

Impact on Highlanders Communities of Sikkim: Overview after Chinese Occupation in the Region-Post British Phase

Sonam Choda Bhutia (chodasonam0607@gmail.com)

Ph.D. Research Scholar, Department of History, Sikkim University, India



Copyright: © 2022 by the authors. Licensee [The RCSAS \(ISSN: 2583-1380\)](http://www.thercsas.com). This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution Non-Commercial 4.0 International License. (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>). **Crossref/DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.55454/rcsas.2.10.2022.003>

Abstract: *Sikkim and Tibet share intimate relationship since its inception. Sikkim was a part of 'Tibetan empire' sphere of influence. Culturally and spiritually, Sikkim has closer links than to its Tibetan counterparts. The 'Open Border Policy' adopted by both countries largely benefitted particularly highlanders communities from Sikkim and Tibet. Lachenpas, Lachungpas, Trompipas, Chumbipas, Drokpas and Lepchas traders freely moved from one place to another for grazing and other markets opportunities. However, due to recent development in the border areas and Communist Chinese expansionists' attitude that led permanently shut down of border. This was a huge set back to those traditional highlanders communities who access free and open border rights since ancient times. They were now compelled to look into other viable livelihood options beside trading and grazing. Therefore, this paper is an attempt to understand the hardship faced by those highlanders' communities of Sikkim who lost their ancient trading rights after Chinese occupation in the region and subsequently tight security arrangement in the border areas. The paper will also be focusing about grazing rights and other extreme difficulties faced by highlanders after they shifted towards other alternatives source of income in inhospitable climatic conditions of the region.*

Keywords: Drokpas, Highlanders Communities of Sikkim, Lachenpas, Lachungpas

Introduction

The word 'Highlander' signifies an inhabitant of a highland.¹ The term Highlanders was first recorded early 15th century in the highland 'mountainous districts of Scotland'.² In other terms, highlanders are also known as Mountaineers or the inhabitants of Northerners.³ Likewise, the Northern districts of Sikkim are inhabited by the highlander communities of Bhutia stock such as *Drokpas, Lachenpas, Lachungpas* and *Chumbipas* or *Trompipas*.

Long before 1975 AD, Sikkim was ruled over by the twelve successive kings of Bhutia origin under the Namgyal dynasty. This dynasty ruled over Sikkim for three centuries dating from 1642 AD to 1975 AD. Sikkim is bounded by Tibet on the Northern side, Nepal on the Western, Bhutan on the Eastern and India on the southern border. Sikkim marked the significant ancient trade routes between Tibet in the North and India in the south. Sikkim and Tibet share a special intimate relationship in politically, spiritually and close people-to-people contact. Sikkim is part of the 'Tibetan' region that falls outside the political and geographical boundaries of Tibet.⁴ The Namgyal's dynasty ruling family can be traced back to the ancestors of the great-grandson of the Tibetan king of Tibet-Tris-Sung-Deusen (AD 730).⁵

Because of the centuries-old close historical relationship between Sikkim and Tibet, the highlanders communities of North Sikkim enjoys open border trade facilities including grazing pass which was backed by both sides' agreements. The open border trade and grazing facilities were in practices until the year 1962. Despite all the circumstances, British Indian authority allows their traditional free access along the border without authorizing any regulations regarding the highlander's movement. Subsequently, these highlanders community continued their traditional pastoral practices along the Sikkim Tibet frontiers. But after the Chinese occupation of Tibet in 1959 and His Holiness Dalai Lama, the Tibetan spiritual leader left the Tibetan plateau in the wave of Tibetan uprising. Due to traffic of refugees' movement along the Northern border of Northeast India, several security concerns were raised. Therefore, the rising vigilance of troops along the border regions hampered the age-old pastoral activities of those highlanders' communities. There was a limited flow of transhumance trade and their pastoral movements during summer month in Tibet and in lowlands Sikkim's belts of Tibetan pasture during the month of winter seasons. Further, the 1962 Chinese invasions on Indian soil strictly restricted the highlander movements and there was a complete closure of border routes between Sikkim and Tibet. Thereby, this paper seek to understand the impacts on highlanders communities of Sikkim after the seal of border routes was enforced for security concerns aftermath of Chinese occupation in the Himalayan regions.

