

## CHAPTER -3

### CULTURAL SYMBIOSIS AND ITS IMPACT ON THE HILL WOMEN.

#### 3.1 Introduction:

The colonial paradigm in Darjeeling presented a different world altogether for the aboriginal as well as the migrant women who carried memories of different worlds with them. It was the fusion of these multiple worlds that created a new image of the local women who reacted spontaneously, contributing to the liberal, cosmopolitan identity of the hills. They were subject of study as 'natives' or migrant settlers belonging to various races and tribes in accordance to the colonial classification. These colonial writings harping on recorded facts relied less and less on oral records, myths, legends, traditions as great narratives or the local papers to study the reaction, real position of the native women as part of the societal structure of Darjeeling hills. Instead of accepting the *universal subordination theory* of woman that came to us from the west we should be aware that women diverge in terms of how race, ethnicity, customs and usages, historical experience and geopolitics affect them. All these factors need to be part of the framework in gender analysis and in determining the native representation of the hill women during colonial rule. Therefore the work here has been divided into nine parts in order to have an explicit and cross-culturally applicable definition of their status and power. They are (a) the background of the various tribes and races; (b) the status and position of the hill women; (c) costumes and ornaments; (d) childcare in the hills; (e) attitude towards sex and related matters; (f) inheritance rights; (g) marriage customs; (h) childbirth and the period of pollution (h) and the impact of the cultural diversity on the position of women.

The population of Darjeeling had considerable increased from a 100 heads in 1835 to 10,000 in 1850.<sup>1</sup> The population rose to 92,141 in 1881. However this data is not reliable as there was immense concealment of females in 1881. Many of them fled on the census night over the frontier to Nepal. Labourers absconded from the tea gardens due to panic and other causes. This may be due to the fear for the unknown the locals had for the newly introduced programmes like census recording or vaccination drives by the British. The census figures for 1891 were more scientific and the hills recorded a

healthy population of 2,23,314 in 1891. The males recorded were 1,23,046 and females were 1,00,268. There was phenomenal population growth in Darjeeling District from 1891 to 1921.<sup>2</sup> By 1941 it stood at 199,891 males and 1,76,478 females in the District. The Darjeeling subdivision alone showed a total population of 1,47,327 in the year 1941 which included 76,710 males and 70,617 females.<sup>3</sup> The coming together of these various races and tribes was bound to have to have a repercussion on the lives of the native women in Darjeeling, bringing about a change in the cultural traditions and customs to a certain extent and evoking a response from them to the colonial policies and changes. The growth in the population in ht Darjeeling Sub-division is given below in Table 3.1.

**TABLE 3.1. GROWTH OF POPULATION FOR THE DARJEELING SUBDIVISION FROM 1901-1941.**

Subdivision	Year	Total	Male	Female
Darjeeling	1901	16,924	10,241	6683
	1911	19,005	11,631	7374
	1921	22,258	12,877	9381
	1931	21,185	12,101	9084
	1941	27,224	15,203	12,021
Kalimpong	1931	12,682	8776	3906
	1941	17,252	11,958	5,294
Kurseong	1901	4,469	2418	2051
	1911	5,574	3126	2448
	1921	6,445	3275	3170
	1931	7,487	4014	3,473
	1941	10,375	6,387	3,988

Source- Census reports of Bengal for 1901, 1911, 1921, 1931, 1941.

