

Inter-Generational Occupational and Socio-Economic Pattern of Bhutias in Sikkim: Case Study of Lachung, Tashiding and Tathangchen

Karma Samten Bhutia¹, Genevive Syangbo²

¹Associate Professor, Department of History, Sikkim Government College, Mangshila- North Sikkim

²Associate Professor, Department of Political Science, Nar Bahadur Bhandari Government College, Gangtok-Sikkim

Abstract

The paper discusses the inter-generational occupational and socio-economic pattern of Bhutias in Sikkim. Case studies of certain Bhutia families were conducted as an oral source for understanding their present status, changing lifestyle and their self perception about the present status. Bhutia families from three Bhutia dominated villages Lachung, Tashiding and Tathangchen in Sikkim were interviewed. The findings reveal that transformations and diversification in the occupational pattern among the Bhutia families in Sikkim has taken place. Agriculture as their traditional occupation has declined as they are pursuing other alternative occupations. The case study shows that the number of Bhutia agricultural households, both as agriculturist and agricultural labour has declined, but they continue as owners of large land plots. The study sheds light on the occupational shift from traditional occupations to business and trade, tourism, and salaried jobs over the years and generations.

Keywords: Occupation, Socio-economic pattern, Change, Bhutia, Sikkim.

Introduction

Bhutias are people migrated from Tibet to Sikkim much before the 16th century. From the historical perspective, the formation of Sikkim as a kingdom began with the consecration of Phuntsog Namgyal as the first king or Chogyal, meaning Dharma Raja and the establishment of the Bhutia rule in the name of Namgyal dynasty in 1642. Bhutia here means the migrated Tibetan people who settled in Sikkim. Once they started settling in Sikkim and established their rule, they considered themselves to be Bhutias and not Tibetans.

Agriculture was the main occupation of the Bhutias in early Sikkim. Apart from agriculture, the Bhutias of Sikkim worked in different occupations to supplement their income. Among such occupations was pasturage carried by the Bhutias of the northern part of Sikkim. The rearing of yak, sheep and goat was carried through a migratory movement. Along with this, they also carried some trading activities within the borders (Bhasin, 2012, p 1.). Some Bhutias groups were into the trans-border trade, especially with Tibet, Bhutan and Nepal. The Bhutias, influenced by Tibetans - Chinese arts and crafts, were also engaged in carpet weaving and handlooms.

The study reflects that change has taken place in the occupational and socio-economic pattern of Bhutias in Sikkim. Agriculture has become the secondary source of income for the present generation of Bhutia

people. The members of Bhutia families have taken up new professions and switched over to different occupations. They are more engaged in business and trade, tourism and salaried jobs. As per the data obtained from various census and case studies, the Bhutias as agriculturist and agricultural labour has declined, but they still own large landed properties in Sikkim.

Objective

The present study intends to understand inter-generational occupational pattern and socio-economic status between the generation of the Bhutias families in Sikkim.

Methodology

This study is based on evaluative research design by adopting a case study method. Structured schedules for interview as well as methods of personal discussion and observation were used for the purpose. Case study was conducted on five families each from three Bhutia dominant villages of Sikkim; Lachung in North Sikkim, Tashiding in west Sikkim and Tathangchen in East Sikkim. The identification of Bhutia families was done specially taking care that the respondents cover both older and young generations.

Lachung in North Sikkim

Lachung village is a valley located in the North-eastern part of Sikkim. Total geographical area of Lachung is 750 sq. km. It is located at the altitude of 8,858'. The valley is approximately 125 kilometres from the capital city, Gangtok. Total area of the village is 2805.82 hectares, with total 401 households. Total population of Lachung is 2495 persons, of which 1796 are males and 699 are females (Census of India, 2011).