Border Impact on *Drokpas*- the Yak Herders of Sikkim Introduction

Drokpas are one of ancient nomadic tribe found in Tibet and Sikkim who constantly flock from one region to another in search of better pasture as per their changing seasonal patterns. The term '*Drokpas*' is of Tibetan origin meaning 'nomad' or 'high pastoral people'.⁶ The *Drokpas* community was engaged in yak herding activity and practised pastoral movement in search of suitable conditions for their livestock's. Today they have to face many challenges such as climate change, border restrictions, limited resources, economic uncertainty and rapid modernity. Towns and cities attract better living conditions for the younger generations instead of the traditional *Drokpas* lifestyle.

Historically, *Drokpas* are originally from Tibet. They enjoyed their ancient close people-to- people contact between Sikkim and Tibet. After the centuries of free border pass for *Drokpas* pastoral activity was put to a halt as a result of 1962, Chinese invasions into India. Before 1962, *Drokpas* used to migrate annually from Tibet to the Northern areas of Sikkim to graze their pasturelands. During the winter months, *Drokpas* temporarily settled at Khampa-Dzong, Tibet, during this period the pastures grass would be longer, more nutritious and would not get compressed by snow. In summer, *Drokpas* shifted south in the hilly regions of North Sikkim in adjoining areas of Dongkong, Lungma, Kerang and Lachen, Sikkim.⁷ *Lachenpas* of Sikkim exercise trade with *Drokpas* and in return, they also looked after the livestock of *Lachenpas*. After 1962, *Drokpas* are forced to settle on either side. Many *Drokpas* were trapped inside the Sikkim side while leaving behind their relatives in Tibet. Their shifting seasonal patterns during both the seasons for summer and winter month for grazing their yaks, sheep, goats and cattle were stopped after the 1962 invasions.

Hardship Face by *Drokpas* Community of Sikkim aftermath of Chinese Invasions

After 1962, the left out community of *Drokpas* on the Sikkim side had to face uncertain living conditions. Politically they were neglected and they continue to thrive their ancestor's legacy of yak herding occupation. Trade was stopped since the movement of highlanders was restricted and extreme weather challenges had to be encountered that led them to switch over to other alternatives means of sustenance livelihood. According to Meteorological data, average 2.50C every year Sikkim is experiencing warmer temperature.⁸ This had impacted the geographical environmental conditions for *Drokpas* due to low fodder for pasture lands to graze, and heavy snowfall including high precipitation which led to the increasing burden of changing global environmental problems for those communities.

In earlier days these yak herders' communities were engaged in lucrative trading activities between Sikkim and Tibet. They weave expensive garments such as *sheema* and *puruk* that found suitable markets in Tibet. After the closure of the border, *Drokpas* continue to engage in trade business within Sikkim. The profit they gained from this trade was utilized in their daily necessities of life. Their major items for exports comprised mostly dairy products such as cheese and butter, *Yarsha Gumba*, and other medicinal herbs that were found available in markets in Sikkim.

The impact of modernity can be felt within the *Drokpas* community. They were exposed to the wave of a series of changes due to the modern educational system and the era of digital technology. The mainstream Indian culture infused the lifestyle of this already extinct community. The younger generations were not interested in continuing their traditional lifestyle. Instead, they flock to towns and cities in quest of better job opportunities.

Lachenpas and *Lachungpas*- the Native Highlanders of Sikkim

Lachenpas and *Lachungpas* as their name derived from the basis of their geographical location. The people from Lachen and Lachung valley are known by names such as *Lachenpas* and *Lachungpas*. These native highlanders' communities of Sikkim are of the Bhutia tribe also known by the local name '*Lhapos*', which means 'the dwellers of the southward'.⁹ This native highlander's community was engaged in the foremost trade relationship between Sikkim and Tibet. Lachung was a trading post of Sikkim before the annexation of Tibet in 1950.¹⁰ People from Lachen and Lachung were also engaged in '*Yarcha Gumba*' (*Cordyceps Sinensis*), business with Tibetan counterparts. Besides, Sikkim's highlands of Muguthang are also well known for rare herbal medicine which is used in Tibetan medicines. *Lachenpas* and *Lachungpas*, before 1962 were actively engaged in trade activities between Sikkim and Tibet. Lachen valley people used to ship

Apples, Kerosene, mirrors, ribbons and planks of wood for house-building, while on return from Tibet they bought barley, wool, Tibetan salt, blankets and carpets.¹¹

