



The Occupational Pattern and Economic Status of Sikkim

Karma Samten Bhutia

Associate Professor, Sikkim Government College, Mangshila, North Sikkim

Date of Submission: 12-10-2024

Date of Acceptance: 26-10-2024

Abstract

The present study provides a brief insight on the occupational pattern and economic status of Sikkim prior to merger with the Indian Union in 1975. Sikkim is intimately connected with the agrarian sector of economy. Sikkim society being feudal, the Chogyal was the sole proprietor of land in the country with feudal lords assisting him. Agriculture and pasturage was the main occupation in the country. Handicraft was also one occupation among the Bhutias. The occupational pattern underwent major changes during the British presence where many developmental works were initiated.

The study also reflects that agriculture has become the secondary source of income. Business and trade, tourism, and salaried jobs has been the most opted for by the people of Sikkim.

Key words: Occupation, Economy, Sikkim.

I. Introduction

The economy of Sikkim has passed through various phases. The demographic and political changes brought about by the migration of various communities, starting with the Bhutias and ending with the merger of Sikkim with India has left great impact on the economy of the state. The economy has diversified and new opportunities have opened up leading to multiple occupational choices for the inhabitants.

The Lepchas are said to be the original inhabitants of the region when the Bhutias set up their kingdom in 1642. Though very little is documented about the economic pattern or system of the Lepchas, history says that they lived a nomadic life. The Lepchas were purely dependent on flora, fauna, forest and to some extent, agriculture as an essence of life (Roy, 2012, p. 74). The main characteristic of the kind of societal structure of the Lepchas was that all production and means of production were equally distributed amidst communities. After the founding of the Bhutia Kingdom in 1642, major changes were seen in the socio-economic pattern of pre-settled groups in Sikkim. The Bhutias brought with them their own pattern of living, mostly influenced by Tibetan culture.

Under the Bhutias the traditional economy of Sikkim was characterised by agriculture, which for many centuries remained under feudalism. Just like in any feudal society, land was the basis of the socio-economic structure. The Maharaja or Chogyal, was the sole proprietor of land in the country. The next in the social strata were the *kazis*, the feudal lords who enjoyed considerable authority in the realms of administrative and economic arenas. The *Kazis* were the most influential and powerful people after the ruler. They administered and collected revenues from the land on behalf of the Chogyal. The village headmen, called *mandals*, extended their support to the *Kazis* in performing their functions as land lords. Hence, land and feudal system became the prime factors in the socio-economic settings of Sikkim. In this type, the system of private ownership of land did not exist and the farmers were forced to work free on the lands of the landlords and also pay certain taxes. Agricultural activities were carried out mainly by the *mandals* (village headmen) and *bustiwalas*. The *mandals* were appointed by the *Kazis* to collect rents and revenues from the cultivators. The actual cultivators were the *bustiwalas*. The main agricultural products were rice, maize, millets and vegetables. The exchange of good was based on barter system, which prevented the development of a currency system. Lives stocks were used for exchange of goods. For the first time, Indian currency was used after the British Political Officer, J. C White took administrative charge of the country (Debnath, 2009, p 67).

The *Kazis* belonged to the Bhutia- Lepcha community and *Thikedars* included Nepalese also. Bhutia-Lepchas had more representatives as landlords. Prior to British intervention in Sikkim the existing land revenue system was introduced through '*elaka*' leases in 1925 by the Durbar. An *elaka* was a revenue collection unit under each revenue collector, basically under the *Kazis*. J C Debnath, gives an account of the number of *elakas* in Sikkim according to the Administrative Report of the Sikkim state for the year 1929-30. Altogether there were 104 *elakas*. The land under the Chogyal, *Kazis* and monasteries were big estates.



Categories of Revenue Collectors and Number of Elakas -1929-30

Categories of Revenue collector	Number of elakas
Private estates of the king	29
Kazis	21
Five big Monasteries	15
Nepalis	13
Managers appointed on commission	11
Lepchas	8
Bhutias	6
Domiciled Plainsman	1
Total	104

Source: J.C Debnath, 2009, p.68.

