

Chapter V

Socio-Cultural Matrix of the Plainsmen

Introduction

The objectives of this chapter are mainly three. First, I intend to explore to what extent is the occupational integration seen in the previous chapter reflected in the socio-cultural integration also. The socio-cultural integration is explored here not only within the various plains communities but also between, the plainsmen as a whole and the hillmen. Second, I would like to explore the strength and weakness of the socio-cultural matrix of the plainsmen in Sikkim. In particular, attention is paid to its implications for ethnic solidarity/conflict within and without the plainsmen. Finally, I would like to assess the compatibility of the socio-cultural matrix of the plainsmen with that of the local hillmen.

In Sikkim, it is still not enough to know what a person does but it must also be asked

who the person is. It is often the latter question that seems to have complicated the situation with regard to ethnicity in Sikkim. When a stranger goes to a place he goes there not only as a person but also as a member of a community, caste, religion, culture, etc. And, when it is not a question of one or two stray strangers but hordes of them settling in an alien socio-cultural set-up, the tension is automatically built up among such people if not equally so among the local people also. A lot, of course, depends on how the migrant groups utilize their culture in the interactive process. Or, whether they utilize it as a means of survival or as a means of ascertaining their own identity. The choice is not there always for such migrating cultural groups: it also depends on what kind of demands are made by the indigeneous cultural environment.

In order to get an answer to some of these questions, it is desirable that the socio-cultural matrix of the plainsmen in Sikkim is explored to its fullest possible detail. I have made an attempt to do so in the following para-

graphs on the basis of eleven socio-cultural variables.

Socio-Cultural Matrix

The discussion here relates primarily to the socio-cultural dimensions of the various communities subsumed here under the word "plainsmen". But since the plainsmen do not operate in a jungle or uninhabited place the situation(s) must be related to its context. Though my primary interest is the plainsmen themselves, it is often by comparing them with the local hillmen that the situation of the plainsmen seems to become clearer. Hence, I often bring in the hill communities in the discussion below.

(1) Family

The family as a domestic group constituting of the father, the mother, and the children is absent in the case of a large number of the plainsmen living in Sikkim today. Such plainsmen are basically those who migrated to Sikkim after 1975. They may be loosely considered as single-member families. Though the exact number

of such single-member families among the plainsmen in Sikkim cannot be ascertained, they constitute about 75.0 percent of the plainsmen migrating there after 1975. Some of them live in groups of two or more than two while others are absolutely single.

About the type of family they have come from one notices two distinct types. Those plainsmen who had migrated before 1950 have mostly (82.5 percent) come from joint family background and only 17.5 percent of them from the nuclear family background. The plainsmen who had migrated to Sikkim after 1950s also have a sizeable section of them (48.5 percent) from the joint family background. On the other hand, almost all the migrants who went there after 1975 have nuclear family background. There is a division along the communities also. The Hindi-speaking Marwaris and Biharis have a greater number of migrants from joint family background than the non-Hindi speaking plainsmen like the Bengalis, Oriyas, Keralites, and the Punjabis. This background is largely reflected in their family types even in Sikkim.

Among the hill communities, there are basically two groups: migrants from the hills of Darjeeling and Dooars and the local hillmen. With regard to both the groups, almost all of them have nuclear family background. Though among the latter group members few joint and extended type families are still to be seen, what is striking to note is that almost all marriageable migrants from Darjeeling and Dooars have settled down either with the local girls or with the girls from their own places. It may be recalled here that unlike the male-dominated migrants from the plains, the females constituted a sizeable group among the migrants from Darjeeling and the Dooars area of Jalpaiguri district.

Thus, with regard to family, migrants from the plains do not seem to have achieved as much of stability as the migrants from the hill areas of Darjeeling and Dooars have. This is quite natural because, socio-culturally, Darjeeling and Dooars are very much a part of Sikkim and it was even historically so until the middle of the nineteenth century.

(2) Marriage

The objective here is not to discuss the institution of marriage as such but to show what forms and relationships of marriage do actually exist among the plainsmen in particular. The importance of marriage in society has been well documented by scholars like Johnson (1962) and Stephens (1963). Therefore, it needs no credential to establish that it is one of the most important sociological variable.

The plainsmen in Sikkim were and are basically monogamous and they normally disdain polygamy of any variety. They are aware of the practice of fraternal polyandry among the Hindus in ancient times, as depicted in The Mahabharata, but such practice was long abandoned by the people in their places of origin.

Caste and community endogamy are also a distinguishing feature of the plainsmen. While the caste endogamy is not usually possible to practise community endogamy seems possible. But strangely most of the plainsmen prefer to acquire their spouses from their native places or at

least from outside Sikkim. Because of this preference their marriages are ultimately endogamous not only at the community but also at the caste levels.

