-tenure which favoured only Lepcha-Bhutia. The lease of land was given to Nepali *Thikkedars* for ten-years while it was for 15 years for *Kajis* (Rose, 1978: 215). Besides a law was in force prohibiting land alienation by hereditary status subject (Bhutia-Lepcha) in favour of non-hereditary subjects e.g. Nepalese (Sengupta, 1985: 21). Even the land revenue for different ethnic groups was discriminatory. The Nepalis had to pay higher rent for the same area and same quality of land than the Bhutia-Lepcha. Because of these discriminations the Sikkimese society was bifurcated into two main ethnic groups - Bhutia Lepcha and the Nepali. Later on, the Sikkim became the 22nd state of India and the Indian Constitution was extended to Sikkim and the Sikkim Citizenship Order 1975 was issued by the Indian Government. According to this order, every person who immediately before the 26th day of April, 1975 was a Sikkim subject under the Sikkim Subject Regulations, 1961 shall be deemed to have become a citizen of India on that day' (Himalaya Today, June 1988). This made a sizeable numbers as non-Sikkimese. However a compromised formula was designed for the election purpose and a sizeable number of them acquired Indian Citizenship. Thereby, the identity as Sikkim subject, which previously included Bhutia-Lepcha, now included some Nepalis as well. Ethnic Groups and ethnic identities emerge as part of a social and political process. It is believed that shared ethnic identity often makes people feel comfortable with similar people and give them a sense of belonging. However, ethnic differences in multi-ethnic societies are usually associated with inequalities in resource sharing, power and prestige and results in stratification of the

society.

Distribution of Population and Ethnic groups in Sikkim

According to the census of 1981, the population of Sikkim was 3,16,385 out of which 2,65,310 were rural and 51,084 were urban i.e. 84% of the total population was rural (Census of India, series 19, Part II A and Part II B). The average density of population per square kilometre was 45 (Table 1). In June 1978, Bhutias, Lepchas, Sherpas and Doptapas were notified as Scheduled Tribes; Kami, Damai, Majhi and Sarki have also been classified as Scheduled Castes which constitute 5-8 % of the total population of the Sikkim (Table 2). Decennial growth of population since 1901 show a massive increase in population, the reason being not only the increase in birth rate but the Nepali migration which was initiated by British and has been a continuous process upto present time.

There are fourteen different groups inhabiting Sikkim. The Lepchas, Bhutias, Sherpas and Tamangs are Buddhists, while other groups are Hindus. Among the Hindu groups there is a major cleavage between touchables and untouchables. This distinction rests on the ability to pollute merely by touching with hands or by touching certain cooked food items. The Brahmans and the Chhetris are at the top of the social ladder. The Pradhans, Mangars, Gurungs, Limboos and Rais belong to the touchable groups and the Kami (metal workers), Sarki (leather workers), Damai (tailors), Lohar (blacksmith) and Majhi (fishermen) are Scheduled Castes. The Sherpas, the Tamangs, Lepchas and Bhutias as non-Hindu ethnic groups are fitted into the system in ranks below the touchables. The distribution of the different ethnic group in 31 Assembly Constituencies of Sikkim State is shown in Table 3, figure 1.

The ethno-historic characteristics of the various population groups represented in Sikkim are as follows :

Lepchas: The Lepchas are about 13 per cent of the total population and are one of the Scheduled Tribes. They are probably of indigenous origin since they have no recorded history of migration. Buddhism was accepted as a religion by most of the Lepchas. Whereas the Lepchas formerly subsisted upon hunting and shifting cultivation in dense forests, where they

Table 1 : Distribution of total population of Sikkim State, District-wise

S. No.	State/District/ Town	Total (T) Rural (R) Urban (U)	Area (in sq. km)	Total population (including institutional and houseless population			Density per sq.km	Females per 1000	Percentage growth rate of population 1971-81
				Total	Male	Female			
	Sikkim	T	7096	316385	172440	143945	45	835	50.77
		R		265301	142341	122960		864	39.50
		U		51084	30099	20985		697	159.73
1.	North District (Mangan Town)	T	4226	24445	14784	11671	6	789	103.28
		R		25675	14272	11403		799	102.44
		U		780	512	268		523	135.65
2.	East District (Gangtok, Singtam Rangpo Towns)	T	954	138762	77232	61530	145	797	62.07
		R		95520	51845	43675		842	39.24
		U		43242	25387	17855		703	154.08
3.	South District (Namchi, Jore- thang Towns)	T	750	75976	40980	34996	101	854	42.85
		R		70611	37787	32824		869	35.89
		U		5365	3193	2172		680	39.03
4.	West District (Gyalshing, Nayabazar Towns)	T	1166	75192	39444	35748	64	906	29.59
		R		73495	38437	35058		912	29.10
		U		1697	1007	690		685	54.84

Table 2: Distribution of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes of Sikkim State, District-wise

S. No.	State/District/ Town	Total (T) Urban (U) Rural (R)	Scheduled Tribe (Percentage)			Scheduled Castes (Percentage)		
			Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female
	Sikkim	T	23.27	22.16	24.60	5.78	5.54	6.06
		R	23.60	22.75	24.59	5.41	5.28	5.57
		U	21.54	19.35	24.67	7.67	6.76	8.96
1.	North District (Mangan Town)	T	55.57	51.08	61.27	3.02	2.98	3.08
		R	56.32	51.98	61.75	2.91	2.86	2.97
		U	31.15	25.98	41.84	6.79	6.25	7.84
2.	East District (Gangtok, Singtam Rangpo Towns)	T	22.01	20.76	23.57	7.02	6.63	7.51
		R	21.35	20.59	22.24	6.87	6.66	7.13
		U	23.47	21.12	26.82	7.34	6.57	8.45
3.	South District (Namchi, Jorethang Towns)	T	17.52	16.65	18.53	5.54	5.29	5.83
		R	18.31	17.52	19.22	5.19	5.02	5.38
		U	7.10	6.36	8.20	10.14	8.52	12.52
4.	West District (Gyalshing, Nayabazar Towns)	T	20.04	19.77	20.34	4.70	6.64	4.76
		R	20.20	19.97	0.45	4.61	4.60	4.63
		U	13.38	12.51	14.65	8.49	6.45	11.45

Scheduled Tribes : Bhutia; Lepcha; Sherpa and Doptapas

Scheduled Castes : Damai; Kami; Lohar; Majhi; Sarki.

