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borders and identities – economy – environment – regional geopolitics in the Himalaya, Hindu Kush and Karakoram

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Caught between Clientelism and the Search for Development: How the Traditional Himalayan Institution of Dzumsa is being Weakened

October 10, 2025 | By **Sangay Lachenpa**

Borders and Identity

Economy

The 2025 election of the pipon (headman) of the Lachen Dzumsa and Lachung Dzumsa in Sikkim was marred by controversy. The Dzumsa members were divided on whether the outgoing pipon should be given another term or a new candidate should be chosen. This culminated in a fight amongst the members in Lachung Dzumsa and an altercation in the Lachen Dzumsa. The Dzumsa is a traditional form of local self-governance institution prevalent in the two border villages of Lachen and Lachung in the Mangan district of Sikkim. The Sikkim Panchayat (Amendment) Act, 2001, recognised the institution of Dzumsa systems practised in Lachen and Lachung as a Gram Panchayat Unit and the pipon of the Dzumsa of Lachen and Lachung was recognised as a Zilla Panchayat member.

The Dzumsa's recognition as a Gram Panchayat Unit and the pipon's as a Zilla Panchayat member, the entry of electoral politics in the traditional institution of Dzumsa, state-led development programmes, state-sponsored welfare schemes and the distribution of state resources (jobs, contracts, services) have produced space for the entry of political clientelism (patron-client relations) into the Dzumsa. This penetration of political clientelism has created division and discord amongst Dzumsa members, hampering the institution's independent functioning and its decision-making powers.

Political Clientelism in the Dzumsa Institution

The introduction of democracy in Sikkim and the general pattern of the elections post-1975 in Sikkim have created a political environment marked by a weak opposition party or an absent one. Such a situation brought about a culture of party-based political clientelism and patronage-driven politics. Clientelism is characterised by hierarchical relations between the patron and the client, where the patron enjoys superior power.

Historically, their isolation and remote peripheral location limited the entry of state institutions and state agencies into Lachen and Lachung. The limited interaction between the state and the Dzumsa implied that the Dzumsa continued to exist independently. As such, the Dzumsa enjoyed autonomy in its decision-making and functioning. However, the changing environment of Sikkim's politics, development issues and the changing role of the traditional institutions meant that the Dzumsa, too, had to come under the influence of the patron-client relationship.

The Dzumsa institution (client) and the ruling dispensation (patron) formed an asymmetric relationship. The patrons provided a selected allocation of state resources (jobs, contract works and services) and state-led development schemes and programmes to the Dzumsa. In return, the Dzumsa reciprocated by not criticising the ruling dispensation, supporting the patron during elections and creating decisions and narratives which benefit the patron. The entry of political clientelism, especially in the Dzumsa areas of Lachen and Lachung, becomes significant as the two villages under Dzumsa contribute a sizeable vote share for the Lachen-Mangan constituency, which constitutes a seat in the Sikkim Legislative Assembly.

The Pipon Election and the External Influence in the Dzumsa

The elections in the Dzumsa, particularly the election of the pipon, have become a significant site of political clientelism. The pipon were appointed by the Sikkim Durbar in the pre-1975 period but with the advent of democracy in Sikkim, the Dzumsa adopted the democratic electoral process in appointing the pipon. Since the early 1980s, the pipon have been elected by the Dzumsa members from amongst their members.

The penetration of electoral politics in the Dzumsa in the elections of the pipon gives the patrons (non-members of the Dzumsa) a space to intervene in the functioning of the Dzumsa. The patrons place their associates (Dzumsa members) to contest for the post of pipon. As such, the autonomy of the Dzumsa is fundamentally challenged as the patron's associates are placed in a strategic position within the Dzumsa's set-up.

The intrusion of electoral politics into the Dzumsa led to the division of the Lachen Dzumsa into two factions in 1999, each faction having its own patrons. One was headed by the Sikkim Democratic Party (the then ruling party) and the other, the Sikkim Sangram Parishad (the then opposition party). The division of the Dzumsa profoundly impacted its legitimacy and functioning as the power and functions were divided into two groups. As such, the year saw the simultaneous functioning of two Dzumsa institutions in Lachen, having their own pipon and the executive body. The important festivals of the community were also celebrated separately, and welfare schemes were distributed separately. The Dzumsa group, having the ruling party as the patron, were able to benefit more in terms of receiving the state-led welfare and development schemes. Each of the groups attempted to control and claim legitimacy, affecting the function and power of the Dzumsa.

Similarly, the pipon election in both Lachen and Lachung of 2025-26 was marred by a controversy and division among the members, with each having a root cause in the larger patron-client relation.

Government Development Programmes and the Dzumsa

The Dzumsa, since its recognition as a Gram Panchayat Unit, has been made the agency for implementing various led development and welfare schemes of the government. For example, the Dzumsa implements the central government's Border Area Development Programme (BADP), Operation Sadbhavna programmes and the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) and the state government's programmes and welfare schemes, such as the distribution of housing schemes, plantation drives, relief distribution, livestock conservation, etc.

However, to enjoy these benefits, the Dzumsa has to be in the good books of the ruling dispensation, which is responsible for allocating these schemes and programmes. These development programmes and schemes lock the institution of the Dzumsa within the higher authority's rules. Selected schemes under Border Area Development Programmes and the Vibrant Village Programmes, for example, get allocated when the Dzumsa are in the good books of the higher authority.

Conclusion

The entry of political clientelism into Dzumsa shows the larger challenges to the traditional local institutions prevalent in the Himalayas. Acceptance of the patron-client relationship gives the Dzumsa a greater advantage in securing government schemes, developmental programmes and state resources. On the other hand, it hampers its autonomy and decision-making.

The Dzumsa engages in a conciliatory strategy of appeasing the patron to enter into the framework of the modern governance system and to access its resources. As a result it becomes a recognised body within the modern government structure. However, in the process, it also loses its authority to act independently and undermines its character as a traditional institution of governance.

About the Author: Dr. Sangay Lachenpa is a Post-Doctoral Fellow at the Centre of Excellence for Himalayan Studies, Shiv Nadar University, Delhi-NCR. He also serves as Guest Faculty at the Department of International Relations, Sikkim University. He can be reached at slachenpa@gmail.com.

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in India's China
policy”

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China specialist and Associate
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