

# Economic History and Development of Sikkim

J.C. Debnath



In the study it has been seen that the economy of Sikkim has the twin characteristics of a traditional and a modern economy. So far as the former is concerned it is mostly shaped and influenced by natural, mainly geographical, and cultural factors. Being completely a hilly economy and having climatic conditions ranging from subtropical to Alpine zones within a span of 80 miles and having similar diversity in rainfall, the country has not yet been able to evolve a stable and viable economy. On the other hand, cultural factors also inhibited the growth of the economy. The Lepcha-Bhutia culture having its roots in the Tibetan brand of Buddhism is a culture of asceticism, abstinence and denouncement of the material world in pursuit of spiritual goals. The social and religious customs, land tenure system, political set-up as well as administrative machinery were all the byproducts of that culture and were intertwined in such a manner that the penetration of economic modernism was practically impossible until very recently.

So far as the modern economy of Sikkim is concerned it has not yet been able to wipe out the traditional one, but has rather emerged out of the latter and both are still living side by side. Though the seeds of modernism were sown long ago when the First British Political Officer was appointed to administer Sikkim in 1889 very little was done to break the vicious circle of the old traditional economy. Only after the introduction of development plans in 1954 was there a major blow to the existence of the old economic set-up and we can say that the "take-off" started at that time. At present the economy is pushing forward with great momentum and it is expected that within a few years Sikkim will have a completely modern economy.



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# **ECONOMIC HISTORY AND DEVELOPMENT OF SIKKIM**

**BEFORE AND AFTER INDEPENDENCE**

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# 1

## Introduction to Sikkim

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To have a proper understanding of the economy of any country and its problems it is necessary, first of all, to acquire a fair knowledge of the country pertaining to its different aspects like geographical features, people, historical background, political set-up and cultural factors, and the influence of all these on the economy. This will be particularly true for an underdeveloped economy like Sikkim's where since antiquity non-economic factors have been playing a major role in moulding the economic pattern of the state until the initiation of planned economic growth in very recent times. While it is not possible to go into details of the interaction of these non-economic and economic factors within the short compass of the present study, it is still fruitful to indicate briefly the relevant factors to facilitate our understanding of the Sikkimese economy.

### **A. Geographical Features**

The role of geographical features in shaping the economy of a country like Sikkim cannot be over-estimated. In fact, man's economy, like his other creations, is superimposed upon and meshed into the geographical environment which is not only a storehouse of source materials like water, electricity and minerals but also a physical and biological condition within which his economic activities like production, exchange and

consumption occur. In this light let us discuss the geographical features of Sikkim.

The name "Sikkim" is derived from the word "Sukhim" meaning a place of peace and happiness.<sup>1</sup> In Tibetan and Bhutia languages it is called Denjong—originating from "Bay Yul Demo Jong" meaning "the hidden valley of rice". This signifies that at the beginning of the 14th century when the Bhutias started entering Sikkim from Tibet they found the Lepchas producing rice in the Tista and other valleys in Sikkim.<sup>2</sup>

The small but beautiful state of Sikkim is situated in the eastern Himalayas. It is bounded in the north by the vast Tibetan plateau and in the east by Bhutan and the Chumbi valley of Tibet. To its west lies Nepal and along its southern boundary stretches the Darjeeling district of West Bengal in India. It is situated roughly along longitudes 88° and 89° East and latitudes 27° and 28° North.<sup>3</sup>

The origin of the lofty Himalayan mountain range which cradles Sikkim is as fascinating as anything. Geologists say that millions of years ago the area now occupied by the Himalayas was the site of the shallow Tethys Sea. During the tertiary period in the earth's history powerful compressive forces folded and thrust marine deposits which arose out of the waters in the form of gigantic earth waves.

In the post-tertiary age, approximately one million years ago, further upheavals took place which raised the central portion and the foothills of the Himalayas into a vast mountain system. During the following millenniums natural forces still acted upon the system and as a result was formed the present complex of mountains and valleys which comprise Sikkim and other Himalayan states.

Sikkim has an area of 2,828 square miles and its shape is almost a rectangle 70 miles long from north to south and 40 miles wide from east to west. Sikkim is a land of varied elevations ranging from 800 feet above mean sea level at the southern foothills to over 20,000 feet along the northern and north-western frontiers. As such the climate of Sikkim varies between the tropical heat of the lower valleys and the icy cold of eternal snows.<sup>4</sup>

From a geographical point of view there are three major lateral divisions of the Himalayas:

- (i) the Great Himalaya,
- (ii) the Inner Himalaya, and
- (iii) the foothills and the bordering sub-Himalayan "Piedmont Plain".

The plain is called Terai and Doars to the south-west and south-east of Sikkim respectively. The state of Sikkim lies in the Great and Inner Himalayas, so that we can divide Sikkim into two broad geographical divisions: the Great Himalayan Sikkim and the Inner Himalayan Sikkim.

The first geographic division—the Great Himalayan Sikkim—is the northern part of the country and is adjacent to the plateau of Tibet and here the peaks rise up to 29,000 feet above sea level, the average being more than 20,000 feet. These mighty mountain chains have been a barrier to the country's development of communication, trade, agriculture and industry, and is a great obstacle to economic growth.

The second division—the Inner Himalayan Sikkim—is the southern part of the country and has a lower altitude. It is a complex area of forest-covered ranges and intervening fertile valleys, such as the Gangtok valley. While it is not as formidable as the Great Himalayan region, it has nonetheless served to isolate the fertile valleys of Sikkim from the Gangetic plains of India and the plateau of Tibet.

The state of Sikkim is geographically a basin. To its north lies the Great Himalayan Range and to the east and west, the Chola and Singalila Ranges respectively which gradually taper into lower altitudes and foothills towards the south. To the south there is no natural feature demarcating the frontier between Sikkim and West Bengal except in the middle where it runs along the Tista and the Rangit till they meet near Melli.

The important passes and peaks in the three ranges of Sikkim forming the natural boundary of the state in three directions may be mentioned. In the Great Himalayan Range the most important passes are Sesela or Dachila (17,343'), Kongrala (16,840'), Nakula (17,290') and Chorten Nymala (19,000'). The Chola or Dongya Range is also pierced by several passes, the most important being Tangkarla, Nathula (15,200') and Jelepla (14,000'). The main pass in the Singalila Range forming the border between Nepal and Sikkim is Chiabhangjangla. In this range is to be found the Kanchenjunga

(28,168'), the third highest peak in the world and other giants like the Tent Peak and the Kabru (24,076'). The highest peak within Sikkim is Siniolchum (22,620').

The Tista river winds its way through Sikkim, the main tributaries being the Rangit, the Rongni-Chu, the Lachen and the Lachung rivers, all snow-fed torrents originating in the Great Himalayan Range. Essentially, the entire Sikkim basin is the catchment area of the Tista river which may be regarded as the main artery of the state's water distribution.

The rainfall in Sikkim varies between 30 inches and 140 inches and some places have even 240 inches per year. The rainy season is between May and November. Along the Tista basin the monsoon cloud penetrates through the deep valleys upto the foot of the highest mountains and hence the wet zone extends as far as the snows. In fact, the bowl-like, mountain-girdled basin of Sikkim has been formed by the erosive work of the Tista and its tributaries.

In Sikkim one finds settled conditions of weather and in this respect they are in sharp contrast with those obtaining in the neighbouring Tibet where they change even in the course of a day. Sikkim has only a few areas where such sharp weather changes occur. Practically speaking, there are only two seasons in Sikkim: monsoon from May to November and winter from December to April.

Economic life in Sikkim is mostly influenced by the state's geographical features, particularly the condition of its terrain and climate. The basis of economic life in any underdeveloped country is land-use and so we should know how land is used in Sikkim. The study of land-use in Sikkim is important more because the state is a completely hilly region and as such poses peculiar problems and obstacles for the use of land.

From the point of view of *land utilization* Sikkim can be divided into three zones:

- (a) Alpine pastures zone,
- (b) forests zone, and
- (c) crops zone.

