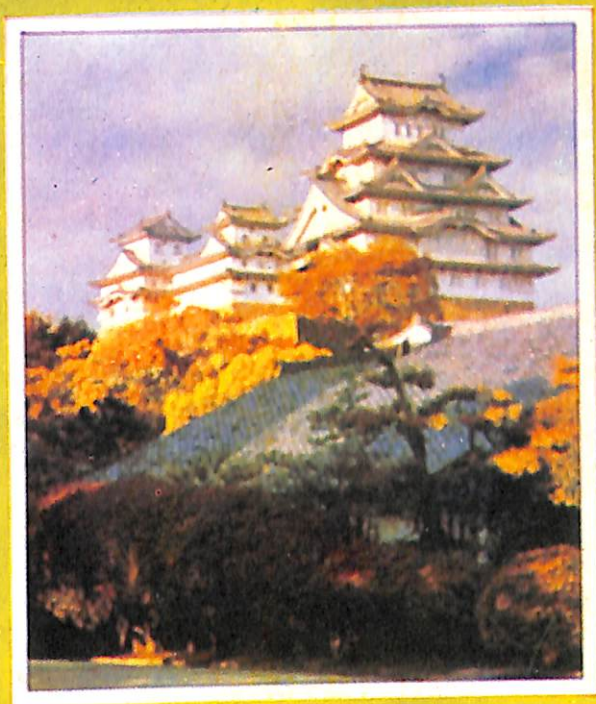


# SIKKIM

## LAND & PEOPLE

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**B. BHATTACHARYA**

# SIKKIM

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## SECTION: A - GEOGRAPHICAL BASE

# 1

## *Introduction*

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For long the land occupied by the present-day Sikkim has been the area of contest for people inhabiting the adjoining regions of the Himalaya. The Lepchas are believed to be the original inhabitants of 'Sikkim Proper'<sup>1</sup> and the name of the country is said to be derived from two Limbu words (the Limbus being a tribe inhabiting originally eastern Nepal) - '*Su Him*', meaning 'new house' (meant for the Limbu girl married to Lepcha boy at that time). The words later changed into '*Sukhim*' which came to be Sikkim in anglicized form.<sup>2</sup> The original Lepchas, however, called their country as, '*Nyema-el*' which meant 'the holy land'.<sup>3</sup> The Tibetans called it '*Denzong*', meaning the land of rice which presumably indicate the trading relations existing between these two countries in the remote past. The country was known as '*Bramashon*' to early European traveller like Horace L. Renna while Bogle called it, '*Demojong*'.

Not much is known about the early history of Sikkim and though the Sikkimese have been able to retain their cultural identity, the country has been invaded time and again by people belonging to two other cultures—the Bhutias from the north bringing with them the Tibetan culture, the Tibetan language, the Lamaistic Buddhism along with a mixture of pastoral and semi-settled agricultural life, while the Nepalese coming from the west brought in Indo-Aryan languages, Hinduism and a settled agricultural practice.<sup>4</sup> In all appearance, the infiltration of the Tibetans began long before 15th century when traders, farmers and the Lamas came in search of new

opportunities in this sparsely peopled country with almost a similar geographical setting but on a much less harsh scale. The Tibetans were at a higher cultural level than the Lepchas at that time and as such could provide facilities for various branches of learning, including medicine, mathematics and astronomy.<sup>5</sup>

However, the credit of organising the Lepchas into a society for the first time goes to a person known as Tur Ve Pa No who was eventually elected as the leader or king called 'Punu' in around 1400 A.D. By this time the Limbus from Nepal had taken occupation of the south-western part of the country and often came into conflict with the Lepchas in one of which Punu was killed. The kingship ended after three more Punus following the death of the first one and the Lepchas resorted thereafter to electing a leader to advise on religious and social matters of the community which gradually shifted itself to the region around Kanchenjunga under continuous pressure of the Limbus.<sup>6</sup>

In the second-quarter of the 17th century A.D., three highly placed Lamas came from Tibet to convert the Sikkimese people into Buddhism and in their search for the descendent of Guru Tashe, a Tibetan noble, they came across a person known as Phuntsog (Panchoo) Namgyal at Gangtok who happened to be his great-grandson and proclaimed him as the Gyalpo or king of Sikkim in 1641 at Yoksam, giving him the title of Chogyal or the Dharma-raj.<sup>7</sup> The kingdom was divided into 12 dzongs or districts, each of them being placed under a Lepcha Governor. The kingdom of Sikkim became quite extensive at this time, including the Chumbi valley in the north in Tibet and the present Darjeeling district of West Bengal.

