

## Chapter - II

### Ethnic Groups of Sikkim in History

#### **Location**

“Located within 28° 07' 48" and 27° 4' 44" north latitude and 88° 00' 58" and 88° 55' 25" east longitude<sup>1</sup>, Sikkim is the twenty second state of India. A tiny mountainous state, bounded by Tibet on the north, Bhutan on the east, Darjeeling district of West Bengal on the south and Nepal on the west, it holds a place of immense strategic importance for the Indian union. Comprising an area of 2,818 sq. miles<sup>2</sup> it is not only a northern gateway to Indian sub-continent but also constitute a vital zone in India's defense system.

#### **The People**

Society in Sikkim is characterized by multiple ethnicity and possesses attributes of a plural society. The present population of Sikkim is composed of different races and ethnic groups, viz., the Lepchas, the Bhutias, the Nepalese and the plainsmen, who came and settled in different phases of history. In absence of an authentic history of Sikkim, it is difficult to say, who were the original inhabitants, who officially acknowledged, were, the Lepchas. The so called autochthonous Lepchas, as pointed out by Gorer, have no reliable history of migration and “place the home of the ancestors – the people of Mayel – in one of the inaccessible Valley of Kanchenjunga.”<sup>3</sup> However, going by the folk-tales, it is generally believed that they have migrated from Assam and upper Burma into this mountainous state. Next came the ‘Khampas’ from the Tibetan Province of ‘Kham’ in the mid-17<sup>th</sup> Century, who are now commonly known as Bhutias. The immigration of the Nepalese started in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century.

In the *Gazetteer of Sikkim* H.H. Risley has mentioned about following three main ethnic stocks in Sikkim<sup>4</sup>

- a) Rong – the aboriginal of Sikkim or the Lepchas as the Nepalese call them;
- b) Khampa or Khamba, the immigrants from the Tibetan Province of Kham, commonly called as Bhutias;
- c) The Limbu of ‘Lhasa gotra’ are believed to have migrated to Sikkim from Shigatsi, Panam, Norpu, Khyongtse, Somdubling and Gyantse – all places in the Tibetan province of Tsang, South of Tsapo.

Risley left out the fourth stock i.e. the Nepalese from his classification, although he enlisted the Nepalese of various sub-cultural stocks in the Census of 1891.<sup>5</sup> Perhaps, it was their late arrival and the ongoing process of migration that influenced him to keep the Nepalese out of his classification of the people of Sikkim. Now, the Nepalese constitute the numerically dominant community in Sikkim. Thus, over the centuries, the narrow fertile valleys of the inner Himalayas have been settled by the Tibeto-Burmese, Tibeto-Mongoloid and Indo-Aryan races, who have adjusted to the rigorous climate of Sikkim. The state recognizes two broad ethnic groups i.e. Lepcha-Bhutia and the Nepalese.<sup>6</sup> Sociologically, the former may be further divided into two social groups with distinct dialects, distinct cultures with a sense of ethnic solidarity – the Lepchas and the Bhutias. Religiously speaking, the Lepchas (who were animist) and the Bhutias are Buddhist and the Nepalese are Hindus,

### **Ethnic Groups**

**The Lepchas:** The Lepchas claim to be the autochthons of Sikkim. The Lepchas (in Nepali the word ‘Lap’ means Vile and ‘Che’ means ‘speakers’ i.e. vile-speakers, a contemptuous term as Lepchas spoke their own dialect and refused to adopt Nepali), “the Rong (the ravine-folk) as they call themselves ... are known to the Tibetans as ‘Mon-ba’ or ‘Mon-rik’, people of the Mon Country – a general Tibetan name for the lower Himalayas from Kashmir to Assam and Burma”<sup>7</sup> The Lepcha concentration is normally found in the slopes of the hills in various parts of Sikkim. They are divided into a number of patrilineal clans (Ptso), which are supposed to have originated from supernatural and mythological ancestry.<sup>8</sup> Earlier the ‘Ptso’ represented a geographical unit.<sup>9</sup> *The Gazetteer of Sikkim* mentions 39 clans of Lepchas along the banks of Talung river, each of which is attached to a locality.<sup>10</sup> The main function of the *Ptso* is to regularize marriage and prevent incest through exogamy. Gorer, who worked in

the Dzongu area of Lepcha settlements in Sikkim, states that except as an exogamic unit the *Ptso* is now functionless.<sup>11</sup> Though the family relations of Lepchas show traces of matriarchy, Gorer found a tendency more to patrilineality among the Lepchas. According to him, the '*Ptso*' supernatural descend, as it were from father to son; women have other different super-natural guardians, although all children are counted as members of their father's *Ptso*'<sup>12</sup>