We can compare this division with a similar one made by Sir J.D. Hooker, the famous botanist who made extensive tours and study in Sikkim during the British days. As the *Imperial Gazetteer of India* says "Sir J.D. Hooker divides the country

into three zones, calling the lower upto 5,000 feet above the sea, the tropical; thence to 13,000 feet, the upper limit of tree vegetation, the temperate; and above to the perpetual snow-line at 16,000 feet, Alpine."<sup>5</sup>

The Alpine pastures zone stretches from the forests zone to the perpetual snow-clad areas but vegetation here rapidly deteriorates as the altitude rises. This zone more or less corresponds with the Great Himalayan region discussed earlier. The snow-clad areas constitute a considerable part of Sikkim and are entirely out of any use. However, the high mountain pastures are an essential part of plant resources of Sikkim and they have made possible the raising of livestock without the need of forest clearance or maintenance. Sheep breeding and rearing is an important means of livelihood here and formerly when there was free communication and trade between Sikkim and Tibet often herds of sheep would pass into the Tibetan grazing land during summer and return in the winter. This seasonal migration was necessary for providing adequate grazing facilities to the sheep throughout the year as well as for the up-keeping of the sheep in a cool climate which is helpful in improving the output of wool.<sup>6</sup>

Below the Alpine pastures starts the forests zone. Forests dominate land-use in Sikkim as well as in other Himalayan states. Here the forests zone can be sub-divided into two sectors:

- (i) the "deciduous" forests in the lower altitude which have been greatly reduced by clearings, and
- (ii) above this sector, the "coniferous" forests with either persistent or deciduous leaves.

Above the tree-line which varies from region to region there is vegetation composed mainly of prostrate mountain pines and rhododendrons marking the gradual transition from forests to the Alpine zone.

Below the forests zone lies the crops zone. The crops zone is very extensive but cultivation naturally diminishes as the altitude rises. Rice and corn are seldom cultivated beyond the altitude of 6,000 feet. At higher levels wheat, barley and potato are the common crops. However, in these higher levels soil and climatic conditions are seldom suitable for farming and consequently crop yields are lower. The existence of two distinct and long seasons has influenced the vegetation of the zone.

Table 1  
Settlement Pattern in Sikkim: 1961

Tehsil	Rural area in square miles	Rural population	Number of villages with population			Total number of villages	
			Less than 200	200-499	500-999		1000-1999
Gangtok	363	49856	51	74	29	1	155
Namchi	715	95726	60	147	48	5	260
Mangan	1736	9759	28	13	4		45
Total	2814	155341	139	234	81	6	460

Note: i) Gangtok town has an area of 4 square miles which when added, gives the total area of Gangtok Tehsil as 367 square miles and the total area of Sikkim as 2,818 square miles.

ii) Gangtok town has a population of 6,848 which when added, gives the total population of Gangtok Tehsil as 56,704 and the total population of Sikkim as 1,62,189.

Sources: i) Govt. of India, *Census of India, 1961*, Vol. 16, Part 8, pp. 40-46.

ii) Govt. of Sikkim, *Sikkim Through Figures* (Gangtok: Planning and Development Dept., 1969), pp. 4-5.

During the monsoon season rice, maize and other crops are grown while during winter oranges, apples and potatoes are the main products.

## **B. Settlement Pattern**

Divergence in geographical features and the consequent difference in land-use in Sikkim has influenced the settlement pattern of the state. In the almost barren Great Himalayan region there is practically no source of livelihood except pasturage. Formerly, however, limited trade took place through the high Himalayan passes. Caravans carried cloth, spices and small manufactured goods from Sikkim and the neighbouring countries into Tibet and brought back salt, wool and yak herds. Since ancient times these passes— Nathu La and the Jelep La in north-eastern Sikkim—were some of the few areas in the world where free trade and travel persisted across international barriers. But after the Sino-Indian border conflict of 1962 there has been a total stoppage of this age-old intercourse. As a result, the settlement in this region has been reduced to a great extent.<sup>7</sup>

Moreover, the harshness of living condition in the Great Himalayan region is incomparable and unbearable. Nowhere else in the world are the mountains so high on the average, nowhere else is there such a difference in level between valley bottoms and the mountain summits and nowhere else is there such a huge mass of steep rocks destitute of plant growth of any kind whatsoever. These extreme natural conditions limit man's economic activities and provide few opportunities for livelihood.

Even in the Inner Himalayan region of Sikkim where altitude is not so formidable a barrier, steep topography aggravates the effects of altitude. The steep contour of land influences the whole life-pattern of the Sikkimese. In Sikkim most of the cultivation is done on sloping ground where work is strenuous and takes up a larger time. The slope increases the effects of gravity on cultivated land, causing the soil to slide downward slowly. Tillage speeds up this process by depriving it of plant cover for some time until cultivated plants grow up and also by making the earth friable. Lastly, the slope causes an outstanding number of avalanches of great destructive power occasionally sweeping away large tracts of cultivated area and high-altitude settlements. As a result of all this we find that

this region of Sikkim is also sparsely populated though compared to the former region the density of population here is higher.

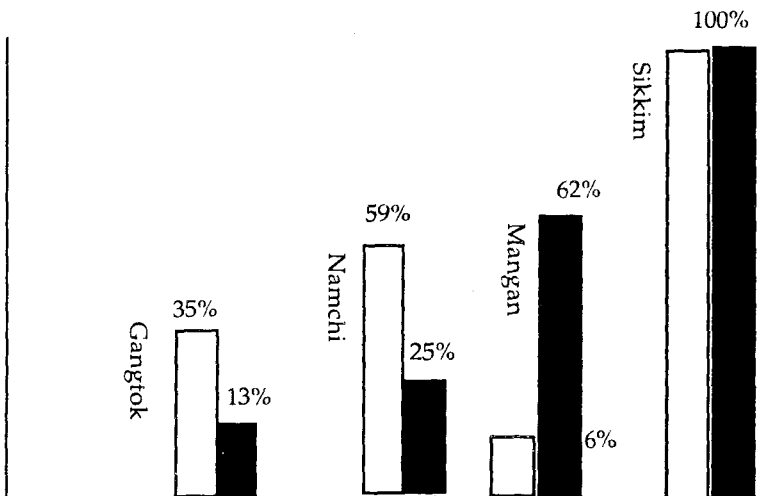
The 1961 census revealed the population of Sikkim as 162,189. The average density of population is 59 persons per square mile and nearly 96 per cent of the population live in rural areas. The average density of 59 persons per square mile is nearly the same as that in the United States but it is considerably less than the corresponding figure for the neighbouring Nepal (174) and a little more than that for Bhutan (47).<sup>8</sup>

The higher density of population in Nepal might have been one reason, among other ones as described later on, for the large-scale Nepali migration into Sikkim during the 19th and early 20th centuries. The Nepali migration was not so large in Bhutan which perhaps explains the comparatively low density of population in that country.

The settlement pattern in different parts of Sikkim is not uniform. The relative distribution of population in the three Tehsils can be shown as in the following diagram:

**Diagram I**  
**Percentage Distribution of Population and Area in**  
**Different Tehsils**

(White columns indicate population and black columns indicate area)



Sources: As in Table 1.

From the above diagram it is clear that Mangan Tehsil which occupies more than 50 per cent of the total area of the state has only 6 per cent of the total population while Gangtok Tehsil which occupies only 13 per cent of the total area has a population amounting to 35 per cent of the total. The reason for this uneven settlement pattern is that in the northern Mangan Tehsil the terrain is mostly barren and dominated by lofty snow-peaked mountains and glaciers which permit little habitation. The other two Tehsils are of lower altitude and both vegetation and communication facilities are available, and hence favourable to settlement.

Let us now discuss the settlement pattern in terms of the size and number of villages in different parts of the state. From the previous table it is seen that most of the villages in Sikkim consist of a population between 200 and 499. If the average number of members in a family is taken as 5, then it means that generally 40 to 100 families constitute a village. The size of the village population in Sikkim is, therefore, quite small compared to that in other states of India.

The size of the village population, again, is not the same everywhere within Sikkim. Most of the villages in Gangtok and Namchi Tehsils have a population between 200 and 499, while in Mangan Tehsil they have a population less than 200. Taking again the average number of members in a family as 5, this means that most of the villages in Mangan Tehsil have less than 40 houses. In general, we see that whereas in the lower valleys big settlements are common, in the upper hill-slopes they are relatively few. This may be explained by the fact that big settlements are more economical in the lower valleys than in the upper stratum of the state.

