

Dynamics of a Hill Society: A Case Study of the Lepchas

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Introduction

The Lepchas are a numerically small but historically, culturally, and linguistically important culture group of the Darjeeling-Sikkim Himalayas. They have arrested considerable attention of scholars and administrators from as early as mid-nineteenth century. The eminent British writers on them were Campbell, Hooker, Hunter, Hodgson, Gorer, Morris, Mainwaring, Sprigg, and the like. Of late, some Lepcha scholars are also coming up with new contentions about their society, culture and history.

The Lepchas call themselves 'Rongs' and bear various titles like Tamsang, Sitling, Karthak, Namchu, Youngmu, Gowloogmu, Chongmu, Sada, Foning, Luksom, Borfungmu, and Rongong. They are, however, known by the term 'Lepcha' the philology of which is yet to be ascertained. Most scholars consider it to be the anglicised form of the word 'Lapche' which in Nepali is supposed to mean 'vile speakers' but this is not true. This word just does not make any sense in Nepali. *Lapche*, by all indications, appears to be a Kirata contribution to one of its groups but how the morphological reversal from *Lapche* to *Lepcha* took place is not explained linguistically by any scholar till date.

The Lapchas are known to be one of the earliest inhabitants of

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the region but the exact account of their origin is still not known. There are in fact two views. The first view, held mostly by the Lepcha scholars, believes that they originated from nowhere but the earth of Sikkim. The second view, shared by most British writers on them, considers that they are migrated from north-east India during thirteenth-fourteenth centuries. In this regard, the following conclusion by Thakur and Lepcha is worth quoting:

We have attempted to offer four-fold explanation to the origin of the Lepchas based on (i) habitational, (ii) linguistic, (iii) divinical, and (iv) historical-anthropological evidences. Yet it seems difficult to give a conclusive answer to the problem of the origin of this tribe (1981:225).

The Lepcha population in Darjeeling, according to 1971 Census, is 13,536. In Sikkim, their total population in 1931 was 13,060 but their exact figure at present is not known. A rough estimate of their population in 1981 was 35,000.

The aim of this paper is to discuss the dynamics of the Lepchas inhabiting this region. There are also a large number of them living in Illam (east Nepal) since the beginning of the nineteenth century but they have been excluded for the purpose of this paper. However, the broad outlines of the dynamics of their society drawn from Darjeeling and Sikkim may be largely applicable to the Lepchas of Nepal as well.

This paper has been divided into four sections: (i) economy, (ii) social organization, (iii) language, and (iv) religion. The data presented here are collected from secondary sources and fieldwork. The fieldwork was done in 1980 in two villages of Kalimpong (Tanek and Purbong) having substantial number of Lepchas and in 1987 in a purely Lepcha village called Lingthem in Upper Dzongu, North Sikkim. My life-long acquaintance with the Lepchas of the region is also an important source of data presented here.

I

In this section, I shall deal mainly with changing technology of cultivation and land alienation. An important phenomenon which occurred in the second half of the twentieth century is the change

from shifting cultivation to terraced or settled cultivation. Karan and Jenkins (1963) describe their traditional practice of agriculture as follows:

The Lepchas cultivated only small patches of the forest, cutting them down the trees, burning the undergrowth, and planting and clearing with corn, buckwheat, and millet (1963:63).

They depended on forest almost entirely not only for cultivation by clearing some patches of it but also for hunting and gathering foods. They were well known for their intimate knowledge about the forest and its resources. They knew more than a dozen types of edible roots and still greater number of edible plants.

But there is virtually no historical evidence on the details of shifting cultivation as it was practised by the Lepchas. We do not know for sure how the forests were allocated for cultivation or who allocated them. Was there any formal authority to do it? What were the functions of the chiefs or clan heads about all this?

The first outsiders they came in contact with were the Tibetans from Tibet and Drugpas from Bhutan. But these immigrants being small in number and basically engaged in trade, herdmanship or administration, they brought no change whatsoever in the prevailing technology of cultivation.

The Anglo-Nepalese War of 1814-16 brought the British to this region. The British not only found this area strategically important but they also saw there a scope to establish their long desired trade relations with Tibet. This required labourers for carrying loads and constructing roads. Still more labourers were required when tea proved to be a viable crop in Darjeeling and began to be cultivated extensively. For all this, the British sent agents to Nepal and not other places primarily because the Nepalis would not require to adapt to the climate of the region and thus incur health hazards. Once the rails of such early settlers were laid, the train of migration began to run on its own. Romanticized stories about Darjeeling replaced the folktales of Nepal and every young man dreamt of coming to Darjeeling. Majority of the early settlers from Nepal were absorbed in tea gardens while the remaining population was either engaged in road construction or agriculture. It was these Nepalis who introduced settled cultivation to the Lepchas (Bell 1905:8, Kandell 1971:44).