### **3.1.1 Background of the various tribes and races:**

While examining the background of the original inhabitants of Darjeeling the Lepchas also known as '*Mutanchi Rongkup*' or the beloved sons of the Mother of Creation reveals the fact that they were the oldest inhabitants of Sikkim. These aborigines of the mountain forests surrounding Darjeeling regarded Sikkim as their fatherland. They are subdivided into the Rongs and the Khambas.<sup>4</sup> Lepcha legends tell us that they were actually from a land called *Mayal Lang*. The Lepchas or the Rongs believed that their primordial God (*It- mo*) created *Fo-dong-Thing* and *Na- Zom Nyu* out of pure virginal.

snow of *Kin-tsom-zang-bu-nyu-chou* (mount Kanchenjanga) and sent them down to live and multiply all over the region. Among their children *Thi-Kung* and his wife *Ni-kung-agal* were venerated as the grandfather and grandmother of the Rongs. The Lepchas entered Sikkim under the leadership of their king *Turve Panoo*. They were conquered by the Tibetans invading Sikkim. Another legend states that the *God of Kanchenjunga* created the first man *Nongyo* from nine elements and a female *Nuzong* as his partner. They were kept in paradise called *Ne Mayel Kyong* where physical relations were forbidden. When they disobeyed God they were sent down to earth called *Tarvong Partam* where children were born to them.<sup>5</sup> Other scholars believe that the original home of the Lepchas was mainland China from where they moved towards the South and settled in Assam, Sikkim and Nepal.<sup>6</sup> Professor Sten Konow is of the opinion that the Lepchas form one of the links which connects Tibetan and the Himalayan dialect into the Tibeto-Burmese language of Assam.<sup>7</sup> Religious hymns, songs and ancient folk tales were orally passed down generations and they spoke about the days of living in caves, ravines and eating fruits, tubers and flesh of wild animals.<sup>8</sup> They were of the Mongolian type around 5 feet to 4/8 feet with broad flat faces, depressed noses, eyes oblique, no beard, a little moustache, olive complexion with the boys and girls having a ruddy tinge with good looks.<sup>9</sup> They were the timid people, peaceful, disliking fixed employment and happy to live in the jungles. The Lepchas have been termed as the children of the mountains, free and happy, carefree, modest, with joyous disposition. They were fond of racing, hunting, quoits, wrestling and jumping. They were born naturalists, very poor agriculturalist with no ploughs and they were nomadic hunters.<sup>10</sup> With the coming of the British the Lepchas had to lead a settled life and practice cultivation and their population numbered 4000 in 1874 and 10,000 in 1901.<sup>11</sup> Lepcha settlements grew up at different places like Darjeeling town, Algarah, Gourbathan, Kurseong, Mirik etc.

A regular census of 1901 showed that the Nepalese numbered 1,34,000 and made up more than half the population. Of them the most numerous were the Khambus and Murmis. The Khambus numbered 33,000 and the title of Rai was conferred upon them as regional heads. The Rais belonged to the Mongoloid stock. Their language belongs to the Tibeto-Burmese. Rais found employment in the British army along with the

Limbus and Gurungs. Both men and women were engaged in agriculture, weaving of mats and baskets for local sale in the hills.

The Murmis numbered 254000 in 1901.<sup>12</sup> The Murmis or the Tamangs apparently did not come into general usage until the twentieth century. It has been mentioned in the Tibetan text of the early thirteenth century that they were a protogroup belonging to Gurungs and Thakalis.<sup>13</sup> These Tamangs were descendants of the Tibetan stock modified more or less by intermixture with the Nepalese. Tamangs were mostly cultivators while the women found employment in the tea gardens.<sup>14</sup> The next most numerous Nepalese caste were the Limbus numbering 14,300, serving as porters, herdsmen, farmers and traders.<sup>15</sup> According to the Limbu tradition their original homeland was in *Limbuwan* or the country of the Limbus in East Nepal from which Darjeeling District first received settlers. These Limbus feel that they belong to the bigger world of the Kirates.<sup>16</sup> They were of the Mongolian stock and are much mixed up with the Lepchas. Yet they were less Mongolian than the Lepchas and are taller, more wiry and resemble the lowland Turanians. They were agriculturalist producing maize, buck wheat and rice. The Limbus also spun, wove and dyed clothes.<sup>17</sup> Next in line were the Magars numbering 11,900 in 1901 and they were probably part of a very ancient influx of the Mongoloids. They acknowledged the overlordship of the Khasas, Rajputs and the Senas and thus began the process of their Hindunization.<sup>18</sup> Through intermarriage of the Khas males with the Magar women the Magars acquired the Khas language and habits without losing their own culture.<sup>19</sup>