#### ***(a) Race, Religion and Language: Conflict and Consensus***

The people of Sikkim, though small in number, is of a very intricate composition from the points of view of race, religion and language. Sikkim has a population composed mainly of three racial elements: the Lepchas, the Bhutias and the Nepalis.<sup>9</sup> The Lepchas and the Bhutias, who are more or less equal in number, jointly constitute about one-third of the total population while the Nepalis account for the remaining two-thirds.

According to popular belief, the Lepchas are the original inhabitants of the land. The local pronunciation of the word Lepcha is 'Lap-cha' or 'Lap-che' and is of a Nepalese derivation. Lap-cha is derived from a word in the Parbatiya dialect of Nepal, meaning 'lap'—speech, and 'cha'—unintelligible, i.e. the unintelligible speakers, a contemptuous term referring to the tribe not adopting the Parbatiya language.<sup>10</sup> The Lepchas call themselves 'Rong Pa' meaning the ravine folk which suggests that they might have lived before somewhere near a river.<sup>11</sup> It is said that they originally migrated from the Assam-Burma border in the 13th century but no authoritative proof of that has yet been established.<sup>12</sup> They ruled over Sikkim until the middle of the 17th century when the Bhutias established their kingdom there.

Due to the infiltration of the Bhutias since then and the immigration of the Nepalis towards the end of the 19th century the Lepchas gradually lost much of their land. Today the principal concentration of the Lepchas can be found only in the Tolung valley of north-western Sikkim. By circumstances the Lepchas have been accustomed to living in remote and inaccessible regions where they have developed a fondness for birds, beasts and flowers and an extensive knowledge of the mountains and forests.

The Bhutias started entering Sikkim from Tibet from the beginning of the 14th century.<sup>13</sup> However, they took absolute control of the country only in the mid-17th century when the Bhutia monarchy was established. The social customs of the Bhutias are generally similar to those of the Lepchas due to religious similarity and close contact for centuries and now the two communities inter-marry freely. The Bhutias are good traders and many of them are herdsmen looking after the valuable herds of yaks and sheep.

The third main community consists of the Nepalis. It is indeed curious that the largest group of people in Sikkim should be the Nepalis who migrated from Nepal slowly but steadily and pushed their way into the land. Today the Nepalis constitute about 72 per cent of the total population in Sikkim.<sup>14</sup> The Nepalis are divided into a number of tribes. They are a hardy and industrious people and make excellent cultivators. The Nepalis have been migrating into Sikkim since the last century and are

concentrated mostly in the western regions of the country. Some of the social customs of the Nepalis differ from those of the Lepchas and the Bhutias and hence there is generally no inter-marriage with the latter two communities. Amongst the more orthodox of the Nepalis, even inter-caste marriage within a tribe is strictly banned due to the influence of the Hindu caste system. There are also two other smaller groups of people in Sikkim.

One such group is the small but distinct group known as the Tsongs. They were originally settlers from the Tsang-po valley in Tibet. In recent years attempts have been made to use the term 'Tsong' to denote persons other than the original Tsongs and this has led to much political dispute. The other smaller group consists of the traders and officials coming from other states of India who are numerically insignificant but socially and economically quite influential.

Previously Mahayana Buddhism of the Tibetan type was the religion of the monarch and as such it has assumed the status of a state religion. There was an Ecclesiastical Department of the Government of Sikkim which supported, financially and otherwise, the maintenance of the Buddhist monasteries of the land. Important religious ceremonies were attended by the Chogyal, as well as the members of the State Council\* and other high officials; and even for the Indian Political Officer and his senior officials it was obligatory to attend such ceremonies.

Now Buddhism is professed by about 28 per cent of the population and most of the Lepchas and Bhutias are its adherents. There are about 67 Buddhist monasteries in Sikkim. The important monasteries from the historical point of view are located at Pemayangtse, Tashiding, Phensad, Phodang, Rumtek and Ralang. These are the most sacred religious centres in Sikkim.

There is no well-established religious centre for the Hindus in Sikkim even though Hinduism is professed by the majority of the people, mainly the Nepalis. This is perhaps because Hinduism has been brought into the country only in the recent past along with the influx of the Nepalis. Moreover, unlike the

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\* It was like a cabinet, but its members were landlords—not people's representatives. Its purpose was to assist the king in administration. In later years some people's representatives were inducted in the state cabinet.

former religion it did not get any state patronage. It is noteworthy, however, that there is no hostility between the Buddhists and the Hindus in Sikkim and the two religions exist side by side and often in a synthesised form.

There is also a small number of Christians in Sikkim. The Church of Scotland Mission and the Scandanivan Alliance Mission are the two main Christian missions in the country. Primitive Lepcha religion of the pagan type is also traceable in some quarters, but it is gradually dying out in the face of its more dominant counterparts.

During the British Raj English was the official language of Sikkim. But after the departure of the British from Sikkim in 1947 regional languages have begun to compete with English. 'Sikkimese' which is the language of the Bhutias and Gorkhali, the language of the Nepalis, are now recognised also as official languages. At present most of the official declarations are made simultaneously in these three languages.

The Lepchas have their own language which is also called Lepcha. It is not an official language but that does not affect the Lepchas very much as they are generally proficient in either of the two other regional languages. The Lepcha language is not developed and has a very limited literature consisting almost entirely of translations from Tibetan religious books. The alphabet was invented in the 17th century but few people know it at present. A grammar was written by General Mainwaring in 1876. But since then no significant attempt was made for the development of the language.<sup>15</sup> Now the Government is attempting to publish some school text-books in it.

The 'Sikkimese' language belongs to the Tibeto-Burman family. It is written in the Tibetan script which is nothing but the ancient Indian Brahmi script that went to Tibet and was accepted there along with Buddhism. The language is very much akin to the dialect of south-eastern Tibet which is adjacent to Sikkim. The different Nepali tribes have their own separate languages or dialects, but almost all Nepalis now tend to speak in Gorkhali. It is a language derived from Sanskrit, written in the Indian Devanagari script and linguistically akin to the family of north Indian languages.

Of all the three regional languages Gorkhali is developing very fast and is tending to be the common language in offices.

In a rural area where the Lepchas, the Bhutias and the Nepalis inhabit, Gorkhali is used as the *lingua-franca*. Among the Lepchas and the Bhutias, 'Sikkimese' or the Bhutia language is understood by all and is used as a common language. But between the Lepchas and the Bhutias on the one hand and the Nepalis on the other, Gorkhali is used as the common language. The reason is that 'Sikkimese' is a complicated tonal language which is not easily mastered by the ordinary Nepali peasant, but the Lepchas and the Bhutias are much more successful in learning Gorkhali which seems to be easier to learn. Moreover, those who are accustomed to go to the Gangtok bazar or who have contact with the Government officials are, in fact, fluent in Gorkhali.

The presence of culturally diverse groups in Sikkim hinders the state's cohesiveness. For instance, the lack of a common racial background is responsible for the disunity of the Sikkimese people. The term "Sikkimese" indicates a resident of Sikkim and has little linguistic or ethnological implication. An urgent necessity is, therefore, to build closer relations between the Lepchas, Bhutias and Nepalis, and the relatively small, but politically and economically significant group made up of the Indian traders and officials.

The Lepchas have lost much of their land by the infiltration of the Bhutias and, above all, by the rapid spread of Nepali settlers. Conflict between the Lepchas and the Tibetan Bhutias led to considerable disturbances in Sikkim in the past. The Lepchas were pushed into the forest and lower valleys below 4,000 feet by the Bhutias who settled at higher elevations. However, at present there is little conflict between these two ethnic groups and perhaps due to the heavy Nepali inroads into Sikkim the two have become much more cohesive, socially as well as politically. But cohesion has not yet been achieved between the Lepcha-Bhutias and the Nepalis.

Before the influx of the Nepalis the Lepchas derived their livelihood mainly from the bounty of the forest. The forest provided plenty of game, edible fruits and tubers, medicinal herbs and fibres that could be woven into fabrics. The Lepchas practised *jhum* or shifting cultivation in which they cultivated only small patches of the forest, cutting down the trees, burning the undergrowth, and planting the clearing with corn, buckwheat and millet.

The Nepali settlers, on the other hand, cut down wide areas of the forest for their paddy-fields. In consequence, the Lepchas' living space was continually reduced, the tribe became more sedentary, enlarging its fields and livestock. Hunting and gathering supplies in the forest lost in importance; the forest ceased to belong to them, and they had to pay dearly for the large amount of timber needed in the construction of their traditional houses.