Others : Tamang, Brahman, Chhetri, Pradhan (Newars), Rai, Limboo or Limbu (Subba), Gurung, Mangar, Other Trading Communities.

constructed pile-dwelling made of bamboo (*Si-Khim*, Tibetan=bamboo houses) - they are now mainly landowners or workers on the land. In the Dzongu reserve area of North Sikkim their chief occupation is cardamum cultivation with very limited activities for horticulture and agriculture pertaining to other crops. It may be mentioned here that this area has remained inaccessible for a very long time and no one

other than a person originally from this area was permitted to trade or reside there (Fig. 2). The language of the Lepchas belongs to the Himalayan group of the Tibeto-Burman Language family.

The Lepchas were always regarded as being on a lower plane of civilization than other ethnic groups of Sikkim, and considered independence more valuable than a settled routine

Table 3: Distribution of ethnic groups by religion and language in Sikkim State

S. No.	Ethnic Groups	Religion	Language	Percent
1.	Lepchas*	Buddhism/Christianity	Lepcha (Tibeto-Burman)	12.8
2.	Bhutias	Buddhism	Bhutia (Tibeto-Burman)	14.1
3.	Sherpas	Buddhism	Sherpa (Tibeto-Burman)	3.7
4.	Tamangs	Buddhism	Tamang (Tibeto-Burman)	5.0
5.	Brahmans	Hinduism	Nepali (Indo-Aryan)	8.4
6.	Chhetris	Hinduism	Nepali (Indo-Aryan)	11.6
7.	Pradhans (Newars)	Hinduism/Lamaism	Nepali/Newari	3.5
8.	Rais	Hinduism	Nepali/Rai	14.6
9.	Limboos or Limbus (Subba)	Hinduism	Nepali/Limboo	9.4
10.	Mangars	Hinduism	Nepali/Mangar	2.6
11.	Gurungs	Hinduism	Nepali/Gurung	6.1
12.	Scheduled Castes	Hinduism	Nepali/(Indo-Aryan)	5.9
13.	Trading communities			2.2

* A few follow Christianity

and life style. They were a race of hunters and food gatherers, roaming the dense forests and remote mountains. They had less communication with the outside world and fewer trading facilities and opportunities than the Bhutias and the Nepalese. The Dzongu region was characterized by great environmental richness and diversity. The inhabitants hunted, fished, gathered wild plant products and engaged in slash and burn cultivation. In Dzongu, slash and burn cultivation was sufficiently productive in combination with other subsistence and productive activities, to account for the small permanent hamlets. Social organization was at chiefdom level with the *Mandal* as village chief dealing with outsiders. However, the rest of the community remained undifferentiated, the main stratum not having any real roots. The Lepchas had an efficiently organised system which made possible the distribution of the varied resources and products of their land.

The geographical position of Dzongu has accentuated its location from the rest of Sikkim. Due to this, Dzongu has not benefitted from the development which has taken place in North Sikkim in the shape of roads and communications - thanks to military settlements - as it does not fall on the highway. The Lepchas of Dzongu even now practice slash and burn agriculture (though in restricted areas of upper Dzongu) and grow dry rice, buckwheat, millet, and barley in these fields following a seven year rotation cycle. Along with this, they practise sedentary cultivation of wet rice, maize, wheat and vegetables. Cardamum, as a cash crop was introduced at the beginning of this century. Though still a reserved area, the isolation

barriers are gradually disappearing as the government sponsored development schemes are being implemented. (One has to obtain a permit for visiting the Dzongu area. The Deputy Commissioner alone can issue the permit).

Bhutias: The Bhutias are of Tibetan origin (Bhutia means Tibetan). They are about 14 percent of the total population and are also a Scheduled Tribe. Most of them now-a-days are farmers, but some of them are still herds-men and breeders of sheep and yaks, which was their original occupation. Their religion is Buddhism, and their language belongs to the Bhotia group of the Tibeto-Burman language family. The Bhutias, who took refuge in Sikkim after the schism in 15th and 16th century, are now spread out in all the districts of Sikkim. However, in the North Sikkim, river valleys of Lachen and Lachung inhabited by Bhutias 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.

Sherpas: The Sherpas, another Scheduled Tribe of Sikkim, constitutes about 3.7 per cent of the total population. They are mainly found in the western parts of Sikkim. The Sherpas originated most likely from East Tibet and migrated from there to the eastern parts of Nepal, which they reached in the first decades of 16th century. During the last three centuries, some groups of them immigrated into the adjacent