About the adoption of this new technology and wet rice in Lingthem, Gorer writes:

When the Mandal first learned about this crop (wet rice) he had experimental terraces made for three years; it was then gradually adopted by the other villagers, as they became convinced of the superior yield of this crop, and the amount of terraced ground is increased annually. Almost every household has at least a couple of terraces and some considerably more (1938:90-91).

The superiority of this crop and technology of cultivation must have gradually convinced the Lepchas to forgo with shifting cultivation but the process of change was not smooth as it is made out to be by Gorer. In Lingthem itself, this new technology was introduced about twenty years before (AD 1917) but even after twenty years no family had all its land terraced. Again in Darjeeling it is reported that the Lepchas jeered at the terraces made by the Nepalis and asked them jokingly if they were preparing the playground for their pigs!

It is also plausible that the Lepchas would not take up terracing so easily if there were no restriction imposed by the British government on the utilization of the forest resources. It may be recalled that a proposal to conserve the forests was first made in 1862 by Sir Dietrich Brandis and Dr. Anderson became the first Conservator of Forests in 1864. During 1868-69 the total reserved forest of the 'British Sikkim' was about 17 square miles. In 1871-72, all forest in the 'British Sikkim' were declared as 'Reserved Forest' and during 1874-75 Jalpaiguri and Darjeeling divisions were created comprising the forest areas then called 'Bhutan Duars' and 'British Sikkim' (Subba 1985a).

Thus, if the superiority of terrace cultivation and wet rice was a positive factor for their taking them up, the reservation of forests and settling of Nepalis in the forests (where the Lepchas earlier roamed for hunting and gathering food or cleared it to grow buckwheat and dry rice) were negative factors forcing them to take up settled cultivation.

A process that continued even after the settled cultivation was fully adopted was the alienation of land from their hands. Even before the large-scale Nepali immigration began, the Lepchas were pushed to lower altitudes by the immigrant Bhutias from the north

(Karan and Jenkins 1963:64). The Nepalis could not use this strong-arm technique to drive away the Lepchas for they themselves were at the mercy of the Tibetan rulers in Sikkim and the British government in Darjeeling. They were in fact allowed to settle only in the waste lands.

Alienation of the Lepcha lands to the British stopped after India's independence but the Bhutias could buy the Lepcha lands even after that and has indeed continued even today. Their land passed on to many Nepalis but this process worked effectively between 1850 and 1949 only. After that the Nepalis, excepting a few scheduled tribes among them, could not buy lands from the Lepchas. But while the alienation of the Lepcha lands to the British and the Bhutias were forceful it was almost voluntary with regard to the Nepalis. They were only too happy to exchange more than an acre of land with a tinful of malt or two bottles of liquor or even mere eulogy!

II

I shall discuss here the changes in marriage, kinship, and family. To begin with their marriage system, it may be first mentioned that there exist a considerable variation with regard to their age at marriage, preference, forms and the rituals associated with it.

As far as the age at marriage is concerned, Gorer (1938:316) finds the incidence of early marriage among them, usually at 8 for girls and 12 for boys. In Lingthem, where Gorer had studied 50 years before, the practice is not much different even now. Early marriage is still prevalent to a large extent but in Tanek and Purbong villages of Kalimpong it is never to be seen except very occasionally.

About preference, they still like to marry within themselves though in practice it has never been possible. In the long days of the Bhutia rule in this region a large number of Lepcha females were married by Bhutias though very few Bhutia girls have been married by the Lepcha boys. Many Lepcha girls, especially from Darjeeling, were also married with Bengalis and Anglo-Indians but none from these communities is reported to have married into the Lepcha society. Looks, family, and socio-economic background play an important role in choosing a partner but it is religion which decides

their preference today.

The traditional form of the Lepcha marriage is considered by many to be polygyny but as early as 1938 Gorer notes:

In Lingthem there are seven men with two wives each (total males then being 89); but only in three cases was the second wife taken because the first wife was sterile. In two of the cases the second wife is indeed only a co-wife by courtesy; Asang gave a home to the middle-aged widow of his elder brother, because she had nowhere else to go; and for the same reason Gongyop took in his wife's sister (p. 166).