As a people, the Lepchas are honest, peace-loving and unselfishly helpful. But their timidity and shyness, their naivety and tendency to individualism have proved poor weapons in the unequal struggle they had to wage for four centuries against the interlopers from the north and the west.

Relationship between the Bhutias and the Nepalis was also not very cordial. Neither the Bhutia King nor the Bhutias in general favoured the large-scale immigration of the Nepalis and they often tried to prevent the influx, though not always with success. Political rights were denied to the Nepalis and that was a veritable breeding ground of discontent among the largest section of the people.

### *(b) The Growth of Population*

A few words may be said about the growth of population in Sikkim. The recorded statistics on population growth since the census was undertaken by the British for the first time in 1891 show remarkable variations. During the first decade (1891-1901) population increased almost two-fold while during the next decade (1901-1911) it increased less than one and a half times. During the next four decades (1911-1950) the increase was even lesser—population increased only one and a half times during this period. A detailed statistics is given in Table 2.

The British encouraged Nepali settlement in Sikkim in order to curb the Tibetan influence on the Bhutia monarchy as well as to have a large number of Sikkimese subjects more loyal to the British than to the Sikkim King. As H.H. Risley says:

“The influx of these hereditary enemies of Tibet (i.e. Nepalis) is our surest guarantee against a revival of Tibetan influence. Here also religion will play a leading part. In Sikkim, as in India, Hinduism will assuredly cast out Buddhism, and the praying-wheel of the lama

will give place to the sacrificial implements of the Brahman. The land will follow the creed; the Tibetan proprietors will gradually be dispossessed, and will betake themselves to the petty trade for which they have an undeniable aptitude. Thus race and religion, the prime movers of the Asiatic world, will settle the Sikkim difficulty for us, in their own way."<sup>29</sup>

It is very difficult to make a comprehensive study of Nepali immigration in Sikkim due to the lack of community-wise population data in the census reports. The Lepchas, the Bhutias and the Nepalis constitute three distinct communities of Sikkim—ethnically, culturally and socially; but it is surprising that the census authorities never took notice of it. It may, however, be presumed that the rate of influx of Nepali settlers gradually diminished but it never died out completely.

### C. The History

#### (a) *Pre-British History: The Era of Absolute Monarchy*

Little is known about the early history of Sikkim. There is no authentic chronicle of the Lepchas who are regarded as the autochtones or original inhabitants of the country which is called after them the Lepcha Land. A much better account is obtained of the Bhutias and the Nepalis who entered the country in later periods successively. There are only a few and scattered references to the Lepchas in the chronicles of the Bhutia Kings of Sikkim. The Lepcha folk-lore and tradition also provide little historical information.

According to one Lepcha legend the first Lepcha chief was of divine origin and The-Kong-Tek was the sixth in direct descent.<sup>19</sup> If each generation is assumed to have an average span of 25 years, for six generations we have a total time-span of 150 years. The time of The-Kong-Tek and Khye-Bumsa is generally assumed to be during the first half of the 15th century, as stated in the royal chronicles. So, according to this calculation, the first Lepcha King reigned around the later half of the 13th century. It can be presumed then that the Lepcha society and kingdom were well-established by the 13th century A.D., but we have no information about the earlier period.

Another Lepcha tradition refers to four Kings named Tur-ve, Tur-Sang-Pono, Tur-Ayek and Tui-Sung who reigned

Table 2  
Growth of Population in Sikkim

Year	Persons	Variations	Percentage variations in total population	Males	Females	Females per thousand males	Variations in males	Variations in females
1891	30,458							
1901	59,014	28,556	93.7	30,795	28,219	916		
1911	87,920	28,906	49.0	45,059	42,861	951	14,264	14,642
1921	81,721	-6,199	-7.1	41,492	40,229	970	-3,567	-2,632
1931	109,808	28,087	34.4	55,825	53,983	967	14,333	13,754
1941	121,520	11,713	10.7	63,287	58,221	920	7,464	4,248
1951	137,725	16,205	13.3	72,210	65,515	907	8,921	7,284
1961	162,189	24,464	17.8	85,193	76,996	904	12,983	11,481

Sources: (i) *Imperial Gazetteer of India* (1908).

(ii) *Census of India* (for the above years).

(iii) *Sikkim Through Figures*, 1969, Tables 4 and 9.

apparently at the same time in different parts of the country. When the four died, their places were taken over by treasurers, secretaries and headmen.<sup>20</sup> It is clear that the above four Kings reigned Sikkim before the arrival of the Bhutia chief Khye-Bumsa. It seems that after acquiring their loyalty Khye-Bumsa and his successors tried to retain it by re-transferring the occupied lands to them and creating a feudal clan of the Lepcha chiefs subservient to the Bhutia supremacy. The reference to the secretaries, treasurers and headmen in the above tradition, perhaps, relates to this class.

The erstwhile Chogyal Ruling House of Sikkim trace their descent from a King named Indrabodhi who was ruler of what is today known as Himachal Pradesh in India. Eastward migration of the western Himalayan tribes under adventurous princes is well-known in history and this was particularly so when Buddhism declined in India—the motive being partly to escape religious persecution and partly to spread the faith. A prince from the far west in the line of King Indrabodhi is understood to have founded the Mynak kingdom in the north-eastern Tibetan province of Kham in the 9th century A.D.<sup>21</sup>

Twenty-five generations after the founding of the kingdom a scion of the Mynak House went on a pilgrimage towards the west with his five sons. This was in the first half of the 15th century. At a place named Sakya one of the sons, Khye-Bumsa, married the daughter of the Sakya hierarch and settled at Phari in the nearby Chumbi valley. This valley became the nucleus of the later kingdom of Sikkim in the early 16th century.<sup>22</sup>

While Khye-Bumsa was at Sakya a big building was under construction in the famous Sakya monastery. So heavy were the four main pillars of the building that none could raise them into place. Then Khye-Bumsa stepped forward and with a Herculean display of strength lifted the pillars into proper position. In fact, the name Khye-Bumsa means "the possessor of the strength of a hundred thousand men" and it was given by the grateful monks of the monastery as a recognition of his great service.<sup>23</sup>

Years later, and apparently on the advice of the same lamas, Khye-Bumsa travelled to Sikkim in quest of the Lepcha-chief The-Kong-Tek and his wife Nye-Kong-Nal. While The-Kong-

Tek was a "*bong-thing*", his wife was a "*mun*". It may be mentioned in this connection that in the primitive religion of the Lepchas the place of the *bong-thing* was very important. He might be called a shaman, a medicine man or an exorciser. He was supposed to possess the power to prophesy and grant boons. His female counterpart was the *mun*, though of a much lower position.<sup>24</sup>

After strenuous search Khye-Bumsa met the legendary Lepcha chieftain who, forwarding the customary exchange of pleasantries and gifts, predicted that the childless Khye-Bumsa would have three children and that his descendants would become the future rulers of Sikkim. The prophecy came true as recorded history shows. Phuntsog Namgyal, a direct descendant of Khye-Bumsa, established himself as the first consecrated King of Sikkim in 1642. Here fact and legend converge.<sup>25</sup>

It is interesting to note how the Bhutia immigrants established a well-ordered kingdom with the support and co-operation of the local Lepchas. There is a description of how Khye-Bumsa established friendship with the Lepcha chief The-Kong-Tek by swearing blood-brotherhood:

"They agreed by this that all the males should be considered to be related to the sons and all the females to the daughters. This friendship was cemented by a ceremony at which several animals, both domestic and wild, were sacrificed and all the local deities invoked to bear witness to this solemn contract of friendship, binding the Lepchas and the Bhutias in an inseparable bond. They sat together on the raw hides of the animals, entwined the entrails around their persons, and put their feet together in a vessel filled with blood, thus swearing the blood troth to each other."<sup>26</sup>

The alliance between the Lepchas and the Bhutias is said to have been possible because Khye-Bumsa had, by this time, converted the Lepchas to Buddhism. But we must not also lose sight of the shamanistic rituals of the above covenant; and it might have been a common belief in these rituals and not Buddhism proper that was the main binding force between the two communities. In fact, the Lepcha religion had a great deal of similarity with the pre-Buddhist and shamanistic religion of Tibet called *Pon* or *Bon*.<sup>27</sup> This common cultural

tie between Tibet and Sikkim was not an insignificant factor in the matter of racial integration between the Lepchas and the Bhutias.