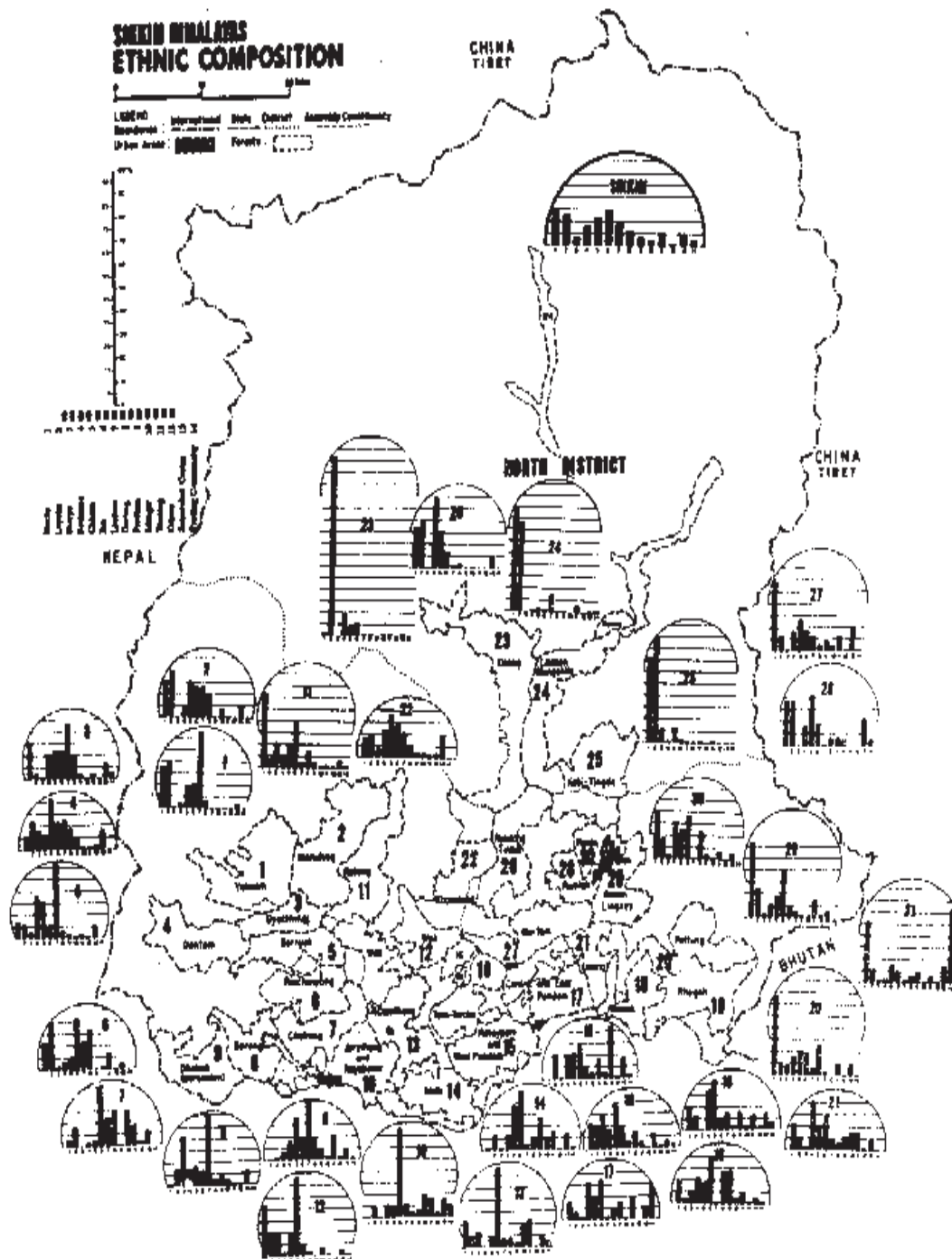


Fig. 1. Sikkim Himalaya: Ethnic Composition

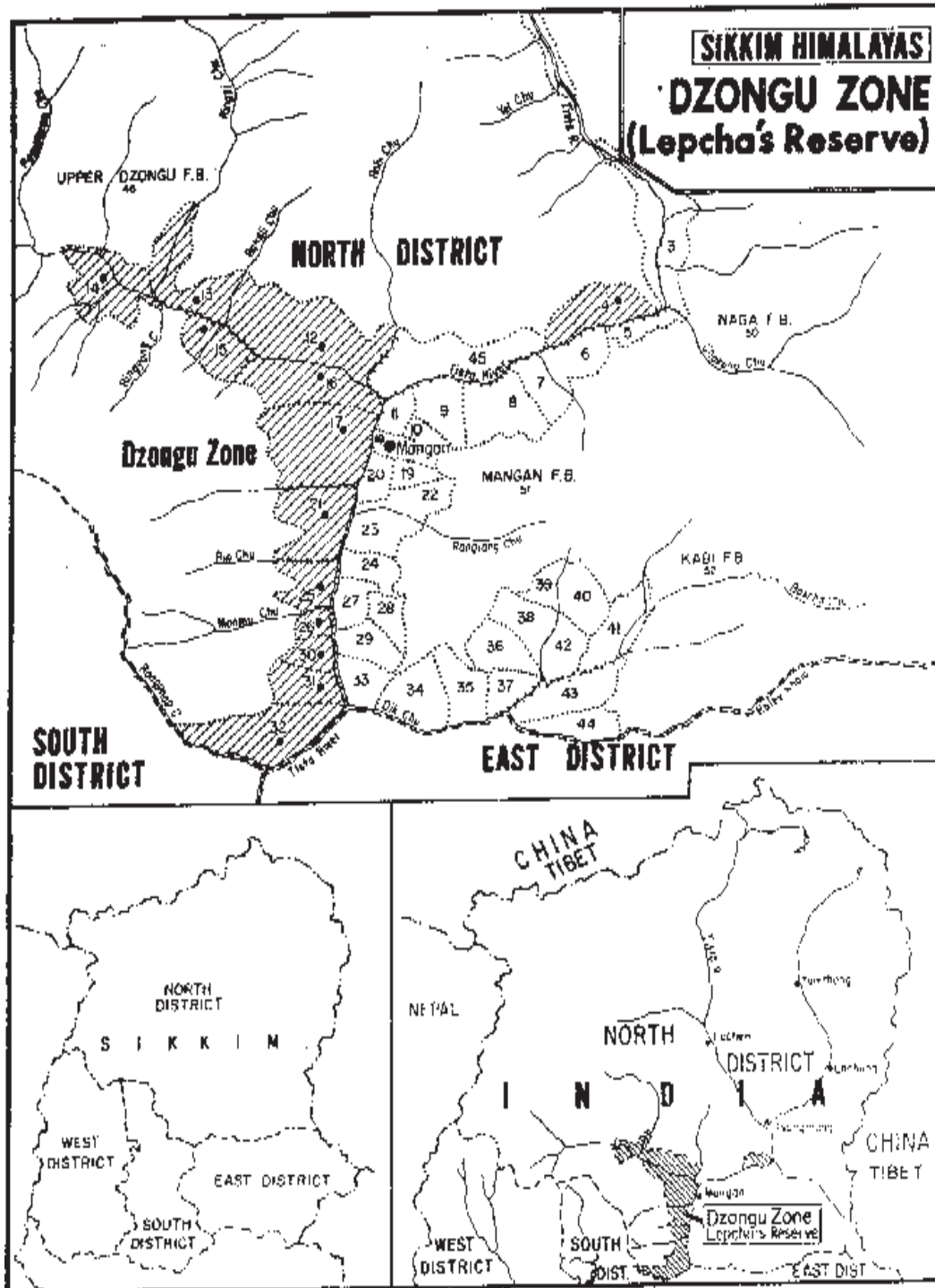


Fig. 2. Sikkim Himalayas: Dzongu Zone (Lepcha's Reserve)

part of Sikkim. There is some evidence that the Sherpas have mixed with the Tibetans (Bhutias). Most of them are small land-owners or cultivators. They are followers of Buddhism. Their language belong to the Bhotia group of the Tibeto-Burman family.

Tamangs: The Tamangs form about 5 per cent of the total population of Sikkim. They are also followers of Buddhism and are said to have come originally from Central Tibet. Their language is classed with the Tibeto-Burman language family (Himalayan group). The Tamangs are mostly farmers. They are spread over all parts of west, south and east Sikkim, which they populated long ago from Nepal. They are therefore one of the so-called Ancient Nepalese Group.

Brahmans and Chhetries: They constitute about 8.5 percent and 11.5 percent of the population of Sikkim, respectively. They are spread in all the Districts of Sikkim except the North. Their language is Nepali (Indo-Aryan family). The name Chhetri is probably derived from Kshatriya (=warrior caste of the Hindu caste system). These two Indo-Nepalese groups are of Caucosoid origin and immigrated into Sikkim mostly during the last hundred years.