The Lepchas had a simple material culture – a subsistence type of hunting and collecting as well as a primitive form of slash and burn type of cultivation of rice, maize and millet. Although they are now Buddhists originally their religion was basically animistic Bon and their priest, 'Boongthing' or 'Mun,' symbolizes the combination of holy specialists, magicians and medicine man. The male priest is called "Boong-thing" and the female is generally called Mun. Every clan has a priest, who in fact is an exorcist. Siiger, who also worked in the Dzongu area, states that "every *Ptso* has its own priest called Boong-thing or *padem*, whose office is hereditary in his own *Ptso*'<sup>13</sup>

Polyandry was prevalent among the Lepchas as well as Bhutias in the past. Conversion of Lepchas into Buddhism paved the way for a social intercourse at the highest level with the Bhutia aristocracy. The interaction was possible due to the 'ritual bond of blood brotherhood'<sup>14</sup> that was established between the two tribes. The bond promoted the growth of a multiple-ethnic society in Sikkim, with the Bhutia invaders providing the ruling dynasty. The Lepcha commoners, who were driven to woods to lead a simple life, were well connected to the world outside, through their custom of *Ingzong* (literally means 'like younger brother') i.e. ritual friendship of economic ties. The Lepchas negotiated *ingzong* with "the Nepalese for their pigs, with the plains Indians for their copper-vessels, with the Bhutanese for their fine cloth, with the Tibetans for their rugs and with the Bhotias for their oxen,"<sup>15</sup> under the patronage of their guardian spirit (*Komsithing*).

The Lepchas have their own language, which according to Mainwaring, is the oldest of all the hill dialects and is contended to be belonging to the Tibeto-Burmese family. In earlier days, they possessed rich culture, but with the advent of the Tibetans and process of Tibetanization, the old rich heritage of Lepcha literature, art and culture were destroyed. Unrestricted matrimonial relations with the Limbus and Bhutias led to erosion of the Lepcha tradition. In contemporary Sikkim, it is quite difficult to locate an all-exclusive Lepcha settlement outside the ruler's private estate

of Dzongu. Buddhism – the religion, which is the pivot of socio-cultural life is the main factor for closer affinities between the Lepchas and the Bhutias. A few of them have been converted to Christianity. They, being relatively better educated and more affluent, have shown an urge for the awareness of the Lepcha identity and a sense of assertion.<sup>16</sup> However, inspite of their conversion to Lamaism or Christianity, they still retained their primitive and tribal ethos in their Lamaist and Christian ways of life.

**The Bhutias :** The Bhutias, who provided the royal dynasty in Sikkim represent the Tibeto –Burmese stock. They were the carriers of the Tibetan culture, Tibetan language, the Lamaist Buddhism and a combination of Pastoralism and semi-settled agricultural practices. The earliest phase of Bhutia immigration probably started with the Tibetan graziers and the missionary Lamas, who came to Sikkim in search of pastures and potential converts to their religion. It must be long before the 15<sup>th</sup> century when Sikkim was sparsely populated by the primitive tribes of Lepchas, few Limbus and Magars. The Bhutias who had migrated in the next phase were the traders, who were in the look out for new markets for bartering their goods. Finally came the Tibetan peasants in search of paddy fields. All these stocks found in Dermer-Dzong (Denzong – the valley of rice-a Tibetan term for Sikkim) wide scope of expansion.<sup>17</sup> It was the establishment of blood-brotherhood in later half of the 15<sup>th</sup> Century, between a Bhutia patriarch named Khye-Bumsa from Phari (Chumbi Valley – Tibet) with the then Lepcha chief, The-Kung-Tek, that has laid a strong foundation for strengthening Lamaism and process of Tibetanization in Sikkim. The Lamaist Missionaries, who were trying to convert the animist tribe without much success, strongly felt the necessity of a strong authority, which could be instrumental in their mission. Later in 1642, a band of Tibetan Lamas discovering such qualities of leadership in one of the Bhutia peasant – Phuntsoh Namgyal,<sup>18</sup> a descendant of Khye-Bumsa, installed him as the first ruler of Sikkim.

