

## Migration and Ethnic Relations in Darjeeling and Sikkim

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### **Introduction**

The Himalayan borderland of India, spread over 1500 miles, has experienced a series of migration from time immemorial. There is no dearth of travel accounts on the Himalayas but there is scanty migrational literature even pertaining to the western and central Himalayas, which have been more open to academic activities than the eastern parts. Still lacking are studies on the recent developments in interethnic relations on the region.

The objective of this paper is to trace the migration history of various communities and show how it has given rise to the competition for or conflict over the dwindling resources (primarily due to the deteriorating Himalayan eco-system) and the nature and trend in such competitions or conflicts. For this purpose I have taken up Darjeeling and Sikkim, which have a lot of social, cultural and historical affinity.

I have deliberately refrained myself from going into the definitional aspect of 'ethnicity' in this paper because I have done it in an earlier paper (1984). Suffice it to mention here that both subjective and objective criteria of 'ethnicity' have been given almost equal weightage. I have also avoided making a review of the sociological works in this field, which today have indeed grown enormous in volume. A few works which are more intimately related to the discussion in this paper are, however, cited at relevant places.

### Migration History in the Darjeeling-Sikkim Hills

The Darjeeling-Sikkim region was a single political territory inhabited by a few tribes like the Lepchas, Bhutias, Limbus, and the Mangars until the annexation of the various parts of Darjeeling by the British around the mid-nineteenth century. The Limbus inhabited the western part of Sikkim which was contiguous to an ancient Limbu kingdom, Limbuan, in east Nepal. They always looked towards west, not the Nepal of today, but the Limbuan of the olden days. Even later, when the Lepchas were assimilated to Buddhism under the Tibetan influence and the boundary between Sikkim and Nepal was defined after the unification of Nepal by the Gorkha king, Prithivi Narayan Shah, in 1769, the Limbus still had a separate 'nationality' though politically they were under two countries. The Mangars too had their own chiefs and had only a formal affiliation with the Lepcha or Bhutia rulers of Sikkim.

The boundary to the north extended, until 1890, upto the Chumbi Valley in Tibet. The topography of the northern frontiers of Sikkim being what it is, the low landers that the Lepchas were (that is why they were also called 'Mon' meaning, in Tibetan, 'low landers') they perhaps did never inhabit beyond Lachen or Lachung in north Sikkim. The farther north was inhabited, if it was at all inhabited, by the high lander Tibetans. Again, the present Kalimpong sub-division being close to Bhutan it is plausible that the Bhutanese had settled there even before 1706 when Bhutan annexed it from Sikkim. The fertile land and moderate climate of Kalimpong must always have attracted the attention of the weather-beaten Bhutanese. The present Siliguri sub-division, then ruled by Sikkim (until 1850), was populated mainly by the Rajbansis.

With none of these groups having a large population, most of the land was vacant. As late as in 1839 Pearson (1839 : 10) noted about Darjeeling that it was totally covered with forest and only a few patches of clearings (for shifting cultivation) could be seen in the distant hills. There lived about 100 souls. To quote O'Malley:

...beyond a few Lepchas and Limbus with their little clearings in the forests, an occasional raid from Nepal, or a stray visitor from the table-lands of Tibet, the Darjeeling hills were practically uninhabited (1907 : 29).

This background is essential because the nineteenth and twentieth century literature on the region is replete with accounts of 'original' inhabitants and 'later' settlers, segregated on the basis of 'community' and referring to groups like the Lepchas, Bhutias, Nepalis, and the plainsmen, and serialising their migration history. But almost every community

in the region has its share of 'immigrants'. And, while talking about a sensitive and tricky subject like 'migration' reference must be made to:

(i) specific locations of the various ethnic groups, (ii) the changing political boundaries of a nation or state, and (iii) the changing ethnic boundaries. [One of the most notable works in this context is that of B.K. Roy Burman 'among the tribes of Manipur' (1987)].

With this premise, let me start with the Lepchas. The Lepchas themselves have no tradition of migration and they believe themselves to have 'originated' from Myel Lyang, a fairy place near Mount Kanchanjanga. But noted scholars on them like White (1909), Gorer (1967), Siiger (1967), and Waddell (1979 Rpt.) have conjectured that their immigration was from the eastern direction, roughly during twelve-thirteenth centuries. They also have linguistic and cultural reasons to believe that they came from the east during then. (Other tribes too have come from east are Jimdars (Rais of the Nepali community) and Meches, during the same period).