Pradhans (Newars): The Pradhans belong to the Newars and are members of the Ancient Nepalese Group. They are Hindus by religion. Their language belongs to the Tibeto-Chinese language family (Himalayan group). They constitute about 3.5 percent of the Sikkim population. The Newars were the first people of Kathmandu valley, from where they immigrated into Sikkim. In Nepal they are divided into two great religious groups: Hindus and Buddhists. The Pradhans of Sikkim. belong to the Hinduistic Shrestha caste group. Their main occupations are trade and handicrafts.

Rais: The Rais form now 14.6 percent of the total population of Sikkim and are concentrated in the Western and Southern Districts of Sikkim. They are Hindus and belong linguistically to the Tibeto-Chinese language family (Himalayan group). Together with the Limboos they are known as the Kiranti group, which most likely has its origin in Tibet. Thus the Rais and the Limboos have apparently a common origin, but today they live separately.

Limboos or Limbus (Subbas): This group is also addressed as Subbas, which means headman or chief. They constitute 9.4 percent of the population of Sikkim and are mostly found in the western and southern parts of the State. In

other respects, too, they correspond to the Rais, with whom they form another Ancient Nepalese group, which immigrated into Sikkim during the last two centuries.

Gurungs: The Gurungs (about 6 per cent of the total population of Sikkim) belong also to the Ancient Nepalese Group, but they are Hindus. Their language belongs to the Himalayan group of the Tibeto-Chinese language family. The Gurungs are mostly likely to be traced back to one of the old Mongoloid mountains populaiton of Nepal, which have mixed with Caucasoid immigrants coming from South, and which have given up their traditional cultural patterns including religion and language. They immigrated into Sikkim during the last two centuries.

Mangars: In this connection, another Sikkim population has still to be mentioned, the Mangars, who are related to the Newars and are only 2.6 per cent of the total population of Sikkim. They are Hindus by religion. Their language belongs to the Himalayan group of Tibeto-Chinese families. The Mangars are the largest ancient group of Nepal, from where many of them immigrated into Sikkim, where they are mostly spread in the West and South Districts.

Scheduled Castes: The five castes - *Damai* (Tailors), *Kami* (Smiths), *Lohar* (Blacksmiths), *Majhi* (Fisherman) and *Sarki* (Cobblers) are referred to as the Scheduled Castes of Sikkim. They are about 6 per cent of the total populaiton of Sikkim and immigrated during the last hundred years from Nepal and West Bengal. They speak Nepali and profess Hinduism.

POPULATION DISTRIBUTION

The population of Sikkim is unevenly distributed over the state's land area. This spatial distribution is influenced by a host of environmental, historical, socio-cultural, economic, demographic and developmental factors. For example, environmental/geographical factors, such as climate, terrain, soils, natural resources, etc., could very well account for the variation in opportunities for economic activities in various regions of the state.

These factors along with the state's restrictions on settling in North Sikkim for groups other than Bhutia-Lepcha has affected the spatial distribution of populaiton. North Sikkim is a resource rich area with cash crop cardamum cultivation, forest resources and alpine pastures

and the population density per square kilometer is only 6. Lepcha 'reserve' in Dzongu was created to preserve their social homogeneity. This was an inaccessible tract of land with scanty population. The whole area was under forest and the Lepcha living there subsisted by collecting the natural forest produce like roots, tubers, leaves, grasses, fruits, herbs etc. This food gathering was supplemented by shifting slash and burn cultivation, wherein large tracts of land were cleared by burning the forest growth and growing the crops with simple implements.

The main aim of the formation of the Lepcha reserve was to preserve their social homogeneity (Fig. 2). However, it appears that this reservation has served only one purpose, namely the use of land for Lepcha exclusively, otherwise their culture has been constantly modified by outside factors. From the primitive stage of cultivation, they have developed agriculture, replacing shifting cultivation by more efficient methods of terracing, ploughing and irrigating lands. Gorer called this survival "artificial" because without the intervention of the *Maharaja* and British Government the Lepchas of Dzongu could very well have lost their identity like others in the state (Gorer, 1938, p.37). In all other parts of the state, Lepchas have freely intermarried, they speak Nepali, they follow Buddhism and Christianity.

Although no reserve was created for Bhutias, as was the case with the Lepchas, they did have some degree of seclusion reinforced by political and ecological factors. The two river valleys of the Lachen and Lachung are reserve areas inhabited by Lachenpa and Lachungpa respectively (Fig. 3) (For details see, Bhasin, 1988). Bhutias in this region have adapted mixed high altitude farming and animal husbandry. Pastoralism is still a major economic strategy. With the sealing of the Indo-Sino borders the Bhutia traders lost their business.

In Sikkim, the ethnicity is linked with ownership of land. Before its merger with Indian union, it was a theocratic state ruled by Bhutias. As already explained, in theory the land belonged to the king and the people had only usufructuary rights. During British administration lease system gave rise to lessee landlordism and resultant three tier land ownership pattern - : *Private Estates* owned by ruling elites; *Monastery Estates* owned by five big monasteries; and *Public Estates* owned by lessee

land lords. In 1950, the lessee system was abolished but administration of private estates and monastery estates remained unchanged. The land Revenue Department started looking after the public estates. It has been mentioned by Rose (1978) that after 1951 land settlement programme, 'approximately 85 percent of the land would be in government estates, 11 per cent in royal family estates and 4 per cent in monastic states'. (Rose, 1978 : 220-221). After its merges with India in 1975; the land settlement pattern in Sikkim has changed. Out of total area of 7299 square kilometres of Sikkim state, only 880 square kilometres are under cultivation. Out of this total cultivable land about 90 per cent is owned by individual families. Out of the total geographical area of Sikkim 39 per cent is under permanent snow and Alpine Pasture and 36 per cent is under forest. Out of the total cultivable land, 78.75 percent is dry land i.e. there are no irrigation facilities. People have to depend on rain for the cultivation of crops. The settlement report of 1958 mentioned that the 'highest percentage of total cultivated land is owned by the Nepalis (66%) who are migrants to Sikkim. Bhutias and Lepchas who are the sons of the soil, own 20 per cent and 14 percent respectively'. However, the work of Dhamola and Bhowmick (1985) draw attention towards the fact that 'the Nepalis population owns the largest number of landholdings but, surprisingly, the Bhutia population has the highest amount of excess land (Ibid: 121). Datta's (1992) study of 48 revenue blocks under Namchi Police Station of Sikkim corroborates the above statement that 77.28 percent cultivable land is under the possession of Nepali people and 11.30 and 11.42 percent cultivable land is owned by Bhutias and Lepchas, respectively. However, it was found that Bhutia possess highest amount of per capita cultivable land holding (10.73 acres) followed by Lepchas (10.61 acres) and Nepalis (4.81 acres). It can be seen that even in South Sikkim where Nepalis are in majority, the Bhutias and Lepchas have more cultivable land. It is due to the fact that though less in number Bhutia and Lepcha own large plots of land and there are many Nepalis who are landless and work as share croppers, agricultural labourers, skilled and non-skilled daily wage earners. In North Sikkim, in Lepcha Reserve Dzongu according to the act now in force any transfer of land or any right or interest in land anyway whatsoever (including transfer by sale, lease, mortgage, inheritance etc.) is

