

Occupational and Socio-economic status of Bhutias in Sikkim

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DOI: 10.29322/IJSRP.9.08.2019.p9296
<http://dx.doi.org/10.29322/IJSRP.9.08.2019.p9296>

Abstract- Sikkim, a tiny Himalayan kingdom till its merger with India in 1975, is one of the smallest states of North East India sharing multiple boundaries with China to the North, Bhutan to the east, Nepal to the west and West Bengal (India) in the south. Though demographically small in size with total 6, 07,688 number of people (2011 census), it is the homeland of multiple cultural-racial ethnic groups. Bhutias, Lepchas, Limboos and Nepalese are the different communities that live in Sikkim, of which the Nepalese constitute the majority of the population.

According to historians, the Lepchas are the original inhabitants of Sikkim. The others have migrated over different phases in the history of Sikkim. The Bhutias were the earliest migrants. However, historians like Chie Nakane, 1966 argue that Limboos and Magars too existed in Sikkim before the Bhutia migration. The Bhutias are basically Tibetan settlers from Kham province in eastern Tibet. According to Namgyal and Dolma (1908), they started migrating to Sikkim from the western and northern passes of Sikkim from 13th century onwards.

Bhutia after settling in Sikkim established its rule in 1642. Till the merger of Sikkim with India in 1975, Bhutias ruled Sikkim and accorded the highest position in political and socio-economic status. In the light of this discussion, the paper intends to discuss the occupational and socio-economic status of Bhutias in Sikkim.

Index Terms- Bhutias, Occupation, Socio-Economic, Status, Sikkim.

I. INTRODUCTION

Sikkim is a state of multi-ethnic cultural group and communities. Initially it was a barren land before people started migrating. Lepchas were the only original inhabitant of Sikkim. Bhutias migrated from Tibet to Sikkim and became the ruling authority of Sikkim in 1642. The Bhutia monarchy ruled Sikkim for 333years (1642 -1975).

Bhutias who were identified as traders and Lepchas as agriculturists were the two dominant communities that existed in Sikkim initially. However, the arrival of the Nepalese from the 18th century onwards brought some changes in the socio-economic structure of Sikkim (T.B Subba, 1992). The Nepali settlement in Sikkim relates partly to the migration with the territorial conquest by Nepal in 1700 and 1740 and the arrival of British in 1887 to a great extent. The first political officer of Sikkim, J.C White, to a large extent was responsible for migration of the Nepalese (Basnet, 1974). Since then the Nepalese started outnumbering the other ethnic groups in terms of population and occupation.

The first population survey of Sikkim in 1891 recorded total population of 30,455, out of which Nepalese had the highest number with 15,458, followed by Lepchas with total 5,762 persons, Bhutias with 4,894 numbers and Limboos with 3,356 total population. Nepalese recorded 50% of the total population in the country. Subsequently, the Nepalese were the leading group in terms of numbers in all the census reports.

According to State Socio Economic Census, Govt. of Sikkim, 2006, Sikkim records 76,070 (13.08%) of Bhutias, 45239 (8.57%) of Lepchas, 56650 (10.7%) of Limboos and 349543 (60%) with Nepalese. There appeared a tremendous change in demographic structure which also led to change in the political and socio-economic structure in Sikkim.

1. Occupational and economic status of Bhutias in pre-merger Sikkim

For the assessment of the occupational and economic status of Bhutias in Sikkim, the study on the lines of pre and post-merger periods may be considered. The discussion on the traditional and the present occupational engagement of Bhutias allows us to draw a comparative understanding on the occupational and economic status of Bhutias in pre and post-merger period. As presented by various studies on Sikkim, the Bhutias accorded the position as the ruling community and enjoyed highest socio-economic status in the society in the pre-merger period.

The social stratification amongst the Bhutia community that existed during the pre-merger period gives a picture of the socio-economic status of Bhutias visa-vis other existing communities. During the monarchical set up in Sikkim (i.e. before 1975) the Bhutia society was structured into four social strata; Royal family, lamas (monks), kazis and the commoners. After the royal family, the lamas during those time occupied most respected position in the society. The lamas were entrusted as the custodian of the important monasteries in Sikkim. Monasteries possessed huge lands under them which made the lamas enjoy both revenue and administrative control in Sikkim. The Lamas also acted as the chief advisers to the Chogyal (maharaja) in both political and administrative affairs of the state. After lamas, the kazis, mostly belonging to Bhutia-Lepcha were the next high positioned group. Kazis were mostly the landlords and zamindars. The feudalistic state structure of Sikkim created a separate entity for the kazis. Lowest stratum was a mix of Lepchas, Bhutias and Nepalese who worked for the Chogyal and the Kazis as agriculturalist and unpaid laborers (Sinha, 2009).