It is not that the plainsmen have always succeeded in maintaining even community endogamy. Deviances are seen among those plains communities which are small in number such as the Keralites, Tamils, Gujaratis, and the Punjabis. Even the Biharis and Marwaris, who are socio-politically well organized, do not seem to have always succeeded in this regard. There are a few cases of such people marrying with the local hill people but the reaction of the members of such defaulters' communities has often been strongly negative. This is particularly true of the Marwaris. There was one such case at Gangtok, where a Marwari boy from Kalimpong had married a Nepali Brahmin girl of Sikkim. That boy had a terrible time for almost one full year because of the ostracism meted out to him by his relatives. But since he was rich he could gradually win over his relatives but even now his community members do not seem to have fully reconciled to this fact.

The local hillmen are also generally monogamous. But polygyny is not very rare among the Nepali high castes and the Lepchas while the Bhutias have an established practice of polyandry, especially of the fraternal type. Both polygyny and polyandry among the three hill communities have remained due to specific environmental and economic forces to which they are exposed. For instance, polygyny among the Lepchas and Nepalis was functional because of the need for a huge labour force to man the cultivation. In the case of the Lepchas, it was also sterility that was responsible for polygyny. Polyandry, on the other hand, was often inevitable among the high altitude dwelling Bhutias because of pastoralism, trade and herding (Subba 1989c).

Another aspect of marriage among the hill communities is the rather weak endogamous rules. Like the plainsmen, both caste/clan and community/tribal endogamy is stressed by the hill communities also. But there are a large number of inter-community and inter-religious marriages among the three hill communities from the very early times. In this context, mention may be made of the inter-

marriages particularly between the Lepchas and Bhutias on the one hand and the Lepchas and the Limbus on the other (Subba 1989b). Similarly, the marriages between the Buddhist Lepcha-Bhutias and the Hindu Nepalis, though less frequent or fewer, have been reported to be fairly well accepted.

Apart from these differences between the hill and the plains communities, there is another very important difference between the two communities with regard to marriage. Both these communities are predominantly Hindus and patri-local but among the hill communities, irrespective of cultural, linguistic, religious and other such differences within them, it is the male's family which has to approach the female's family for marital union. This is just the reverse in the case of the plainsmen no matter what linguistic group they belong to or from where they come. The most distinctive symbol of this difference is the practice of paying dowry by the latter and paying the bride-wealth by the former. As a matter of fact, these two practices are the most important homogenizing forces within the two

groups of communities.

(3) Age.

The age composition of the migrants is an important variable because it not only seems to determine their adaptation to the local socio-cultural milieu to a great extent but also bears the potentiality of determining the internal structure of the migrants. Theoretically, the children and the youths tend to pick up the local customs and food habits much more easily than the elders among the migrants. Hence, the chances of adaptability and compatibility depend to a large extent on the age composition of the migrants.,

Here it is more important to see the age composition at the time of migration rather than the same at the time of the present study. This is because of the fact that the first few years of contact with an alien environment are more important than the later years. It is in the first few years that the impressions - good or bad - are received or given in a contact situation. It is also in the initial phase of contact that one should seek to find answers to inter-

ethnic conflicts or tensions particularly between locals and migrants. The way the two groups interact in later years is not entirely insignificant but it is often secondary.

With regard to the age composition of the plainsmen at the time of their migration to Sikkim, it may be pointed out that no clear distinction can be made about the early and recent migrants. Whether they migrated to Sikkim for trade, as in the case of most Marwaris and Biharis, or for service occupations, as in the case of other plainsmen, the bulk of the migrants (67.1 percent) belonged to the age-group of 20 to 40 years. There were some (32.9) who were below 20 years or above 40 years at the time of migration but they had gone there to join their relatives and live there either as helpers or dependents. They had no active role to play in the economic or political activities of the family nor did they have any ambition of their own.

Even the migrants from the hill areas of Darjeeling and Dooars, it may be noted, were of the same age group at the time of their migration.

Like in the case of the plainsmen, they were later joined by their family members. But no such particular age-group dominance can be seen in the case of the local hillmen.

Given this background about the age composition of the migrants to Sikkim, it was quite natural that those who did not have strong familial ties settled down with the local men and women. Due to linguistic, cultural, religious and other barriers between the hill and plains communities as a whole, it was basically the migrants from Darjeeling and Dooars, who had shown a more successful socio-cultural adaptation than their counterparts from the plains of India. Because of the same reasons, many courtships between the members of the plains and hill communities could not finally mature into formal bonds of marriage as it did in the case of the migrant and local hillmen in Sikkim.

(4) Sex

Table 2 given in Chapter II has shown that the percentage of females among the plains communities is only 32.6, which shows that two-

third of their population is constituted by males. It may be remembered here that this male-female ratio is obtained at the time of the present study and does not speak of the male-female ratio at the time of migration. The present study shows that only a few females migrated to Sikkim along with their male counterparts. Such females belong to the category of servicemen who had gone there on deputation, transfer or were serving in the military services.

In other words, migration of the plainsmen to Sikkim was initially almost exclusively a male phenomenon. Some of the family members joined them later and those who did not have any to join them remained single even after many years of their stay in Sikkim. But almost every normal migrant who had stayed there for more than five years had acquired a spouse or a relative from the place of his/her origin.