Lachung valley has 115.2260 hectares of land as Apple orchard/field, 2074 hectares of land belongs to Sikkim Sarkar, 11.7400 hectares of land is possessed by *Gumpa* (monastery) and 68.7910 hectares of land is *banjo* (wasteland) land. About only 40 percent of the valley area is utilised for cultivation (Land Revenue and Disaster Management, Chungthang, Government of Sikkim, August, 2019). Lachung which form part of this study is inhabited by the Bhutias who are known as Lachungpas. The Bhutias of Lachung are the descendants of Tibetan immigrants from Hah and Paro in Bhutan. They call themselves of the *Lopon Lhumdrub* caste. The actual date and the period of their coming to Sikkim is not clear but it is assumed that they have migrated to Sikkim during the phases of Bhutanese invasions of Sikkim. As history spells that the Bhutanese invaded Sikkim in 1676 (Bhasin, 2012). The language of Bhutias of Lachung is called *den-jong-ke*, a Tibetan dialect which is spoken in Ha valley of Bhutan. The dialect is quite different from the dialect spoken by the Bhutias of other parts of Sikkim.

There exist few differences in the culture and tradition of Bhutias of Lachung and the Bhutias of other parts of Sikkim. The first difference found is that the Bhutias from Lachung celebrate '*Losaar*', instead of '*Losoong*', which is celebrated by Bhutias of other parts of Sikkim. '*Losaar*' and '*Losoong*' are significant festivals of Bhutias in Sikkim for welcoming new year. '*Losaar*' is celebrated in the month of February and *Losoong* is celebrated in December. The Bhutias of Lachung followed a mixed agro-pastoral and trade economy. It means that marginal agriculture was practiced due to the mountainous location and cold climatic environment. So, to sustain and supplement their economy they indulged in pastoralism and marginal trading activities across the borders. Historically, Lachung was a trading post between Sikkim and Tibet. However, indulgence in cross border trading has ended with the closing of the Tibetan border in 1962. Now the Lachungpas have diverted their engagement towards tourism as Lachung now has

become the most prominent tourist destination in Sikkim. Today tourism is the main sources of economy of the valley. So, we can say, agriculture, pasturage and tourism are the main occupations of the Bhutia people of Lachung.

The entire Lachung valley is divided into three blocks; *Shertchu*, *Singring* and *Beech-chu*. These three villages have their cultivable lands at *Khedum*, *Leema* and *Lothen*. *Khedum*, *Leema* are agricultural land and *Lothen* is a pasture land. With this the Bhutias of Lachung have been able to carry agriculture and pasturage simultaneously. The total cultivable land of these three places is about 13-16 hectares. These lands are located at lower altitude (i.e. five kilometres away) from Lachung bazar. The households of *Shertchu* and *Singring* have agricultural land at *Khedum* and *Lothen*, while the households of *Beechchu* have cultivable land in *Leema* and *Khedum*. Maize, wheat, barley, potatoes, radishes, peas, cabbages and other vegetables are grown. Potato and cabbage is grown in ample where surplus is sold out in the market. As mentioned above, pasturage is also one of the primary activities that the Bhutias of Lachung are involved. Lachung has common forest and pasture land to carry pastoralism. Common grazing and forest land enable them to further their activities without any hindrances. Yak, sheep and goat rearing are part of pastoralism. The yaks are used for producing milk products, goats and sheeps are kept mainly for wool and meat. Today tourism has flourished in Lachung and has become a prominent lucrative sector for the Bhutias of Lachung. As the Lachung valley which was a traditional village, has now opened to tourism, the traditional houses are being replaced by new houses and concrete hotels.

One of the significant features of Lachung is the *Dzumsa*; a traditional administrative system. According to history of Sikkim, the institution of *Dzumsa* was established during the reign of Thutop Namgyal, the ninth Chogyal of Sikkim. In general, *Dzumsa* means a 'gathering place'. The institution was vested with administrative powers and acted as general council of villagers. *Dzumsa* is headed by 'Pipon' or Village chief. During the Bhutia kingdom, *pipons* were vested with the function of delegating the powers of the king (Chhetri & Lal, 2018). The functions of *Dzumsa* includes land holding, resource management and community organisation. The *Dzumsa* also has judicial role to play. The institution of *Dzumsa* remained intact during the transition of political set up in 1970's. Administrative reorganization of Sikkim introduced the panchayat system of local government which was not imposed in Lachen and Lachung. The institution of *Dzumsa* was officially recognised in 1985 and continues to function even today.