The enthronement of the Chogyal was followed by a period of about hundred and fifty years during which the dynastic rule of the Chogyals continued and in 1706 the Bhutanese army invaded Sikkim but was finally defeated by Tibet which came to its rescue and in gratitude of that the great monastery of Pemayangtse was built by the king of Sikkim.<sup>8</sup> The peace was short-lived and with the emergence of Gurkha power in Nepal, a number of invasions were conducted into Sikkim in the middle of the 18th century causing great hardship to the country besides

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bringing significant changes to the social structure with a lasting effect., For instance, the Gurkhas gradually came to represent an important section of the Nepalese population in Sikkim. At the same time the Newaris losing power to the Gurkhas in Nepal, started moving eastward to settle down in the territory occupied by Darjeeling district and finally entered Sikkim in the middle of the 18th century to monopolise the copper mines and the minting industry.<sup>9</sup> It did not take long for the Nepalese, in general, to start encroaching upon the forests of Sikkim and cutting down valuable timber. There had neither been any resistance to immigration from Tibet, nor to the unrestricted entry of the Nepalese in Sikkim and the latter was accepted very easily when some people welcomed them for the development of the resources and for different types of construction work when the country was quite under-populated, having only about 30,000 inhabitants in the last century.<sup>10</sup>

The relation between Sikkim and the British represented by the East India Company began sometime in 1814-15 and in terms of a treaty signed by Sikkim in 1817, the East India Company agreed to hand over the territory captured by Nepal to Sikkim and the political boundary between Nepal and Sikkim was fixed along the rivers Mahananda and Mechi and the Singalila range. But Sikkim forfeited her independence for good by this treaty since according to article 3 of the treaty (Treaty of Titalia), she lost the right to take any independent decision in future in any of its disputes with Nepal or other neighbouring states. This was followed by the loss of Darjeeling which Sikkim was forced to cede to the East India Company as a gift in 1835. The East India Company further acquired an additional territory of Sikkim covering 640 sq. miles as a sequel to its military expedition to Sikkim in 1849 on a flimsy pretext. Though the whole of the country was not physically annexed to British India in view of political considerations, affecting its relationship with other Himalayan states like Nepal, Tibet and Bhutan, the Government of India sent a military expedition in 1860 and reduced the power of the king almost to subservience by the Treaty of 1861 which brought Sikkim under the control of British India, making it a de facto protectorate of the Government of India.

This is the turning point in the political history of Sikkim. The appointment of a political officer stationed at Sikkim's capital, Gangtok, from 1889 onwards put the final stamp on the relationship that was likely to emerge between the British and Sikkim. The first political officer, John Claude White, made the impression very clear in his encouragement to Nepalese immigrants who virtually flooded the country, submerging for ever the interests of the original population of Lepcha and Tibetan origin in Sikkim. The Nepalese, in fact, was comprising nearly two-thirds of the total population of the country, but unlike the Tibetans, the Nepalese retained their cultural entity without encouraging free intermarriage with the local inhabitants.

One, however, may look into some of the measures taken by White contributing immensely to the development and welfare of Sikkim at this time. These include laying tracks into densely forested hills, the introduction of apple cultivation, cloth weaving, carpet manufacture and copper mining. They had a hand in opening schools and hospitals as well. All these along with the measures taken on improving the land tenure system, land rent, etc, bore heavy dividend as evidenced by the fact that a span of about thirty years of British overseeing resulted in the increase of population by five-fold and material resources by ten fold in Sikkim.<sup>11</sup>

The cultural hiatus between these two groups coupled with numerical superiority of the Nepalese led to an acrimonious situation in terms of political authority which still remained vested in the king and his advisers, the latter mostly representing Bhutia-Lepcha interests. The grievances of the majority population sharpened further on the issues that most of the higher governmental appointments were made from among the Bhutia-Lepchas, that all the State Ceremonial functions were conducted in traditional Bhutia-Lepcha style. Numerous Buddhist monasteries throughout Sikkim were maintained on government aid and the two national festivals were of Buddhist faith, observed annually at the government's expenses. Though Nepali was virtually the most widely spoken language in the country, the official recognition was denied to it.