Lachenpas practised the seasonal movement of yaks on the Tibetan side. As recorded Brigadier- General A.G. Yeatman-Briggs, C.B., August 1896, and Captain W.F. O' Connor, R.G.A., August 1900,¹² *Lachenpas* were having a seasonal hold over huts at upper belts in areas such as Lamteng-60, Tallum Samdong-15, Yathang ka-Lep-17, Tangu-20. Below Lamteng there were no proper houses. Their pasture movement of yaks and sheep including in winter stayed at Lamteng during November and December and then went down to the valley of Latong, Tumlong, Denga and Gnema. The total number of yaks in the valley comprised of 400, cattle 40, ponies 100, goats 30. Two hundred of the yaks carry loads, while in winter 100 yaks remain at Lachen and 300 moved towards the Tibetan side for better pasturage.

Due to the open border policy between Sikkim and Tibet, both sides used to exchange grazing grounds. Tibetans used to bring 300 yaks into Lachen valley and 500 yak's and 1000 sheep graze on the Sikkim side of Lhonak valley. *Lachenpas* used the Lungnala pass to bring Yaks into Lhonak valley during the summer months. The reference were also found with regards to Lachen headman used to levy nominal fees of 7 ½ rupees to the Tibetan side for open pastures in the Lhonak valley.¹³ However, the regular collection of pasture grazing lands for Tibetan was not fixed. The highlander's communities of Sikkim devote themselves solely to grazing cattle and yaks as their means of livelihood. An agricultural practice was practically unknown to these highlanders owing to unsuitable conditions for growing crops as most of the seasons the land was filled with snows. However, reference was made to growing certain vegetable cultivation in Lachen and Lachung regions such as potatoes, turnips and a little buck-wheat.¹⁴

Lachungpas were engaged in transport business where they used to supply ponies on Tibetan border areas for transporting trade items. They also use pasture lands in the upper ridges for grazing cattle and yaks. Livestock such as yaks, goat, sheep and cattle were reared by the *Lachungpas* during ancient times. Their major pasture grounds include the Yumthang valley during summer seasons where the viability of grasslands was plentiful. The highest grazing grounds of Sikkim were at Momay Samdong, this was the place where *Lachungpas* used to pasturage their livestock during September and October.

Because of the unique cultural lifestyle and identity of the highlanders community of Sikkim such as *Lachenpas* and *Lachungpas*, they had their unique legal set-up called the 'Dzumsa' system, which is a meeting place of their communities headed under the elected village headman 'Pipons'.¹⁵ *Lachenpas* and *Drokpas* share a very special relationship in terms of mutual understanding and agreements. *Lachenpas* Yaks were looked after by the *Drokpas* and in return, *Drokpas* exchanged by giving dairy products including Yak, sheep meats to *Lachenpas* during special occasion such as Losar or Loosoong. The close bond relationship between *Lachenpas* and *Drokpas* can be witnessed during the annually *Drukpas Tseche* festivals which commemorates Buddha's first sermon to his disciple at Sarnath. *Lachenpas* from the lower valley headed under the *Pipon* along with troops of monks and villagers gathered at *Drokpas* village at Muguthang to preside over annual rituals to offer prayers to Mother Nature for peace, prosperity, and good health for all. After the completion of day-long rituals both the *Lachenpas* and *Drokpas* were engaged in traditions sports such as the Yak race, tug of war, shot put and weightlifting.

Impact on the Lifestyle of Native Highlanders-Post British Phase

Sikkim was under the influence of the British India government until 1947 and then after the 1950 treaty with India made Sikkim's status a 'protectorate' state of India. Internally Sikkim administration was governed under the hand of Chogyal's, whereas externally Sikkim's defence, foreign affairs and communication were under the charges of New Delhi. Despite the changing wave of political feud and internal problems in course of Sikkim history, the highlander community continued to enjoy their rights and Sikkim's good relationship with Tibetan counterparts was always maintained positively. However, after the Chinese invasions in Tibet and thereafter 1962 war broke out between India and China, these ancient trade routes and herders pass for the highlanders community were held to a standstill. The Concentration of troops responsible for border security then became the main focus. The important valley pass was now filled with landmines, several bunkers were constructed, and the outpost was doubled up that put those highlanders' community life into danger zone. As a result, many Tibetans *Drokpas* communities were also trapped on the Sikkim side.¹⁶ Their traditional seasonal migratory practices were also put into question.