Tashiding in West Sikkim

The word 'Tashiding' is a Tibetan word, 'tashi' means blessing and 'ding' refers to land or place. So Tashiding means a 'blessed land'. Tashiding village is located in West district in Sikkim, situated 27 km away from the West district headquarter, Gyalzing. It is located at the elevation of 4090 feet and lies at 27° 17' 00" north latitude and 88° 20' 00" east longitude. Tashiding covers the geographical area of about 663.11 hectares.

The total revenue block of Tashiding is 663.1140 hectares. Tashiding has total 403.5460 hectares of agricultural land, 167.7420 hectares of forest (*khasmal*) land, 87.0120 hectares of waste land (*banjo jamin*) and 111.1280 hectares of land belonging to Tashiding Monastery (Land Revenue and Disaster management, Government of Sikkim, Geyzing, West Sikkim, January, 2019).

This village falls under Gyalshing sub-division and well connected by roads from Gyalshing and Yuksom. According to Buddhist scriptures, it was in Tashiding that Guru Padmasambhava blessed Sikkim as sacred land in the 8th century. Tashiding is known for one of the oldest monasteries, built in 1651 by Ngadak Sempa Chembo belonging to Nyingmapa Buddhist Sect. It is also famous for *Thong-wa-Rang-dol* (holy

Chorten), meaning ‘savior by mere sight’. Another important feature of this monastery is *Bumchu*, the annual sacred water festival. The place of tourist interests are the Silnon Monastery, *Tso-Nim-Dawa* (Pokhari Dara), the ruins of Pao-Hongri Monastery and Phamrong waterfall. Also, it is famous for sacred caves; Kasturi Orar (Cave) and Lhari Nyingphuk (Gazetter of Sikkim, 2013).

Tathangchen in East Sikkim

Tathangchen village is located in Gangtok Tehsil of East district in Sikkim. Tathangchen is derived from the word ‘Ta’ which means horse and ‘thang’ means grazing place for horses. Since Tathangchen was just below the royal palace, it was a grazing land/ place for the horses belonging to royal palace and its subordinates.

It is situated at 2 km away from the capital town, Gangtok, which is both district and sub-district headquarter of Tathangchen village. The total geographical area is 521.5 hectares with latitude of 27.3287 and longitude 88.61823. the elevation (in meters) is 1654. Total population of the village is about 936 persons of which 480 male and 456 females with total 209 households (Census of India, 2011).

Total land area of Tathangchen is 191.0350 hectares, where 11.0460 hectares of land is paddy field, 85.6120 hectares of land is forest land, 15.5900 hectares is cultivated land, 3.7240 hectares of land is banjo (waste) land and 75.0630 hectares of land is Sarkari land which includes footpaths, kholsa, khasmal etc. Situated so near to Gangtok, it enjoys almost all the main facilities and people living there are also attached to Gangtok professionally.

Tathangchen village is sparsely populated as compared to other two Bhutia dominated villages considered for the study. The Bhutias of Tathangchen holds both cultivable and non-cultivable land.

Table 1. Village-wise Distribution of Area, Households and Population

Village	Area of village in hectares	Number of Households	Population		
			Persons	Male	Female
Lachung (North)	2805.82	401	2495	1796	699
Tashiding (West)	663.11	281	1478	762	716
Tathangchen (East)	521.50	209	936	480	456

Source: Census of India, 2011, Sikkim, Series 12, Part XII-B.

The distribution of areas of villages, number of households and population illustrates that Lachung has the largest geographical area with 2805.82 hectares of land. Further, it has the highest number of households (401) and population (2495 persons) in comparison to the other two villages. Tashiding on the other hand has the second largest area of land with 663.11 hectares, 281 households and 1478 population, of which 762 are male and 716 are female. Lastly, Tathangchen has the lowest area of land with 521.50 hectares, comprising of 209 number of households and population of total 936 persons; 480 male and 456 females. Further, it reflects that the percentage of female population is lower than the male population in all three villages.

