

ECO-SYSTEM AND ETHNIC
CONSTELLATION OF
SIKKIM

DR. MAMATA DESAI

NETAJI INSTITUTE FOR ASIAN STUDIES

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AND
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Best Books

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PREFACE

Sikkim has always been an interesting area of Himalayan studies. *Sikkim* now acquired added significance as a subject of enquiry to Indian geographers and social scientists because, apart from its Himalayan location, it is now the youngest and the smallest State of the Indian Republic. There is a strong wind of change blowing through this mountain domain of the Nepalis, the Lepchas and the Bhotias which calls for a detailed analysis not only to understand the dynamics of this remote mountain habitant but also to realise the problems of integration of various units of north-eastern India into the mainstream of Indian nationalism.

The ethnic scene in Sikkim underwent radical change, once in 1947 and then again in 1975 when it opted to be an integral part of India. The economic scene, which generally undergoes slower changes, has, nevertheless, witnessed significant transformation of the area as a part of the greater Indian economy.

Dr. Mamata Desai, a Fellow of the Department of Ecology, Netaji Institute for Asian Studies, has attempted a serious review of this process of transformation which has been going on in Sikkim. Her book, the 'Eco-system and Ethnic Constellation of Sikkim', bears imprint of a serious effort on the part of a geographer to understand the 'impact of changing human activities on a mountain eco-system'. As the author herself says, this smallest and the youngest State of the Indian Union 'is characterised by multi-ethnic societies. Historical developments influenced by geographical forces have given rise to an ethnic composition typical of a physical transition in Sikkim'. In the present book the author seriously tries to look into this process of transition.



INTRODUCTION

The living organisms in this planet exist under natural conditions in physical and biological isolation. There is a constant interplay both among the different population groups themselves and with the physical and chemical components of the environment. The functional system that results from this interplay is known as eco-system. So the eco-system concept is applied to a somewhat arbitrary series of functions of the world and its inhabitants. Sometimes it may be possible to constitute certain topographical boundaries, such as rivers, mountain ranges, oceans or some physical barriers providing a discrete outline to an eco-system.

Therefore, there are two basic variables in a given eco-system, the biotic and abiotic. If our whole planet may be regarded as a single eco-system, its biotic components are the living populations like man, plants, animals. By contrast, the oxygen, carbon-dioxide, water vapour, and other gases and suspended particles of the air, together with the various geological, chemical and physical features of sea and land, comprise the totality of habitants of this eco-system. The relationship between all these components of the environment is manifest in that a change in any one of them affects all others, and brings about a change in their condition. These changes are consequent on both natural processes and man's economic and other activities.

Especially mountain eco-system is unusually sensitive to quite small disturbances and the consequences of disturbance are often irreversible. As a mountain region is characterized the land surface, this dimension

produces a major ecological contrast within a short linear distance and special biological adaptation is required to meet the conditions of low temperature, high radiation and strong winds characterizing these areas. The high gradient results in vertical zonation of soils, flora and fauna, and different eco-system types. Accordingly man's way of life, his habit, land use and exploitation patterns are differentiated accordingly.

The present project focusses on the impacts of changing human behaviours as well as different types of economic and social activities adopted by different ethnic groups due to changing eco-system in Sikkim Himalaya.

Sikkim, the smallest and youngest State of the Indian Union, is characterized by multi-ethnic societies. Historic developments influenced by geopolitical forces have given rise to an ethnic composition, which is typical of the physical transition in Sikkim, situated as it is between the higher Himalayas of Nepal, China, Bhutan and the plains of West Bengal.

The State is essentially a mountainous territory located in the Eastern Himalaya, with an area of 7096 square kilometers.

The earliest writings on Sikkim in the 19th century were mainly by the British, who were captivated by its exotic culture, beautiful landscape and massive wealth of its flora and fauna. Till very recent times these literatures were the only sources of information on Sikkim. Since then, the State offers a pre-eminent example of the operation of the processes of change that has taken place in it. Whether it is in political structure, social organisation, economic life, manners or customs, this small State has witnessed an unusual concentration of changes in the last hundred years. Its unique situation has influenced its diverse ethnic mix of the Lepchas, the Bhotias and the Nepalis.

All these groups are characterized by specific ecological adaptations as well as social organisation of the specific region where they live.