Bhutia rulers began to establish their dominance because the central administration was maintained according to the Tibetan

style of state craft. The creation of new class of Kazis further accelerated the powers of Bhutias in Sikkim. After the royal family it was this class of people who commanded power over their regional territories. They also acquired traditional education basically entrusted towards religious learning. The kazis wielded considerable authority in the realm of economic and administrative arenas. In the later phases of the Chogyal rule, the kazis established themselves to be more influential and more powerful than the rulers. They were responsible for insulating feudalism and zamindari system to its peak in Sikkim. They were indeed responsible for promoting the main policies of aggravating administrative powers into their hands, specifically when Sikkim was encroached by foreign invaders, especially Nepal and Bhutan in the 18th century.

However, this administration of Sikkim underwent severe changes during the period of Colonial intervention. The change in the administrative structure was seen since the appointment of first British political officer in 1887. A new pattern of administration was introduced and new bureaucratic system was proposed by John Claude White in 1888, the first Political Officer of Sikkim. Hence, it is seen that the change in the wave in socio-economic and occupation pattern of people in Sikkim was brought by the British entry into Sikkim.

This new administrative structure opened new occupational avenues for the people of Sikkim. The agriculture based society slowly turned towards modern society which created avenues for many government services and new occupations. Bhutias being the most educated lot got the possible entry into these new occupations.

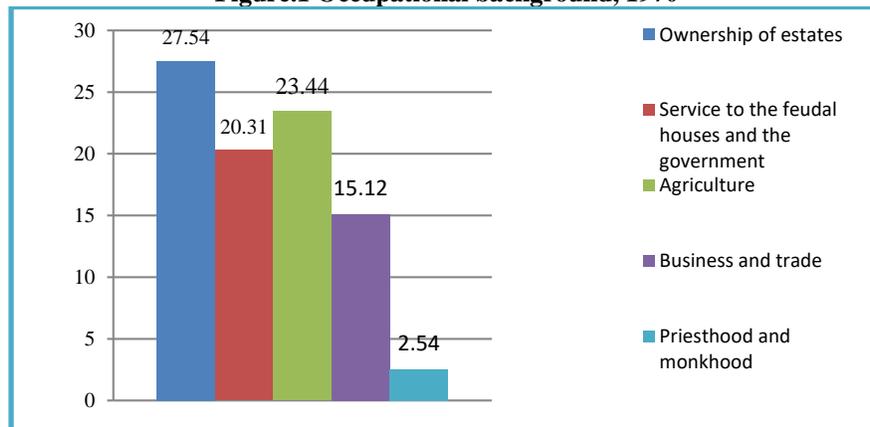
Secondly, the abolition of landlordism during the reign of Tashi Namgyal (1893-1963) further changed the occupational

pattern. The system of government during this period was based on absolute monarchy with deeply rooted feudalism. Many agitations took place in Sikkim for the abolition of landlordism. The abolition of landlordism made the kazis and land holders to opt for other means of occupation. By then many commercial networks were established in Sikkim. They moved towards different commercial occupations like household industries, banking, transport services, communication and construction works. Majority of the traders and contractors belonged to the Bhutia aristocrats and kazis. After they lost their privileges as landlords they got into state's best service sectors. However, the trade and market was captured by Marwaris and other traders from the plains.

Today, Bhutias are found working in different sectors in the state. Substantial amount of Bhutias still practice agriculture as the source of income along with pasturage. Apart from this they also practiced other existing occupations for their livelihood. Influenced by Chinese arts and crafts, carving and weaving (yarning) are some of the occupations followed by them. The main products being carpets and woolen clothes and this practice is been carried forward under Sikkim Handloom and technical institutions in modern Sikkim.