Table 2. Village-wise Distribution of Literates

Village	Illiterate			Literate		
	Persons	Male	Female	Persons	Male	Female
Lachung (North)	696 (27.9)	312 (44.8)	384 (55.1)	1799 (72.1)	1484 (82.5)	315 (17.5)
Tashiding (West)	480 (32.5)	202 (42.1)	278 (57.9)	998 (67.5)	560 (56.1)	438 (43.9)
Tathangchen (East)	227 (24.3)	91 (40.1)	136 (59.9)	709 (75.7)	389 (54.9)	320 (45.1)

Source: Census of India, 2011, Sikkim, Series 12, Part XII-B.

Tathangchen has the highest literacy rate with 75.7 per cent. Lachung accounts to 72.1 percent of literates and Tashiding has 67.5 per cent of literates. Highest literacy rate is among the male population. The female literacy rates of the villages are less but Lachung has the comparatively the least with only 17.5 female literates. The figures also reveal that Tashiding has the highest percent of illiterates with 32.5 pr cent. Lachung has 27.9 per cent of population as illiterates and Tathangchen has the lowest percentage of 24.3 percent. All the three villages have female population with the highest number of illiterates.

Table 3. Village-wise Distribution of Workers, Cultivators and Agricultural Labourers.

Village	Total workers			Main Workers			Marginal workers			Cultivators			Agricultural Labourers		
	Persons	Male	Female	Persons	Male	Female	Persons	Male	Female	Persons	Male	Female	Persons	Male	Female
Lachung (North)	1952 78.2	1525 78.1	42 7	1707 68.4	1445 84.7	26 2	24 5	80 32.7	16 5	68 2.7	14 20.6	54 79.	7 0.28	2 28.	5 71.
Tashiding (West)	650 44	412 63.4	23 8	623 42.6	402 64.5	22 1	27 1.8	10 37.3	17 63	4 0.3	2 50	2 50	16 1.1	8 50	8 50
Tathangchen (East)	340 37	253 74.4	87 25.	314 36.4	243 77.4	71 22.	26 2.8	10 38.5	16 62	3 0.3	1 33	2 67	-	-	-

Source: Census of India, 2011, Sikkim, Series 12, Part XII-B.

Lachung has highest workers as main workers, marginal workers, cultivators and agricultural labourers. Total workers in Lachung is 78.2%, Tashiding has 44% and 37 % in Tathangchen. Female population are less represented as compared to male counterpart in all categories of workers, except as cultivators and agricultural labourers. All three villages have the least percent of people engaged as cultivators and agricultural labourers. The major factor for such decline is the engagement of people in other service

sectors, mostly in government service in case of Tathangchen and Tashiding and spread of tourism industry in Lachung.

Findings of the Case Study (Village-wise)

The finding of the study has been divided under three sub-head as per the respective district of the respondent; North, East and West respectively. As it is mentioned earlier these case studies intends to study the inter-generational occupational and socio-economic pattern of the respective Bhutia families. The study evolved over the family background, their occupation, educational status and land holdings of three generations of a Bhutia family. The respondents for the case study were the middle generation, and throws light their socio-economic backgrounds and their parents families. The findings of the same are presented below. During the case studies care was taken to highlight the condition, educational level and occupational patterns of the girls/women in the Bhutia society as well.

Lachung: It appears that Bhutia families of Lachung have a multiple occupation with mixed source of income. Income is presently earned through different occupation beside the traditional one. For many households, traditional occupation alone could not meet the modern requirements and hence, they are engaged into a subsidiary occupation. The subsidiary occupation is one which is adopted to earn additional income which constitutes a part of his income. Income from construction of modern houses and buildings that has been used as hotels, home stay and shops is the major source of income for the people. Buildings are given in lease for opening of hotels, home-stays and shops. More importantly, income from the tourism sector has contributed to the income of Bhutia families. From the case study, it is found that most Bhutia families of Lachung have landed property and residential buildings in the state capital, Gangtok. The present generation Bhutia people of Lachung are more into salaried jobs.

Tashiding: The occupational structure of the respondents in the case study in Tashiding village shows that at present they have engaged in diverse occupations ranging from agriculture, business to salaried job. Interestingly, the Bhutia families have multiple sources of livelihood and their economic activities have been diversified into different occupations. Moreover, education has driven them, particularly the younger generation, for wage employment. Their agriculture based occupational structure has undergone change to non-agricultural occupational practices specially with the technological, educational and economic changes. Education can be assumed to be one of the major determining factor for a change in employment and occupational structure of the Bhutias. The size of land holdings of the Bhutia families are big in size. The land holdings of the Bhutia families in Tashiding varies from above 2 acres to 30 acres of land.