Sikkim, politically a theocracy, has her social structure, mainly based on the social status ascribed by or inherited

through tribal affiliations. Its economic status is basically a feudal one. However, the socio-political scene of Sikkim has witnessed the abolition of bureaucracy and the emergence of a competitive party system in the recent past. The changes reflect a new orientation in the socio-demographic profiles of the ethnics of Sikkim. These changes have direct effects on the socio-cultural and socio-economic systems of the existing ethnic groups and have indirect effects on the surrounding eco-systems through their changing behavioral patterns.

The advent of the eighteenth century witnessed an aggressive encroachment of Nepalese on the Sikkimese territory. This was the beginning of a new phase in Sikkim's history. The ethnic scene of Sikkim began to undergo a rapid change with the advent of the British. Not only had the early Nepalese settlers multiplied in numbers, but at present they even constitute 75% of the total population, reducing the Lepcha and the Bhotia communities to 11% and 14% respectively. So, from the very beginning of the eighteenth century, the State acquired the status of a plural ethnic society. So long as the British ruled, the ethnic imbalance and interaction had no major impact on Sikkim's political, social or economic environment. The Bhotias retained their dominant position supported by the elite class like kazis, whereas the Lepchas remained as an appendage of the Bhotias. But this ethnic scene changed rapidly after 1947, and again after 1975. The economic imbalances affected by environmental conditions amongst the three communities were also marked. The Bhotias own the best lands, control business and urban property, while the Lepchas who are mostly confined to Dzongu area in the North District, with their primitive life style, live in utter poverty despite their rich cardamom and apple growing lands, and the Nepali agriculturists who have limited land right, are mostly share croppers. All these factors contributed towards general dissatisfaction among the different ethnic groups. With Buddhism as the State religion the vast majority of Nepalis, who were Hindus, resented its dominance. The language was yet another issue. So, this project is an attempt to study the effects of these constant political, economic

and technological changes on the existing ethnic constellation and the surrounding environment, as well as the problem created by socio-economic and technological forces external to the area.

So the main problem-oriented objectives are as follows.

The first problem focusses on the physical environment of the State, which includes geolithology, physiography, climate, soil and natural vegetation. To study the existing ethnic constellation of the region, it is necessary to survey the surrounding physical environment, because one of the main objectives of the present work is to emphasize on man induced factors of land depredations, which result in deforestation, soil erosion, etc.

The second problem focusses on the character and nature of ethnicity of the State and their historical background. This chapter also focusses on the socio-cultural and socio-economic changes that have been taken place since the nineteenth century with the changing eco-system.

The third problem deals with the socio-cultural activities and the cultural heritage of the region. The chapter also focusses on the relationship between the cultural activities of the existing ethnic groups and natural environment.

The fourth problem concerns the changing socio-demographic profiles in relation to the changing eco-system. This chapter also includes a sub-chapter on the Lepchas of Dzongu. The demographic constitution of Dzongu is that the Lepchas have been diminishing in number over the years. So, a special survey has been conducted to study their socio-economic activities in relation to the existing eco-system.

The fifth and the last problem focusses on the human adaptation to changing environment. To explain such changing environment some flow-models have been prepared to clarify the situation. In this regard some villages with different ecological backgrounds, and inhabited by different ethnic groups from the different altitudinal zones have been selected and studied to co-relate their socio-cultural and socio-

economic life with the natural resources and the eco-system management.

To conduct the present scheme the adopted methodologies were as follows :—

✓ 1. **Field Work** : In order to undertake a field survey it has been divided into two types :

- a) **Preliminary survey** : This type of survey has been conducted with a view to collecting landuse data, climatic data, soil samples and information regarding types and methods of agriculture, forest statistics, and mode of fuel consumption. In this regard, relevant data have been collected districtwise as well as revenue block-wise.
- b) **Micro level sample survey** : The objective of the micro level sample survey in some selected villages is to co-relate their socio-cultural systems with the natural resources and the eco-system management. The villages selected have different types of water sources, agricultural activities and also different types of socio-cultural activities. This made a comparative limnological study possible.

To explain the changing socio-demographic pattern, different statistical methods have been used. Socio-cultural and socio-economic studies have been conducted through interviews during the field work, mainly to examine the changing pattern of life style with the changing environment. The surveys were conducted during 1982 and 1983.