It may be added that even earlier than that, in 1899, Waddell noted that "the Lepcha has usually only one wife, and there is no ceremonial marriage" (p. 99).

Marrying father's younger brother's wife and elder brother's wife, whether on their husbands being deceased or not, is socially acceptable. In fact, in most such cases, it is the society that compels the man to enter into such union. But only 2 such instances were reported from Lingthem in October 1987 while none from Tanek and Purbong in 1980.

The rituals of traditional marriage were conducted in seven stages: Nyom Vet, Nyom, Pnol, Nyom-Kyomu, Nyom-Tangong, Nyom-Asek, Nyom-Rum-Fat, and Nyom-Hi-Hron (Tshering 1971:12). After 4 days' stay at the groom's house the newly married couple was required to return to the bride's family and the groom had to stay in her family and participate in the family chores for three years. Only after this was the bride allowed to stay at his house. The groom until then would not be called komok-myok (resident son-in-law) but would be considered so if he continued to stay in her father's residence even after that. There are some resident sons-in-law even today in Lingthem but in Tanek and Purbong there is none.

With regard to kinship, it may be broadly termed as classificatory system in which certain collateral relatives are addressed by terms which also apply to lineal relatives. For instance, *Abo* is addressed to father, father of spouse, elder brother of spouse, husband of elder sister of spouse etc., and *Aku* for father's younger brother, any man whom father calls brother, any man mother calls *Aku*, etc. Moreover, the same word means different kins depending on

whether a man or a woman is addressing. For instance, *Azong* to a man means wife of younger brother or father, of any man called *Aku* or *Ajong*, wife of elder brother, younger sister of wife; and to a woman, younger brother of husband, son of husband's elder brother, son of men husband calls elder brother or younger brother (Gorer p. 143; also see append: 463-66).

Since the organization of group is related to the need for the exploitation of nature for food these terms indicate the economic necessity of kin organization – the necessity to work in groups for hunting or roaming in dense forests for collecting food.

Waddell (1899:99) writes that they showed “traces of matriarchy, in which the children trace their descent through their mothers and not through their fathers”. Though ‘matriarchy’ and ‘matriliny’ are often closely associated Waddell perhaps meant ‘matriliny’ for ‘matriarcy’ is related to power and authority over the family members and its resources and not with descent only. Quite different from what he says it was reported by many old Lepchas that the traditional descent was what we call ‘parallel descent’ in which the sons trace their descent through their fathers and the daughters through their mothers. But at present they have strong patrilineal descent system called *ptsho*.

Family is the smallest unit of the Lepcha society. This unit, which is called joint or extended family in sociological terminology, previously consisted of large numbers. It was perhaps the constant fear of aggression by the Bhutias from east and north and the Gorkhas from the west which forced them to live in joint or extended families. Such an arrangement would ensure some sense of insecurity in times of emergency. Otherwise, the houses being dispersed and the distance between houses being often more than a kilometre, no immediate help could be expected. But equally important reason, if not more, was the vast amounts of land held by them. They could rarely cultivate all the lands they possessed even when they had plenty of manpower at home. Moreover, they required more members not only for cultivation but also for monkhood, tending the animals, bringing water and firewood, and staying guard to their crops lest monkeys and other wild animals destroy them.

But things began to change after they came in contact with the British. First of all, security was ensured as peace was restored in the region. There was a drastic fall in the size of their landholding

and there were migrant Nepali labourers to take over many of the tedious jobs which the Lepchas did earlier. It is reported that emergence of nuclear families was notable particularly after 50s since when Nepali labourers were available for looking after their agricultural and cardamom fields.

III

There is a lot of controversy about the origin of the Lepcha language as it is so about their origin itself. Various scholars have shown various linkages: Waddell with Anglong (or Mikir), Shafer with Tangsa Naga dialect, Bodman with Adi, Forest with Khasi, etc. Sprigg, however, claims that the Lepcha language has been considerably influenced by the Tibetan language during three hundred years of Tibetan rule in Sikkim (1982).

I am not a competent person to comment on the change in the language itself: what I can do is to show the change in its use. It appears that this language had a respectable position almost till the end of the nineteenth century (Sprigg 1982). In this regard, the following words of Mainwaring may be reproduced:

The Lepcha language which had, hitherto, been the language of the whole country of Sikkim, which all Tibetans, Butias (sic), or others who entered the country acquired and spoke, in which under the rule of Colonel Lloyd, business was carried on, and justice in the English Courts administered, in the character of which, decrees and documents were written and recorded; — this language was completely set aside, and Hindustani was made the chief language in Dorjeling. The Tibetans and the Butias of Bhutan were patronized, to them were given the appointments in the administration of the country, and they were made the advisers and counsellors of the State; their influx into Sikkim increased (1876:xiii-xiv).

