

TRIBAL HANDICRAFTS OF SIKKIM : A PROFILE

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The purpose of this paper is to present a profile of the tribal handicrafts of Sikkim. The handicrafts of the two scheduled tribes viz., the Lepchas and the Bhutias, have been discussed here separately together with the issues like the history of tribal crafts, procuring of raw materials, problems of craftsmen, and the deteriorating quality of the articles concerned. It also outlines the ambiguity about the right direction both among the elites of these tribes and their simple brethren.

The word 'tribal', in common parlance, includes only those tribes which are scheduled in the Constitution. But there are a large number of other tribes everywhere in Sikkim, who in all respects have the claim to be declared as tribes. Handicrafts are never a monopoly of the scheduled tribes. The non-scheduled tribes and other artisan castes like the Kamis, Sarkis, and Damais are also adept in this field. Besides, there are Newars who are known to be very expert craftsmen and their skill surpassed the skill of every other Himalayan people and had considerable respect in Tibet also.

I have chosen here to discuss the handicrafts of the scheduled tribes of Sikkim. The reason is clear, it is primarily the scheduled tribes who are today engaged in handicrafts work. The non-scheduled tribes are basically agriculturists, the Newars are either in the business or service and the three artisan castes mentioned above have almost given up their traditional occupation. Many Damais still do tailoring but most Sarkis have given up cobblery. The Kamis too confine themselves in making iron implements for agricultural or household purposes.

The scheduled tribes of Sikkim, as enlisted in the Constitution (Sikkim) Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes Order, 1978, are :

1. *Bhutia* (including Chumbipa, Dophapa, Dukpa, Kagatey, Sherpa, Tibetan, Tromopa, Yolmo), and
2. *Lepcha*.

TRIBAL DEMOGRAPHY

In Sikkim, the first ever reliable Census of 1891 shows that the Lepcha population was 5,762 or 18.9 percent of the total population and the Bhutias, 4,984 or 18.1 percent (Risley 1972:259). According to the Census of 1931, the last with ethnic categories in detail, the Lepchas were 13,060 or 11.9 percent and the Bhutias, 11,955 or 10.9 percent. The 1951 Census showed the total population of Buddhists as 39,997 out of which the Lepchas were 13,625 or 9.9 percent and the Bhutias, 15,826 or 11.4 percent.

Thus, the percentage of the Lepcha-Bhutia combined was 35.1 in 1891 but it came down to 22.8 in 1931 and 21.3 in 1951. Taken separately, the Lepchas' percentage came down from 18.9 in 1891 to 11.9 in 1931 and to 9.9 in 1951. The percentage of the Bhutias, on the other hand, fell from 11.1 in 1891 to 10.9 in 1931 but rose again to 11.4 in 1951. Now, since the Tibetans are also subsumed under the Bhutia group their population must have gone up slightly due to the influx of Tibetans in Sikkim after 1959. The Census of 1981, which includes only the naturalised Tibetans gives the total number of scheduled tribes in Sikkim as 73,623 constituting 23.3 percent of the total population.

The distribution of the scheduled tribes in Sikkim is given in the following table.

TABLE—1

Distribution of the Sch. Tribes in Sikkim, 1981

State/District	Total Pop. of STs	% of STs to the Total Pop.
Sikkim	73,623	23.3
North	14,702	55.6
East	30,540	22.0
South	13,310	17.5
West	15,071	20.0

Source : Census of India 1981, Sikkim : 114

This table shows that the East district alone has more than 40 percent of the total scheduled tribes population in Sikkim but in terms of their percentage to the total population in each district the

North has more than 50 percent. The larger percentage of the scheduled tribes in this district is partly due to a long policy of not allowing the Nepalis to settle there. There is a huge Lepcha reserve in this district and is known as Dzongu which consists of 13 revenue blocks. Moreover, the North being mostly a high altitude district the Bhutias are commonly seen.

It may also be pointed out that an overwhelming majority (85.1 percent) of the scheduled tribes live in the urban areas. But again it is mostly the Bhutias who live in the urban areas: the Lepchas being basically agriculturists are more in the rural areas.

SOCIO-ECONOMIC BACKGROUND

Both the Lepchas and Bhutias are basically segmentary societies in the sense that their clan divisions cannot really be organized vertically as in most Indian societies. Some clans, specially those associated with the royal families or priestly class often claim a higher status in these societies also. And the butchers, ironsmiths, cobblers, etc. are looked down upon. But there are no principles like hierarchy and seclusion, which could formalize the status differences within themselves. A butcher holds a low position as long as he continues to be one but soon after he relinquishes this job he is accepted as any other member of the society.