In Sikkim, there existed a system of free employment of the peasants towards the land lords. Various factors were responsible for such a system. The first factor was that the country did not follow any organised system of agriculture until the migrated Nepalese started the practice in the 19th century. There prevailed a system of shifting cultivation which prevented the peasants from occupying any land. The second factor being Bhutias' engagement mostly in trading and pasturage, they had very little knowledge of farming and agriculture. Apparently, the agricultural growth was unsubstantial. Initially, the revenue generated from the agricultural production was very meagre and hence the system of owning private land was not felt necessary. Third and most importantly, the land-holding system was such that the Chogyal was the absolute owner of the land in the country. It was impossible for the farmers to tie themselves to the land unless gifted by the ruler.

There existed two different types of taxation system: one for the Bhutias and Lepchas and the second type for the Nepalese. Limboos were included in the Nepalese group. The Lepchas and Bhutias were charged 8 annas (half of a rupee), while the Nepalese were supposed to pay 14 annas as land revenue. The Bhutias and Lepchas were exempted from paying any tax for grazing of animals (cows), but the Nepalese were imposed with tax of 8 annas for grazing of each herd. Hence, the Lepchas and Bhutias enjoyed some relaxation in the taxation system while the other group, the Nepalese were levied with heavy taxes. It was only in 1747 that system of annual taxation was introduced by Rabden Sherpa Gyalpo, a Tibetan Regent deputed by Government of Tibet to look after the administration of Sikkim. A fixed system of revenue like *h bah-pa*, *b Zolung*, which means tax on forest produce and Tshong-skyed, an income tax was introduced (Subba, 2011, p 62).

The first British Political Officer, J. C White, introduced a new lease system for land tenure in 1888 that led to the introduction of a new land settlement pattern. The new settlement pattern brought changes in the ownership of the land system (Debnath, 2009, p. 68). The launching of the new economy dismantled the existing feudal-based economy in Sikkim. In addition, a number of the new lessee landlords, mostly Newars from the Nepali community were created. More migration of Nepalese was allowed. Not only this, the Political Officer initiated a course of new revenue generating avenues in the country. For the first time, land revenue settlement was introduced, forest excise measures were adopted and the traditional taxation system was also revised in 1898. Trade and commerce developed to such a great extent that the revenue of the country which was Rs. 30,458 in 1891 was raised to Rs. 22,00,000 in 1889 (Subba, 2011, pp. 44-46).

Till the end of the 19th century, the revenue system of the country did not include land as a source of revenue because there existed no system of private land-owning. The entire land belonged to the ruler. The revenue system started with the advent of the British. Since then, land has become the essential source of revenue in Sikkim. One of the important changes brought in was the monetisation of the budgetary system.

Transportation was another area that received the interest of the British, which led to the easy movement of goods and items from one part of Sikkim to another. This facilitated the development of trade and commerce. Before the development of transport and communication services, people used to ride on mules to reach their destination which was more time consuming. The development of trade and commerce contributed in the increase of the state's economy. Also, as J.C Debnath writes in his book,



'*Economic History and Development of Sikkim*' the development of trade and commerce led to the introduction of capitalist economy in Sikkim, which means there was a growth in ownership of private property. The introduction of the currency system led to the birth of a new economic class that paved way for modern economic system in Sikkim (Debnath, 2009, pp 47-48). The age old traditional market economy has been replaced by a modern market economy.

Industrially, Sikkim did not flourish during the Chogyal period. During that time in Sikkim, there was no entrepreneurial class. There was craftsmanship based on traditional Sikkimese cottage industries. The practice of carpet and rug weaving by the Bhutias and bamboo-craft, woodwork, spinning of loom and weaving traditional textures by the Lepchas were some of the traces of the existence of small scale industries. The Nepalese contributed with the workmanship in metalwork, silverware and woodwork.

Carpet weaving was done in the factory owned by the Chogyal. To support the sustainability of the culture of traditional weaving, two weaving schools were opened at Lachung and Lachen in North Sikkim. The cottage industry gave training to young Sikkimese in local handicrafts, carpentry, handmade paper, carpets, doll making, handloom and weaving.

Among the modern industries, the distillery of wines and liquors was the first industry established at Singtam in 1955. The second factory was for fruit preservation, established at Singtam in 1956.

Border Trade was one of the thriving sources of the economy in the country in the pre-merger period. Trade with Tibet was carried through the Nathu-la Pass. Trade markets were extended to Gangtok, Kalimpong, Darjeeling and Calcutta. Human porters and animals like ponies and yaks were used to carry items in this border trade. Indian goods and commodities were supplied from Calcutta to Tibet and likewise Tibetan wool, gold, precious gems, borax, dogs, yak tails and other light and luxury items were brought to Indian markets. This border trade flourished till 1962. After that, it was closed due to the Sino-Indian war of 1962. The reopening of the border trade again in July, 2006, took the economy to a new heights in Sikkim. However, the local traders, mainly the Bhutias had more competitors in the border trade as the market was open to new traders coming from all over the region. The re-opening of the Nathula border trade boosted the economy of Sikkim.