In the beginning of the nineteenth century, a little before they came in active touch with the British, some spatial mobility among the Lepchas has been recorded: some of them in Darjeeling had to leave for Nepal when they resisted against the Tibetan regime and others left for surrounding areas in the wake of large-scale tea-cultivation in the second half of the nineteenth century and onwards. According to my informants, many in Sikkim also left their home and hearth to settle in Darjeeling and Kalimpong to save themselves from the atrocities of the feudal lords there. The Lepcha colonization in Kalimpong during the seventeenth-eighteenth centuries has been noted by Awasty (1978: 8) also. Thus, locationally, they became new settlers in many parts of the region though notionally perhaps the entire region was theirs.

The Limbus too have more or less a similar history. Like the Lepchas on the north, they have been inhabiting west Sikkim since time unrecorded. But unlike them, some sections of the Limbus believe to have 'originated' from Kashi or Benares in India. Others believe themselves to have come from the Tsang province of Tibet (Risley 1972:27-38). (That is why they are also known as Tsangs, Tsongs or Chongs). Still others claim to have emerged from the mother earth. Despite such controversial antiquities, it is well-known that they were there when the Tibetans started descending down the hills of Sikkim to finally establish the Namgyal Dynasty in 1642. What distinguishes the Lepchas from the Limbus is that none of the former had come from across the present Indo-Nepal border though a large number of them (about 1200) had, in 1825, crossed it to settle in Illam, east Nepal. On the other hand, the latter have some share of their population from across the present border with Nepal.

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The origin of the Mangars is traced to Nepal's lower western by Buchanan (1879 : 26) and north (Shin) by Chemjong (1966 : 70) they are known (Basnet 1974 : 15) to have settled in south-western Sikkim under their own chiefs, since at least the seventeenth century. However as in the case of the Limbus, the Mangars have some of their members from across the present border with Nepal. But unlike the Limbus enjoy a special status of 'Backward Class' in Sikkim (only) the Mangars are not given any such special privileges.

Under the Constitution of India, a large number of groups like Yolmus, Sherpas, Dophthapas, Tromopas, Chumbipas, Dukpas, Kagas and Tibetans are subsumed under the term 'Bhutia' (Census of India 1951 Sikkim: 112). However, in local and social contexts there are meaningful differences among them. Of the various groups, the origin of Yolmus (or Kagatey) and the Sherpas is traced by themselves to Nepal. Some of them like the Lachungpas and Lachenpas are there in Sikkim since ages. They were once a part of the Tibetan nation, socially and culturally though not politically. The recent group to join the generic group of the 'Bhutias' are the Tibetan refugees arrived in the 1950s, following the Chinese occupation of Tibet in 1959.

Finally, there are plainsmen, representing mainly the Biharis (from Bihar), Marwaris (from Rajasthan, Haryana, etc.) and the Bengalis (mainly from Calcutta and erstwhile East Pakistan). The Marwaris came almost together with the British, initially for the wool business and the Indo-Tibetan trade. A few Biharis are also known to have come here as early as the Marwaris. Besides a few teachers and clerks, the Biharis are mostly bakers, cobblers, barbers and grocers. The Marwaris are mainly cloth merchants though earlier they were actively engaged in trade across the border and cardamom business. The Bengalis, who began coming here along with the British administrators, remain as clerks, officers, administrators and teachers.

I would like to stress at this juncture that no particular community can claim to be the 'sons of the soil' on any piece of land now in Darjeeling and Sikkim (Subba 1985 a, b). If some of these communities do not own land it was due to some legislative measures designed to protect the 'local' interest. But 'protectionism' should not perhaps be based too much on historical grounds for it is a potential threat to stability in ethnic relations.

Now the changing demographic composition in the region may be briefly discussed. The Lepchas having no outsiders to join them depended entirely on their natural population growth. The Bhutias' natural population growth was once less than that of the Nepalis due to polyandry: some Nepalis in contrast practised polygyny. But the influx of their kins from Bhutan, Tibet and Nepal joining them over the cen-

and making them numerically stronger than the Lepchas. For example, in 1891, the Lepchas and Bhutias in Sikkim had almost equal percentages (19.1 and 18.9 respectively) but by 1951 the percentage of the Lepchas had come down to 9.9, while the Bhutias still were 11.4 per cent (Risley 1972: 27, Sinha 1975: 10).

The Nepalis have been most fortunate in this regard. Their mettle in the warfield, tea gardens and agricultural fields persuaded the British to encourage their immigration. They finally turned out to be the largest community in the region, however heterogeneous they may otherwise be. The socio-economic and political implications multiplied as they formed nearly 65 per cent of the population: the Lepchas comprising 12 per cent, the Bhutias 13 per cent, and the remaining 10 per cent plainsmen.