In terms of religion, the Bhutias rather than the Lepchas have remained strictly Buddhists. While there are only a few isolated cases of the Bhutias adopting Christianity, about 7 percent of the Lepchas in Sikkim have already adopted this religion. The conversion of the Lepchas from Buddhism to Christianity still goes unabated. That the Lepchas have been able to forsake Buddhism more easily than the Bhutias could be due to many reasons. One of the reasons is the shallow vertical spread of Buddhism among the Lepchas. This in turn was due to the inimical relations these two communities had for centuries and the forced subservience of the Lepchas to the Bhutias. Because of all this, the Lepchas did never feel Buddhism as something of their own but a religion of their masters, conquerors or rulers—the Bhutias.

The literates among the Lepcha—Bhutia combined population form 33.1 percent which is quite satisfactory in view of the national average and the fact that mass education started on a limited scale only after 1950s. In the West district, the rate of literacy is still low (23.3 percent) but this is also true of other non-scheduled population in this district.

With regard to their class position, it seems that it is better than that of the Nepalis. The study conducted on the elites of Sikkim shows that the scheduled tribes constitute 33.2 percent of the elites with only 21.3 percent population (Sinha : 1975:10). The excess land per holding was also found to be much higher among them than among the Nepalis (Bhandari 1958). All this shows, at least analytically, that they have quite satisfactory class position.

Looking at the occupational distribution among them, it is found that their percentage in the categories of household industry (which includes handicrafts proper), processing, manufacturing, servicing and repairs is only 17.7 (Census of India 1981 : 132 - 33). But district-wise, it is very high (79.2 percent) in the East, which is mainly due to the urban/industrial centres like Gangtok, Rangpo, and Singtam falling in this district. It is also found from the Census figures that they have taken to non-agricultural occupation less than other occupations but the handicrafts are mainly their monopoly.

TRIBAL HANDICRAFTS : THE SCOPE AND BACKGROUND

The scope of tribal handicrafts is rather vague. There is ambiguity about whether the true tribal handicrafts should be considered as those manufactured by the tribals themselves, those depicting tribal culture irrespective of who manufactured them, and those which are for the consumption of the tribals or non-tribals. This ambiguity has not been overcome in the following attempt of M. K. Pal to define the scope of tribal handicrafts :

If the emphasis is on the tribal culture and simplicity of technology, objects manufactured by the tribal and non-tribal craftsmen mainly for the consumption of the tribal communities should be considered as specimens of tribal craft. Objects manufactured by the tribals according to their tradition for non-

tribal consumers should also be included under the category of associated tribal craft from the cultural point of view. If the emphasis is on the economic development of tribal population all objects manufactured by the tribals, whether according to tribal tradition or not, and whether the consumers are mainly tribals or not, should be included under the category of tribal craft. Objects manufactured by the non-tribal craftsmen mainly for tribal consumers should be put under a special category of associated tribal craft from the economic point of view (1978: 268).

In the above citation, Pal makes a distinction between 'tribal craft' and 'associated tribal craft' on the basis of cultural and economic points of view. But he apparently has no objection if the 'associated tribal crafts' is included in the 'tribal craft' proper. It is this appendage that actually blurs the scope of tribal handicrafts.

To my mind, tribal crafts should be understood essentially to mean those objects which are manufactured by the tribal people. The important question we should address ourselves here is *who* manufactures rather than *what*, for *whom*, or *why* manufactured. Even if the objects produced by them do not sufficiently represent their culture and tradition such objects may be considered as tribal crafts. The tribals are also human beings like any other person in this world and have their biological needs to be fulfilled. Thus it is not proper to expect them to manufacture only such objects which reflect their tradition and culture. Even those objects produced simply for winning their bread need to be considered as tribal crafts. Needless to add that there may also be many crafts which are manufactured purely for domestic consumption.

In fact, the changing situation has already brought about some departure in their crafts from what they used to be previously. The basic raw materials and the basic principles have seldom changed but the auxiliary raw materials are very often not the same which we knew earlier in the name of tribal crafts. It's to accommodate such changes that the operational definition of tribal handicrafts must be rested on the singular pillar symbolised by the question — who has manufactured ?

Finally, a craft is often given a special connotation—commercial, commercial value—in a bid to distinguish it from art but this is not widely accepted and even those crafts with domestic value cannot be excluded. Aesthetics is the soul of both art and craft and here too the aesthetic value of the tribals is primary and that of the consumers secondary. It is, however, true that those objects which appeal to the aesthetic sensibilities of the consumers fetch more value.