Today the native highlander community of Sikkim such as Lachenpas and Lachunpas no longer practices their traditional yak herding occupations. Instead, they lend their Yak to *Drokpas* for rearing. *Drokpas* were now only left to continue their traditional lifestyle too the number of herders is decreasing. Their major concerns have been climate change and restricted border movements which they earlier did handsomely. Since the high altitude belts of the Tibetan valley are rich in pasture lands rich in herbs of nutritional values for yaks. But today due to strict security concerns their movement was stopped and their Yaks were pasture in the lowlands valley where the grass is short resulting into a fodder crisis for their livestock. The number of highlanders' communities with domesticated Yaks, Sheep, Goats and cattle's was decreasing at a rapid pace. The younger generations had no interest in their traditional nomadic life. It is difficult for younger generations to adapt and live in the highlands due to the lack of better facilities and extremes harsh weather conditions. *Drokpas* still used dried Yak dung for firewood and other household purposes. The dead bodies were cremated after using dried yak dung. Unfortunately, the yak population is on the decline and their fatal rate has been on the rise due to changes in weather patterns such as lack of pasture marshy lands and heavy torrential rainfall including unseasonal snowfall. Highlands lacks the basic animal husbandry care unit including medical facilities to treat animals and humans in times of need. Army personnel posted in highlands border areas sometimes help to solve their basic necessities but to no avail. The highlander especially *Drokpas* community has lost their age-old cultural significance with time in the web of modernity. This highlander community had to switch off their sustenance patterns to other agricultural activities as an alternatives means of livelihood. Only a few *Drokpas* families in Sikkim were left who continue to exercise their traditional Tibetan nomadic lifestyle. *Lachenpas* and *Lachungpas* had completely given up their nomadic lifestyle and switched over to tourism sectors as profitable means for sustaining livelihood.

Conclusions

British India left Sikkim as a distinct political identity due to its accessible channel of communications between India and Tibet after the lapse of their paramountcy in India in 1947. The colonial legacy was continued after post British period by New Delhi with 'stand still' agreements signed between Sikkim and India and to be retained until a new treaty could be negotiated.¹⁷ This ultimately culminated in the signing of the 1950 treaty between Sikkim and India on 5th Dec 1950.¹⁸ The treaty made Sikkim status as a protectorate state of the Indian union, whereby defence, foreign affairs, communication and law and order are to be looked upon by the Indian Government.

Within nine years after signing India and Sikkim accords, Tibet the Sikkim's closest ally was under Chinese invasions in 1959 forcing thousands of Tibetans to infiltrate India, Nepal, Bhutan and Sikkim. On 17th March 1959,¹⁹ His Holiness Dalai Lama fled Tibet and moved to India along with his followers. The border areas of Sikkim saw a large number of migrants entering the kingdoms due to the Chinese aggression. As per the 1950 treaty, the defence of Sikkim was under the domain of Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India. In the wave of such a crisis, the Indian Army assisted by Sikkim Guards was deployed in the border areas to control the ongoing threat. The impact could be felt to those highlanders community whose sustenance means of livelihood was through movements via trade ties with Tibet and their summer pasture in Tibetan grasslands was abruptly disrupted and discontinued. Despite the British intervention in Sikkim politics as de-facto ruler, these highlanders community continue to carry forwards their ancient nomadic lifestyle. British always wanted to make Sikkim and Tibet on good terms for their easy communication channel between Sikkim and India. The Young husband expedition proves to be successful due to assistance provided by the Sikkim's authority. After the transfer of power in 1947, India continues to claim rights of the British legacy regarding Sikkim status. In such a phase, the highlander's communities of Sikkim did not face any challenges about their traditional Trans movement. But the Chinese invasions of Tibet in the 1959 and 1962 Sino-Indo war changes the course of Himalayan history between two ancient civilizations. In the aftermath of the Chinese occupations, Sikkim and Tibet border was sealed completely. Soldier's deployment in the border areas was doubled up, whereby the free and open pasture lands were filled with landmines, increasing the risks of highlander's life. In the wave of intertwined Chinese aggression, highlander's communities of Sikkim exercise their limited pasturage within the intra state.