Among the migrants from the hill areas of Darjeeling and Dooars the male-female ratio is not as imbalanced as it is seen in the case of the migrants from the plains of India. Sikkim being rather close to these regions and many of

them having relatives and friends in Sikkim the number of females migrating from these regions was naturally more than the number of females from the distant plains. Besides this geographical advantage for the females from these regions the cultural factor should also be added. It is commonly known that the hill women are much more outgoing and enjoy a higher degree of freedom than their counterparts from the plains of India. This is also an important reason why their number is more in Sikkim than the females from the plains. It was the same reason why the hill females are engaged in various jobs while the plainswomen are mostly householders. The plainswomen are, in fact, rarely seen outside their houses except in rare occasions.

More important than the ratio of male-female population among the migrants is perhaps the difference in the status of women between the hill and plains communities. It is quite commonly believed that the status of females among the plains community is lower than among the hill communities. Both hill and plains communities are patrilineal and male-dominant but there is no

denying that the hill females enjoy a much higher status than their counterparts from the plains. Here, the difference has to be located in the economic role the females play rather than their religious tradition because, as already mentioned, both the hill and plains communities are by and large of the same tradition. The hill women are to be true much more economically active than the plainswomen are found. This is perhaps why the former enjoy a much higher status than the latter.

This is also perhaps one reason why the males from the plains of India avoid marrying the females from the hills and vice versa. It is true that, such cultural barriers have not succeeded in making such unions possible in some cases. But more importantly, it is reported that the cases of illicit relations between the plainsmen and hill girls are quite common and this has proved to be one of the important sources of tension, if not conflict, between the two groups of communities. In this context, some affluent Marwari traders and powerful bureaucrats from the plains of India are frequently alleged to have exploited the hill girls by virtue (or vice?) of their money or power.

Such a situation is nothing peculiar of Sikkim. Whenever the migrants from outside have settled in large numbers in areas experiencing rapid developmental activities, such developments seem to follow naturally. Such cases are known to have existed in states like Nagaland, Mizoram, Manipur, and Arunachal Pradesh also. In most of these states, the indignation of the locals against the outsiders is rooted in such relationships though in actual practice these issues are not directly referred to. For doing so would mean humiliation of their own people. In most of these states, sex is rather free but women are at the same time a symbol of their prestige.

(5) Education

With regard to education of the plainsmen in Sikkim it may be first of all pointed out that there are quite sharp differences not only vertically but also horizontally. With regard to the first, it may be safely stated that most of those who migrated to Sikkim before 1950 and a large section of those who had migrated after 1950 but before 1975 were illiterates or semi-

literate in the sense that they had no formal schooling. Most of them were naturally expert in sums but very few of them could do anything more than that. But their descendants and their fellow members, who migrated there after 1975, are almost all highly educated and even professionally qualified. Even their womenfolk are almost equally ahead in this matter.

With regard to the horizontal division about education it is clear that the Hindi-speaking Marwaris and Biharis have much lower status compared to the speakers of other Indian languages. This is probably due to the historicity of their migration: while the former are by and large earlier migrants the latter are later migrants. It is also due to the reasons for their migration: the former had gone there mainly for business while the latter have gone there for service. There are other minor factors too but these two are the most important ones that explain their horizontal difference in educational status in Sikkim.

About this, the disparity between the males and females should also be brought out. Nowadays

the plainsmen and hillmen alike make no distinction about the education of their male and female children. But the fact that the literacy of females among the plainsmen is lower (21.8) than that at the state (22.2) and national (26.0) levels shows that the plainswomen did not receive equal attention in this respect before, which could be before their migration or even after it.

In this context, it should be brought to light that there was not enough scope for educational achievement in Sikkim before 1950s. Though the opportunities for education were much wider in other parts of India barring the north-east the traditional beliefs and values are known to have inhibited the spread of female education in general and that of the low caste people in particular. Thus, the level of literacy was on the whole very low for both sexes. It was mainly after 1950s that education began to receive a focussed attention of the government, particularly in Sikkim.

For various reasons discussed earlier in this section, the state of educational affairs in Sikkim is much better today than before. The same seems

true of the plainsmen as well, as indicated by the educational standard of the recent migrants vis-a-vis their predecessors. Hence, the emergence of the educated middle class in Sikkim is a rather recent phenomenon. It was not there before 1950s and it received full impetus after 1975. Ethnically, however, the dominance of the plainsmen in this class is still prominent though the local hillmen are also gradually coming up.

(6) Religion

About the religious affiliations of the plainsmen in Sikkim the Hindus constitute more than 90.0 percent of their total population. The remaining 10.0 percent plainsmen are distributed among the various religious groups like Christianity, Islam, and the like. Of the non-Hindu plainsmen, the Muslims are the most dominant numerically.