Now, regarding the early forms of the Sikkimese arts Madanjit Singh writes :

The earliest known art forms in Sikkim do not go back before the 15th-16th century A. D. These are rather crude carvings in relief placed upon chhortens (receptacles of worship)... The first chhortens were built after Tibetan models and other shapes were fixed by definite measurements and design. The earliest stone reliefs used for outer decoration of chhortens go back to a period before Phuntsog Namgyal (born 1604 A. D., who was the first ruler of Sikkim). (1969).

The Sikkimese crafts, however, developed significantly during the Namgyal dynasty and under the constant guidance received from the experts in Tibet. The Buddhists, particularly Bhutias, looked towards Tibet not only for artistic guidance but also for the supply of raw materials.

This partly reduced the Indian dependence on Tibet for the various Bhutia handicrafts which were in high demand all over India. The severing of relationship with China and the final closure of the border in 1962 gave a big jolt to the craftsmen in Sikkim. They not only lost the spiritual connection with Tibet but also suffered from the lack of raw materials. In many cases, they had to switch over to new crafts or even agriculture as the raw materials for traditional crafts were no longer available.

But the necessity of revitalising the Sikkimese crafts was promptly realised by the Sikkimese Government. The high demand for the Sikkimese crafts specially after the merger. (or annexation, if you like) of Sikkim, could not be allowed to subside. Realizing this and also realizing the need to preserve the Buddhist culture in the wake of

growing Indian influence all around the Government Institute for Cottage Industries (GICI) which was established as early as in 1957 was geared up. This Institute not only trained young Lepcha and Bhutia boys and girls in the manufacturing of various commercial articles but also stood as the guardian-angel of the Buddhist culture (Subba 1984 : 73-80).

Whatever may be the previous attempts to revive Buddhist art and crafts in Sikkim, they did never reach the level of commercial heights which was witnessed after 1975. In the process of democratization of Sikkim with generous funds from the Centre all-round expansion took place after that. But popular education being denied almost totally until the ushering in of democracy there, skilled manpower was almost nil there. Thus, hundreds of people from Darjeeling and other parts of India poured in there, who subsequently became potential buyers of the manufactured articles by the Lepcha and Bhutia craftsmen. Moreover, military personnels had increased in number from 1962 onwards and they too became some of the prized customers.

Had all these developments not taken place the handicrafts of Sikkim would probably have languished more than they did before. Therefore, the development of handicrafts in Sikkim have to be seen in close connection with the politico-economic developments in Sikkim as a whole.

THE LEPCHA CRAFTS

The Lepchas are expert craftsmen but their crafts are meant mostly for domestic use. It is the Bhutias who usually manufacture articles for commercial purpose. The Lepchas make simple articles like table, ornaments, clothes, fishing and hunting instruments out of resources locally available except iron implements. The iron implements were locally designed but the raw materials were by no stretch of imagination locally availed

Some of the major Lepcha crafts are listed below. (The informations are collected from various individuals, museums and cultural centres.)

1. Hats or *bu* in Lepcha. It has four variations in shape : circular, cone-shaped, woollen cap and boat-shaped. The sizes vary considerably but the basic raw material is bamboo.

2. Weaving instruments. The weaving instrument is called *Thagrodam*. It consists of two tall and heavy stands and a number of wooden and bamboo pieces.

3. Thread crosses. These are used purely for religious purposes by the priests for trapping the *mung* or demon; therefore often called *mung-li* or demon-houses. These are of three types : square, cruciform, and octagonal. When a Buddhist Lepcha dies, a Bongthing or Lepcha shamanist is invited to the house. He makes such thread-crosses on bamboo splits to prevent the devil from causing another death. These are fixed against the skull of the dead.

4. Iron implements. A dagger or *ban* is a common iron implement of the Lepchas. The hilt is made of wood and often decorated with flower designs. The sheath or *banhyam* is made of a single wooden piece tied around with a leather strip or iron wire at least at two places to hold the dagger. A loose string made of bamboo fibre or tree bark hangs along the sheath to tie it against the hip.

Besides, they have scissors, flat traingular hoes, axes, hammer, nadles, knives, and crooked implements for cardamom cultivation.

5. Dress and ornaments.

6. Make-up kits.

7. Other domestic articles like winnowing basket, cylindrical box of wood for measuring grain, wooden bowl for powdering spices, rat-trap, fish-trap, and panniers.