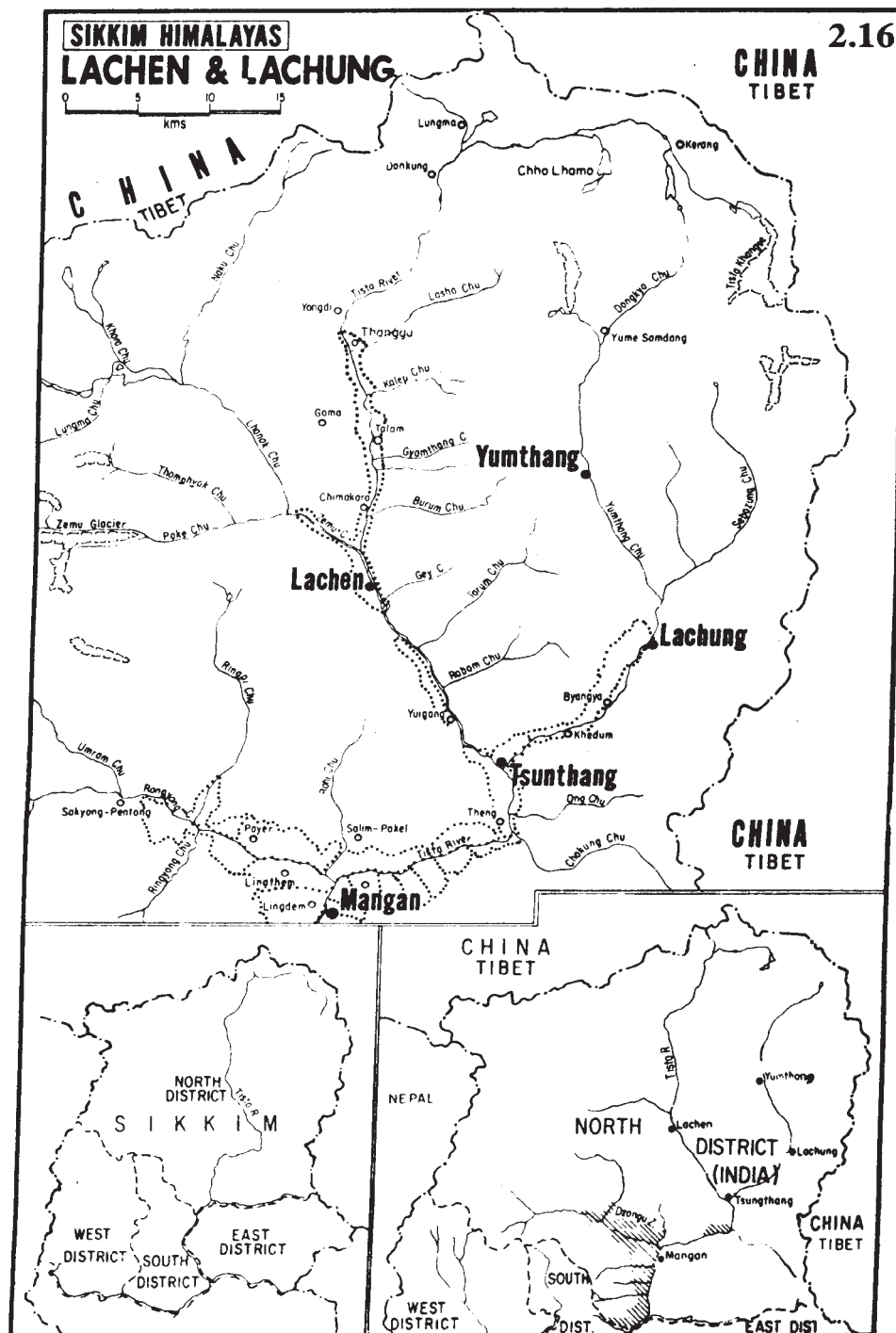


Fig. 3. Sikkim Himalaya: Lachen and Lachung

prohibited in respect of land owners. Though Dzongu is a Lepcha reserve only 56 percent of the total households are of Lepchas, the rest belong to temporary settlers of Limbu, Rai, Tamang, and Sherpa labour (Bhasin, 1990). Labour is procured from Mangan district headquarter. Passes from the district headquarter are obtained by employers for the required number of labourers. A person can be a permanent labourer with his employer. The required renovation of a working permit has to be obtained by the employee. The period of validity is for three months to one year. A pass can be renewed only four times. A new pass has to be obtained after the expiry of the stipulated period. The labour rates are fixed by the Panchayat but the labourers do not work on payment alone, they also rent land. Lots of illegal leasing out of land has taken place in Dzongu yet no reliable information could be gathered on this count. These tenancies are always verbal and no records are maintained. These labourers live either in field dwellings or in temporary houses. These Nepali labourers are very industrious and are able to save money which they usually loan it to their Lepcha employers who are spend thrift and always in need of money. They spend lavishly on rituals and ceremonies. When these loans are not returned, labourers get hold of Lepcha fields. Though highly illegal, it is common in Dzongu. The labour demand cardamum as security and interest. The cardamum was introduced in the area in order to improve the economic conditions of the Lepchas. It could not be predicted at that time that the entrance of money into the area was going to have disastrous consequences on the illiterate people organised on egalitarian lines, which previously had no cash economy. The whole cardamum trade is in the hands of the Marwaris. They earn profit by advancing cash to the Lepchas against their cardamum produce. The Marwaris send their representatives to the debtors asking for quick payment. The difficulties of ready cash compell Lepchas to sell their cardamum crop at lower rates.

An expanding Lepcha agricultural family could usually, with effort expand its holdings if desired. But ownership of land, however, is not sufficient in itself to ensure wealth. There must also be manpower to till the land. Here the land is plentiful and the labour is the limiting factor in production. The egalitarian society of the Lepchas of Dzongu might well

be seen as the product of the situation. At this stage, the most precious capital is not land, but labour which cannot be passed from one generation to another. It is true that because of the 'Lepcha reserve' the Lepchas of Sikkim were able to retain their culture and economy. But reservation in itself is not a magic wand, it only administratively protects the local inhabitants from the exploitative interests of the outsiders. However, if outsiders enters as brokers or labourers-there is every probability that their interests are not being safe guarded. Lepchas cultivate cardamum but in the absence of proper marketing facilities, their produce is bought by the locally settled merchant class at a much lesser price. The economic condition of Lepcha remains poor, who still practice dry slash and burn type of rotational maize, millet and buck wheat cultivation.