There has been some revival of the Lepcha language after the 'merger' of Sikkim with India in 1975. For instance, provisions are made to teach this language upto secondary level education in more than a dozen schools in Sikkim. However no such provisions are there for the Lepchas of Darjeeling as yet. They are compelled to

take up 'Nepali' as their mother tongue in the absence of such a provision.

Most of the Lepchas of the region have forgotten their language totally and accepted 'Nepali' as their mother tongue for all practical purposes except census operations. Except in Lingthem nowhere did I find two Lepchas speaking in their own language for a long time. Even there I often noticed them switching over to Nepali or borrowing some words from the same. Of course, the Lepcha language is known to have lent out and borrowed many words to and from the Nepali language as many other languages of the region like Limbu, Rai, Newar, and Bhutia have. But the widespread use of Nepali as the *lingua franca* and falling of many rich languages to almost total disuse may be attributed to the overwhelming majority of the Nepali speakers in the region. Nepali is not only the link language within the Nepali society but also between the hill communities and between hill and plains communities.

IV

The earliest religion of the Lepchas may be termed as 'animism' or 'shamanism' in which the *Mun* or the priestess and the *Bongthing* or the priest held the centre positions (see, for details, Hermanns 1954:46-54). There is practically no difference between the *Mun* and *Bongthing* as far as their roles and functions are concerned. Thus the following description about the *Mun* is applicable to the *Bongthing* as well:

The chief function of the *Mun* is to ward off the misfortunes and illnesses caused by devils, which is done, partly by sacrifices, and partly by direct communing with the supernaturals. On certain occasions the *Mun* become possessed by their guardian spirit and prophecy; at death ceremonies they summon the soul of the dead man to speak his last wishes through their mouth, and then conduct it into the *rum lyang* — the place of the Gods — where it is reborn as an infant, and grows up to an eternal life similar to the life here on earth (p. 182).

This has a striking similarity with the functions of Phedangma,

Bijuwa, Jhankri, etc. found among other Kirata groups like the Limbus and the Rais.

It is believed that Buddhism was first introduced into Sikkim around 1641, after the consecration of the first king (Phuntsog Namgyal) by three fugitive monks belonging to the Nyingmapa sect (Gorer, p. 188). But it is not known exactly when the Lepchas began to accept this religion. It may only be guessed that such a process could not have begun before 1697 when the first ever monastery (Sanga) was established in Sikkim. This is because Buddhism, especially lamaism which is prevalent in Sikkim, and monastic life are very closely related. It is also clear that without the royal patronage this religion could not have spread as much.

By the turn of eighteenth century, the horizontal spread of Buddhism among the Lepchas was complete in the sense that there was not one Lepcha who did not call himself a Buddhist by then. But the vertical spread was partial which is best indicated by the fact that it was the Buddhist Lepchas who accepted Christianity in large numbers. There are mainly three reasons for the shallow vertical spread of Buddhism among the Lepchas:

One, Buddhism was associated with a 'superior' race – the Bhutias or the rulers – and adopting this religion perhaps meant many royal privileges as it probably meant punishment for not adopting it. Some of them were even forced to change their ethnic identity (Mainwaring 1876:xiv). One of the striking examples is the ex-speaker of Sikkim Legislative Assembly. Sonam Tshering Bhutia is actually a Lepcha but he had reportedly adopted the Bhutia title to save his land lying above the Kazi Road from being confiscated by the rulers.

The second reason was the tacit enmity between the Lepchas and Bhutias, which occasionally got expressed in open clashes too (Karan and Jenkins 1963:64). The Lepchas could perhaps never accept fully the religion of those who plundered their property – cultural as well as material. The aggressive Bhutias were never accepted whole-heartedly by the Lepchas.

Finally, 'animism' was perhaps more functional to their socio-religious life. A *Mun* or *Bongthing* served their purpose at a much lower cost: most often just a fowl and few pinches of rice and ashes would do. But the Buddhist monks performed lengthy rituals, often

continuing for weeks, and often not available when wanted. A *Mun* or *Bongthing*, on the other hand, would be available almost in every village.