8. Hunting instruments like bow and arrow.

9. Musical instruments.

10. Religious objects.

Though the Lepcha crafts are chiefly oriented to domestic consumption many of them could be innovated for commercial use too. But they are an easy-going type, having a penchant for adventuring in

the forests. This does not overrule the fact that they have enough talent and given proper incentives and training, they can equal the Bhutias in manufacturing commercial crafts, if not in selling them.

THE BHUTIA CRAFTS

The Bhutia crafts, as mentioned earlier, are essentially market oriented but they are also inevitably tied to their religious symbols and beliefs. Some of their crafts are described in the following.

1. Ornaments and dresses. They are mainly *seling-sampo* or hat for ladies, *sampa* or boot for ladies, *lachcha* or tying the hair, fire-necklaces, *namchusey* or ear-ring, and *ghow* or necklace. Most of these are used in formal gatherings only.

2. Wood carving. This craft is supposed to be a very ancient craft of the Bhutias and is becoming very popular for the last ten years or so. Earlier, their carving was confined to their *cheosums* or altars. It was only after the establishment of the GICI that large number of boys got the opportunity to learn this craft from expert Tibetans and make it a profession.

Some of the most common designs on wood-carving are the eight glorious emblems, lions, and dragons (single and double, facing each other). They also carve the picture of *Mahakal* on a wooden piece which is used as a mask during the *lama* dances, and initiation crown representing *Pancha dhyani Buddha* or five meditating Buddhas.

3. Metal objects. Some of the popular metal crafts found among the Bhutias are goblets made of human skulls set in metal, tea-pots, amulet shrines, trumpets, prayer-wheels, plates, containers, etc.

4. *Thanka* painting. *Thanka* is perhaps the most sophisticated Bhutia craft. In a *thanka*, Buddha's images are painted with prescribed colours on canvas. It is also embroidered on a piece of silk cloth. The measurements and colour combinations are usually tradition-based but this is not to say that the artists have no scope for imaginative forays.

The prices of *thankas* are generally very high and go in terms of thousands of rupees because : (i) the preparation of them take a

long time and sufficient expertise, (ii) the raw material required for them are very costly, and (iii) the production is limited and so is the number of able craftsmen to produce them.

PROCURING THE RAW MATERIALS

The GICI in Gangtok gets its quotations for raw materials invited through the Public Relations Department of the Government of Sikkim and the same are bought through the State Trading Corporation of Sikkim. The materials like wool are brought from Ludhiana but timber and cotton are either locally purchased or bought from the neighbouring West Bengal. The finished products are also supplied through the State Trading Corporation only.

But there are many individual craftsmen who have no such infrastructure either for procuring the raw materials or for selling their finished products. They usually collect their raw materials from the local forests or markets and the products are sold out privately. There are of course some such craftsmen who collect their raw materials from the GICI and sell their products to the same Institute.

Before the Sino-Indian rivalry, most of the raw materials required used to be procured from Tibet and were of superior quality. The raw materials which are procured from within the country are alleged to be of inferior quality.

Curiously enough, no attempt has been hitherto made to *create* the resources within the State. The development agents of Sikkim seem to have paid little attention to the dwindling forest and other natural resources. But unless they realise their folly as early as possible, the development of local arts and crafts will have to suffer considerably. Total discontinuation of this occupation may be avoided temporarily or even permanently by importing raw materials from outside but such dependence is bound to escalate the prices and hamper the market of the crafts and ultimately the employment of the craftsmen.

In fact, the craftsmen have begun feeling rather disgusted with the whole state of affairs. They are already on the look-out for more viable alternative employments.

CONCLUSION

The tribal handicrafts in Sikkim are undergoing a critical stage at the moment. The Lepcha and Bhutia elites understand very well how important it is to keep these handicrafts alive for the sake of their culture and religion. They sincerely patronize these crafts by decorating their drawing rooms with as many and as exquisitely designed crafts as possible. But then it is confined there. They have no clear answer as to what should be done towards fulfilling their cultural needs and the employment needs of their semi-literate or illiterate brethren, who are languishing in this profession.

The gradual erosion in the quality of raw materials as well as the quality of craftsmanship is another important concern. One of the reasons for this, which is unavoidable like the division of labour in modern economic enterprises, is the alienation of the craftsmen from their crafts. The other reason is the low social status given to the craftsmen who always suffer from uncertainty of employment despite high demand for their products. Better working facilities and regularisation of their jobs would certainly improve the situation but unless something is done towards resource generation too the success may be temporary.

NOTE

The above list does not take any cognizance of the religious background of the scheduled tribes. It may also be pointed out that Kagatey and Yolmo mentioned separately here are actually two names of the same group of people.

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