The study conducted on the occupational background of the Bhutia families by A.C Sinha in 1970 revealed that in Sikkim more than 90% of the people were engaged in agriculture. The figure below reveals the percentage of people engaged in different occupational patterns. It shows that 27.54% were the ownership of estate, 23.44% were agriculturists, 20.31% gave their service to the nobility and the aristocracy, and 15.12% were into trade and business.

Figure.1 Occupational background, 1970



Source: A.C Sinha, 1975.

It is evident from the field study conducted by A.C Sinha in 1970 that the major occupation of the Sikkimese people was agriculture. The highest percentage of the Bhutias were the owners of estates and second highest were in agriculture and then into government services.

Right after the merger, people got entry into the service sector of newly created state of Sikkim. According to A.C Sinha

(1975), Bhutias were the highest in number to get into the higher bureaucracy, followed by Kazis, who are also of Bhutia and Lepcha origin. Secondly, Bhutias got entry as Contractor-cum soldiers in voluntary politics. Table below presents the occupational affiliation of the dominant ethnic groups- 1975.

Table 1. Occupational affiliation of the dominant ethnic groups- 1975

[1] Sl. No	[3] Occupation	[4] Bhutias	[5] Lepcha	[6] Khasi	[7] Newars	[8] Nepalese	[9] Indian	[10] Unidentified	[11] Total
[12] 1	[13] Higher bureaucracy	[14] 45	[15] 2	[16] 34	[17] 9	[18] 2	[19] 1	[20] 31	[21] 124
[22] 2	[23] Trade and business	[24] 3	[25] -	[26] -	[27] 1	[28] 3	[29]	[30] 11	[31] 55
[32] 3	[33] Contractor-cum soldiers in voluntary politics	[34] 12	[35] 1	[36] 2	[37] 1	[38] 2	[39] 37	[40] 33	[41] 51
[42] 4	[43] Agriculture	[44] 2	[45] -	[46] 4	[47] -	[48] 8	[49] -	[50] 33	[51] 47
[52] 5	[53] Professions	[54] 1	[55] -	[56] 1	[57] -	[58] 2	[59] -	[60] 9	[61] 17
[62] 6	[63] Priesthood and monkhood	[64] 8	[65] 3	[66] -	[67] -	[68] -	[69] 4	[70] 4	[71] 15
[72] 7	[73] Ownership of estate	[74] -	[75] -	[76] 5	[77] -	[78] -	[79] --	[80] -	[81] 5
[82] 8	[83] Others*	[84] 1	[85] -	[86] -	[87] -	[88] -	[89] 4	[90] 12	[91] 17

Source: A C Sinha, 1975.

So far we have seen the status and position of Bhutias in the pre-merger period. The assessment of community wise occupation and socio-economic status in Sikkim in pre-merger period sheds light that Bhutias dominated Sikkim politics after the establishment of their kingdom in 1642. And no doubt, they started enjoying the highest degree of social and economic status in the society. The Nepalese migration and settlement, however, brought some changes in the socio-economic structure, yet Bhutias retained their position as the highest among the social strata.

2. Occupation and socio-economic status of Bhutias in Post-merger period

This part of the paper tries to discuss the occupation and socio-economic status of Bhutias in the post-merger period. The assessment of occupational pattern and socio-economic status of Bhutias (visa-vis other communities) is discussed under the headings: occupational pattern, income status, landholding status in the state.

3.1 Occupational pattern

Since merger in 1975, various avenues for jobs and new occupational patterns emerged in Sikkim. This led to migration of people especially from India and neighbouring countries like Nepal in the search of new jobs which changed the demographic profile of the state. Sikkim in its initial period of statehood faced the challenge of meeting the demands of the new service sectors. There was great demand of skilled and educated manpower which Sikkim lacked during the time. In such situations the migrated Nepalese and Bhutias who were more educated among the communities in Sikkim were able to occupy better places in the service sectors in the state.

The occupational status of the existing communities captured in 1998 reflects that the Nepali group consisting of Bahun/Sharma, Chhetri, Pradhan/ Newar, Gurung, Manger/Thapa, Tamang, Limbo, Rai, Sunwar and Dewan are the group with highest number occupying gazette posts in the state. Schedule tribes including Bhutia and Lepcha have the second highest number of employees in all cadre of job in 38 departments. Table.2. provides the information on the employment status of different communities in 38 departments in the state in 1998.