The consecration of the Bhutia ruler was a turning point in the history of Sikkim, which marked the beginning of Bhutia dominance over Sikkim. The Pagan Lepchas were converted into Lamaist Buddhism followed by the Tibetans. The new religion and the ruler made a deep impression on the socio-economic life of the Bhutia community. Moreover, the appointment of the Lepcha Dgongpens and the Bhutia Kalons by the first ruler led to the emergence of feudalism and bureaucracy,<sup>19</sup>

thus marking the hold of the Bhutias virtually complete over Sikkim. 'The dominance of the Bhutias was so overwhelming that the Lepchas remained the poorest and the most neglected of the people, barring a few who intermarried with the Bhutia elite to reach the level of equality.'<sup>20</sup>

Apart from religious conversion, the matrimonial relations paved the way for cultural and social assimilation of the two communities. Thus a new community, a new people with their established religious faith, educational convention and long standing social federation, entered into Sikkim having profound effect on the social, economic and religious foundations of the early people of Sikkim.<sup>21</sup>

The inter-marriages between the two tribes provided an opportunity to move in the higher ladder of social hierarchy. The matrimonial relations between the Tibetan nobles and Lepcha chiefs or Dzongpens gave rise to a new affluent class of the Kazis. A Bhutia labourer with some savings, could be a trader, buy some cattle and land, marry a Lepcha chief's daughter and could consequently move in the higher ladder of social hierarchy as 'Kazis'.<sup>22</sup>

The Bhutia social structure is patriarchal. The practice of polyandry finds no favour with the young generation in the land of the Lamaist. The Buddhists monastery and monk were the pivots around which revolves their daily life. The monasteries are the main repositories of Bhutia culture. Until recently, the monks were considered as 'the intellectual elite' of the Bhutia society and education was the sole preserve of the monasteries. Even the first ruler was declared as an incarnate Lama. The Lamaist Church of Tibet also undertook the role of the moral guardian of Sikkim. Hence the Lamas, who are a class by themselves, exerted tremendous influence and commanded respect in the society of Sikkim. Thus, the Bhutia immigrants became a stratified society with the Lamas (the Clergy), the Kazis (aristocrats) and the commoners arranged in a descending order in terms of social status.<sup>23</sup> However, with the abolition of feudalism and with the advent of democracy a new class of commoners – the neo-rich plebeians - emerged, thus adding another stratum in the social hierarchy.

The Bhutia immigration took place in phases. Risley has identified the original families and the sequence of their arrival. The earliest immigrants represented 14 main families of Tibetan origin. Of these, 6 were descendents of Khye-Bumsar and 8 were of other Khampas, now known as the *Lbeps-m-Tshanb Gyad*, or the tribe of 8 respectable names. In addition, there were 8 *Rui-Chhung* or little families, who came to Sikkim at various times, since the establishment of the monarchy. After this came

the *Chumbipas*, immigrants from Kham in Tibet and Hah in Bhutan to the lower reaches of the Monchu near Chumbi, which has further six sub-divisions.

In the north, the Lachen-Lachung Valleys were colonized by other immigrants from Hah and Paro in Bhutan, now known as the *Lhopen-Lhundub*. Finally, Risley identifies another category, in which he gives names of 12 other families.<sup>24</sup>