The wise and diplomatic administration of the Bhutia chiefs also contributed to make that integration firmer and permanent. The Bhutia immigrants in co-operation with the local Lepcha chiefs established for the first time a central political power in Sikkim with the Bhutia control at the apex of the system. The local Lepcha chiefs who contributed to the formation of the kingdom were appointed as ministers, governors and high officials. With the regranting of lands the local Lepcha chiefs were transformed into an aristocracy of feudal lords who were subordinate to, but compared well with, the Bhutia aristocracy. There was, therefore, no feeling of being ruled by foreigners among the Lepchas who gradually mingled with the newcomers and adopted their religion and culture.<sup>28</sup>

The dynasty of Phuntsog Namgyal ruled Sikkim until the country was merged with India in 1975. A genealogical table of the successive rulers is given below:

### The Consecrated Rulers of Sikkim

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1. Phuntsog Namgyal (1604 - ?)  
Consecrated in 1642
2. Tensung Namgyal (1644 - ?)  
Consecrated in 1670
3. Chagdor Namgyal (1686-1716) Son of the second wife of Tensung  
Consecrated in 1700 Namgyal
4. Gyurmed Namgyal (1707-1733) Son of Chagdor Namgyal  
Consecrated in 1717
5. Namgyal Phuntsog (1733-1769) Only son of Gyurmed Namgyal  
Consecrated in 1733 born of a nun—posthumously
6. Tenzing Namgyal (1769-1793) Son of the third wife of  
Consecrated in 1780 Namgyal Phuntsog
7. Tsugphud Namgyal (1785-1863) Son of Tenzing Namgyal  
Consecrated in 1793
8. Sidkeong Namgyal (1819-1874) Eldest surviving son of the  
second wife of Tsugphud Namgyal
9. Thutob Namgyal (1860-1914) Step brother of Sidkeong Namgyal  
Consecrated in 1874 and son of the fifth wife of  
Tsugphud Namgyal

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| 10. Sidkeong Tulku (1879-1914)<br>Consecrated in 1914  | Second son of the first wife<br>of Thutob Namgyal   |
| 11. Tashi Namgyal (1893-1963)<br>Consecrated in 1914   | Step-brother of Sidkeong Tulku<br>and the first son of the second<br>wife of Thutob Namgyal |
| 12. Palden Thondup Namgyal<br>(1923-82) Consecrated in 1963<br>was the Ruler of Sikkim until<br>it was merged with India in<br>1975. | Second son of Tashi Namgyal   |

Source: Government of Sikkim, *Sikkim: A Concise Chronicle*.

### ***(b) The British Penetration and Control: The Era of Dyarchy***

Without going into details of the later history of Sikkim we may mention only the most important and relevant events since the beginning of the 19th century when Sikkim came in contact with the British. It was also during this period that the Nepalis, being encouraged by the British, settled in Sikkim in large numbers.

Sikkim came directly under British influence when she was involved in the Anglo-Nepali war of 1814-15. In this war Sikkim was allied with the British. In the Treaty of Titalia concluded in 1817 a new boundary was established between Sikkim and Nepal whereby Sikkim regained many parts of southern and western Sikkim that had been lost to Nepal following the Treaty of 1792 between Nepal and Tibet. In 1834-35 Sikkim sought British assistance to prevent an incursion into Sikkim by the Kotapas, the rebel Sikkimese, supported by the Nepalis. The rebels and the Nepalis were repulsed and in 1835 the district of Darjeeling, so long forming the southern part of Sikkim, was ceded to the British.<sup>30</sup>

The government of Sikkim in the pre-British era was always a Tibetan-type hereditary and absolute monarchy since 1642 when Phuntsog Namgyal was consecrated as the first Chogyal of Sikkim. The word "Chogyal" is a Tibetan word meaning Dharma Raja and it had been commonly used by various Tibetan kings and chieftains in the past. Like the Tibetan "Tsongdu" or National Assembly, the Chogyal of Sikkim also had a Council of Ministers consisting of the 'Kazis' or feudal landlords who assisted the King in the governance of the

country. However, the King was the supreme authority and any action on the part of the subordinate authority was subject to the approval of the King.

During the British reign in India this absolute monarchy was gradually undergoing a change. Being threatened by her hostile neighbours Sikkim had been slowly coming within the fold of British influence and control. By and by the British acquired a position to have a say in the internal administration of the state and in the treaty of 1861 Sikkim virtually became a protectorate of the British. Clause 19 of the Treaty says:

“The Government of Sikkim will not cede or lease any portion of its territory to any other State without the permission of the British Government.” Furthermore, “the whole military force of Sikkim shall join and afford every aid and facility to British Troops when employed in the Hills”, and “the Government of Sikkim engages that no armed force belonging to any other country shall pass through Sikkim without the sanction of the British Government.”<sup>34</sup>

In the Convention between Great Britain and China relating to Sikkim and Tibet in the Year 1890 the Chinese recognised Sikkim as a protectorate of the British Government. Clause 2 of the Convention says:

“It is admitted that the British Government, whose protectorate over the Sikkim State is hereby recognised, has direct and exclusive control over the internal administration and foreign relations of that State, and except through and with the permission of the British Government, neither the Ruler of the State nor any of its officers shall have official relations of any kind, formal or informal, with any other country.”<sup>35</sup>

In 1889, just one year before the signing of the Convention, Claude White was appointed the First British Political Officer in Sikkim and had been invested with the authority of a *de facto* ruler. Henceforth the relation between the Sikkim Government and the British Government remained practically the same until the latter withdrew from India in 1947.

Only in 1905 did the Maharaja regain some of his authority as a ruler following a visit to Calcutta, where he was invited to meet the then Prince of Wales. Then in 1906 a significant

change took place in the administration of Sikkim when control over all state affairs was transferred from the Government of Bengal to the Government of India.<sup>31</sup> But still the situation did not change very much. As H.H. Risley said two years later:

“Sikkim, in fact, has been treated substantially as part of British India, subjected for political reasons to the nominal rule of a princelet of the Merovingian type.”<sup>32</sup>

*The Imperial Gazetteer of India* (1908) gives a description of this dyarchical political set-up in Sikkim: “The Political Officer, who is stationed at Gangtok, advises and assists the Maharaja and his Council but no rules have yet been laid down for the civil and criminal administration. The landlords ... exercise a limited civil and criminal jurisdiction within the lands of which they collect the revenue, but all important cases are referred to the Maharaja or the Political Officer. Those referred to the Maharaja are decided by him in consultation with his ministers (*lompo*), at present five in number, two of whom are always in attendance on him. Appeals are heard by the Maharaja sitting with one or more members of his Council, or by a Committee of the Council. Capital sentences passed by other authorities require the confirmation of the Maharaja. The annual budget estimates of income and expenditure are, in the first instance, approved by the Maharaja and his Council, and are then submitted for the sanction of the Government of India by the Political Officer.”<sup>36</sup>

From the description of the *Imperial Gazetteer of India* (1908) it appears that a great amount of political and economic power had been usurped from the King by the Political Officer. The Political Officer had three types of power:

- a) He would advise and assist the King in administration, thereby exerting his influence behind the curtain.
- b) He would act as the final authority for the matters that were referred to him by the landlords.
- c) He had the sanctioning authority of the state budget on behalf of the Government of India and as such exerted a great influence in the economic matters of the state.

In fact, the remaining powers in the hands of the King were only nominal as the British frequently over-ruled the

royal decision and on occasions even imprisoned the King.<sup>37</sup> This was facilitated by the fact that there was no written constitution or law of the country, as the *Imperial Gazetteer* states: "no rules have yet been laid down for the civil and criminal administration". In such a situation the British fully exerted their influence to attain their objectives.

In May, 1946, prior to the British withdrawal from India, Lord Wavell, the Viceroy of India, declared on behalf of the British Government that under the new Indian Constitution Britain would cease to exercise the powers of paramountcy in relation to the Indian states. *Sikkim, as an Indian state under the Indian Constitution of 1935*, came within the scope of the above declaration.