Table 2. Community-wise Employment Status in 38 Departments, 1998

Sl. No.	Communities	Selection IAS/IPS/IFS	Gazetted Grade I	Gazetted Grade II	Non Gazetted III	Class IV
1	Scheduled Tribe	23	95	120	888	1115

2	Scheduled caste	2	7	15	143	450
3	Nepali	20	86	220	1634	4618

Source: Report of the OBC Commission, 1998.

The Comparative study of the communities reflects that Nepalese being the greater in number in the state, employment number is also large. Schedule tribe which also includes Bhutia and Lepcha has the second highest number of employees distributed across all categories of employments in the state. The data of community wise employees in the state elicits that Nepalese group has the highest percent (74.3%) of total employees whereas Bhutia records 17.2% of employees and Lepchas are 8.5%.

To find out the working status of the people (community wise) living in the State, five types of nature of employment has been discussed, which covers the entire nature of employment pattern the State of Sikkim has been adopting; Regular, Work-charged, Ad-hoc, Muster Roll and employees working in private and other sectors. Table 3 presents the distribution of employees in the state in 2002.

Table 3. Community wise total numbers of employees - 2002

Community/Caste	Regular	Work-charged	Ad-hoc	MusterRoll	Others/PSU	Total
Nepali (Bahun, Bhujel, Chettri, Damai, Gurung, Jogi, Kami, Majhi, Manger, Pradhan, Rai, Sarki, Sherpa, Subba (limbo), Sunuwar, Tamang, Thami).	15026 (71%)	1205 (80%)	124 (67.8%)	7890 (81%)	1565 (74.6%)	25810 (74.3%)
Lepcha	1902 (8.9%)	72(4.8%)	19 (10.3%)	789 (8.1%)	171 (8.2%)	2953(8.5)
Bhutia	4275 (20.2%)	229(15.2%)	40 (21.9%)	1070 (10.9%)	361 (17.2%)	5975 (17.2%)
Total	21203	1506	183	9749	2097	34,738

Source: Sikkim – A Statistical Profile- 2004-05, Government of Sikkim.

The table sheds light that Nepalese has 71% of the regular employees, 80% as worked charged, 67.8% as adhoc, 81% employees working on muster-roll basis and 74.6% working in other sectors. Among the Bhutias 20.2% are regular employees, 15.2% are working as worked charged, 21.9 as adhoc employees, 10.9 % on muster roll and 17.2% working in other sectors. 8.9% of Lepchas are regular employees, 4.8% working on work charged, 10.3% on adhoc basis, 8.1% as muster roll and 8.2% working in other sectors in the state.

Similarly, we can see consistency in the increase in the number of employees amongst all three groups in 2006. Nepalese is the leading group followed by Bhutia and Lepcha communities. The available data on community wise number of employees in 2006 highlights on the total number of employees; regular and non-regular employees in the state. It also presents total number of employees working in the Private sector Units, including regular and non- regular. The following table presents the Community wise number of employees in the state in 2006.

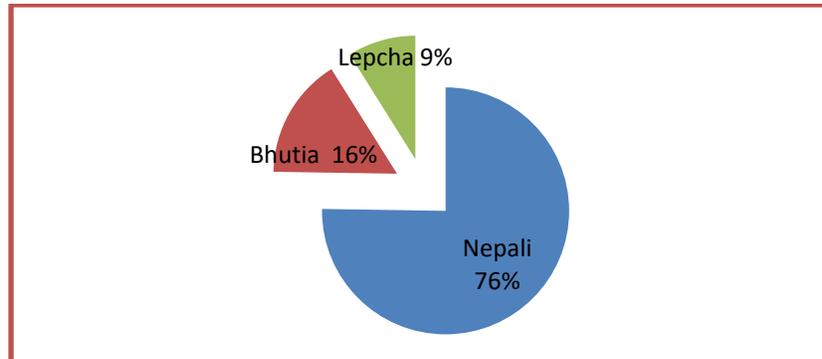
Table 4. Community wise total numbers of employees – 2006

Community	Government		PSU	Total
	Regular	Non Regular	Regular + Non Regular	
Nepali	21479 (73%)	20,878 (77.3%)	2584 (78.3%)	44941 (76%)
Bhutia	5367 (18.4%)	3481 (13%)	530 (16.1%)	9378 (16%)
Lepcha	2325 (10%)	2646 (10%)	183 (5.6%)	5154 (9%)
Total	29171	27005	3297	59473

Source: Department of Economics, Statistics, Monitoring and Evaluation, Govt. of Sikkim, 2006.