The growing discontent found the occasion of India attaining its independence in August 1947 as an opportunity to replace monarchy with an elected government reflecting majority interest. The development that followed was rather slow. The formation of the Sikkim State Congress in December 1947 was the first step in this direction, demanding among other things a popular interim government to function till merger with India. This prompted the then Maharaj Kumar to organize Sikkim National Party which stood for an independent Sikkim. However, the two parties came to an agreement on Sikkim continuing to be an Indian Protectorate in respect of external affairs, defence and communication and enjoy internal autonomy. A treaty to this effect was signed with the India Government in December 1950. The first general election for local self government was held in 1953 for which both the Nepalese and the Lepcha-Bhutia groups were allotted six seats each, keeping out another six to be nominated by the king. (The two political parties bagged equal share of seats). It was succeeded by fresh elections in 1958, 1967, 1970 and in 1974 and during this period the relation between the king and members of the Sikkim State Congress came to be very bitter. In the last election the State Congress won a thumping victory with a tally of 31 out of 32 seats in the Assembly which advocating Sikkim's participation in the political and economic institutions of India, later on took a resolution paving the way for complete dissolution of the Chogyal's rule and merger of Sikkim with India. According to another resolution of the Assembly a special opinion poll was held on 14th April 1974, conducted by the Additional Election Commissioner and the results were declared the next day as 59,637 votes in favour and 1,494 votes against merger which, ultimately, took place on April 26, 1975, making Sikkim the twenty-second State of India.

Geographically lying between 27° 4'50" and 28° 7' 50" north latitude 88° 11' and 88° 56' east longitudes, Sikkim is a completely mountain-locked State, bordered on the north by Tibet (China), on east by Tibet (China) and Bhutan, on the west by Nepal and on the south the hill division of Darjeeling district of West Bengal. It covers an area of 7,096 sq.km. stretching for about 113 km from

## 2

# Physical Setting & Resources

### 1. Geology and Physiography

Sikkim, essentially a mountain State belonging to the Eastern Himalaya, provides a representative cross section of the latter as truly reflected in its structural formations which contain some of the oldest rocks recorded in the Indian sub-continent and constitute the main body of the Himalaya. During the early period of geological history, deep-water marine sediments were deposited in many parts of the area which later on were subjected to repeated folding, faulting and thrust movements. The principal rock formation in Sikkim consists of igneous and metamorphic rocks of the Cambrian age. Igneous rocks are represented by large masses of granites, and metamorphic rocks are represented by schists, quartz and quartz phyllites etc. Devoid of any flat land, the area is composed of four tectonic belts, having structural and stratigraphic characteristics and delimited by important dislocations. The four tectonic belts are known as (a) the Foothill belt, (b) the Inner belt, (c) the Axial belt and (d) the Trans-Axial belt.

The Foothill belt is made up of the autochthonous Siwalik deposits of the quarternary era, occurring mostly in the south and Gondwana rocks. The younger Gondwana rocks consist of sandstone, shale and carbonaceous shale with occasional occurrence of thin coal bands and is separated by the major boundary thrust, making the lowest tectonic plane. The Inner belt comprises thick sequences of greenschist *facies*, known as Daling metamorphic rocks, the name 'Daling' being given by Mr. Mallet after a place called Daling in the Darjeeling district. Phyllites form the

predominant rocks in this group which occur in the form of a dome-shaped anticline. Dalings appear to underline the gneiss and pass into mica schists. The Daling group of rocks fall into two classes, high-grade metamorphic and low grade metamorphic rocks of which the former are represented by such rocks as garnet, staurolite, Kyanite, sillimanite while the latter are characterised by the presence of chlorite. The most important structural element is the 'tectonic window' found in the Rangit Valley area of South district where long weathering and denudation have revealed the presence of older rocks of Daling series encircled by younger Gondwana rocks.<sup>12</sup>

The Axial belt of the Sikkim Himalaya consists of gneisses which continue from the Inner belt succeeded by the northern belt of the sedimentaries known as the Tethyan Himalaya, usually being richly fossiliferous in their composition.