### **Spiralling of the Ethnic Conflicts**

There is no account of this intra-ethnic conflicts among the Lepchas but probably such conflicts had strifed them, as one can guess from the accounts on other tribal societies of north-east Himalayas given by Hutton, Elwin, Fürer Haimendorf and others. The incoming Bhutias could not have completely overrun their land had the Lepchas been united and strong. The threat of the Bhutia domination over them perhaps united them and made it possible for them to fight against the Bhutias. As per the oral history narrated by some Lepchas they had fought with the Bhutias. In one such fights, many of them were killed in a place in north Sikkim called 'Meinsithang' (the name itself is self-explanatory: 'meinsi-thang' meaning a flat land where the Lepchas were killed). This place is located in between Chungthang and Lachen, eight kilometres north of Chungthang. Even elsewhere, like Damsang garh in Kalimpong, the Lepchas had fought against the Bhutias. The remains of a dilapidated fort of the Lepchas can still be seen there. In this regard, Karan and Jenkins may be quoted here:

Conflict between the Tibetan Bhutias and the Lepchas has had considerable disturbances in Sikkim in the past. The Lepchas have been pushed into the forests and lower valleys below 4000 feet by Bhutias who have settled at higher elevations (1963: 64).

If the Mangars and the Limbus had supported the Lepchas in their fight against the Bhutias, the entry of the Bhutias into Sikkim would have perhaps been difficult and could perhaps never capture Sikkim politically though in terms of religion, that is, the spread of Buddhism, there could perhaps be no apparent conflict or resistance from the same peoples. But

the Mangars numbered only a few hundred and felt insecure before the Bhutias. The Limbus were much larger in number and posed a threat to the smooth takeover of Sikkim by the Tibetan Bhutias but the royal matrimony established by the Tibetan Bhutias with them neutralised the Limbu potentiality to counteract the Bhutia domination. And the Lepchas themselves were by nature never a fighting people.

As the Bhutias were descending to the south, the British expeditioners were exploring the north, especially the prospect held by trade through the Himalayas (Coelho 1967: 16). In the process, the latter found in Darjeeling an ideal place for their children to grow in a homely climate and a soothing place for their afflicted soldiers. The Raja of Sikkim was somehow persuaded to grant them this hill station and the areas surrounding it. Later, Darjeeling was made a reservoir for their soldiers due to restrictions imposed by Nepal, between 1846-85, on recruiting the soldiers from Nepal. It also turned out to be an ideal place for tea cultivation.

Meanwhile their diplomatic relations with Sikkim deteriorated and the necessity to counteract the Bhutia animosity was felt. This led them to encourage the Nepalis to settle there. These people were expected to support the British if need arose and serve them as labourers in their tea-gardens, forests and construction works or as porters in the much coveted Indo-Tibetan trade; in short, to fulfil the colonial interests.

There were a large number of them in Sikkim in no time, occupying lands legally or notionally belonging to the Lepchas earlier excepting a few forbidden areas like the North district. This became a matter of grave concern specially to the Bhutias who, until then, were enjoying the supremacy over the Lepchas, Mangars and the Limbus. Naturally, they tried their best to stop the Nepali immigration. Some of them who had already settled were harassed. A deputation was also made to the British administrator, Sir Ashley Eden, stationed in Kalimpong then, to stop the Nepali immigration. Eden gave them all assurance and issued a decree maintaining that the Nepalis could settle only in vacant and/or waste lands. There was no manifest resistance from the Lepchas then but they perhaps shared the Bhutia concern. And it was only after the Nepalis posed a threat of numerical supremacy in Sikkim that the Lepcha-Bhutias formed a 'negative solidarity' (Subba, 1984) despite different primordial values. Therefore, ethnic relations cannot perhaps be seen essentially as 'conflict' relations like Chandan Sengupta (1984) has done.

Another dimension was added to the inter-ethnic relationships in the region when the hill communities found themselves outmanoeuvred by the plainsmen. Most of the white-collar jobs were held by the Bengalis, more so in Darjeeling than in Sikkim. The trade and business was dominated by the Biharis and Marwaris. The only sectors where the hill

communities found employment were tea, agriculture and military services. But stagnation in these sectors appeared much before Independence and along with it appeared social organizations like the Hill Men's Association, NE-BU-LA (standing for Nepali, Bhutia and Lepcha) and the Gorkha League (a regional political party) in Darjeeling. The anti-plainmen feeling was brewing up even in Sikkim and was from time to time given impetus by the political parties, specially after the installation of democracy there in 1975. The most spectacular development in this regard was the sweeping victory (30 out of 32 seats: 1 Congress and 1 Independent) of the Sikkim Sangram Parishad in early 1985. The secret behind it was the successful exploitation of the anti-plainmen sentiment by this party. And in Darjeeling, the same sentiment has culminated in the active demand for a separate statehood in the last six years or so, though sporadic voices for separate statehood were heard from 1907 onwards.

### Mechanism of Ethnic Domination

It is worthwhile here to attempt an explanation of how an ethnic group dominates another and which finally leads to ethnic conflicts. The mechanism of such dominations is found to differ spatially and temporally.