It is presented that in both government and non-government sector, Nepali community has the highest number (76%) of employees in the state. After Nepalese, Bhutias has the second highest number of employees (16%) and Lepchas has total of 9% employees share in the state.

Figure.2.Total numbers of employees (Regular + Non Regular) 2006



Source: Department of Economics, Statistics, Monitoring and Evaluation, Govt. of Sikkim, 2006.

Sihha (2009) argues that there are many reasons for Bhutias to get into the higher bureaucratic posts in the state, one being their affiliation to the royal family as well as their socio-economic status. Secondly, as mentioned earlier the educational background of the Bhutias keeps them edge above the other communities.

According to the available statistics provided by the Department of Personnel & Administrative Reform & Training, Government of Sikkim, 1999 and 2005, the ethnic background of the bureaucrats in Sikkim – 1999 & 2005 is provided in the following table.

Table 5. Ethnic Background of the Bureaucrats in Sikkim – 1999 & 2005

Number of cadres and percentage								
Ethnic Communities	1999				2005			
	IAS	IPS	IFS	Total	IAS	IPS	IFS	Total
Lepcha	-	-	-	-	01(2.1)	-	-	01
Bhutias	12 (44.5)	04 (17.4)	05(21.7)	21	13(28.3)	03(12.0)	05(17.8)	21
Nepalis	06(22.2)	05(21.7)	06(26.1)	17	9(19.6)	4(16.0)	6(21.4)	19
Sherpas	-	-	-	-	01(2.1)	-	-	01
Others	09(33.3)	14(60.9)	12(52.2)	35	22(47.8)	18(72.0)	17(60.7)	57
Total	27	23	23	73	46	25	28	99

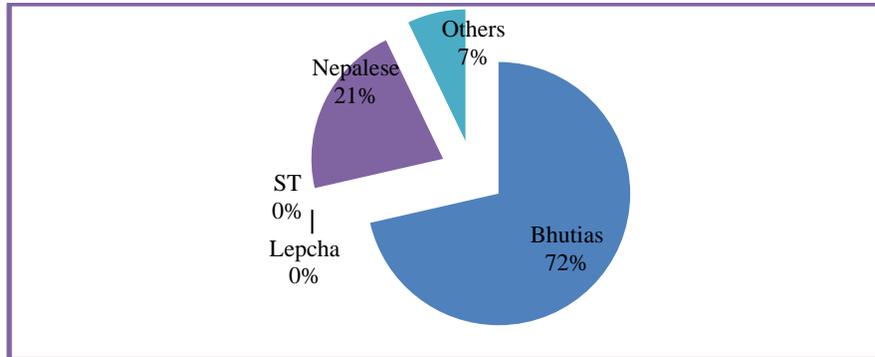
Source: Department of Personnel & Administrative Reform & Training, Government of Sikkim, 1999 and 2005.

It shows that the Bhutias are in the highest administrative posts in the state. In the highest category of administrative posts like IAS, Bhutias are represented 44.5%, 17.4 % in IPS and 21.7% in IFS. In total, Bhutia makes 28.7% of administrators in 1999. However, the percentage of the Bhutia bureaucrats in 2005 has

slightly decreased to 21% as compared to 1999. But as a community as a whole it has the highest percentage in the state.

There was not only high participation of Bhutias in the state administration; the number of civil servants in higher bureaucratic posts is also highest in the state.

Figure 3: List of highest cadre (IAS) in Sikkim, 2006



Source: Statistical Report, DESME, 2006.

The above figure is an indicative of the fact that the Bhutias are highest in the cadre of IAS in the state government.

3.2 Income status

Income as a determinant factor of socio-economic status can be measured in a variety of ways, including family income and

assessments of wealth. The collection of income includes the measurement of total income, earned or unearned.

The socio-economic survey conducted by the Department of Economics, Statistics, Monitoring and Evaluation, Govt. of Sikkim in 2006 presents the distribution of income of different communities in 2006.

