

Patterns of Adaptation in Sikkim

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