It can be seen that there is spatial imbalance due to terrain, historical and economic factors. The eastern and Southern part of the state are easily approachable by roads making the exchange of raw material, finished products, services and facilities convenient. The northern and western parts of the state are not easily approachable by roads.

The vertex of progress in Sikkim is in eastern region. Fruit preservation, liquor, tannery, paper pulp mining and other industries have been started in eastern Sikkim. The labour force in these industries is exclusively of Nepalese origin. Dairy farming, piggery and poultry are also being run by the state government. Urbanization in Sikkim is a recent phenomenon, affected primarily by the recent changes in the socio-economic system. The process of industrialisation and economic development of this area has not benefitted the local population of Bhutia and Lepcha as they do not work as labourers. Road construction and transportation of the goods is managed by Nepalese.

As compared to east district, south and west district are under developed. South district is lacking in material resources like forest, mineral, agriculture and livestock. Entrepreneurs in south and west districts are still in a latent stage. Nepalese in these areas are indulging in transport sector including manual transport as well as road construction.

At the ethnic level, it is difficult to determine who dominates the economic scene. Traditionally all land belonged to the king, who used to give portions of it to his cronies, courtiers, *Kazis* and the like in return for services. How-

ever, with the changes in political setup the land ownership pattern also changed. At present, only in North Sikkim, the landownership is strictly for the Lepcha-Bhutias of that area. Traditionally the trans-Himalayas trade was in the hands of Bhutias, some of the Lamas and Marwaris. With the sealing of the Indo-Sino borders, the Bhutia traders lost their business. Now the commercial establishments are controlled by the Marwaris and Madesia traders from the Indian plains. They are money-lenders, general merchants, hoteliers, wine venders, clothiers, wholesale dealers etc.

The agriculture sector is dominated by the Nepalese, who are industrious and practise intensive agriculture. The Lepcha practise subsistence agriculture. The Bhutias with their large herds practise pastoral economy on high altitudes. In the traditional structure, which exists even today, the elite owns the estates, commands wealth, status and a degree of power. The estates in rural areas were owned by the *Kazis* and the Newars. With their accumulated wealth, the *Kazis* and the Newars have made investments in other sectors. These are in and outside Sikkim. The important cash crops such as cardamum and apple are grown in areas reserved for the Lepchas and the Bhutias. Orange orchards in Southern Sikkim are mainly in the hands of the Nepalese.

The white-collar professions such as teaching, journalism, medicine, engineering, have been a relatively new phenomenon for Sikkim. The clerical and lower teaching jobs are open to all, but the more prestigious and important posts are the domain of the second generation of the dominant class. Sikkim being a theocratic state, the priesthood commands respect and power. Anybody can be recruited as a monk from among the Buddhist population. On the other hand among the Nepalese, entry to priesthood is regulated by birth. A person has to be born into a Brahman family to become priest. Modern education is the best method to move up the social ladder. It elevates status as well as increases the income of the family.

We have seen from the ethnographic account of the population of Sikkim that Sikkim is a plural society, where many ethnic groups are residing side by side. The social pattern in Sikkim has developed from a casteless Buddhist culture. As a result there were no menial or artisan classes in the state until frequent association with neighbouring states in India and Nepal led to their migration from the Gangetic

plain, particularly from Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. There is free movement of merchants, roads labourers and construction workers from Nepal, Bhutan and other neighbouring state.

The ethnic groups in Sikkim may be viewed as aggregates whose degree of differentiation is a function of prevailing ecological and economical condition. They have occupied different economic *niches* since historical times, *niches* that are being threatened by modernization, development programmes and accompanying socio-economic changes. Ethnic interaction within groups are asymmetrical and function to maintain the differential organization and control that exists. This can be observed among elite population of Bhutia Lepcha group maintaining the status quo as original inhabitants of Sikkim and their control over resources and power, thus trying to deny the numerical supremacy of the immigrant Nepali group. The traditional stable ecological conditions in the area favoured the social isolation of these potentially competing groups. The breakdown of the isolating mechanism among the local groups may not be so advantageous under the new socio-economic conditions. However, ethnic groups are not homogenous isolated units, but are dynamic fluctuating entities which respond to ecological changes and resulting resource pattern. In multi ethnic societies, emphasis has been placed on the cultural differentiation of population units within an overall system of multi ethnic unit.

Social-Interaction Among Ethnic Groups

Social interaction among ethnic groups is common whenever and wherever economic gains are to be achieved. This social interaction has not resulted into assimilation because of social and cultural differences between the groups inspite of inhabiting the same neighbourhood. The whole of Lepcha society is divided into named exogamous patrilineal *Putso* the primary function of which is to regulate marriage. Lepchas have no prescribed or preferential marriage arrangements in terms of kinship network. Instead Lepcha avoid marriage links with father's or mother's *Putso* for many generations. All the members within these generations are classified as brothers and sisters. Among Lepchas *Putso* is very important and Lepchas introduce themselves by their *Putso* name. Lepchas lay great emphasis on individual achievements and initiative. There are no re-

straints, human, cultural or supernatural which cannot be overcome. Lepcha individualism is rooted in group functioning. They emphasize communal or collective co-operation and achievements. With the advent of Bhutias Lepchas original religion *Pon (Bon)*, usually identified with Taoism and the demon and fairy worship was replaced by Lamaism. Numerous traces of both of these primitive faiths are found embedded in Sikkim Lamaism.

There are no localized clans or lineages among Bhutias. Clans have little or no role to play in marriage. Bhutias names are associated with a locality which they inhabit. There is no geneological ideology involved. Marriages take place among members of the same community. Affinal relationship links almost all the household members who are not related through consanguinal ties. There are no prescribed institutionalized rules either of a descent group or primogeniture succession or inheritance. Due to lack of residential rules, various alternative arrangements are made.

In spite of having some structural differences in their social organisation, there are similarities between the Bhutia-Lepcha groups. In both the ethnic groups the family is the smallest and most important unit of the social organisation. It is a true corporate group. It is the economic unit, as well as the unit of participation in all public, social and religious projects. All sons inherit property equally. Both follow custom of bride price and both allow polyandrous and polygynous marriages. Both the groups practise Lamaism. Lamaism is a mixture of several elements. The chief element is Mahayana Buddhism with an admixture of *Tantric* Hinduism, some Chinese and Mongolian elements and Tibetan Bon religion. Lamaism has a justifying mythology and scriptures, an ethic and a social organization. The craving for protection against malignant gods and demons causes the people to pin their faith on charms and amulets and to erect tall prayer flags with strings of flaglets. Lepcha and Bhutia rituals primarily serve to insure that a person will have a long and healthy life and suffer few misfortunes. Both Lepcha and Bhutia perform healing and purification rites. Rituals in both groups 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. Among Bhutia-Lepcha, the potential productive force is reduced because it is obligatory for individual families to encourage one of their children to go to *Gompa*. The Buddhists in Sikkim are beef eaters, which is a costly item. *Chi*-(local beer) made from millet or rice is consumed by both the groups. Their houses are made of expensive timber by experts. They spend heavily on birth, marriage and death.