About the new position of the Indian states Wavell also declared: "The void will have to be filled either by the states entering into a federal relationship with the succession Government or Governments in British India or, failing this, entering into particular political arrangements with it or them."<sup>38</sup>

In accordance with this formula Sikkim wanted a treaty relationship with independent India, but until that was concluded, she agreed to maintain the former relationship. Accordingly, a Standstill Agreement was signed on February 27, 1948 between the Sikkim Durbar and the Government of India according to which all agreements, relations and administrative arrangements as to matters of common concern existing between the British Crown and the Sikkim state on August 14, 1947 were deemed to continue pending the conclusion of a new treaty.

Negotiations for a new Indo-Sikkim Treaty started in 1949 and it was finally signed on December 5, 1950 in a climate of goodwill and friendship. The Treaty opened a new chapter of mutual collaboration and help in the history of Sikkim.<sup>39</sup>

The main provisions of the Treaty may be mentioned as the following:

- (i) "Sikkim shall continue to be a protectorate of India and, subject to the provisions of this Treaty, shall enjoy autonomy in regard to its internal affairs." [Article 2]
- (ii) "The Government of India will be responsible for the defence and territorial integrity of Sikkim. It shall have the right to take such measures as it considers necessary

for the defence of Sikkim or the security of India, whether preparatory or otherwise, and whether within or outside Sikkim. In particular, the Government of India shall have the right to station troops anywhere within Sikkim." [Article 3(I)]

- (iii) "The external relations of Sikkim, whether political, economic or financial, shall be conducted and regulated solely by the Government of India, and the Government of Sikkim shall have no dealings with any foreign power." [Article 4(I)]
- (iv) "If any dispute arises in the interpretation of the provisions of this Treaty which cannot be resolved by mutual consultation, the dispute shall be referred to the Chief Justice of India whose decision thereon shall be final."<sup>40</sup> [Article 12] [Vide Appendix II]

The end of the British rule in India not only ushered in an era or new Indo-Sikkimese relationship, but it also brought about a new political atmosphere within Sikkim. The independence movement in India had already created a great impact on the minds of the Sikkimese people. Moreover, the various reforms of Sir Tashi Namgyal, the then Chogyal of Sikkim, aroused a high level of political consciousness. As a result, we find for the first time in the history of Sikkim the formation of various political parties like Sikkim Rajya Praja Sammelan, Praja Mandal and Praja Sudhar Samaj. These parties launched political movements for the establishment of democratic rights of the people. Let us see now how far these new political forces were able to mould the traditional political set-up of the kingdom.

Previous to 1947, the Maharaja administered the state with the help of a number of secretaries and landlords and there was no people's participation in the Government. In 1947 when India shook off the British yoke and gained independence Sikkim also felt the first shake of political agitation, and in December that very year, the three political parties—Sikkim Rajya Praja Sammelan, Praja Mandal and Praja Sudhar Samaj—were all amalgamated into a single party, the Sikkim State Congress, with a three-fold demand of "*Abolition of Landlordism, Accession with India and an Interim Ministry as a prelude to the*

*introduction of fully responsible government in Sikkim.*"<sup>41</sup>

The Sikkim State Congress demand of accession to India was opposed by a section of the people and this led to the formation of Sikkim National Party which favoured only a treaty relationship with India.

The Chogyal had all along tried to keep up with the growing political demands of the people. In 1947 he included some members of the public in the State Council which was hitherto composed only of landlords. In 1948 three Congress members representing the Lepchas, Bhutias and Nepalis were appointed Secretaries to the Government. However, these members were expelled from the Party several months later and they had to resign.

In April, 1949 a demonstration was staged by the Sikkim State Congress. The Indian Political Officer in Sikkim mediated between the Durbar and the Congress and a Ministry under Sikkim State Congress was formed in May, 1949.

The Chogyal later dissolved the Ministry and requested the Government of India for deputing a Dewan\* whose rank was that of a Prime Minister. Meanwhile the administration was taken over by the Political Officer until the arrival of the Dewan in August, 1949. Since then the position of the Dewan has always been held by Indian officials.

In 1951 an All-Party Agreement was reached whereby the State Council was to be composed of 17 members of whom 6 were to be reserved for the Lepaha-Bhutias, 6 for the Nepalis and the remaining 5 were to be nominated by the Chogyal. Another All-Party Agreement was reached in 1952 regarding the electorate and the method of election.

Based on these agreements a Proclamation was issued in 1953 defining the Constitution and the function of the State Council. According to this the State Council would be elected and an Executive Council formed to govern Sikkim. This Constitution was modified in 1958 following an agreement between the two parties and the Constitution of Sikkim stood as such until the popular uprising in 1973.<sup>42</sup>

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\* The Dewan was later on known as the Principal Administrative Officer and subsequently as the "Sidlon", a Tibetan synonym.

Sikkim, however, could not evolve a political unity during the period under review due to its lack of internal coherence and occasional misunderstanding as to its relation with India. Political problems in Sikkim were of two types. First of all, there was the social heterogeneity which hindered the growth of political unity and integrity. Secondly, the smallness and geographical position of the country made it dependent on India which generated various misgivings among the people.

Until 1961 the Nepali settler did not have the status of a citizen. But in that year the Sikkim Subjects Regulation came into force and this gave citizenship to the settlers. The regulation was, however, the subject of heated discussion in the Sikkim State Council and provoked considerable agitation outside. The regulation approved by the Indian Government was promulgated by the Maharaja but without the consent of the State Council.

The regulation divided the Sikkimese people into three distinct races — Lepcha, Bhutia and Tsong. The new term 'Tsong' was for the people other than the Lepchas and the Bhutias. Since the term Nepali denotes a citizen of Nepal, a new term for the Sikkimese Nepalis was necessary to distinguish them. The Sikkim National Party dominated by the Lepchas and the Bhutias, demanded that the new term be reserved for the people of Tibetan and Bhutanese origin and that the Nepalis settled in Sikkim be called Sikkimese Nepalis. The Sikkim State Congress and the Sikkim National Congress, dominated by the Nepalis, favoured replacing 'Nepali' with 'Tsong'. Thus the term Tsong became the bone of contention for the Lepcha-Bhutias as well as the Nepalis.

A section of the legislation further empowers the Government to deprive any subject of Sikkim of his citizenship if he has shown by act and speech to be guilty of dissatisfaction or disloyalty towards the King. This provision has been subject to much criticism as the political parties fear that it may be used to revoke the citizenship of the party leaders when they are in opposition.

All this indicates how racial heterogeneity of the Sikkimese led to disunity in the political field. To curb further complications the Government prohibited fresh settlement of the Nepalis. But still a great deal remains to be done before

all internal differences and discords are eliminated and a united Sikkimese nation emerges.

Again, coming to its foreign policy, particularly its relation with India, Sikkim had not yet been able to evolve a unanimous public opinion. The protectorate status of Sikkim in the Treaty of 1950 had not satisfied all and everyone in Sikkim. There was often a clamour for greater autonomy and freedom in the external affairs of Sikkim. After the entry of Bhutan into the United Nations with the patronage of India this demand became much more vocal.

Moreover, even though some Sikkimese would allow India to control the external affairs of Sikkim, they were not ready to tolerate any intervention in the internal matters of the country. The Treaty vests full powers to the Government of Sikkim so far as internal matters are concerned. But in the discharge of duties and responsibilities for all external affairs of Sikkim "whether political, economic or financial," for defence and strategic communication India might seek the co-operation of the State Government which the Sikkimese may not like, or India might do something which may look like intervention in internal matters in the eyes of the Sikkimese.

Under these circumstances the position of the Indian Political Officer in Sikkim was a very delicate one. He was a representative of the Government of India and as such should look after Indian interests. But it was also his duty to see that Indo-Sikkimese relation is not embittered. Compared to the Political Officers in the British period, who were practically autocrats, the later incumbents in the post had to be much more tactful.

The position of the Sidlon is also no less delicate. Since its inception the post has become part of Sikkim's administrative machinery, and his role is as difficult as it is important. As the chief adviser to the Maharaja his interests must be those of Sikkim. Yet, no matter how much they are, he is a suspect — an Indian in Sikkimese clothing. As a result, however useful and sympathetic he may be, he is not given the full credit that he deserves.

Whatever may be the motivations and attitudes of the political parties the truth is that Sikkim cannot be a fully independent country simply because it must depend for its

everyday necessities upon India, the only neighbouring country from which it can procure goods and services of all types and at the lowest transport cost. It is to be remembered in this connection that all the development plans of Sikkim have been entirely financed by India apart from other usual grants and subsidies, and without this help from India it would hardly have been possible for Sikkim to execute those plans.