The four tectonic belts generally conform to the four physiographic zones, namely the sub-Himalaya, the Lower Himalaya, the Higher Himalaya and the Tibetan Himalaya. The physical configuration of the country is largely influenced by the geological structure which is clearly evidenced by the present topography, the drainage system, the widely varied landscape, the incidence of frequent landslides as well as human response. The mountains widely varying in altitude ranging between 230 m in the south to about 8579 m in the north at the summit of the Kanchenjunga, the third highest peak of the world lying on the border with Nepal in the west, rise in elevation towards the north, making it deeply cut into steep escarpments in contrast to the lower, open, fairly well cultivated areas of the south. In general, the northern, eastern and western portions of the country composed of hard gneissic rocks are capable of resisting denudation to a large extent whereas the central and the southern portions formed of comparatively soft, thin, slaty and half schistose rocks, are subject to greater denudation, and with minimum elevation have given rise to the highest concentration of population in Sikkim. One of the typical physiographic features of the country is river terrace,<sup>13</sup> occurring along the rivers which in many cases constitute important locations for large settlements and towns.<sup>14</sup>

Though the trend of the mountain system is in general from east to west, the major ridges run almost in a north-south direction, such as the Singalila and the Chola ridges (Fig. 1). Besides, another ridge running from north to south in the central part of Sikkim divides the waters of Tista from that of the Rangit river. The valleys cut by these rivers and their tributaries have steep, gorge-like appearance, those of Tista and Ranjit being more than 1524 m in depth. The lower portion of such deep valleys are not congenial for human settlement which have developed at an elevation of 1220 m to 1830 m in such valleys. However, due to heavy rainfall the valley sides are subject as much to erosion as the bed of the channel, thus giving rise to U shaped valleys<sup>15</sup> in contrast to V or I shaped valleys in Western Himalaya with much less rainfall. Nevertheless, the steep, narrow valleys and gorges are ideal for the construction of dams for the generation of hydel power leading to economic development.<sup>16</sup>

The northern part of Sikkim comprises the highest region of the State enclosed on all sides by lofty ranges and spurs of the greater Himalaya, giving rise to a number of glaciers like Zemu, Talung, Changsang, Lhonak etc. The region is studded with a large number of lakes; nearly 28.64 per cent of the country falling within this part remains perpetually covered by snow. This mountain-locked country surrounded by ridges ranging from 3000 m to 3500 m in height is connected with the countries lying around it by a number of passes occurring at different altitudes, such as Jelep La (4040m), Nathu La (4728 m), Cho La (4435 m), Thanka La (4877 m) in the east on Chola Range, Donkiua Kongralamu (4503 m) and Naku in the north, and Kanglanangma (5102 m) and Chai Bhanjan (3139 m) in the west between Sikkim and Nepal. Another important physiographic feature of this mountainous country is represented by the thermal springs located in the eastern and some other parts of Sikkim sprouting mineral water the economic as well as therapeutic value of which has yet to be investigated. They have developed at Yumthang (22 km north of Lachung), Tarum (3 km south of Jorpul on Chungthang—Lachen Highway); Ralangralop (South Sikkim); Sakyong - Penthang Zongu in North

### 3

## Human Resources

In 1991, the population of Sikkim was 406,457,<sup>31</sup> being the smallest among the twenty-five States of India, which was 59,014 in 1901 and 209,843 in 1971—prior to its merger with India, thus registering an increase of almost 589 per cent between 1901 and 1991 and a little over 93 per cent or nearly doubling in the course of the last two decades. Though between 1971-81 and 1981-91 the decadal growth rate has slumped by 23.20 per cent, the annual growth rate has been 4.14 per cent in 1971-81 and 2.43 per cent in 1981-91.<sup>32</sup>

Table-1

#### DECADAL VARIATION OF POPULATION IN SIKKIM\*

Year	Male	Female	Total	% Decadal Variation
1901	30,795	28,219	59,014	—
1911	45,050	42,861	87,920	+ 48.98
1921	41,492	40,229	81,721	- 7.05
1931	55,825	53,983	109,808	+ 34.37
1941	63,289	58,231	121,520	+ 10.67
1951	72,210	64,515	137,725	+ 13.34
1961	85,193	76,996	162,189	+ 17.76
1971	112,662	97,181	209,843	+ 29.38
1981	172,440	143,945	316,385	+ 50.77
1991	216,427	190,030	406,457	+ 28.47

\*Source: Census of India 1981, Series - 19, Sikkim.  
 Census of India 1991, India, Paper 2 of 1992  
 Final Population Total: Brief Analysis of Primary  
 Census Abstract.