The Gurungs numbering 8,700 as recorded in the Census of 1901 in Darjeeling were pastoral nomads and traders. These Gurungs coming from western Nepal were an amalgamation of several different people incorporating elements of both Tibeto-Burman and Indian-Aryan origin which could be seen in their religion and rituals.<sup>20</sup> Highest in the caste structure of the Nepalese were the Brahamins followed by the Chettris and the census of 1901 recorded Brahman population as 5,000 and the Chettris as 11,600. Traditional accounts state that the Brahmans and Rajputs fled to Chittoor and Kanauj during the twelfth century as a result of Muslim invasion and they settled in Nepal. Some married local Magar and Gurung women and were accepted as Chettris or

kshatriyas or warriors.<sup>21</sup> The Newars in the same period numbered 5,880 in the District and were traders, artisans, agricultural workers or domestic hands in the hills. The term Newar designate a number of former ethnic groups who have through centuries of intermingling formed a homogeneous community with common tradition of language and heritage. They have both Tibeto- Burmese and Brahmanic- Gorkha features.<sup>22</sup> The population of the hills during the colonial period also included the Sunwars or the Mukhias of eastern Nepal believed to be off-shoots of the Magars but deeply influence by the Chettri culture. Among the lower caste the most numerous were the Kamis numbering 9,800 in the District of Darjeeling mostly workers in iron and gold.<sup>23</sup> Kamis were the descendants of people who were punished for disrupting the agnatic unity called '*had phode*' (breaking of bones) by marrying agnatic lineage and heading towards liberalization or emancipation. They are endogamous and divided into Lohars and Sunars.<sup>24</sup> Mention must be made of the Damais numbering 4,600 in 1901' the Sarkis 1,800 and the Ghartis 34,500 by the census of 1901.

The Bhutias of Darjeeling numbered 9,300 consist of the Sikkimese Bhutias, the Drukpas of Bhutan, the Kagatays or Yolmos and the Sherpas or the Bhutias of Nepal.<sup>25</sup> The Sherpas of Solua Khambu originally from the Tibetan province of Kham,<sup>26</sup> were unalloyed Buddhist and they settled as cultivators, porters, weavers and traders. The Drukpas numbering 2,350 in 1901 were practically confined to Kalimpong as farmers and traders and since olden times they have thrived on the trans-Himalayan trade. The fourth class of Bhutias the Tibetans numbering 1,700 were migrants from the tableland of Tibet and were engaged in trade. Other groups were the Tibetan Muslims and the Indians who were Muslims by religion and they were from the plains who settled in Darjeeling intermarrying local women to make up the native population of the hills.<sup>27</sup>

### **3.2. Status of the Hill Women in the Family set up:**

The above mentioned multi-ethnic, cosmopolitan character of the hills have not changed over time in which most of the families have a joint family structure in which the women enjoys a great deal of authority as among the Lepchas, Bhutias, and the Mongoloid tribes among the Nepalese. For the Lepchas the family unit is an important

their lives and families are closely knit together. Although the Lepcha family is patrilocal and the father enjoys supreme authority, the relationship between the husband and the wife is based upon love and co-operation of domestic and farm work. Lepcha women have co-equal rights over property and decision-making in family matters. A striking feature of the Lepcha community is that they work hard for the community as a whole and are not at all individualistic or self-aspiring like the hardworking Sherpa community. The Lepcha girls have the right to adopt the surname of their mother. Lepchas prefer the joint family structure unlike the Sherpas and new houses are made only when the family increases in size and accommodation is required. Lepcha couples respect each other and the spouses address each other using titles or kinship term like the mother of so and so or the daughter-in law and avoid names unlike the Sherpas of Darjeeling hills.<sup>28</sup>