Non-interference in Sikkim's internal affairs had been reiterated again and again by Mr. Nehru, the late Prime Minister of India, who once said: "If we bring a small country like Sikkim within our fold by using force, it would be like killing a fly with a bullet."<sup>44</sup> The subsequent Prime Ministers of India and the Indian Political Officers in Sikkim have also expressed similar views.

However, by a popular mandate through referendum Sikkim became a full fledged state of Indian Union in 1975.

It is necessary to emphasise this aspect because much of the country's present difficulties spring from an ambivalent attitude towards India.

#### **D. The Society**

The role of cultural environment is no less important in the making of the Sikkimese economy and, in fact, the economy of a country is but one aspect of the composite culture of that country. According to Thoman the term "culture" designates:

"the totality of a society's ideals and ideas, including such diverse features as mores, folk-ways, laws, arts, sciences, religious beliefs, highways and cities — in short, including the lasting accumulation of human learning and thought in that society. In this sense, a culture is a recognizable way of life of a group of people, regardless of the size of that group. It is a summary of what that group believes to be of positive and of negative importance, and includes the objectives, the problems, and the achievements of that group."<sup>45</sup>

Culture is pertinent to the study of any economic system specially because the different peoples of the world do not have identical objectives, nor do they have identical means of reaching their goals. Certainly most members of the primitive societies do not consider seriously the possibility of owning

refrigerators or automobiles, nor are they able currently to produce and maintain such commodities. Their entire grasp of needs as well as the means of satisfying them is limited to the horizons of elementary cultures.

On the other hand, members of certain technically advanced societies specially in the West look upon refrigerators and automobiles as objects of want. The cultures of such societies obviously contain not only an understanding of how an automobile is produced and maintained but also an incentive for ownership of this costly gadget.

Still there are certain other societies, that may not regard ownership of an automobile as a worthy goal in this life. Most of the oriental cultures are of this type and economic underdevelopment of these countries does not necessarily mean cultural backwardness as compared with the technically advanced western countries. Cultural objectives of a society are thus very important in shaping that society's needs and wants as well as the means of satisfying them.

Let us now see whether and to what extent Sikkimese culture has contributed to the development of the economy. As culture is a very broad and general concept only the most salient features of it which materially affect the economy will be taken into consideration. The Sikkimese population can be divided into two distinct culture groups: the Lepcha-Bhutias professing the Tibetan-type Buddhism and the Nepalis professing Hinduism and our study will follow this division.

With regard to the Lepcha-Bhutia group we shall particularly mention the roles played by the marriage system and the village monastery in the economic life of the people.

The marriage system among the Lepchas and the Bhutias is in many ways related to the economic fate of the people. One important feature of it is the custom of bride price. In a poor country like Sikkim this custom is quite unwarranted: often it proves to be too exorbitant for the groom. This necessitates a strenuous saving for a long time on the part of the bride-groom and very often he has to work in the fields of his would-be father-in-law to cover the bride-price. On the other hand the strenuously saved bride price is channelised

into unproductive expenditures, mostly in the form of feasts in which the entire village people are invited.

This custom of bride price eats into the very vitality of the society and is one of the prime factors for the degeneration of economic welfare of the people. If the entire amount of bride-price collected from all the marriages in a village could be utilised for economic development of the village, the villagers might have had the experiences of some of the most essential amenities of the modern world such as village roads, water supply, electricity, sanitation and better housing facilities.

It is very difficult, however, to break any tradition which is deep-rooted in the psychology of the people—but it seems to be unavoidable in the context of the extreme poverty of the Sikkimese people. Moreover, the custom of bride price is not a cherishable element of culture and as such there should be no hesitation in doing away with it. On the one hand the Government should take legal steps to stop this practice and try to enforce them effectively, on the other hand the people should be given modern education and enthused to work for the economic uplift of the people.

The existence of the custom of polyandry among the Lepcha-Bhutias is another important factor which has affected the economic life of the people to a great extent. This custom is a direct result of the custom of bride price. When several brothers can save money that is enough only for a single bride. They think it reasonable to go for polyandry. First of all, it has led to a reduction in population. It is one of the reasons why the Lepcha-Bhutias who settled in Sikkim long before the Nepalis are now numerically smaller than the latter.

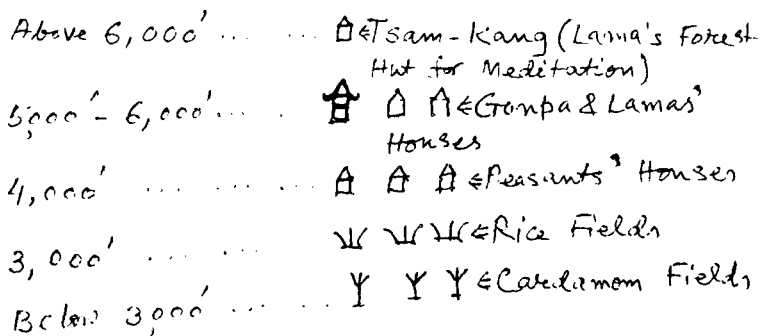
Secondly, polyandry has increased the immobility of the members of the family which means also the immobility of labour. This has led to the concentration of the Lepcha-Bhutia community in a few small areas in the north of the country.

Thirdly, it hinders the incentive to work. While a brother earns, other polyandrous brothers may sit idle or even work within the family.

Let us now consider the role of the village monastery in moulding the rural economy. Since the time of Bhutia migration

into Sikkim the Gonpa\* or the village monastery has become the pivot of community life as well as the prime bond of unity between the two ethnic groups, the Lepchas and the Bhutias. The geographical location of the Gonpa in a typical Sikkimese village\* can be demonstrated by the following diagram:

### Diagram II. A Sikkimese Lepcha-Bhutia Village



From the above diagram we see that the gonpa is situated at the highest point in the village, normally at the height of 5,000' to 6,000' feet from the sea level overlooking the valley and backed by the forest. Still higher in the forest is the lama's\* hut for meditation called Tsam-Kang. Outside the precincts of the gonpa but around it there is a hamlet or cluster of households of the lamas who serve the gonpa. Further below there is another hamlet at the height of near-about 4,000 feet inhabited by the peasants. Below that there lie the rice fields and pastures until at 3,000' feet one finds the beginning of the cultivation of cardamom. Apart from the gonpa, within each hamlet there is at least one Buddhist shrine of some kind unless the hamlet is entirely inhabited by the Nepalis.

\* In English it is often spelt as 'Gonpa'. The Tibetan spelling, when transliterated, is 'd Gompa'.

+ In Sikkim a distinction is made between a village and a hamlet. While the former is a composite structure as shown in the following sketch, a hamlet is a part of the village representing a cluster of households often on a racial basis.

All the households within the jurisdiction of the gonpa are called "Zindha". Generally the Zindha supports the gonpa but sometimes a gonpa possesses its own land which may be a source of its income. But originally the gonpas did not possess any land but were simply authorised to receive gifts and donations from certain villages over which they had their respective religious authority. Actually, certain villagers were made laymen of a certain gonpa and these people used to support it with their own contributions.<sup>46</sup>

But in course of time some gonpas accumulated savings out of these contributions and these were used for the purchase of land. However, excepting the five big gonpas of the country the gonpas in general did not possess much land. After the land reform of 1951 the gonpas in Sikkim, except the big five, lost their land, if they possessed any, and now they depend entirely on the donations from the Zindha.

There are two types of gonpas: the traditional type of monastery in which monks always live, and the temple type in which monks pay their visit only on religious occasions. The monks of the Geluk sect observe celibacy and reside solely within the gonpa—and here the gonpa takes the shape of the traditional monastery. But the monks of the Kagyu sect normally have their wives and children and generally reside outside the gonpa — and there the gonpa takes the shape of a temple. When the monks of the Kagyu sect are not engaged in prayer or meditation they cultivate and live outside the gonpa. But there are occasions of festivals when they stay in the dormitory of the gonpa being engaged in prayer day and night; and temporarily the gonpa looks like a monastery.