A major part of the physical environment has been studied with the help of airphotos and satellite imageries.

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Plate No. 1 Gigantic Summits of Mount Kanchanjanga



Plate No. 2 River Tista, the Ganga of Sikkim



Plate No. 3 A Lepcha mother with her kid in Dzongu Region—North District



Plate No. 4 A typical Bhotia family in the North District



Plate No. 5 A recently migrated Nepali lady with her kid}

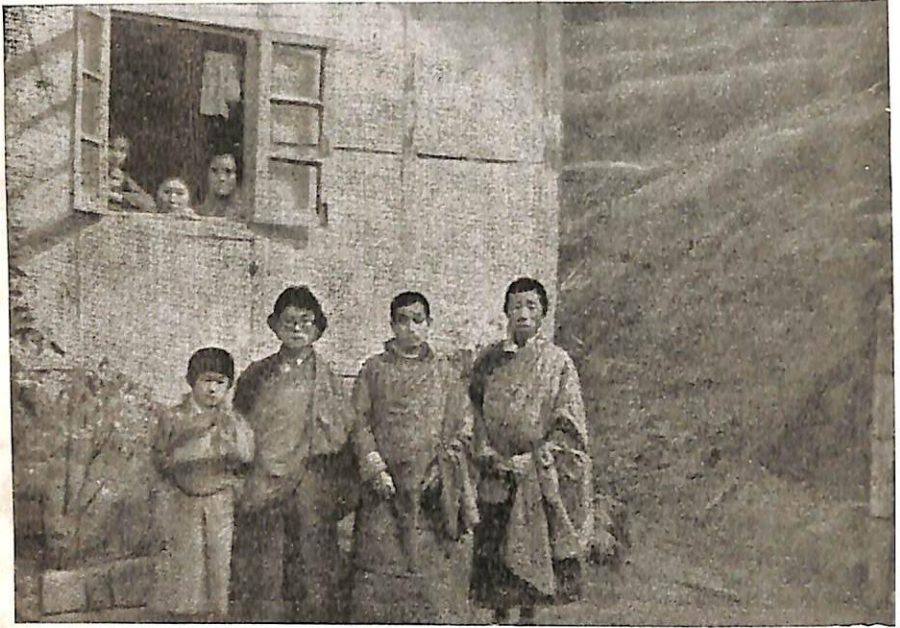


Plate No. 6 The Bhotia lamas

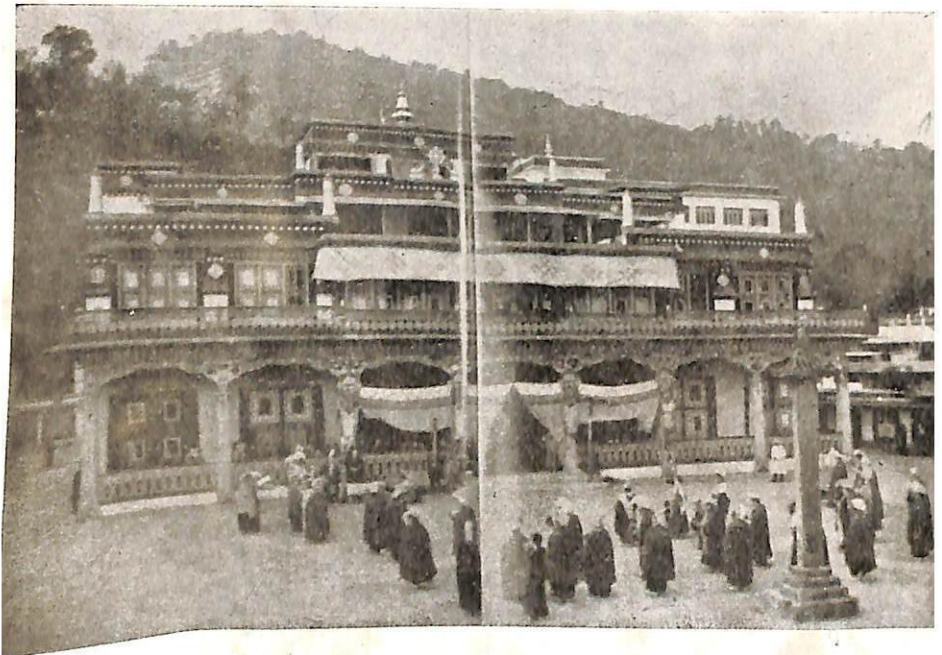


Plate No. 7 Rumtek Monastery

CHAPTER I

PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

Sikkim is essentially a mountainous country without a flat piece of ground. This rectangular shaped State when viewed on a world map appears to be insignificant in the mighty Himalayas, but surrounded on three sides by precipitous mountain walls, the State looks like a 'pearl in a craggy oyster'. The name Sikkim is probably of Nepalese origin, meaning 'new place', and probably refers to the new kingdom established by Phuntsong Namgyal in the midst of the seventeenth century. Tibetans have been calling the region as "Donzong" which means the land of rice. Even today the Tista is called 'Be-Yul-Denzong' or the hidden valley of rice by the Bhotias. Lepchas who are said to be autochthonous to Sikkim called it as 'Mayel Nyang' or 'paradise'.

The State of Sikkim is located between $88^{\circ}00'58''E$ and $88^{\circ}55'25''E$ longitudes and $27^{\circ}04'N$ and $28^{\circ}07'48''N$ latitudes. It is bounded by China in the north and east, Nepal in the west and Bhutan in the east. In the south it shares the boundary with the State of West Bengal. Bounded by foreign nations on two sides and by an Indian protectorate on one side, this tiny State has a strategic importance out of all proportion to its size. Actually, Sikkim and Bhutan are separated by Chumbi valley, once a part of Sikkim and now a part of Tibet, and a strategic camping ground for Chinese armed forces. This Tibetan enclave occupied by Chinese troops has made the location of Sikkim quite strategic.

Its unique situation has exposed it to influences from political, social, economic and cultural quarters, playing upon an unusually diverse ethnic mix in its diminutive size of barely 7096 sq km (Fig.1).

