

Social Organization, Continuity and Change: The Case of the Bhutias of Lachen and Lachung of North Sikkim

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ABSTRACT All societies are involved in the process of social change. The study of socio-cultural change is the systematic study of variation in social and cultural change. However, in societies there are structures and processes which are more prone to change while there are others that are resilient to change. The structures which do not change are social continuities. The efforts to improve or bring development cannot ignore culture. The very process of socialisation is one in which cultural knowledge is constantly transmitted, acquired, and produced. Cultural beliefs and values shape what occurs within formal education systems. Economic and political changes are often expressed in cultural terms. Meanwhile, culture also works as a force to reshape the environment and therefore influences economic and political systems. Anthropological perspectives on cultural continuity and change can thus make critical contributions to more informed and enlightened policies and practices in the new millennium. The study centres on the two prominent groups of the Bhutias- the Lachenpas and Lachungpas who are settled in two river valleys of Lachen and Lachung of North Sikkim. The Bhutias of Lachen and Lachung practiced marginal agriculture and yak, sheep and goat rearing as a part of their subsistence. Maintenance of such herds was possible only through a skillful organisation of the migratory movements to avail pastures in certain niche or at certain times in the particular environment of the region. High up on the northern borders, marginal agriculture and animal husbandry was not sufficient to sustain the population, so the people of Lachen and Lachung indulged in marginal trading activities with Tibetans across the borders. The barter of timber, wood, dyestuffs and dairy products of that region for Tibetan salt and wool formed the basis of this trade. The people of Lachen and Lachung 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. Since the closure of the trans-border trade they are facing several problems. The Bhutias have tried to solve these problems with their traditional social organisation. The key aspects of social organisation, transhumant production system, continuity and change among the Bhutias of Lachen and Lachung have been discussed in this study. Units such as the household, the village or *busti*, encampments, and *dzumsha* defined by predominantly local interaction patterns between kinsmen and friends are the most important institutions which anchored these Bhutias to a specific community and territory. This traditional organisation (*dzumsha*) has a formal set up to show an example of social cohesion between the people with range of activities. *Dzumsha*, which has been under operation for over 600 years, controls resources and looks after conservation of resources, pasture management for grazing, conflict resolution, social and community mobilisation, traditions and local governance.