**The Nepalese :** The term Nepalese is a very broad and generic term, which encompasses within itself, a number of hill tribes as well as Hindu castes. The Nepalese community in Sikkim is inclusive of three sub-cultural sectors: the Kiratis, the Newaris and the Gorkhas. The Kiratis include Limbu, Rais, Magars, Gurungs, Tamangs and host of other marginal tribal stocks. Among these Limbus and Magars are supposed to be the autochthonous inhabitants of Sikkim. The origin of the Limbus is veiled in obscurity. There are three 'septs' among them. One belonging to Lhasa gotra believed to have migrated from Tibet, while the Limbus belonging to Kasi gotra, are believed to have come from Benaras. A large number of them are believed to have emerged from the 'mother' earth, hence are called Bhuiputta. While a large majority of them are animistic and Hinduized some of them, particularly those belonging to Lhasa gotra, follow Lamaism. Risley narrates a Limbu folk-story taken from an old Limbu manuscript about the origin of Lhasa and Kashi gotra.<sup>25</sup> They have their own mythology, which delineates the creation of the (Universe and Man) and specific customs and laws. These Mundhums constitute the basis of their peculiar religion Yuma Sam Samyo or Yumasam Religion. The tribal priests called Phedangmas, Yebas and Yamas (the last being female priests) are the prominent members of the Limbu society and are responsible for all household rituals, ceremonies relating to marriages and funerals with divinations and exorcism of evil spirits through animal sacrifice.<sup>26</sup>

The Limbus does not maintain much distance from the Lepchas and had a tradition of inter marriage with the latter. They are called Tsongs (cattle or yak merchants and butcher) by the Bhutias and Lepchas and Limbus by the Nepalese. The appellation Sikkim itself is a Limbu,<sup>27</sup> which denotes that they were one of the earliest settlers in Sikkim.

The Kirati tribes, with a stronger tribal ethos may broadly be classified into two groups, on the basis of their absorption into the larger civilizations. There are (a)

the animists-cum-Hinduized Gurungs, Magars, Rais, a section of the Limbus, and (b) the Lamaist Tamangs, Sherpas and a section of the Tsongs.

The second sub-cultural stock of the Nepalese in Sikkim includes the Gorkhas, like the Chhetris, Thakuris, and the Bahuns. With the emergence of the Gorkha power in Nepal during the reign of Prithvi Narayan Shah around the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, the Nepalese made numerous raids eastwards and clashed with the Bhutias as well as the Kiratas. The settlement of Gurkhas can be traced back to this period. The Newars, the third sub-cultural stock of the Nepalese, also entered Sikkim during this period, with the liquidation of Newari power in Kathmandu Valley by the Gurkhas. They monopolized the copper mines and minting industry in Sikkim. The Newars in Sikkim are, by and large, Hindus with the highest socio-economic prominence. Some of the most enterprising even emerged as the Nepali-counterpart of the Kazis and were drawn into policymaking and administrative process during the Maharaja's time. Along with them came a large number of service castes such as Brahmins (Bahuns), barbers and artisan castes such as smiths (Kamis), tailors (Damai) and shoe-makers (Sarki).<sup>28</sup>

Of the Nepalese, who settled in Sikkim, the Bahuns occupy the highest position in the social hierarchy. They are mainly the agriculturists and are mostly orthodox Hindus, who would not normally have any matrimonial relations with other castes. However the rigidity of social attitude and behaviour, which the Brahmins maintained rigidly, is somewhat disappearing with the passage of time. The next in social rank are the Thakuris and Chhetris. They are entitled to wear the sacred thread and have Brahminical prejudices. Although there are some cases of inter-caste marriage, such marriages are still considered exceptions rather than rules.

On the whole, the Nepalese of Sikkim may be divided into two groups on the socio-ritual grounds: the Tagadharis, who wear second thread such as Bahuns and Chhetris and the Matwalis, who do not put sacred thread and are in the habit of drinking alcohol. The Tagadhari Nepalese maintains a social distance and look down upon the Bhutias, Lepchas and Kirats as 'carrion' eaters.<sup>29</sup>

Despite the divisions of Nepalese into many tribes and sects, each having its own social system and language, the growing social intercourse among them, and similar experience of suffering from political and economic discrimination and adoption of Nepalese as common Lingua-franca, identical life-style and common religion have tied the members of this largest community together. The sense of unity

and fellow feeling has aroused an ethnic feeling among the Nepalese in Sikkim. Thus the Nepali Hindus as a group are united against the Lamaists.

Apart from these three predominant ethnic communities of Sikkim, mention must be made of the 'plainsmen'. Though relatively small, they constitute a socially and economically significant group. The Marwaris are the owners of the commercial establishments in the urban areas; they also have stretched their hands well into the villages through money-lending business. Besides, there are the Madesia traders and number of other plainsmen's community from different states to serve in the administrative and other posts.<sup>30</sup> The influx in the post-merger era had become a concern to the Lepcha-Bhutia and the Nepalese in general.