Important routes and passes connecting both sides were closed and were under constant strict vigil by the security forces. Highlanders were compelled to practice their nomadic lifestyle under limited resources in Sikkim only. Besides, there are many hardships faced by the highlander community. Climate change has

severely affected these highlanders community, for which in depth experimental research needs to be conducted. The numbers of their grazing livestock are on verge of decline. They no longer wanted to carry on their age-old nomadic life and some family had already discontinued their ancient pastoral life. New boom economic activities such as Tourism and hospitality sectors open up better avenues for these highlanders community. Agricultural activities found suitable place as highlanders begin to practices horticulture production including crop cultivation. The government of Sikkim should focus on uplifting those highlanders communities of Sikkim who remain isolated and cut off from the rest of state due to extreme topographical conditions. Today, their traditional cultural practices are on verge of extinction. The population of *Drokpas* is on the decline. The appropriate government measures should be enforced for safeguarding this ancient community. We cannot ignore these isolated indigenous communities of Sikkim in the face of a rapidly changing world order. More research on their unique lifestyle and their distinct identity should be brought up in the mainstream channel in days to come. May these isolated highlanders communities continue to, preserve, conserve and thrive in the modern world despite many hardships and challenges.

References/Foot Notes/Citations

¹ URL:<https://www.merriam-webster.com> accessed on 26th Sept, 2022.

² URL:<https://www.etymonline.com> accessed on 26th Sept, 2022.

³ URL:<https://www.wordhippo.com> accessed on 26th Sept, 2022.

⁴ Saul Mullard, “*Opening the Hidden Land: State Formation and the Construction of Sikkimese History*”, Rachna Books & Publications, Gangtok, 2019, p.1.

⁵ J. Claude White, “*Sikkim and Bhutan: Twenty-One Years on The North-East Frontier 1887-1908*”, Pilgrims Publishing, Varanasi, 2009, p.16.

⁶ Devika Sakhadeo, “*Are These the Last Drokpa Yak Herder in Sikkim?*” 16th July, 2018.

⁵ Ibid, p,1

⁸ Ibid, p,1

⁹ “*The Splendour of Sikkim: Cultures and Traditions of the Ethnic Communities of Sikkim*”, Cultural Affairs & Heritage Department, Government of Sikkim, Gangtok, 2017, p.2

¹⁰ Meraj Shah, “*The Yak Trail*”, Business Today Magazine, Nov 14, 2010.

¹¹ Prava Rai, “*The Disappearing Drokpas of North Sikkim*”, Sikkim Project: The Land and its People, Dec 17, 2021

¹² Captain W.F.O’ Connor, “*Routes in Sikkim 1900*”, Intelligence Branch of the Quartermaster Generals Department in India, Pagoda Tree Press, Calcutta, 2009, p.59.

¹³ Ibid, p.59

¹⁴ Ibid, p.59

⁵ Ibid, p.17

¹⁶ Ibid, p.2

¹⁷ Sapna Gurung, “*Sikkim’s Democratic Experience Political and Social Aspects*”, Levent Books, Kolkata, 2018,p.23

¹⁸ Ibid, p.24

¹⁹ “The Tibetan Diaspora” in Tsering Joldien (eds.) *Tibetan Refugees in Leh Districts (Ladakh)- A Sociological Overview*, Library of Tibetan Works & Archives, Dharamshala, 2015, p.199.

Monday, September 2022. <https://www.merriam-webster.com> (accessed September Monday, 2022).

Monday, September 2022. <http://www.etymonline.com> (accessed September Monday, 2022). Monday, September 2022. <http://www.wordhippo.com> (accessed September Monday, 2022).

Connor, Captain W.F.O'. *Routes in Sikkim*. Intelligence Branch of the Quarter Master Generals Department in India., Calcutta: Office of the Superintendent of Government Printing, India, 1900.

- Gurung, Sapna. Sikkim's Democratic Experience Political and Social Aspects. Kolkata: Levent Books, 2018.
- Joldien, Tsering. "Tibetan Refugees in Leh Districts (Ladakh)- A Sociological Overview." In
The Tibetan Diaspora. Dharamshala: Library of Tibetan Works & Archives, 2015.
- Mullard, Saul. Opening the Hidden Land, State Formation and the Construction of Sikkimese History. Gangtok: Rachna Books & Publications, 2019.
- Rai, Prava. "The Disappearing Drokpas of North Sikkim." Sikkim Project, The Land and its People, 2021.
- Sakhadeo, Devika. "Are These the Last Drokpa Yak Herder in Sikkim?" Business Today Magazine, 2018.
- Shah, Meraj. "The Yak Trail." Business Today Magazine, 2010.
- The Splendour of Sikkim: Cultures and Traditions of the Ethnic Communities of Sikkim.
Gangtok: Cultural Affairs and Heritage Department, Government of Sikkim, 2017.