A Lepcha widow enjoys greater freedom and higher social status than her Hindu sisters. Widowhood is not considered unlucky or a curse as among the females in the plains and a Lepcha widow can remarry without any difficulty. However, the Lepcha women do not take hasty steps in matters of divorce as they regard marriage a ritual and not a contract like the Sherpas. It has been remarked that polyandry is not found among the Lepchas and a marriage ceremony is a serious affair.<sup>29</sup> The couple adjust well and a divorce only takes place when a compromise cannot be reached at the insistence of the elders of the family. In case of a divorce the lama pronounces the divorce and compensation is paid to the woman by the husband. In case of adultery the guilty party will have to pay the compensation. In Kalimpong it was a rule that in case a man drove away his wife and forced her to return to her father's house he had to pay a fine as the 'marriage price.' Similarly the second husband had to pay the former husband the 'marriage expenses' in case the wife eloped prior to getting a divorce or the family of the woman had to provide the former husband a suitable substitute in which case the payment made by the second husband went to the woman's parents.<sup>30</sup>

The freedom given to the tribal women is denied to the females in the Brahman or Chettri women among the Nepalese in Darjeeling hills. Among the upper caste

Nepalese the household is patrilocal extended family and they function as a unit with regard to sharing of labour, rearing of children, festivities, marriages, death rites and a common budget. Generally speaking these upper class women are confined and cannot take decisions or mix with others in society except on formal occasions. The birth of a daughter is welcomed in Darjeeling but the upper class Hindus prefer sons as they are needed to fulfil the funeral rites of the parents. The women's surname changes after marriage to the clan of her husband. Yet a widowed or a divorced woman will be accepted back in her natal home and may participate in family affairs. They look upon marriages as a spiritual bond and an irrevocable act, thus divorces are not approved. There is great tension between the married lady and her in-laws in an orthodox set up even in the liberal surroundings of the hills of Darjeeling .

The Chettris have a puja relationship with their sisters. The girl is worshipped by her parents and brothers and often receives gifts from them. Right from childhood the traditional Nepali male grows up to respect his mother and sisters, a sentiment quite absent in western societies. The males of the Chettri family have to worship even their maternal aunt on the death of their father. There are certain exceptions to this rule of honouring the female gender. For instance the pure blooded Chettris are to marry partners of a similar kind. If the Chettri male marries a non-Chettri woman, the wife is not allowed to smear tika during festivities on the forehead of the sons of a pure Chettri lady nor is she allowed to cook for her husband or her own sons once they wear the sacred thread. A divorcee or widow in a Chettri household can never enjoy the same status as a married Chettri woman.<sup>31</sup>

A sharp contrast is seen in the status of women belonging to the Magars, Gurungs, Tamangs, Limbus, Sunwars and the Rais among the Nepalese of the hills. There is more flexibility and adjustability seen among them where the old and young share the workload, joke and sing in groups. They live in large joint families but the family units are well balanced. These tribes are patriarchal in nature excluding the Limbus but very flexible compared to the upper caste. All these tribes and races allow the females to take part in the family economy like hulling the rice, weaving, planting of paddy,

weeding, harvesting, collecting fuel, looking after the livestock and cooking the family meals. Little girls follow their brothers to the fields and learn quickly. There is no strict division of labour. The wives help the husbands in running the household. The tribal women of the hills lead a very relaxed and adjusted lifestyle even when they are married. Children of a Limbu man by a Bhutia, Lepcha, Gurung, Sunwar, Magar or Murmi woman or the children of a Limbu woman by a man of any of these groups are admitted without question into the Limbu community.<sup>32</sup> This applies for the Rai and the Tamang women too. Consent of the society is shown by accepting the food given by her. This rule of adoption does not apply to the '*pani na chalna*' (low castes) women. The Gurung, Rai, Limbu, Tamang, Magar, Kami or Damai women are allowed to speak out and take part in the home management and contribute towards the family income.<sup>33</sup> Strong grandmothers are often seen ruling the roost. Mention may be made here that for these tribal women the colonial discourse of the 'oppressed women' does not apply. Such power enjoyed by the women and the surviving matriarch of the joint family is something totally unfamiliar to the superior discourse.