There is no restriction on the basis of descent, status, wealth or occupation of the father for a boy to become a lama, though on the whole there are more lamas among the Bhutias than among the Lepchas. The only exception is the Pamiongchi gonpa which is the biggest monastery in Sikkim where admission is open only to the sons of the Bhutia aristocrats. Fourteen major noble families of Tibetan origin have the right

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\* The priests in the monasteries of Sikkim are generally called 'Lamas' though the term is applied in Tibet only to those who have achieved the highest religious status and learning.

to be admitted to the monastery without payment of entry fee. Eight other minor families of the Bhutia nobles have also the right of admittance, but only on the payment of a heavy entry fee.<sup>47</sup> There are a few nunneries attached to some gonpas. As in the case of boys, entry into the nunneries depends on the desire of the girls rather than that of their parents. Training in the nunneries is not very severe and no specific discipline is observed.

The relationship between the gonpa and the peasants is an age-old one and it has remained intact even when there has been major changes in the upper strata of the society. Before the abolition of landlordism in Sikkim the peasants used to contribute to the gonpa through their landlords, apart from their own personal contributions. Often there were changes in the ownership of land which meant changes in landlords, but never was the peasant ousted from his ancestral land of cultivation, nor was there any change in the relationship between the gonpa and the peasants.

Even now the influence of the gonpa over the peasants has not diminished. The factor behind this is the fact that the activities of the peasants are greatly regulated by the gonpa: the rituals at birth, death, illness or the agricultural rites are all performed by the lamas of the gonpa. In short, the priests are the intellectual elite whom the peasants consult for guidance. For a Buddhist peasant hardly a day passes without any contact with the lamas.

Economically speaking, the lamas are a parasitic class of the society and they, along with the expensive religious rites and customs, cause a huge drainage of savings of the people. Moreover, the lamaistic culture has also influenced the attitude of the people towards the modern world. The Lepchas and the Bhutias are generally averse to modern education and much more eager to educate their sons in lamaistic training.

Lamaism seems to be an important factor behind economic backwardness of the Lepcha-Bhutias. In this connection we may refer to the hypothesis of Max Weber which proclaims that the rise of Protestantism was a major cause of Industrial Revolution in Europe.<sup>48</sup> According to him Protestantism kindled the light of courage and initiative among the people that had

so long remained passive. This spirit was conducive to economic ventures.

The Weber hypothesis highlights the role of religion in the economic development of a country. In this respect lamaistic Buddhism is not very congenial to economic prosperity. The Buddhist Lepcha-Bhutias of Sikkim are basically introvert in nature and to a devout Buddhist spiritual advancement is more important than economic prosperity.

The Nepalis, on the other hand, are extrovert in nature and more interested in mundane matters. As a result, we often see the Nepalis succeeding the economic ventures where initiative and perserverence are essential. We can hardly see the Lepcha-Bhutias in those fields. This will be evident from the story of Nepali immigration into Sikkim as told by Namgyal and Dolma:

“Since the year 1871 ... there was an influx of Gorkhalis from the neighbouring state of Nepal.... They settled down for good, and began digging, hoeing, smashing and overturning rocks, felling down trees, and turning the courses of streams at such a rate that all jungles were turned into fields, in a very short time.”<sup>49</sup>

One characteristic of these colonists was that once they had succeeded in establishing a local community of their own, they gradually expanded to other neighbouring areas dominated by the Lepchas and the Bhutias. From the Nepali point of view, these areas, though inhabited by the Lepchas and the Bhutias, were considered to have much unused land. In fact, the latter two communities cultivated only the most fertile lands of the area leaving aside the less fertile ones. These waste lands were enough to attract the land-hungry Nepali colonists. While converting such barren lands into arable lands the Nepalis usually worked as casual farm labourers for the Lepcha-Bhutias. The latter hired the labourers because many members of their families occasionally lived outside the locality to lead a religious life in the gonpas or other institutions. The entry of the Nepalis was not, therefore, opposed but welcomed in such cases.

An outstanding feature of the Nepali settlement was that though initially the colonists were economically handicapped,

particularly with regard to the availability of land, ultimately they became successful. A Nepali who had come from Nepal with empty hands could, within two decades, succeed to such an extent that economically his standard became comparable to or even higher than that of the Lepchas or the Bhutias who had been settled there for generations.

The basic reason for such an outstanding achievement of the Nepalis compared to the others is to be found in the differences in cultural pattern of the two communities. These differences have, in turn, led to different rates of capital accumulation as between the two communities. A higher rate of capital accumulation is generally found among the Nepalis. The cultural factors that influence the rate may be mentioned as follows:

- (i) First, given the same labour force with the same resources, the productivity of the Nepalis is much higher than that of the rest due to an intensive use of their labour.
- (ii) Secondly, the consumption of the Nepalis is much lower than that of the Lepcha-Bhutias due to the former's lack of and the latter's indulgence in conspicuous religious expenditures.

Regarding the productivity of labour force it may be noted that whereas many Lepcha-Bhutias engage in priestly activities thereby reducing potential productive labour, almost all the Nepalis devote their labour to the economic pursuits of life. For the Nepalis, entry into priesthood is entirely regulated by birth: unless one is born a Brahmin one cannot be a priest. So a non-Brahmin Nepali thinks it incumbent to climb up the ladder of social prestige, success and economic prosperity through his own perseverance.

For the Nepalis, wives are an important source of labour and to them marriage means the acquisition of more labour for productive purposes rather than the responsibility to feed a dependent. Again, Nepali children over the age of five are often put to work and those above ten may even earn more than their own requirements. This is not so among the Lepcha-Bhutias. Moreover, the Nepalis are versatile labourers: they can act as coolies in the bazar, construct roads and buildings, collect various kinds of fruits, roots, herbs and other materials

from the forests for their own consumption as well as for sale in the bazar and so on, whereas the Lepcha-Bhutias hardly engage themselves in any type of work other than cultivation, even when they are extremely poverty-stricken. Due to all these, naturally, the productivity of the Nepalis is higher than that of the other communities.

Coming to the consumption pattern of the two communities we may first refer to the custom of bride price and feast on the occasion of marriage among the Lepcha-Bhutias as referred to earlier. This often exhausts the entire accumulation of savings of the family concerned and may even lead to a life-long debt. In contrast, the marriage of a Nepali couple is very simple and no conspicuous consumption or expenditure is made therein.

Another drainage of savings among the Lepcha-Bhutias is that they often have to feed some members engaged in monastic activities. Almost every household has one or more monks to support. Even when a monk earns in his profession his support is maintained by the society. In that case the Buddhist population has to perform the following activities as part of their religious duties:

- (i) occasional donations to the gonpa either (a) in kind or (b) in money — and these being particularly heavy during festivals;
- (ii) free labour service for the (a) construction or (b) repair of the gonpa; and
- (iii) payment of high fees for various sorts of services rendered by the lamas.

On the other hand, the amount spent by the Hindu Nepalis for religious purposes is negligible. The Nepalis have no obligation to the gonpa — neither have they any institution like that. There are, of course, a few Hindu festivals but the expenses for these are very low compared to that of the Buddhists.

Another important point to note is that alcoholism is a widespread practice among the Lepcha-Bhutias whereas a Hindu Nepali hardly drinks. This means that the Nepalis can save a lot which their counterpart might have spent for drinking. Moreover, aversion to drinking is congenial to hard

work and physical fitness which increase the productivity of labour.

The diet, clothing and housing of the Nepalis are quite simple and inexpensive. A Nepali can do away with rice that is expensive in Sikkim and be satisfied with the consumption of maize grown on his own kitchen garden. But, for the Buddhists, rice is a must and it is often taken along with meat which is also another expensive item. The materials as well as tailoring of Nepali costumes are simple and cheap and can be obtained in any market of Sikkim. On the other hand, the Tibetan-style Bhutia costume, which has also come to be the Lepcha costume, is much more expensive and requires a great deal of special tailoring. The difference is perceptible even in the case of housing. A Nepali house is easily built by a man himself out of mud and straw while a Lepcha-Bhutia house is built of timber which is expensive and requires expert handling by hired carpenters.

We see, therefore, that in contrast with the Buddhist Lepcha-Bhutias who are basically introvert and accept any situation as given, the Hindu Nepalis are basically extrovert and challenge any situation that confronts their economic interests. A Nepali believes that the limitations imposed by a particular situation are not insurmountable but requires to be tackled tactfully and diligently. A Lepcha-Bhutia on the contrary, simply by-passes those limitations while journeying to the spiritual world.

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