What distinguishes the religious pattern of the plainsmen from that of the hillmen is that the former group of people have no followers of Buddhism and the so-called 'Animism'. On the other hand, there are very few Muslim followers

among the hill communities in Sikkim. In fact, they can be easily counted in finger tips in any particular locality.

Hinduism is certainly one of the most dominant religions among the hillmen but it is certainly not the most dominant. Buddhism has received the royal patronage for about three hundred years in Sikkim. It is still a very important religion though numerically it is not as important as Hinduism. Most of the hill-tops of Sikkim are studded with chhortens, manis, prayer flags, etc. and the monasteries have a more prominent presence than the Hindu temples. Everywhere in Sikkim one encounters a Buddhist monk more frequently than a Hindu priest. Therefore, it is quite natural for any visitor to Sikkim to develop some interest in Buddhism and to get the impression that this religion is dominant.

There is another important dimension of the religious distribution of the hill people. The so-called 'Animists' are officially and often mistakenly clubbed together with the Hindus. Even the 'animists' find it easier to declare themselves to be Hindus than as animists because

there is no composite name for this religion and the various names used by them in their own languages are not accepted as 'religions' for administrative purposes. Some of them are also shy of being known as an 'animist'. Hence, officially they are known as Hindus only. Here, the contention of many scholars is that Hinduism cannot be defined and it very much includes the 'animistic' practices also. This is largely true but there is a growing consciousness among some of the groups practising 'animism' about their separate status in the eyes of the ignorant Hindus who look down upon it.

What perhaps needs to be highlighted in the context of religion is the multi-religious character of both the hill and the plains communities. The number of followers may be varying but there are members from both the hill and plains communities in almost every religion like Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity. It is significant to note that even the small religious denominations like Pranami Dharma, Kabir Panthi, B'Hai, and others have some members in both. The religious intermixture is perhaps one of the most concrete bonds between them.

(7) Language

Table 6 given in Chapter II has clearly shown that the Hindi-speakers constitute more than three-fourth of the total plainsmen. The remaining one-fourth is represented jointly by about a dozen linguistic communities. But in fact this is only the picture that has emerged from the census enumerations. In actual practice, the linguistic situation of the plainsmen is quite different from what has been just projected.

The so-called Hindi speakers actually represent two major communities known as the Marwaris and the Biharis. As already stated, the Marwaris have a dialect of their own, which is difficult to understand by a pure Hindi-speaker. Similarly, the Biharis are actually divided into two major dialect groups known as Bhojpuri and Maithili, neither of which is, again, easily understandable to a pure Hindi-speaker. In other words, the so-called Hindi-speakers are a group of assorted people actually speaking the Marwari, Bhojpuri, and Maithili dialects of Hindi. However, it should perhaps be pointed out that all the members

speaking these dialects know Hindi fairly well and use it frequently as a link language between themselves.

The speakers of the so-called other languages have as a matter of fact only a rare opportunity in Sikkim to speak in their own languages. Being few in number and often living at distant places, it is virtually impossible for them to meet each other frequently and speak in their own languages. But it should be noted that they have not forgotten their languages because they have a close and regular contact with the people of their communities.

Even the local peoples, particularly those who are educated or who live in the urban areas can manage to speak in Hindi fairly well but the language which is most widely spoken by the hill communities is Nepali. Until 1950s, many Sikkimese could not speak or understand the Nepali language very well. As a matter of fact, there are still some pockets in North and West Sikkim where the local people cannot speak in any language other than their own. By and large, the hill people of Sikkim have four major language groups - Nepali,

which is the lingua-france of Sikkim as a whole; Limbu, which is widely spoken in West Sikkim; and the Lepcha and Bhutia languages, which are also widely spoken in North Sikkim. These three non-Nepali languages have received a renewed attention of the government today.

The Nepali language is in fact not only the lingua-franca of the three hill communities and other plains communities in Sikkim but also in areas like Darjeeling and Dooars. It is recalled by old informants from the plains communities that they initially spoke with the local people in the Hindi language but very soon they picked up the Nepali language and began to use it as a medium of communication. The post-1975 migrants also used Hindi but many of them could converse in English as well. Today, there is hardly any plainsmen living in Sikkim and yet not knowing the Nepali language. Hence, the widespread use of this language has bridged the communication gap not only within the plains and hill communities but also between the two.

In this regard, a special mention must be made of the Marwaris. The older generation Marwaris in particular can switch on to a number of languages like the Marwari, Hindi, Lepcha, Bhutia, and the Nepali smoothly. Their capability to learn the local languages has not gone unappreciated not only by the local people of Sikkim and Darjeeling but also that of Arunachal Pradesh and Bhutan. Many of them can speak the Lepcha and Bhutia languages so easily that the Nepali neighbours remain baffled because they cannot manage more than a few words of these languages. The learning of the local languages by the Marwaris and learning them so well may have been a strategy for their control over the economy of the local people if not the people themselves but this has certainly contributed to building a healthier socio-cultural matrix in Sikkim and other such Himalayan areas where the Marwaris have settled for trade or business.