This is the general picture of the so-called Buddhist Lepchas. But about 30 per cent of the Lepchas in Darjeeling and 8 per cent of them in Sikkim are Christians today. They are in almost every sect of this religion but apparently the Roman Catholics preponderate over others like Protestants, E1-sadais, Pentecostals, Seventh-Day Adventists, and so on. Such Lepchas are generally more educated and urbanized than their Buddhist counterparts. They have also forsaken many such cultural traits which were closely associated with Buddhism. Thus, the Buddhist Lepchas are quite justified when they allege that the Christian Lepchas have lost the 'Lepchahood' completely. On the other hand, the Christian Lepchas argue, quite correctly again, that neither Buddhism nor the cultural traits associated with it are actually theirs: their actual religion is *Mun-Bongthism* as some of them put it.

It is not important here to show who is right and who is wrong. What must be stressed instead is the cleavage between these two religious groups, which is almost turning into a major crisis of their society. There is growing dislike and mistrust between these groups affecting even the principles of their patrilineal clan. Such a development has, instead of making them a strong ethnic group, weakened them considerably.

Conclusion

If we see the various changes described above we find some relationships between them. Changes began to occur perceptibly after the seventeenth century when they were overruled by the Tibetans from Tibet. But more remarkable changes took place after they came in contact with the British. It was they who encouraged Nepali settlers, put restriction on the free utilization of forest resources, introduced new crops including tea and cinchona, built roads and railway lines, and paved the way for the missionaries who in turn initiated the spread of modern secular education, proselytised the local tribes, taught them about health and hygiene, and so on. As a result we saw settled cultivation, land alienation, obliteration of early marriage, religious endogamy, patriliney, spread of Nepali language, cleavage between the Buddhist and Christian

Lepchas, and so forth.

We may now pick up a few instances of how one factor caused change in another. For instance, let us take the early marriage. This was necessitated by two things: one, demand for family labour to man the vast lands, and two, lack of schooling facilities for the Lepcha children. Once the demand for family labour was cut down due to drastic fall in the size of their landholding (which in turn was caused by various other factors discussed above such as availability of Nepali labourers and land alienation) there was no need for a big family whether joint or extended. Besides, once schools were opened the children already crossed eighteen years of age by the time they were through. Since there was an appalling fear of being teased by the classmates if married during school life their marriage used to be postponed until they finished schools. The combined effect of these two factors was the obliteration of early marriage. This is also supplemented by the fact that those who had married early were invariably illiterates or drop-outs.

To take another instance, the change from parallel to patrilineal descent may be discussed. The parallel descent was sustained by a number of factors of which two are important. One, this was a mechanism which helped them to keep their female population within their area. The male and female children were treated equally and even addressed with the same word. And two, they lost their male population considerably in the various clashes with the Tibetans from the north, Drugpas from the east and the Gorkhas from the west. This created a shortage of male population and many families would not have any male to pass the property on. Thus descent and inheritance along the female line had to discontinue.

But once peace was restored in their land by mid-nineteenth century, the forests which they owned before, customarily, notionally or legally, were either made 'reserved forests', brought under extensive tea and cinchona plantations, or converted into agricultural fields. All this reduced their landholding size considerably making it difficult for them to divide their lands between sons and daughters whenever they had both.

More important reason, however, was the large-scale out-marriage of the Lepcha women. The Lepcha women were married not only by the Bhutias and Nepalis but also by a large number of British, Anglo-Indian, and Bengali officers and planters. But the series of clashes the Lepchas had earlier with the Bhutias and

Nepalis and the resentment against the British in particular and plainsmen in general had developed an 'inward-looking' attitude in them. Thus, they no longer cherished the idea of their women married to non-Lepchas getting a portion of their traditional holdings. Hence, patriliney.

Similarly, almost every change in their society today can be traced to the historical developments that occurred after the seventeenth century and particularly after the nineteenth century.

The once forest-dwelling people which the Lepchas were have considerably changed today. The Constitutional privileges accrued to them as scheduled tribe have raised many of them to the highest echelons of our bureaucratic set-up. Countless of them have prospered considerably after migrating to many foreign countries like Nepal, Bhutan, Malaysia, Singapore, and Brunei.

But all this should be no reason for their complacency. A vast section of them are still illiterates and a still bigger section engrossed in the world of superstitions. Even the educated Lepchas have shown little responsibility towards their uneducated brethren. There are negligibly few to bother about their language and social solidarity. They are either Buddhist Lepchas or Christian Lepchas but none just Lepchas. It is time for them to learn to live as Lepchas too.

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