**Political Organization :** The political culture of Sikkim before the merger was oriented to theocratic feudalism. The ruler combining both the secular and religious authority was regarded as the embodiment of divinity. As an incarnate Lama, his responsibility was to rule the subjects in accordance with the tenets of the *Chhos* – the Dharma. His title ever since 1642 was Chogyal, a synthesis of two words *Cho* (Choss) as established religion and *Gyalpo*, the ruler or 'the king who rules according to the Divine Law',<sup>31</sup> thus justifying the appellation.

Ideologically, the traditional Tibetan government was a synthesis of clerical and lay elements. "... there could not be any absolute separation between spiritual and temporal estates. Besides, the Lamas held a good number of civil posts. The apex, the *sakya hierach*, was the meeting point of both ecclesiastical and civil jurisdiction. Here was a government possessed of both *Chhos* (Dharma) and *Srid* (Samsar)"<sup>32</sup>

The multiple ethnicity and the British subjugation in later part of the history, made the Chogyal to incorporate many non-Tibetan and secular democratic elements into the theocratic political system. The emergence of Nepali Thikadars as counterpart of Kazis, and appointment of non-Tibetans as lay civil servants can be cited as instances. However, the Lamaists were given priority over other communities in matters of distribution of State resources, in the name of safeguarding the interests of the minority Bhutias and Lepchas. It was, in fact, a race between the numerically minority Bhutias and Lepchas on the one hand and the Nepalese on the other for access to the political power. The Lepcha-Bhutia combine, despite being a minority, had a complete political hegemony over the numerically dominant Nepalese. The Nepalese were discriminated in socio-economic and political domain. The Nepalese,

in response, tried to gain some political control by launching democratic movements, which ultimately led to the abolition of monarchy and subsequent merger of Sikkim with the Union of India in 1975.

**Demographic Profile :** Ever since the establishment of Sikkim's effective contacts with the British, the immigration of the Nepalese and their settlement in the state had been the most controversial issues. The administration found it difficult to formulate a feasible policy for their settlement. The uncontrolled inflow of the Nepalese in the beginning of the nineteenth century was taken by the Bhutia rulers as a threat to their power. Commenting on the changing population scenario a century back in 1894 Risley predicted in the *Gazetteer of Sikkim*: 'The Lepchas are rapidly dying out, while from the west, the industrious Newars and Gorkhas of Nepal are pressing forward. Here also religion will play a leading part. In Sikkim, as in India, Hinduism will assuredly cast out Buddhism and the praying wheel of the Lama will give place to the sacrificial implements of the Brahmin. The Land will follow the creeds, the Tibetan (the Bhutias) proprietors will gradually be dispossed and will take themselves to the petty trade ... Thus, race and religion, the prime movers of the Asiatic World will settle Sikkim difficulty for us in their own way".<sup>33</sup>

The first authentic information regarding population of Sikkim is the Census of 1891,<sup>34</sup> which puts the total population of the state to 30,458 that comprised 5,762 Lepchas, 4,894 Bhutias, 3,356 Limbus and the rest 15,458 Nepalese of various ethnic stocks. In 1909, J.C. White, the first political officer in Sikkim noted "... the greater number of the inhabitants of Sikkim ... are the *paharis* (Nepalese) who number nearly 50,000 (62.5%) of an estimated population of 80,000."<sup>35</sup> He noted the Lepcha population to be about 6,000.<sup>36</sup> The latest Census figures for the ethnic affiliation are available for 1931, when out of total population of 1,09,808, the Lepchas numbered 13,060 (11.89%), Bhutias accounted for 11,955 (10.88%) and the rest were mainly the Nepalese.<sup>37</sup> The 1951 Census data gives the religious affiliation of the people. Out of a total population figure of 1,35,725, 39,397 were the Buddhists with 13,625 (9.89%) Lepchas and 15,626 (11.3%) Bhutias. 81,872 were Hindus (the Hindu Nepalese) and 15,991 Yuma Samyo or Yamaism (Limboos). After ten years in 1961, the total population increased to 1,62,189 with 49,894 Buddhists and 1,08,165 Hindus respectively.<sup>38</sup>