Finally, it may be added here that I have noticed the children of the Marwaris and Biharis playing about the streets and lanes and the language they spoke in was Nepali only. This

was also found true of the school going children. The children belonging to the plains communities do not have separate schools to read in. They read in the same schools where the local children also go. And the local children being more in number in all the schools and collges the influence of the Nepali language on the new generation of the plains communities has been significant and there is every likelihood that it will be even more so in future.

(8) Dress

The plainsmen are often called dhotiwala, meaning loin-clothesmen, by the hillmen including the present Chief Minister of Sikkim, Nar Bahadur Bhandari in some of his speeches. But the loin-cloth is more a symbol than a dress actually used by the plainsmen. The very climate of most of the towns in Sikkim does not encourage the wearing of such thin loin-cloth by any person or community there. Thus, it is basically the older generation Marwari males who wear the loin cloth as lower garment and shirts and coats as upper garments. There can also be seen some Biharis

wearing loin-cloth sometimes but wearing of the one piece cloth called lungi is more common as the lower garment for them. The shirts they wear are slightly different from the western shirts in the sense that they have a bigger front pocket and two large and long side pockets. Even the length of such shirts is much more than that of the western ones. Their coat is also not identical with the western coat and it is better known as Nehru coat.

The youths and children among the Marwaris and the Biharis neither wear a loin-cloth nor the one-piece cloth called lungi. They are known to be ashamed of wearing them and take pride in wearing the western shirts and trousers only. The women among them wear sari and blouses but the younger ones are found to have a preference for salwar kameej. They do, however, wear sari after their marriage but seldom before it.

The Lepcha, Bhutia and the Nepali communities have their own special male and female dresses. But majority of them do not wear their traditional dresses. The common dress for most educated

and urbanized males of these communities is, as true of the plainsmen, the shirts and trousers only. In North Sikkim, however, many Lepcha and Bhutia people are often seen wearing their traditional dresses but even there it is more often the females and the older generation members who are found to be wearing their traditional dresses. Among the Nepalis too, it is mainly the older generation members who wear the traditional dress and cap.

The females among the hill communities have gone in a big way for the dresses like sari and salwar kameej. Wearing of the trousers by them, specially the youths, is also not uncommon. On the other hand, the Bhutia female dress called bakkhu is no longer the exclusive dress of the Bhutia women: the local Lepcha and Nepali women also wear this dress very often.

In short, there is a high level of homogenization in respect of dress irrespective of the cultural and historical background of the various local and migrant communities living in Sikkim today. Instead of each community wearing its own

traditional dress the most popular dresses for the males are trousers and shirts and for the females, sari and salwar kameej. Another interesting aspect of this homogenization process in Sikkim is the wearing of the western coat on the top of the traditional dresses like dhoti-kameej for the plainsmen and daura-suruwal for the numerically dominant Nepalis. And for the elites of Sikkim, the western suit and neck-tie completely overshadow their own cultural dresses and backgrounds.

Therefore, the dhoti or loin-cloth cannot be considered as the dress of the plainsmen except, symbolically. Even the symbolic use of this term for all the plainsmen is quite inappropriate because loin-cloth is not the traditional dress of all the plains communities. It is significant to note here that it is also the traditional dress of the Nepali high castes, particularly the Brahmins, who owe their origin to the plains of India only. Hence, the politics of dress seems to have nothing to do with the ecology of dress, particularly in Sikkim.

(9) Food Habits

The food habits of a migrant community depend partly on the tradition which it represents and partly on the availability of food articles in a new place. With regard to this, it is perhaps risky to either support the "cultural determinism" or the "ecological determinism" theory. This is because food habits tend to change over generations if not within a generation. Even when the foods conventionally eaten by a migrant community are not available in a particular area it often adapts the local foods to its traditions. And in Sikkim, where the infrastructural facilities are well developed today, it is not at all difficult for the plainsmen to conform to their traditional food habits.

Traditionally the plainsmen, particularly the Marwaris, are known to be vegetarian and teetotaller but not other plains communities. The Biharis, for instance, have a widespread habit of alcoholism and eating non-vegetarian food. They are not, however, believed to eat beef and pork but mutton, chicken, eggs, and fish are permissible in their society.

Barring these two plains communities, it is very difficult to generalize on the food habits of other plains communities. There are families among them who do eat beef though traditionally they are not supposed to. Among them, particular mention may be made of those who are married to Lepcha and Bhutia women and those who are Christians. The one thousand odd Urdu speakers from the plains being Muslims have no restriction on eating beef but pork is a taboo for them. On the other hand, the Hindu plainsmen including some Bengalis are known to relish pork. And alcoholism is more a matter of individual taste and habit than a cultural trait among them in Sikkim,

Among the hillmen, including those who have migrated from Darjeeling and Dooars, vegetarianism is practised but to a limited scale. There are many Nepali high caste members who are reported to be strictly vegetarians like the orthodox Marwaris. There are also people belonging to other Nepali castes like the Rai and the Mangar, who have some followers of the vegetarian sects of Hinduism like Pranami Dharma and Kabir Panthi.