The Nepali groups in Sikkim are Hindus having a major cleavage between touchables and untouchables. This distinction rests on the ability to pollute merely by touching with hands or by touching certain cooked items. Nepalese are both monogamous and polygamous. They practice polygyny to increase labour force. They are hard workers and do not spend much time and cash in religious activities. Their staple food is maize and millet, which is cheaper than rice and can be grown in less fertile lands. Their houses are less expensive and self made with mud and straw. They spend less on social events like birth, marriage and death. Lepcha-Bhutias rituals and religious practises are long and expensive and their contribution towards *Gompa* establishments are major drain towards economic resources. All these and their drinking habits tend to lower their birth rate and increase their death rate. The practice of bride-price among Lepchas and Bhutias delays their marriage. Earlier Bhutias and Lepchas with more sons and limited resources went in for fraternal polyandry. Though fraternal polyandry functioned to conserve land and labour in the family yet it managed to produce a pool of unmarried females. At present all types of marriages are practised. The practise of polyandry lowered the birth rate. The average number of children among Nepalese is much higher who marries early and sometimes practise polygyny. Among Nepalese, the priests are born among Brahmin castes and others cannot enter the priestly order. These factors explain the separate existence and identity of the groups. The struggle to control limited economic resources rests on the ethnic lines. In Sikkim, the distribution of ethnic groups is controlled by ecological and historical factors; different groups have established stable coresidence in an area where they are exploiting different ecological *niches*. In areas where all the three groups are residing and are exploiting the resources of the area, the Nepalese who are

numerically strong and industrious are replacing Lepcha-Bhutia, what Abruzzi call 'competitive exclusion'. This is what seems to have happened which prompted the creation of 'reserves' in North Sikkim. In other parts of Sikkim, Nepalese are dominating the scene, though estates are still in the hands of Bhutias. Sikkim is industrially backward, landlocked and agriculture dominated state where land is still a important factor in respect of ethnicity. Historical realities, traceable events, economics-political decisions are the causes of contemporary ethnic pluralism of Sikkim. Exploitation of different resource *niches* by different groups has contributed vastly to their ability to inhabit the same area.

In many places ethnic conflicts appear to be on the rise. Such conflicts are thought to be intractable and inevitable because they are supposedly based on hatred, however it is not so as all ethnic conflicts are not necessarily ancient or inevitable. A different situation exists in Sikkim where Nepali migration is a comparatively recent phenomenon. The impact of this migration has been great and has social and cultural ramifications. In Sikkim, the relationship between the established Buddhist (Lamaism) population has led to competition and confrontations culminating in the dethronement of the Buddhist monarch and the incorporation of Sikkim into the Republic of India. The landholding Bhutia-Lepcha group and other castes and occupational groups are tied as political clients and economic serfs. Subsistence is based on diversified and well developed plough culture. The main crops are maize, millet, wheat and rice; much of the ploughed land is rain fed or by artificial irrigation. Manuring, crop-rotation, crop-mixture and regular fallow land rhythms are followed, according to the nature of the soil, altitude and water supply. All rice is irrigated, with nursery beds and transplantation.

Only part of the Bhutia-Lepcha population is engaged in cultivation. Other occupational groups perform labour specialized services in return for payment in kind or cash. Till 1962, the principal occupation of many Bhutias was trade with Tibet and Indian plains. In fact they had virtual monopoly in trade as they mixed it with transhumant activities. In North Sikkim, trading was their main occupation which they carried out along with their pastoral activities. The barter of timber, wood, dye stuffs and dairy products of that region for Tibetan salt and wool formed the basis of this trade. The Bhutias of

Lachen and Lachung in North Sikkim pursued it as an occupation intimately interwoven with their pastoral activities. Thus as long as trade was unhampered by political restrictions it enabled them to remain economically independent. However, with the closing of the Tibetan border in 1962, social life changed for these people. It deprived the Bhutias of their livelihood and had an adverse effect on their traditional crafts. As long as Tibetan wool was imported in large quantities weaving flourished and they produced a variety of woven articles. The Bhutias of Lachen and Lachung were sufferers in another way because of the closure of the border. Many of their yak and sheep heads were seized by the Chinese in 1962 during their seasonal migration under the traditional transborder pasturing usage arrangements. Such partial transformation of economy have led to many changes in Bhutia society. The situation of the Bhutia is unlike that of other ethnic minorities and it does not conform to the usual pattern of integration into larger economic and political systems. Political events beyond their control have led to the transformation of their traditional economic system. 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 is redistributed and reallocated after every three years. They have their own traditional local government system and the provision of the 1965 Panchayat Act have not been extended to this area (Bhasin, 1989).

The Bhutias in Sikkim could be transhumant farmers, pastoralists and settled farmers and traders depending on the area of the state inhabited by them. The resources available to them can be classified in to three categories:

Fixed resources:	Land, pastures, forests, houses
Mobile resources:	Labour and livestock
Skills:	Farming, pastoralism, spinning weaving and trading.

The Bhutias are placed in an environment where resources are not only scattered but are also accessible only in certain spatial and temporal situations.

Since 1970, with the spread of education some changes have taken place, but the essential structure has remained the same. In multiethnic

villages, the interactional pattern is expressed mainly in commensal behaviour and rules governing marriage. All the ethnic groups have their own taboos concerning the eating of flesh of certain animals. The veneration of the cow is accepted by practically all Nepali groups except the Sherpas and the Tamangs. Earlier Brahmans and Gurungs did not indulge in drinking *Rakshi* and *Tumba* (local liquor), but now some people do drink, though not in public. It was customary for Rai to prepare liquor at home. Brahmans and Gurungs who have taken to drink these days, do not prepare liquor at home but buy it from others.

The specific rules governing intercaste interaction between Nepali groups are always within the general framework of the Hindu caste system, though with some regional variations. With other ethnic groups also, they have stratification and ranking as a function of the overall caste system, but some groups within the system may be in a state of temporary or permanent equality. When two groups publicly exchange food, water and marriage partners, they are socially equal and regard each other as such.