The Censuses of 1971 and 1981 have done the categorization on the basis of language spoken in the households. Although, both Censuses have common basis of categorization there are some discrepancies. In 1971, there was no separate mention of the groups like the Limbus or the Sherpas. But these groups were identified and separately mentioned for the first time in 1981. Secondly, the case of three different terms like the 'Bhutias', the 'Tibetan' and the 'Sikkimese Bhutias' were quite ambiguous. Even though the word 'Tibetan' is used for the Tibetan refugees, the ambiguity lies in the difference between the Bhutias and the Sikkimese Bhutias. Such discrepancies have been done away in 1981 Census report, as is shown in Table 2.1.

The Table shows that in 1981, Nepali language is spoken by a large majority (62.57 per cent) of the population in the State. While the Lepcha and Bhutia as a linguistic group accounts for only 7.26 percent and 6.9 percent of the total. It is also to be noted that after 1891 only the Lepchas, Bhutias and the Limboos are recognized as distinct ethnic groups, while all other groups were regarded as 'different tribes (races) of the Nepali community.'<sup>39</sup>

Table 2.1: Language Classifications in 1981 Census

Sl.No.	Language	No. of Speakers	% Percentage
1	Nepali/Gorkhali	1,92,891	62.57
2	Lepcha	22,391	7.26
3	Bhutia	21,548	6.9
4	Limboo	17,922	5.8
5	Sherpa	10,726	3.4
6	Tibetan	4,149	1.3
7	Other Languages	18,899	6.1
8	Other Schedule VIII Languages	19,570	6.3
9	Other than Schedule VIII Languages	166	0.05

Source: Census of India, 1981, Series 19 – Sikkim Paper 1 of 1987. H.H. 16 Part B (1) pp. 26-27.

Table 2.2: District-wise Percentage distribution of two major religious communities of Sikkim (1991 Census)

State/District	Total Population	Hindus	Buddhist
Sikkim	4,06,457	68.4%	27.1%
North	31,240	36.9%	60.2%
East	1,78,452	69.1%	26.1%
South	98,604	71.2%	22.9%
West	9,8,161	74.1%	22.7%

Source : Census of India, 1991

The Census of 1991 gives the categorization on the basis of religion (Table 2.2). The Buddhists (comprising mostly Bhutias and Lepchas) account for 27.1% of the total population, whereas the Hindus constitute the largest share of 68.4%. Except an insignificant minority, who are converted into Christianity, most of the Lepcha-Bhutias are Buddhists. A comparative study of Census figures of 1891 and 1991 (Table 2.3) shows how the population of Bhutias and Lepchas, who are declared as Scheduled Tribes by the Presidential Order of 1978 and other ethnic communities like the Nepalese and others have changed over the last one hundred years in Sikkim.

A close scrutiny of the trend of population growth over the last hundred years brings to light that there has been a tremendous multiplication of population figures in Sikkim. It also becomes clear as to how the population balance has tilted in favour of Nepalese. The Lepcha-Bhutia combine constituted 35% of total population in 1891. Hundred years later their share of total population (along with others who are included in Scheduled Tribes) has tumbled down to 22.36%. The fall in their percentage has obviously gone in favour of Nepalese, who thus emerged as the largest social group, in contrast to the indigenous Lepchas and the ruling Bhutias, who have trailed behind in terms of population, hence becoming the minority community.

Table 2.3 : A Comparative Census Figures of 1891 and 1991

Sl.No.	1891 Census			1991 Census		
	Particulars	Population	%	Particulars	Population	%
1.	Bhutias	4,894	16.06	S. T	90,921	22.36
2.	Lepcha	5,762	18.91	Lepcha Bhutia Sherpa & Others		
3.	Nepalese	19,560	64.02	Nepali including	3,15,556	77.64
4.	Others/ Miscella- neous	242	0.8	S.C & Others		
	Total Population	30,458	100	Total Population	4,06,457	100

Source : Subba, J.R., *The Limboos of the Eastern Himalayas*, 1999, p. 120

The change in the demographic scenario thus widely affected the social, economic and political sequences, which obviously had wide repercussions in the inter-ethnic relationships.

## Notes and References

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24. H.H. Risley, op.cit., pp- 28-30
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