Such people strictly avoid non-vegetarian food and alcoholism. Alcoholism is in fact a taboo among many Christians also such as those belonging to the sects like El-Shadai and Penticostal.

Most of the hillmen are otherwise both non-vegetarian and alcoholic. Alcoholism is particularly reported to be popular among the tribal societies like the Lepchas and the Bhutias and so is non-vegetarianism. A comparison with the Muslims among the plainsmen can perhaps be drawn with the prosperous Nepali caste called the Newars. Like the Muslims, the Newars do not eat pork while most other Nepali castes and tribes avoid beef. Buffalo meat is supposed to be the most prestigious among the Newars.

Smoking does not strictly come under food habits but it is generally included under any discussion on food habits. With regard to this, it may be pointed out that smoking is more common among the plainsmen, barring the Marwaris, than among the hillmen. The hill tribes in particular have very few smokers even today and this habit is believed to have been rubbed off by their Nepali

neighbourers. But even among the Nepalis, smoking is not an obsession as it is found among some of the tribes in north-east. Among the plainsmen, smoking of bidi and chewing tobacco are very well known among the Biharis while the Bengalis are particularly noted for their cigarette-smoking habits. As a matter of fact, smoking is catching up fast among the town dwellers, particularly the youths irrespective of their caste, creed and religious backgrounds.

Further, it may be noted that what has been described above is more ideal than actual. In actual practice, deviances from the norm are always reported. For instance, some of the teachers from the plains of India, who are professed Hindus and often belonging to high castes, are reported to be avowed beef eaters and alcoholic. In fact, there are some who lightly remarked that the plainsmen have become more non-vegetarian and alcoholic than the hillmen themselves. This is certainly an exaggeration but it also means that a part of it is true.

On the basis of the above discussion on the food habits of the plainsmen as well as the hillmen in Sikkim, the binary model of Levi-Strauss is difficult to extend to Sikkim. One cannot just classify them into vegetarian and non-vegetarian, alcoholic and non-alcoholic, beef-eating and not, pork eating and not, etc. Even if we confine ourselves to any particular community, whether from the plains or local, such binary oppositions are difficult to find in all respects.

Such a laxity cannot however be attributed to the expected anonymity in an urban set-up. The Sikkimese towns, excepting Gangtok, are fairly small and almost everyone knows the inhabitants of his town. Though food is often a private matter of a ^{family} ^ the small-town situations do not allow freedom to those who want to experiment with new food habits. That some plainsmen have taken to the foods and drink not usually permitted in their native societies is perhaps because the hill Sikkimese society not only permits but also encourages such experiments. In many

cases, it may also be due to loneliness, strain and anxiety of such migrants.

(10) Attitudes

Attitudes being a subjective feeling of persons, groups, or communities about another group of persons or community, it is difficult to make any definite statement about them. For judging the attitude of one about another, stereotypes are usually taken as the basis but this cannot be a strong criterion. Above all, attitudes are classified into subjective judgements like 'good' and 'bad' or 'neutral', or 'superior' and 'inferior', and 'advanced' and 'backward'. But the very classification of such attitudes into the above categories tend to be based on subjective judgements of the researcher.

Yet social psychologists in particular put a lot of emphasis on the study and measurement of attitudes. About half a dozen attitude scales are available in social psychological literature but such scales neither help us to understand the social background of the people bearing different

attitudes nor do they help us in changing or improving their attitudes.

Despite such problematics related to the study of attitudes it is nonetheless an important cultural variable. Attitudes are not just formed in a day: they take a long time to form and crystallize. Hence, it may be briefly discussed here in the context of Sikkim.

On the basis of my limited field experience in Sikkim, I believe that some attitudes are built in a migrant community much before they actually migrate. Such attitudes are formed on the basis of whatever they have heard from the people visiting their places of origin. Hence, in a way, the attitudes of a few individuals get transported to distance places and which are retransported by the people migrating afterwards. This process goes on giving attitudes an almost stable form.

Most attitudes are derived from what a society gathers about another society's cultural practices like food habits, marriage practices, sexual relations, religion, language, dress, and

so on. Normally, if such cultural traits and practices are different from what a community holds to be ideal it tends to consider them as bad, and good if they tend to conform to their own value and cultural systems.

The attitudes like good and bad can be merged with the superior - inferior classification of attitudes. If the cultural practices and norms of the native communities are considered 'bad' by the migrant communities the latter also tend to consider themselves as superior and vice-versa. Now, with regard to such attitude classification, it may be grossly generalized that the plainsmen in general have a superior feeling vis-a-vis the hillmen there. Though the superior - inferior feeling is also found within the plains and hill communities what seems to matter more is this feeling between the migrant and the local communities. It is the politicization of such feeling and attitude that was largely responsible for the ethnic divide between the Bengalis and the Nepalis in Darjeeling, the Manipuris and the Kuki-Naga tribes in Manipur, and the Khasis and the Dakhars in Meghalaya, and the like.