Tathangchen: Primary field data result validates that means of livelihood of Bhutia families of Tathangchen has undergone a change. Salaried employment has replaced the self-employment, particularly in agriculture activities, as the main source of livelihood for majority of the Bhutia families. The engagement in new jobs and other allied occupations has enhanced the income of the family. Agriculture has become secondary activity for most of them. Case study shows that employment in agriculture sector is lower among Bhutia families of Tathangchen than the Bhutia families of Lachung and Tashiding. The extent of salaried employment is higher bringing occupational shift among the Bhutia community. Most of the Bhutia houses in Tathangchen are multi-storied buildings which are given on rents to the tenants. House rents supplement their incomes. Also, the younger generation are into salaried jobs mostly in government sector. A transition of their livelihood system from agricultural to non-agricultural pursuits is evident. Shift from agriculture to non-agriculture urban pursuits, informal to formal

sector and traditional to modern occupations and services is noticed. A similar pattern and trend prevails in other two areas; Tashiding and Tathagchen.

The overall trend obtained through the case studies indicates many transformations being taken place in the occupational pattern and socio-economic status between the generation of Bhutia families in Sikkim. There is noticeable diversification in their occupation pattern which is usually considered to be a positive development as it constitutes an essential part of growth. Agriculture was their traditional occupation. It is seen that amongst first generation (respondents' parents) people were more dependent on agriculture as the main source of income. What derives from the case studies is that the involvement in parental occupation has declined. The second generation people were not only dependent on agriculture as a main source of income but they were also engaged in other activities like tourism, government services and renting house etc. for their source of income. They have got other job avenues with the changing economic pattern of the state which was not available in the time of the first generation people. Bhutias are pursuing other alternative occupations as salaried jobs in both private and government sectors, businessmen and entrepreneurs.

Expectedly, the size of Bhutia agricultural households, both as agriculturist and agricultural labour has declined in all the three villages: Tashiding, Tathangchen and Lachung. However, analyses of the case studies show that Bhutia people owned largely an inherited land and have added more lands by themselves. When we see the size of the family in the first generation, the size of the family is relatively bigger than the second generation. The decrease in the family size may be education and awareness of family planning and also the change in the belief system of the people in general. Among the surveyed Bhutia families, the structure of the family shows the existence of mostly a nuclear type.

A growing trend of learning and receiving education is observed among the Bhutia group. The first generation Bhutia people were rarely educated and many have not received any formal education but in the following generation (second generation, respondent) it is seen that almost all have received either formal or monastic education. This may be because in the time of the first-generation school facilities were not available as education system started very late in Sikkim. Moreover, in the third generation (respondent's children) it is found that majority of them have received education up to graduation and most of them have received their higher education outside Sikkim.

Conclusion

Sikkim's joining to the Indian mainstream and the foundation of democratic state in 1975, contributed to the exposure of the people and the diversification from their traditional occupation into modern job avenues. Pursuit of education and li

teracy has increased from earlier generation to the present. However, notable disparity in the levels of education between male and female and between rural and urban is observed. Adopting a new occupation has contributed in increase in their other livelihood assets. The changing occupational patterns is also examined with reference to educational impact. It is observed that education has a direct impact on upward occupational mobility.

Among the surveyed Bhutia families, the family sizes have become smaller and are mostly nuclear type. The findings show that pursue of education and literacy has increased among the Bhutias and majority of them have received education up to graduation and most of them have received their higher education outside Sikkim.

The study also reflects that agriculture has become the secondary source of income for the current

generation of Bhutia people. As they have shifted over to business and trade, tourism, and salaried jobs. Even though the Bhutia share as agriculturists and as agricultural labour has declined, they still own large landed properties in Sikkim and income from land, coupled with income from other sources help them to survive a very high income group in society. Thus, the findings of the case studies give a clear understanding of how generational changes have taken place among the Bhutias of Sikkim.

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