In Sikkim, the system of stratification is based on the sole criteria of eating two dishes namely *Kalo-Daal* and *Murwa ka Bhat* (black pulse and porridge made of millet flour). *Kalo Daal* and *Murwa ka Bhat* is only served to members of one's own caste and castes that are considered lower. Higher castes do not accept this from lower castes.

Foods that are not subjected to ritual pollution include fruits, vegetables and uncooked grains. Brahmans and Chhetris accept raw food items and food cooked in *Ghee* from touchable castes. Thus, there is hierarchy among the touchable castes according to local logic. The Pradhans, Mangars and Gurungs exchange raw and cooked food among themselves, but not *Kalo Daal* and *Murwa ka Bhat*, which they accept only from Brahmans and Chhetris. Pradhans, Mangars and Gurungs exchange uncooked food with Rais and Limbus. Rai and Limboos exchange raw and cooked food with each other but not *Kalo Daal* and *Murwa ka Bhat* which they accept from Brahman, Chhetris, Pradhan, Mangars and Gurungs. Buntawa *Thar* of Rais, do not accept *Kalo Daal* and rice touched by other group because they consider *Kalo Daal* sacred as it is kept in the grave along with the dead. Pradhans, Mangars and Gurungs can cook on the hearths of the Rais

and the Limbus, but they usually do not touch it, because of the belief that some god-like spirit resides in the hearth of the Rai. This same god is kept in the fields of the Rais. Both these above mentioned food are considered dangerous probably because they are black and are associated with *yama*, and because black pulse is used in funeral rites. For many Mangars, their preparation and consumption is hedged in by taboos.

Rais do not marry among people who burn their dead; if they do so they are outcasted and cannot attend the rituals of their own *Thar* (Clan)- which is very important to them. The Limboos and Mangars also bury their dead, so intermarriages between the three groups do take place. Gurungs in Sikkim cremate their dead while in other places they bury their dead.

Marriage in a Brahman household would be attended by all the groups residing in the *Busti*, but food would be served separately. The seating arrangement would be allowed for the following combinations:

- (i) Brahmans and Chhetris;
- (ii) Pradhans, Mangars and Gurungs;
- (iii) Rais and Limboos
- (iv) Sherpas and Tamangs;
- (v) Lepchas and Bhutias;
- (vi) Kamis, Damais, Majhis, Sarkis, Lohars

We have seen from the account of the population of Sikkim that it is a plural society where twelve ethnic groups are residing. The analysis of Sikkim as a plural society is based on the theory of pluralism that stresses cleavages or discontinuities between groups within a society differentiated by ethnicity, religion and culture. These basis of differences are primordial and have been socially structured in the process of interaction. In plural societies both ethnic differences and ethnic assimilation give rise to conflict. Assimilation in Sikkim has not taken the form of a true melting pot thus prohibiting the birth of a genuinely new society as it happened in Mexico, where the Spanish, Indians and Blacks were amalgamated to such an extent which gave rise to new mestizo Mexican culture. The constituent groups made perceptible contribution to the composite culture. Assimilation in Mexico has not phased ethnicity out entirely but rather reduced it to such a level that it no longer regulated everyday life.

Ethnic groups exhibit a wide variety of adaptations to different natural and cultural environments. Leo Despres (1975) in his study of the relations between African Americans and

Hindus in Guyana, suggests that ethnic, cultural and racial identities confer competitive advantages with respect to environment resources. The Hindu segment of Guyana society, has a firmer grip on the land than the black group. Plural societies are generally characterised by a history of violent conquests followed by colonialism, slavery, indenture and other forms of highly institutionalised segmentation and inequality between ethnic groups. Furnivall (1956) described the Burmese and Javanese groups as 'plural society'. In Sikkim the Bhutia Lepcha and Nepali groups mix but do not combine. They represent different sections of society, live side by side but separately within the same political unit. They are involved in the same political and economic order but are distinct from one another.

In many places ethnic conflicts appear to be on rise. The reason for violence eruption is the absence of strong uniform interests and cross cutting ties between the groups. Absence of constitutional ways to resolve conflict is another factor. Cross cultural, cross-natural and cross-historical studies are needed to be carried out to find out about the possible explaining factors, so that comparisons can be made to predict ethnic relations and arising conflict in the world. If the factors giving rise to ethnic conflict may be categorized, then these can be controlled to reduce ethnic tensions in the world.

In Sikkim, the factors that may give rise to ethnic conflict are the changes that have been brought about after its merger with Indian Union. Under the Sikkim subject provision act which previously only referred to Bhutia-Lepcha now includes the Nepalese. The question of Sikkimese identity has become a socio-political dividing the inhabitants as Sikkimese and non-Sikkimese. It started with the idea to protect the interest of the earliest settlers (Lepcha-Bhutia and some Nepalese) of the small, subsistence agriculture based and industrially backward society.

After its merger with Indian Union, the resources came under the direct control of the state. Allocation and the distribution of state's resources and rewards are carried out in democratic way. After 1975, the expanding services and business sector required large work force which attracted skilled, better educated, labour force from other parts of the country. Business was in the hands of Marwaris, who conducted whole sale business between the Sikkimese towns and other trade centres of In-

dia. Newars who carried on trade between Sikkim and Nepal, the Bhutia traders dealt in woollen and dairy products and the *Deswali* or Bihari who moved around the towns with their goods on their heads. Even today, the Marwaris have upper hand in the economic affairs of the state. The establishment of military cantonments in north and east Sikkim offered numerous opportunities which benefited Marwaris who acquired contracts of supplying things. Mushrooming of video parlours and libraries in the towns of Sikkim provided another opportunity for business. Marwaris and rich *Kajis* started showing video films by renting out video-cassetts and video screens. There has been a constant outflow of income from the state both as unaccounted money and investments outside. The siphoning off the capital has obviated the generation of income and employment in Sikkim. The government development programmes meant for alienating poverty could not remove the symptoms of socio-economic deprivation, politico-cultural alienation and inaccessibility of resources and technology. The development programmes generated jobs in all sectors of society which were mostly taken by outsiders especially in Education Department. Lack of professionals in Sikkim motivated many outsiders to work in Sikkim.

In this social environment, the original inhabitants of the Sikkim are afraid of impending loss of their exclusive control of resources and power. The Sikkimese identity of the original inhabitants has become very important to them. With this 'identity card' they want to avoid confrontation with the non-Sikkimese who are superior than their local counterparts in terms of education, professional skill, political consciousness and manipulation.

The tension generated over the issue of identity of Sikkimese and non-Sikkimese because of changes that have taken place in the political, economic and social structure of the society can only be minimized by process of redefining the Sikkimese identity.

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