Let me first take the case of the Bhutia domination over the Lepchas. The singlemost attribute of the Bhutias, lacking among the Lepchas, is their expertise in trade and commerce. The Lepchas being shifting cultivators and food-gatherers almost till the end of the nineteenth century they produced just enough for their livelihood. The need to produce surplus was just not there. Their cultural system was also bound up with their mode of economy. For example, they could pay the bride-price by working in the field of the bride's father for one to three years. The Bhutias, on the other hand, inhabited the higher altitudes where snow covered everything for some months every year. This habituated them to produce surplus even after they shifted to the lower altitudes. Besides, the Indo-Tibetan trade gave unprecedented paramountcy to them.

The Bhutias were also the harbingers of a culturo-religious revolution: from animal or nature worship to a sophisticated religion like Buddhism. The *lamas* (monks) and tantric Buddhists easily displaced the Lepcha 'Bongthings' (priests cum medicinemen) who had no written text from which to draw their legitimacy. Whatever texts, religious or otherwise, they had are reportedly destroyed by the Bhutias in the early stage of their confrontation with the Lepchas. With a theocratic regime established in Buddhist framework, the peace-loving wanderers in the forest which the Lepchas were, had no way out except to play the second fiddle to the Bhutias and be gradually assimilated with the ruling ethnic group

of the Bhutias.

The gradual domination by the Nepalis later over these two tribes is another interesting phenomenon. Chie Nakane presents (1966) and Awadesh Sinha reiterates (1981) a thesis in this regard, based on religious differences—that the Lepchas and Bhutias have remained backward due to Buddhism and all its paraphernalia while the Nepalis have prospered because of Hinduism. In a separate paper (1985 a) I have presented an alternative thesis—the main reason why the Nepalis have prospered too is their expertise in the new technology of cultivation called 'terraced cultivation' which was so widely practised since the middle of nineteenth century. Numerically also they were most dominant but mere number was not the cause of their success. But what Nakane and Sinha failed to point out that almost half of the Nepali population in Sikkim were Buddhists only and there were glaring socio-economic inequalities within each of the above three communities.

While the main reason for the Nepalese domination over the Lepcha-Bhutias has been identified as the technology of cultivation it is entirely different in the case of the domination of the plainsmen over the hill communities. The single most factor which explains the success of those plainsmen, except the Bengalis, is sheer expertise in business. (It is this business acumen which also explains the success of some Newars in the region.) The Bengalis being more qualified and trained in every field have cornered most of the white-collar jobs in the region.

The case of the Tibetan exiles needs a special treatment. Most of them are settled in groups and in urban areas of Sikkim and Darjeeling while a few are scattered over the region. They are mostly self-employed and only about 150 families in Kunphenling Tibetan Settlement at South Sikkim are directly assisted by the Indian Government and the Tibetan Government in Exile at Dharamsala. Those who are privately settled are relatively richer and some of them have prospered spectacularly in the last quarter of this century.

The most striking development that has taken place after the arrival in this region is the revitalization of the Buddhist culture and religion. Without them to revamp the Buddhist Bhutias, there could have been a greater assimilation of their members with the Hindu culture and less resentment against the Hindus than it is seen today but their own cultural heritage would have eroded too. But of late their prosperity has arrested the eyes of their neighbours and developed a faint sense of resentment among those earlier settlers including the Bhutias who call themselves 'Sikkimese'. It may be mentioned here that the sense in which most of the people use the word 'Sikkimese' is often wrong though its meaning itself has remained rather confusing. During the nineteenth century, only the Lepchas, Bhutias and the Limbus were considered 'Sikkimese'. The first quarter

of the twentieth century included the Paharias or Nepalis also and since 1961 only those registered under the Sikkim Subjects Act are counted as 'Sikkimese' though the plainsmen had always been excluded (Sinha 1981: 86-87). In popular parlance, however, only the Bhutias are referred to and refer themselves as 'Sikkimese'. Unless this aspect of the development is taken care of, the problem may snowball into proportions beyond control.

### Conclusion

The nature of ethnic conflicts is gradually surfacing in the region and no definite shape can be discerned as yet. Such conflicts have arisen in different places for different reasons. But one factor that stands out as the most common in all such conflicts is the domination—whether economic, demographic, cultural or political—of one ethnic group or a number of ethnic groups by another. Therefore, the ethnic conflicts arise basically out of uneven 'power distribution' in a given political boundary of a state or nation. ['Power' is found as a key to ethnic domination or conflict between the Muslims and Christians of Uttar Pradesh also by Nirmala Srinivasan (1984) and especially 'political power' with regard to the ethnic conflicts in the territorial societies of North-East India by S.K. Chaube (1975).]

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