For the Gurungs, Rais, Tamangs and Limbus of the hills divorce is easily handed over without a fuss and no social stigma is attached to divorce and remarriage for women is not difficult. Among the Limbus divorce is quiet prevalent. If a husband divorces the wife it is known as *khemjong* and if the wife leaves the husband it is called *najong*. In the former case rituals are unnecessary but in the latter case the woman has to return all the ornaments given by the ex-husband. The Tamang divorce procedure is simple. A thread tied to their waist has to be broken and a fee paid for the divorce after which the couple may separate. The husband of the Rais or Tamangs may keep two wives, as this is not an uncommon practice in the hills. The wives live in separate houses but the second wife has less status than the first wife, and her children have less claim to the father's property. If we turn our attention to the Newars of Darjeeling hills, it is seen that they have a strong sense of ethnicity and identity and have strict rules regarding customs, traditions and festivities. Yet the Newar lady is free to divorce and remarry provided the man does not belong to the lower caste. Compensation is to be paid to the husband. It must be pointed out that divorce is neither encouraged by the Magars nor the Damais who term it as called '*sinkopengo*'.<sup>34</sup> The divorced Magar woman is

separated from girls married as virgins during a funeral nor is she allowed to make an offering to the dead. Second Magar wives do not receive sindoor from their husbands and are given glass bangles instead. Among the Kamis a divorce takes place only with social approval.

Unlike the tribal society the Indian Muslims in Darjeeling hills have strict rules for the women to remain indoors. The Koran commands her to make herself attractive for her husband and must satisfy his libidinal needs. She must obey her husband and the relationship between them is to complement each other. While Islam permits prevention of pregnancy it does not allow infanticide or abortion. A Muslim mother is greatly respected as 'Paradise lies at the feet of the mother.'<sup>35</sup> A peculiar feature found among the Indian Muslims of Darjeeling is that, intermarriages between them and the Nepalese women works out well and these women adjust to the teachings of Islam and leads a settled life. Widow remarriage is not looked down upon by the Muslim society. Just as the women's right to decide about their marriage is recognized so also is their right to seek an end to an unsuccessful marriage. But in order to protect it from hasty decisions under temporary stress certain waiting periods are observed by couples who seek a divorce. Three chances or pronouncement of divorce is given to the woman provided she has no contact with the husband. After which the husband cannot meet her during the period of *iddat*. Neither can he remarry her unless she marries another man who may divorce her. Women have the right to divorce on the grounds of ill-treatment and the husband has to return the gifts given to her previously. On grounds of adultery a man may divorce his wife and is solemnized by the Qasi.<sup>36</sup>

Unlike the higher caste Nepalese or the Indian Muslims of the hills of Darjeeling the Bhutia ladies go around unveiled, partaking in social activities and like the Lepchas are equal partners in the management of the joint family. Among the Tibetans, Drukpas, Sherpas and the Sikkimese Denzongpas of the hills there is great team work in the farm, money matters, trade and commerce. Girls are encouraged by their parents to work along with them. It helps to cultivate a sense of self-reliance and independence at an early age. The ladies of the house converse freely with visitors and dine along with male members without any shyness. Education of women was absent in Tibet except

among the very rich who kept personal tutors in the early twentieth century<sup>37</sup>. In comparison the Tibetan ladies in Darjeeling were encouraged by the missionaries and government to go to schools and scholarships were given to them.<sup>38</sup> The life and economy of the average Bhutia woman revolves around animal husbandry, cottage industry, agriculture or trade and commerce along with the family members.

