

DZUMSA

Keeping traditions alive in the high mountains

Majestic Lachung Monastery

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When fresh experiments of autonomy under the provisions of the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution of India have become the buzzword to address recent ethnic uprisings in different corners of the country, the Bhutia people living in remote areas tucked between the high mountains of North Sikkim have been able to keep the centuries-old *dzumsa* alive, the indigenous autonomous institution of the tribe, not only with its traditional hue but simultaneously making the institution attuned to handle complex issues of modern administration.

The autonomous institution of the Tibetan dialect speaking Bhutia

people living in Lachung (8000ft) and Lachen (9200ft) areas of North Sikkim district bordering China is so dynamic and democratic in nature besides being crucial to their lifestyle that even after the introduction of a new administrative set up following Sikkim's merger with India way back in 1975, authorities preferred to keep *dzumsa* alive in these two most protected and restricted areas in India, rather than imposing the new administration.

However, while recognizing its traditional role, *dzumsa* have been bestowed with more responsibilities to act as the key agency of implementing welfare programmes of the modern Panchayat system. Thus,

this indigenous institution has become a unique example of an autonomous institution in the Himalayan belt inherited from traditional ways which has managed to survive in the changing world.

"In fact, *dzumsa's* role was more of a judiciary in our customary life. It was primarily responsible for maintaining community law and regulations and organizing community events. Guilty persons or parties were summoned before this apex body in public and accordingly a penalty or punishment was fixed for the guilty. Community rule was strict and all decisions were taken on the floor of *dzumsa*, in

public. The role of the institution has been extended to a large extent during the post-merger period with India. Now the *dzumsa* performs all the responsibilities of a Panchayat, apart from performing its traditional role," says Thendup Lachungpa, the *pipon*, head of Lachung *dzumsa*, while narrating about the institution. Although the responsibilities have increased, the original structure has remained similar as in the customary practices, adds the 65 year-old senior leader, who once served in the erstwhile Royal Army of Sikkim.

In the structure of the *dzumsa*, two *gyapans* assist the *pipon* in all his tasks. There is a council of about 18 *gembo*, or responsible village elders representing different areas whose responsibility is to help the institution in its overall functions, as well as the chief, and in dispensing its decisions. Prior to any meeting, the *gyapans* call the village people to assemble in the community hall on a certain day. The tradition of making announcements by shouting names of family heads by the *gyapans*, visiting their localities, is still alive. Any family or person who fails to attend such a meeting is levied a penalty that is to be deposited during the next meeting. This ensures participation of at least every household in all public meetings. One representative from the Buddhist monastery in the village in the council is mandatory in the institution as all Bhutias follow Buddhism. This representative from the religious institution is called *chuitempa*.

Dzumsa is an elected body and the term of the body is one year. However, the chief and the council may be re-elected for another year or more according to the villagers'



The *pipon* addressing village issues.

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mandate. In customary practices, only one person for the post of *pipon* was nominated. Now, more than one person may be nominated by villagers. In such a case, names of the nominated persons are written in slips of paper and then placed before the council. The *Chuitempa* puts all the papers in a bottle and then performs a holy ceremony so that the name of the right person comes to his hand. He then draws a paper randomly after shaking the papers inside the bottle thoroughly. The person whose name emerges first is nominated as the chief for that year unanimously without further dispute. The new *dzumsa* council is formed after the yearly Mask Dance ceremony performed in the monastery that normally takes place in the month of February.

Bhutias in this part are divided

into two clans- *Lema* and *Khedum* and both clans have their own *dzumsas*. Although the role of the *dzumsa* has been extended over time, the original purpose of the institution of being the singular judiciary has remained the same and all disputes are settled in this apex judiciary known as *khamtsu*. Normally dispute cases of accused parties or individuals are settled mutually on the floor of the council. If the person or the accused party disobeys the council's mandate and refuses to settle the matter mutually, it may impose a penalty. The rate of the penalty is usually very high. Finding it difficult to bear such a heavy toll, parties or individuals often try to settle matters mutually. Even, during the time of inviting the council for *khamtsu*, the accused parties or individuals have to bear the expenses of serving the mem

bers a meal and *chaang*, the traditional millet beer. Thus, for fear of such expenses and high penalty, people usually avoid disputes and try to solve matters between themselves.

"This is one of the reasons that the instance of crimes is rare in areas coming under a *dzumsa* jurisdiction. In very rare occasions, if the accused party or individual deviates from the *dzumsa's* decision, the matter is sent to the district administration to be settled before a formal judiciary. Such examples are, however, very rare," says the *pipon*.

The people living in Lachung identify themselves as Lachungpa, while those living in Lachen as Lachenpa. Only the original Lachungpas and Lachenpas in their respective areas can be members of *dzumsas*.

According to Gyamsto Lachungpa, a senior villager of Lachung, the causes of the existence of such a customary institution and people's acceptance of it even today, can be attributed to



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All welfare funds, aid or relief, granted to these two beautiful hilly stations, strategically located in border areas and tourist hotspots have been distributed for the villagers through *dzumsa* in open public meetings so that every person knows about such matters.

However, all these conventional as well as government responsibilities have made the institution overburdened at times, particularly with the complexities of the modern age, he feels.

"During the days of our customary practice, society was simple and the *dzumsa* authorities have to bear only the conventional responsibilities. However, the institution is now responsible for implementation of

all government schemes. Again, being located in important strategic security zones, the authorities of the institution have to maintain a cordial relation with security forces deployed in these areas for implementation of the development activities," he says.

While this unique autonomous institution is entirely male dominated, the administration is now putting pressure on the authorities to provide women some space in the leadership, as female participation in Panchayat in the state is fifty per cent.

"I think every person will be benefited properly when women too will enjoy the opportunity of taking part in *dzumsa* decisions. Some of the government schemes are women oriented and women must be given a chance to take part in decision making to implement such programmes," says Donka Lachungpa, the *pipon's* wife.

Such issues of adaptability of *dzumsa* to engender its functioning are often found to be very challenging in the process of transition. However, the inherent flexibility of the institution to embrace modern concepts of administration really makes an interesting arena of study for those who study such ancient institutions that are not just surviving but adapting to the changing world around them.

Ratna Bharali Talukdar