But a close observation reveals that such attitudes are very much there within the plainsmen and the hillmen in Sikkim or the migrant and the native communities there. To illustrate the case of Sikkim, a few points may be noted here.

The Marwaris by and large consider the Biharis as 'inferior' to them. The Bengalis on the other hand often treat the Marwaris as 'inferior' to them. The Nepali high caste members similarly treat their low caste members or even the Lepcha-Bhutias as 'inferior' to them and the latter tribes, in turn, consider the castes like the Kami, Sarki, and Damai as 'inferior'. Thus, the attitude difference between the migrant and the native communities there can also be very much extended to the inter-plains and inter-hill communities.

It has been briefly mentioned in the beginning of this chapter that the people from Darjeeling considered themselves superior to the people of Sikkim. They belong to the same cultural group, speak the same language, and have the same food habits. Despite this, the higher level of literacy and greater participation of the hill people of Darjeeling

in literary and cultural activities has given them the false reason to feel superior to their brethren in Sikkim. And, finally, there is also seen the same sort of dichotomy between the urban and the rural dwellers in Sikkim and Darjeeling. The former consider themselves more advanced than the latter.

It is also important to note whether or not a particular community, caste or tribe admits itself as inferior. For instance, with regard to the Marwaris, the Biharis do have an inferiority feeling but the same cannot be said, with equal confidence, about the Bengali attitude towards the Marwaris. Similarly, the Lepcha-Bhutias are often considered as inferior by the orthodox Hindus but they do not suffer from the inferior status accorded to them. Some of them, on the contrary, discuss some of the cultural habits of such orthodox^{do} Hindus like cunningness and treachery with considerable derision.

(11) Orientation

The orientation of a migrant community depends partly on its own level of socio-cultural adapta-

tion and partly on the socio-cultural environment of the host society. In certain states of India like Sikkim and Arunachal Pradesh it is even influenced by some special constitutional or legal provisions made on behalf of the native tribes and communities. Theoretically, the orientation of a migrant community is expected to be directed towards their native place for quite some time after their migration. After that, the orientation is expected to shift its direction towards the region of their inhabitation. It is implied here that such a migrant community will have had some degree of economic as well as socio-cultural adjustment with the local milieu by then.

But the Sikkimese experience shows that no such theoretical proposition can be made about the migrants as a whole. For instance, the Biharis and Marwaris migrated to Sikkim almost at the same period but they have different economic orientations. Orientation can further be conceptually divided into economic and cultural and the two may not go always hand in hand. Let me illustrate

these statements with some examples.

In Sikkim, almost all the plainsmen are culturally oriented towards their native places. They celebrate most of the festivals and rituals celebrated by their native people but seldom participate in the local cultural and ritual functions. They have their own priests, own festivals, etc. though some of them invite the local priests and some of the festivals are the same as that of the locals. They mostly acquire their spouses from their own places of origin and only a few of them have married the local hill girls. Whether it is for their superior feeling or the crisis of identity but they are by and large oriented towards their places of origin only.

With regard to their economic orientation, however, there are perceptible differences within the plainsmen. The Marwaris, for instance, are economically oriented towards Sikkim itself in the sense that whatever profit or surplus capital they earn is reinvested within Sikkim. The source of such capital may have changed or they may not

reinvest in the same business but the capital remains very much within Sikkim. But other plains communities, barring those who are married with local women and settled there, are very much oriented towards their places of origin only. The savings are remitted back to their native places for supporting their families back home or for buying oxen or lands as the Biharis do. The reasons for such remittances may vary from community to community and family to family but they do not plough back their savings in Sikkim. As a result, a large sum of money is siphoned off from Sikkim every month or so.

The following table may be presented to show how closely do the plainsmen interact with the people at their places of origin.

Table 10. Frequency of respondents' visit to their native places, 1989

<u>Frequency</u>	<u>No. of Respondents</u>	<u>Percent</u>
Twice in a year	62	30.0
Once in a year	110	53.4
Once in two years	5	2.4
Occasionally	22	10.8
<u>Very rarely</u>	<u>7</u>	<u>3.4</u>
Total	206	100.0

Source: Fieldwork

Table 10 given above shows that 30.0 percent of the respondents visit their native places twice in a year and 53.4 percent once in a year. The percentage of other categories of visitors to their native places is only 16.6. Thus, on the basis of this table, one can conclude that the plainsmen have a strong backward pull. This can be taken as one of the criteria of their low socio-cultural adaptability.

The above table, however, does not include figures on those who keep in regular touch with their family members and relatives with the help of trunk-calls and letters. It was not possible to collect data on such matters but it was learnt that telephone calls between them in Sikkim and their relatives far away was common.

Compared to the migrants from the plains of India, the migrants from Darjeeling and Dooars are obviously in an advantageous position to visit their places of origin. But since most of them have some relatives there in Sikkim itself, they often do not feel the necessity of going home every now and then. They do, however, visit their

natal families whenever possible and particularly during festivals and other such major occasions.