The Sherpas of the Dareeling hills do not live in joint families but opts for the nuclear family which they regard as an effective unit like those settled in Sola – Khambu in Nepal.<sup>39</sup> Sherpa women are very industrious and good at setting up their own family business. The lady of the house commands high respect. The Sherpa wife enjoys greater freedom and higher status than the Hindu Nepalese women of the hills. They keep themselves busy and are even more industrious than the male members. Sherpa ladies address their husbands by their names. In matters of divorce the procedure is very simple. The divorce is usually an act of mutual consent and takes place in the presence of the relations of the wife. A thread is broken in a symbolic gesture and 1 rupee is paid by the woman as payment. Compensation is to be paid by the second husband to the first. However, it should be note that the wife cannot claim such payment from the second wife and the man has the right to introduce the two wives at home. Sherpa widows have to marry the elder brother of her husband but can remain free by a simple ceremony of disassociation. The Tibetans believe in easy divorce without any social stigma.<sup>40</sup>

In view of the points discussed above, it can be seen that the rich mosaic of culture in the hills, shows the existence of more than one discourse on gender conceptualisation, based upon traditions and religious background. Apart from the religious and family values, the spatial organization of the traditional upper caste Nepali family like the Brahmins and Chettris together with the Nepali Muslims separate the domain of the males from that of the females; while the tribal units like the Lepchas, Tamangs, Limbus, Rais and the Bhutias empower the women by allowing them to participate in the economic matters. These lead to a conclusion different from that of the western concept of the native women. Acceptance of the colonist discourse will only undermine the traditional rights, importance and flexibility enjoyed by these groups.

### 3.3. Costumes and Ornaments worn by the Hill Women:

As part of women studies it is necessary to study the colourful costumes and ornaments used by the hill women that are traditional and designed to keep off the cold. The Lepcha women wear their hair braided in two tails tied with silken cords or tassels. Their garments are coarse, silken or woollen, with an overall small sleeveless cloak, covered with crosses and fastened with silver chains.<sup>41</sup> The dress consists of two pieces of cloth held in place by a metal clasp or bamboo pins and a cloth girdle. Colourful *dompras* are worn by men and *domdyams* by the women. The *domdyan* consists of a piece of a rectangular piece of grey cotton hanging down from the shoulders and reaching below the knees called *dumjom*. A shirt of bluish white striped cotton and a silk sash called *nyom rek*. A long white jacket like garment with long sleeves called *tago* and a rectangular head dress of cotton called *thyak tuk*.<sup>42</sup> Before the introduction of factory items, weaving was done in a yarn called the *remi* which was extracted from *Urtica dioeca* (stinging nettle) called *ku-zoo* and coloured with vegetable dyes.<sup>43</sup> Lepcha ladies are extremely fond of ornaments like necklace called *tho* if made of gold or *leyap* when made of silver, wild boar tusk charm called *sa pik bu*, bracelets of metals and girdle pendent called *ja guk* and the simple chain called *leyap*. Precious and semi-precious stones, charms, idols, bones, teeth and hair of wild animals are worn profusely by women.<sup>44</sup>

The Brahman and Chettris have no particular dress of their own. The Brahman men prefer the *daruwal sural* with a waistband or a dhoti and a shirt. Women wear the *phariya cholo* tightened by a *patuka*. They decorate themselves with the Nepali ornaments made of gold and silver like the Gurungs, Rais, Limbus and Magars who love to wear the *potae* or glass beads of different colours along with a *tilhari* or *naugedi* placed at the base of the throat. Both glass and gold bangles are used by them and necklaces made of silver coins arranged in rows called the "*patna*". Silver rings are worn as anklets along with gold clips on their hair. The Rai ladies wear a velvet blouse called the *chowbandhi cholo* with a shawl arranged at one shoulder passing from the waist and a bag called the *ghalek* slung across their shoulders.<sup>45</sup> The Gurung women's traditional dress consists of a petticoat under a white tubular skirt plaited at the front