Except in the south, where it is not separated by any mountainous feature from West Bengal, the State is separated from Nepal, Tibet and Bhutan by mountainous walls ranging in height from 3600 metres to 9100 metres above sea-level. The mighty range of Singelila separates it from Nepal in the west. At the trijunction of Nepal, Sikkim and West Bengal stands the Singelila peak (3697 metres). The mighty Kanchenjunga peak stands between Nepal and Sikkim.

On the eastern side is Dongkya range which forms the part of Indo-Tibet border. Its greatest elevation culminates in a 7134 metres high peak in the north-west. This mountainous wall on the east is pierced through the strategic passes like Nathula, Jelep La, Wangkar La. The northern border along Tibet coincides roughly with the central Himalayan axis running between Kanchenjunga and Chomolhari on the Tibeto-Bhutan border.

About two-thirds of the total area remain snow covered throughout the year, and send out glaciers like Zemu and Talung. These lofty snow covered regions are practically devoid of any human habitation, and only a few nomadic tribes with their yak and sheep visit the places during summer months.

The most magnificent and noteworthy group of mountains in Sikkim is that which is dominated by Mount Kanchenjunga. It is represented by fine gigantic summits of rock and ice. The other noteworthy mountain peaks of Sikkim are Kinchinjahan, Siniolchu and Chomiome. (Plate No. 1).

In between the mountains on the east and west of Sikkim there is a succession of deep valleys with Tista valley as the largest valley. It can be said that Sikkim is a land with varied elevations from 220 metres in the southern foothills to more than 8500 metres above sea-level along the northern and north-western border.

Drainage

Though there are a number of streams and rivulets in Sikkim, yet the Tista is the largest river in Sikkim. (Plate No. 2). Winding its way through Sikkim it divides the State into

The above mentioned graph showing the districtwise concentration of three most important ethnic groups reveals that the number of Bhotia population is not more than 3500 in any district, the maximum being 3,280 in the East district. But the Lepcha population dominate the North district. Also they are second major in number in the East district. They are not below 3500 in any district. Nepali group dominates the East, West and South districts, while they are contrastingly minimum in number in the North district. (Fig. 3)

Table No. 10
Linguistic Groups

Towns	Bhotia	Lepcha	Nepali
Gangtok	153	397	5744
Singtam	64	29	1094
Rangpo	39	—	1122
Gyashing	213	6	221
Jorethang } Nayabazar }	44	5	853
Mangan	112	44	180
Namchi	109	74	173

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