Table 6. Community wise percentage distribution of household by income category, 2006

Community	Household	0 - 2500	2501-5000	5001-10000	10001-25000	25001-Above
Bhutia	14769 (7.81)	11.48	11.46	13.69	16.73	21.52
Lepcha	8041 (4.3)	7.70	7.59	6.88	6.44	5.59
Nepali	188915 (88.1)	80.82	80.95	79.43	76.83	72.89
Total	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00

Source: Department of Economics, Statistics, Monitoring and Evaluation, Govt. of Sikkim-2006.

Considering the distribution of population in the state, the Nepalese are more employed and as expected they are the highest income bearers.

It is seen that the Nepalese have the highest percentage of income. Bhutias as always comes after Nepalese, followed by Lepchas.

3.3 Landholding status

The pattern of land distribution is one of the major determining factors of studying economic status of the people. In this study we have also been able to categorize communities on the lines of distribution of land by land size.

Table 7. Community wise Distribution of Land in Sikkim (Area in Hectares), 2006

Communities	Total Paddy fields (Area %)	Total Dry Land (Area %)	Waste land (Area %)	Cardamom (Area %)	Total Cultivable land (Area %)
Bhutia	21.12	16.13	24.18	27.05	20.32
Lepcha	14.97	---	17.53	32.72	20.38
Nepali	57.19	64.95	62.00	22.37	58.66

Source: Land Record Section, Department of Land Revenue, Govt. of Sikkim, Gangtok, 2006.

The distribution of land by size, 2006 gives us an understanding that Bhutia as a community possesses 20.32 % of cultivated land area and Lepcha possesses 20.38% of cultivated land. Nepalese (total of land owned by Bahun, Bhujel, Chettri, Damai, Gurung, Jogi, Kami, Majhi, Manger, Pradhan, Rai, Sarki, Sherpa, Subba (limbo), Sunuwar, Tamang, Thami) is the group possessing 58.66% of the total land in the state.

Table 8. Community wise distribution of land by land size, 2006

Community	Less Than 1 Acre	More than 1 Acre less than 2.5 Acre	More than 2.5 Acre less than 5 Acre	More than 5 Acre less than 10 Acre	More than 10 Acre less than 25 Acre	More than 25 Acre	Grand Total
Bhutias	83.17	10.58	2.40	2.40	0.96	0.48	100.00
Lepcha	78.81	13.91	3.97	0.00	3.31	0.00	100.00
Tamang	86.84	7.89	0.00	2.63	2.63	0.00	100.00
Limbo	91.45	4.61	1.97	1.97	0.00	0.00	100.00
Bahun	88.15	11.11	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.74	100.00
Chettri	84.83	12.36	2.25	0.00	0.56	0.00	100.00
Pradhan	87.50	7.50	2.50	2.50	0.00	0.00	100.00
Rai	89.21	8.27	2.16	0.36	0.00	0.00	100.00
Manger	85.48	14.52	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	100.00
Gurung	95.31	1.56	1.56	1.56	0.00	0.00	100.00
Suwar/Mukhia	100.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	100.00
Thami	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Jogi	100.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	100.00
Dewan	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Bhujel	83.33	16.67	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	100.00
Kami	87.50	12.50	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	100.00
Damai	100.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	100.00
Sarki	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Maji	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Sanyasi/giri	100.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	100.00
Others	100.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	100.00
Grand total	86.80	9.60	1.91	0.88	0.66	0.15	100.00

Source: Department of Economics, Statistics, Monitoring and Evaluation, DESME, 2006.

Detailed status of land holding by land size presents that 83.17% of Bhutia households possess less than 1 Acre of land. 10.58% of households possess more than 1 acre and less than 2.5 acres of land, 2.40% Bhutia households possess more than 2.5 Acre less than 5 Acre of land, 0.96% possess more than 10 Acre and less than 25 Acre and 0.48% households possess more than 25 Acre of land.

Referring to the earlier works on Sikkim, Bhutias were identified as elites in the pre-merger period. According to AC Sinha (1975), Bhutia community possessed high political, social and economic status in Sikkim. Today, Bhutias accounts to 13.08% of the total population yet, they have good share in the state's employment, landholding and household income in the

state. It may be said that with the increasing population, Bhutias have been able to represent in almost all sections of the state.

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