held securely by a velvet cloth in forming a triangle in front together with the *patuka*, *chowbandi* and the shawl known as *majetro*. The Tamang women in addition to the Nepali dress use the '*pangden*' or an apron like the Tibetans tied at the hips. The Tamang women's ornaments include the gold and silver earrings called *bhutil* or *kiru*, bangles called *singikarmu*, *muga* and *gahu*, silver amulets called *jantar* and the traditional glass beads the *pota*. The headgear is complete with the *sirphuli* and the heavy *sirbandhi*.

All Nepalese ladies delight themselves in using the reji or silver *chandrahari*, *dhungri*, *bulchior*, *lawangfuli* on their pierced noses; the *lurke* or *kean dhungi* on their ears. Rai ladies are known to carry the musical instrument called the *binayo* and *murchunga* tied to the ends of their blouses. The wide piece of cloth around their waist or the *patuka* is used as a pocket to carry things including the *khurpa* or the sickle for cutting grass. Magar ladies have an added item in the form of silver necklace embedded with coral. Unlike them the Newari ladies wear the *parsi* or the pleated *saree*, tied at the waist by the *jani* or the waistband. They wear a long sleeved blouse called the *misalan* and throw a shawl over their shoulders called the *ga*. Footwear is made of cloth and ropes. They pierce several holes along the earlobes to wear the *tuci*, *mundari*, *palpwari*, *tuci* and the *makaphosi*. Newar women avoid the traditional Nepalese *tilhari* adorning the *potae* necklace or the *dhungri* on their noses. The silver necklace called the *wo-sikha* has religious importance. Their hands are adorned with bangles and rings called *luchuri*, *bahi*, *baju*, *pancharatnachuri*. Ladies prefer to plait their hair in two.<sup>46</sup>

To this variety of ethnic costumes the Tibetan ladies gracefully walk around in different hues and colours of the *bhaku* or gown that has remained the same for several generations. *Bhaku* is worn along with a loose long sleeved brocade blouse called the *hanju*. Married women use the striped apron or *pangden* and woollen boots called the *doochas* during winter months. The headgear consists of a fish-shaped piece of felt reaching the forehead to the middle of the back decorated with all types of precious and semi-precious stones. Further from the temple area the felt projects on both sides and semi-circular pieces of cloth edged with fur cover their ears. This is called the *peyrak* and is a status symbol. Their jewellery is made of precious metals and stones. Mention

must be made of the special charm box called the '*gau*' set in colourful stones, corals and pearls in different shapes containing charms to ward off evil. This *gau* is suspended in a chain of pearls or agate called the '*zee*' and highly prized by all Bhutias. <sup>47</sup>

Similar to the Tibetan *bokhu* is the '*anggi*' worn by the Sherpa women with an inner blouse called *bangjur* together with the woollen boots. The married ladies use two types of aprons- one at the front called the *pangden* and the other at the back called the *gele*. In fact in Solu Khumbu which has an altitude of 18000 m above sea level the apron is made of sheep wool or yak hair called the *matti*. But in Darjeeling the apron made of wool or thick cotton serves the purpose.<sup>48</sup> The headgear is called the *muksha* and the cap the *shyamahu*. The silver belt called the *ketik* and silver ornaments known as the *kaedak* is widely used. Bangles and necklaces are made of corals, turquoise and agate called *zheepcha*. Hair is piled up in a bun.<sup>49</sup>

Similarly the Sikkimese Denzongopas wear the gown called *gho* and a loose shirt called *thego* tied with a colourful belt and a striped apron. A colourful headgear known as *thuri shambu* is also used. Heavy ornaments of precious metals and stones are preferred by these hill ladies. Shoes are made of sheep or yak skin.<sup>55</sup> The Drukpa Bhutias wear the *kira* a homespun gown made of cotton held at the shoulders by silver clasps joined by chains dangling lucky charms. A heavy coat of different design called the *yat* is used by them. Drukpa ladies cut their hair very short like the men at home.<sup>50</sup>