Conclusion

The above discussion on the socio-cultural matrix of the plainsmen vis-a-vis the hillmen in Sikkim may be summarised with the help of the following three figures.

Figure 1. Acculturation of the Plainsmen and Hillmen

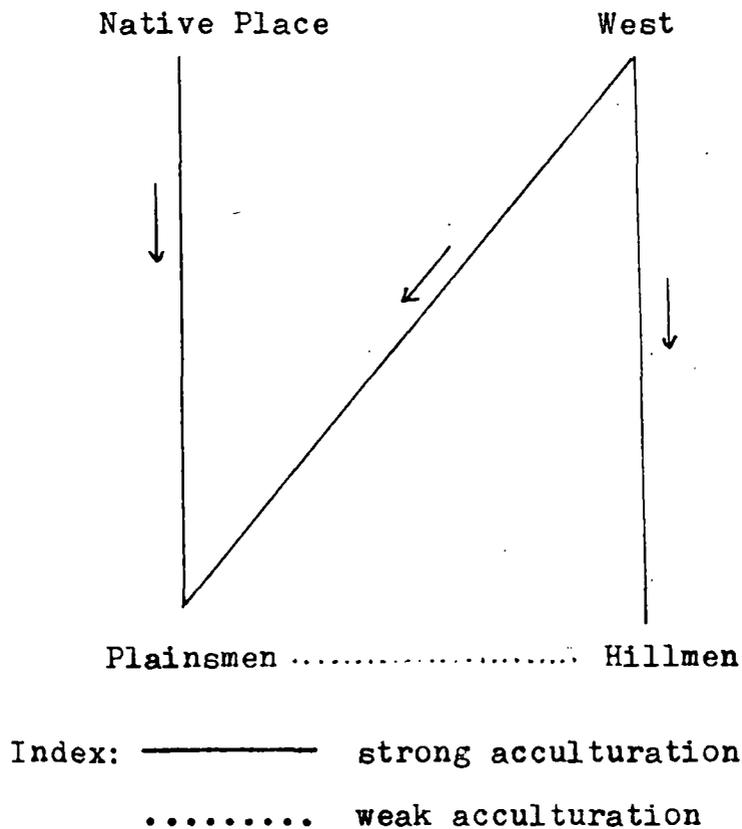
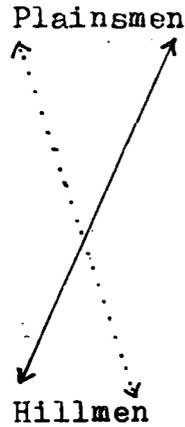
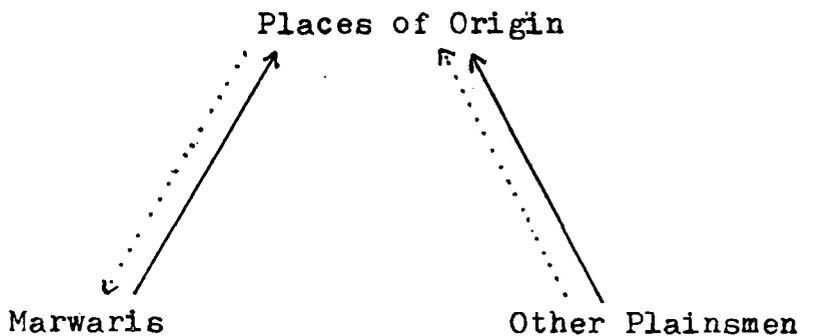


Figure 2. Interaction of the Plainsmen with the Hillmen



Index: ——— Occupational interaction
..... Cultural interaction

Figure 3. Orientation of the Plainsmen



Index: ——— Cultural orientation
..... Economic orientation

Figure 1 given above is intended to show that the plainsmen and the hillmen have been constantly borrowing cultural traits from the West but there has been negligible cultural exchange between the plains and the hill communities themselves. The plainsmen are also constantly reinforced by the people in their places of origin but there is no such dependence in the case of the hillmen from Darjeeling or Dooars.

Figure 2 shows that there has been close economic interaction between the plainsmen and the hillmen but this is not reinforced by cultural interaction. True, no culture exists as an "island" (Boon 1982:15) but the interaction is really negligible enough to be ignored.

Finally, Figure 3 is presented to depict the orientations of the plainsmen in Sikkim. The figure shows that the Marwaris are economically orientated towards Sikkim itself whereas culturally towards their native place only. On the other hand, the non-Marwari plainsmen are both econo-

mically and culturally oriented towards their native places.

The above three figures being gross representations of the socio-cultural matrix of the plainsmen in Sikkim, the details discussed in this chapter could not obviously be brought out. However, one of the possible roles of a sociologist is to build models out of a myriad of complex details. It is only through model-building, even at the cost of factual details, that one can probably strive towards theorisation proper.