When Sikkim joined the Indian Union in 1975, some far reaching economic changes were brought in after Sikkim was declared a backward

state, both in the agricultural and industrial sectors. Hence, the post-merger developmental strategy was to enhance state's economy. In this aspect, various services aimed at consolidating the agricultural economy. The new schemes covered renew of land reforms, provisions for agricultural marketing, seeds, fertilizers and pesticides and irrigation. The services provided encouraged horticulture, for which new crops like wheat, rajmah, rape and mustard were introduced. The services also included the extension of more agricultural land, high-yielding varieties of seeds and also introduction of multiple cropping. Thus, agricultural development made considerable progress in Sikkim. Sikkim underwent many changes in its economy and demography after it joined the national mainstream in 1975. Development activities were increased considerably, which led to rapid urbanization, especially in towns like Gangtok, Jorethang, Geyzing and Namchi. The migration of rural people in search of job opportunities enabled growth of these towns which were driven by administrative and commercial growth. This urbanization accelerated the economic growth in Sikkim.

Tourism has emerged as one of the world's biggest industries. Tourism enables the viable and sustainable development of a region or a state. Through travel and tourism, new jobs and employment capacity are built up that strongly contribute to the socio-economic progress of the state. In recent years, Sikkim has developed as one of the most prosperous tourism destinations in the country. Sikkim's economy has become the mainstay of Sikkim's tourism. Most areas in North district are tourist destinations. From Kabi (where the brotherhood agreement 'Lho-Men-Tsong' between the Bhutias, Lepchas and Limboos was made) to Chungthang, Lachung, Lachen and Tsho Lamo lake and Guru dongmar lake are the sites of tourist attractions in the North district. In West Sikkim, most tourist visit Pelling and Yuksom (the first capital of Sikkim). This has provided economic and livelihood opportunities as hotels, resorts and home stays are increasing. Transport has also received support from tourism, providing jobs and income to many. Shops, restaurants and the sale of souvenirs are another source of income patronised by tourism.

Hence, the primitive agriculture based occupational pattern has undergone total transformation in Sikkim. Apart from agriculture, pasturage and trade, people in Sikkim have entered into a new occupation, jobs and employment through industrialisation and tourism in modern Sikkim. Change has been noticed in the occupational pattern. The economic and technological developments of the



modern world have contributed to form this change. The economic transformation is accompanied by a rising number of educational institutes that also provide job opportunities for many.

References

- [1] Bareh, H.M. (ed), 2007 (reprint), Encyclopedia of North-East India, Volume VII, Sikkim, Mittal Publication, New Delhi.
- [2] Bhasin, V., 1989, Ecology, Culture, NAD Change: Tribals of Sikkim Himalayas, Inter-India Publications, New Delhi.
- [3] Debnath, J. C., 2009, Economic History and Development of Sikkim, Abhijit Publications, Delhi.
- [4] Duff, A., 2015, Sikkim-Requiem for a Himalayan Kingdom, Random House Publishers, India Pvt Ltd. Gurgaon, Haryana.
- [5] Gupta, M.D., 1992, Sikkim: Problems and Prospects of Development, Indus publishing Company, New Delhi.
- [6] Mullard, S., 2011, Opening the Hidden Land: State Formation and the Construction of Sikkimese History, (edited by Henk Blezer, Alex McKay & Charles Rambel), Koninklijke Brill NV, Leiden, Global Oriental, Hotel Publishing, IDC Publishers.
- [7] Namgyal and Dolma., 1908, History of Sikkim, first unpublished English work on Sikkim.
- [8] Sinha, A. C., 2008, Sikkim, Feudal and Democratic, Indus Publishing Company, New Delhi.
- [9] Subba, T.B., 1989, Dynamics of a hill society: The Nepalis in Darjeeling and Sikkim Himalayas, Mittal Publications, Delhi.
- [10] Subba, J. R., 2008, History, Culture and Customs of Sikkim, Gyan Publishing House, New Delhi.
- [11] White, J. C., 2009, Sikkim and Bhutan: Twenty-one years on the North-East Frontier 1887-1908, Pilgrims Book House, Varnasi, India.