There is a wide variation in the spatial distribution of population, nearly half (43.90 per cent) of which is concentrated in the East district. The lowest concentration occurs in North district (7.69 per cent) and between the two other districts of South and West, it is almost similar, 24.26 per cent, and 24.15 per cent. The extremely rugged terrain coupled with inhospitable climate makes many areas of Sikkim uninhabited. As a result, a large part of the State is very sparsely populated. For instance, the North district comprising nearly 60 per cent of the total area of Sikkim has barely 8 per cent of the total population.

The average density of population in Sikkim was 57 persons per square kilometer in 1991<sup>33</sup> as against 267 for India and in terms of the thirty-two States and Union Territories, it held twentyninth place in order of rank, followed by Andaman & Nicobar Islands (34) and the two hill States of Mizoram (33) and Arunachal Pradesh (10). It may be interesting to observe that, Sikkim held the same rank in average density in 1981 as well. The average density having been widely at variance from being 6 per sq. km. in North district to 145 in East district, has maintained more or less a steady increase through the decades, rising from 8 persons per sq. km. in 1901 to 57 persons per sq. km. in 1991.

The male and female components of the population give a more clear picture implying its inherent strength of providing a stable population, man-power potential etc. The following Table shows that the situation has been far from satisfactory with steady decrease in the proportion of females between 1911 and 1981, recording a slight recovery in the ratio for the first time in 1991, though still there remains a wide difference between the two components, of which the males dominate by a large number. The reasons for general disparity in the sex ratio may be summed up as the differentials in certain types of mortality which are sex selective and due to preference for male children resulting in utter neglect of female children, the relative gap in the health conditions between males and females and the lower expectation of life at birth for females as compared to males caused by high maternal mortality.

## SECTION: B - ECONOMIC BASE

# 5

## Agriculture

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A country peopled by immigrants coming through ages from different stocks of culture and heritage, owes much of its economic development to the experience, skill and tradition of those immigrants which, ultimately moulded to suit the physical situation, gives rise to a form not much different from the economy practised in similar Himalayan situations. Thus, the Lepchas, the Tibetans or the Bhutias as they came to be known and the Nepalese coming from different cultural backgrounds, have contributed to shaping the economy of Sikkim in which, till now, agriculture in association with animal husbandry takes the dominant role. This is further reflected in the agricultural practices as prevalent in Sikkim today including the terraced cultivation, the *Jhuming*, the type of the crops produced and the implements used. But what has emerged through practices done by many generations is one considered to be much more advanced than found in any of the North-Eastern States, mostly having a similar physical setting. The most remarkable feature of Sikkim's agriculture is that the practice of mono-cropping has largely been replaced by double or tripple cropping on the basis of relay cropping or multiple cropping system irrespective of altitudinal or agroclimatic handicaps. The character as well as nature of production has certainly changed, giving higher returns made possible with the introduction of short duration, photo-intensive high-yielding varieties of paddy, maize, and dwarf wheat. Another very important feature of Sikkim's Agriculture is that it consists of a wide ranging variety of crops grown

in response to its greatly varied physical conditions. Simultaneously the entire structure of animal husbandry has undergone detectable changes, receiving a great fillip from the introduction of improved technology.

All these, however, do not make Sikkim self-sufficient in its agricultural products, the pursuit on the whole constrained by physical limitations. The difficult terrain with strong slope, lack of sunny aspect with frequent changes in slope-faces, changing elevation at short intervals, rock outcrops and poor soils and land-slides, soil-erosion and occasional droughts are some of the major hindrances to agricultural activities in the region where the success of crops so long has largely hinged on the behaviour of monsoons.

Above all, however, land suitable for agriculture has always been the greatest limiting factor where not more than 12 per cent of the total land area could be converted into agricultural practices, leaving no prospect for any further extension in this respect without impairing the ecological balance in a harmful way. As mentioned earlier, in terms of land capability classification, land belonging to the first three classes, I to III, really suitable for cultivation, are quite rare in Sikkim. This deficiency is partly made up by land for agriculture available from an elevation of 300 m to 3000 m though most of the cultivated land lies below 1800 m elevation.

*Land Use:* The land use pattern in Sikkim having evolved from a widely varied physical setting and human action through centuries in utilising the environment, has a distinct character, in many ways different from that of the plains. The last cadastral survey, carried out in 1980-81, gives the details of the nature of land use in Sikkim (Table) 1.

According to Table-1 the largest land-user is the forest followed by barren lands, together taking up more than 61 per cent of the total land area of Sikkim while another 15 per cent occupied by buildings, roads etc. is used for non-agricultural purposes. Thus, taking land not available for cultivation into consideration, altogether 75.22 per cent of the total land remains beyond the orbit of agriculture. This is of serious concern where barely 11 per cent of the total



constructed which gradually needed further improvement to make them worthy for the movement of heavy traffic with trucks and passenger bus etc. and this was taken up in the subsequent plans. Thus, at the end of 1979-80, there were 872 km of roads in various categories, of which 547 km were surfaced and 325 km were unsurfaced. They provided 174 km of surfaced roads and 103 km of unsurfaced roads per 100,000 people as compared to 113 km of surfaced roads and 179 km of unsurfaced roads for the country at that time. Apart from this, a large length of 1.2 m wide foot-tracks and a large number of foot-bridges across gorges providing inter-village communication had been developed at the onset of the Sixth Plan. Unfortunately, these tracks were neither by maintained the State nor by the villagers as a result of which the earthen tracks often remained damaged. In addition, work began ultimately to cover 243 km of roads under expansion, primarily to serve the interior villages under the Minimum Needs Programme.

However, of the total length of 872 km of roads at the end of 1979-80, as much as 755 km was below minimum standard required as most of these roads were initially built in the form of jeepable roads or as bridle paths. Situation had not improved much at the beginning of the Sixth Plan (1980-85) when the total length of roads of various categories under the control of the State Government amounted to 892 km. A total of 423 km of border and strategic roads and 40 km of the National Highway are under the control of the Border Roads Organisation.

The road-network connected 158 villages (Revenue Blocks) at the commencement of the Sixth Plan and during the plan period the total additional length of the roads to be constructed amounted to 488 km of which 349 km was completed, leaving 139 km to be completed in the Seventh Plan (1985-90) which were at various stages of construction. Besides, the construction of seven major and 29 minor bridges, improvement of 189 km of narrow road and surface-strengthening of 68 km of roads came under the purview of the Seventh Plan as the spill over of the previous plan. In addition to that, new programmes on the construction of major and minor bridges on the roads

grazing in forest lands, depletion of the biotic resources etc. which in their wake activate a number of degradational processes leading to fast deterioration of the environment. The increasing scale and incidence of soil erosion, soil creep, landslips and landslides are only a few of the instances of the present endangered environmental situation in Sikkim Himalaya, threatening life and property of the inhabitants.

The reckless abuse of the environment has largely been due to the fact that the people had no way of finding any other sources of living in a closed society and depending constantly on the nature's bounty without replenishing it in any form, has made natural processes quite disturbed in the long run. To cite an instance, the energy requirement of the people in Sikkim is mostly met from the forest biomass and according to the reports of the FAO, the Himalayan region is one of the six zones in Asia having a serious fuel-wood crisis.

Nevertheless, the environment not only has shaped the economy of the mountain country, having a distinctive character of its own as compared with other regions of the Himalaya in terms of the typical products of the agricultural system, the wide variation in the physical conditions of the environment has also made the existing economic activities much more divergent in character with a greater degree of speciality in the nature of produces in different fields. The most important fact in this respect should not be lost sight of that, however tiny in size Sikkim may be, the unique advantages lie in its physical conditions where the north-south free passage for monsoon coupled with major rivers coursing in the same direction, gives an openness continuing deep into the north, making wide climatic changes grading from sub-tropical to almost alpine over a very small stretch of the landmass (about 113 km) rising in quick succession from a mere 230 m to over 8,500 m.

The great diversity in physical settings emerging from such a situation over small distances makes scope for an equally great degree of specialisation which realised in its proper perspective, may give rise to a highly developed economy through correct handling. One needs to view the situation right from the beginning in the most realistic



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