Like the Bhutias, the Tibetan-Muslims of the hills wear the traditional *bokhu* and the Tibetan ornaments. While the Nepalese married to the Indian Muslims wear the *sahwar kameeze* as Islam makes it compulsory for women to cover up their entire body without having any transparent clothing.<sup>51</sup>

### **3.4. Child care in the Hills:**

The overall impression of the family structure in Darjeeling hills is one of flexibility and accommodation between the young and the old and it is precisely this joint family pattern that helps the parents to bring up the young children and babies with the help of the elder siblings or the grandparents when they go out to work in the farm, plantation or

go for marketing in the local bazaar. Unlike the Indian plains there is hardly any difference made between the boy and girl child with the exception of the upper caste Nepalese and the Nepali Muslims. Children are treated affectionately and babies are weaned after a year and fed on rice gruel with mashed vegetables, pulses, soup, cow's milk, meat, oat or barley paste according to the income of the parents. Toilet training is gradual and hygiene is not much emphasized by the masses. Lepchas in the hills make good parents and the mother does not allow the child to cry for very long periods. Mothers carrying their babies on their backs go about uninterrupted doing the household chores or the farm work. As a result Lepcha children are quiet, happy and content. Both the parents share the responsibility for the children's upbringing. At the age of two plus the child is allowed to play outside the house with leaves, flowers mudpacks, stones bamboo pieces and they run about chasing butterflies and dragonflies with other children of the family or perhaps of the village.

Great attention is given to the Tibetan or the Sherpa children and they are sometimes even over-indulged and made to feel special by the entire household as the birth of a child is welcomed by them. These children spend their time playing with wooden toys, rag dolls, bow and arrows, marbles, clay models, catapult, housekeeping, singing songs, playing group games and skipping till they are sent to schools or are big enough to learn household chores. Unlike them the Brahman and Chettri families among the Nepalese desire the first born to be a boy child who is treated as an adult from the age of ten and made to follow strict caste rules. The little sisters accompany their mothers to the kitchen and pick up culinary skills. A Nepalese girl child of any caste by the age of ten can perform all domestic chores of child rearing, housekeeping, grinding corn, hulling rice, milking cows even cleaning the cowshed and carrying water or wood to the house.<sup>52</sup>

The Bhutia child enjoys a warm and informal relationship with their parents. They participate joyfully in all festivities and social gatherings in the villages no matter what religious background they may come from. While some of them both male or females help in the household chores, fetching water, tending the cattle, with the farm work or in the plantations, as porters depending upon the economic status of the families. Sherpa

children imitate their hardworking parents and contribute to the family income. The Lepcha, Nepalese and Tibetan children are courteous to their elders. The young girls are taught to serve food and drinks to the elders and visitors just like their mothers. A lot of social interaction takes place between both the sexes due to their participation in rituals, seasonal agricultural work, road construction works, festivities, in village fairs of in the group collection of fodder and fuel in the jungles. This free mixing of the youth helps them to choose their partners resulting in early marriages among them in the hills where the mean marriageable age is 16 years.<sup>53</sup>

### **3.5. Attitude towards Sex, Menstrual cycle and Pollution amongst the Hill women of Darjeeling Hills:**

There is a rather casual attitude towards sex in the hills of Darjeeling. The Lepcha children are aware of sex from a young age. The community does not forbid relationship between couples unless it should include nine generation of cousins on the father's side and four generations on the maternal side. Such forbidden relationships are considered as incest resulting in a family curse for generations. Should a Lepcha girl get pregnant out of wedlock and the child's father refuses to marry her then a religious ceremony frees the girl from all types of stigma and she can marry another man. Moreover chastity in adult girls previous to marriage is not very rigidly insisted upon.<sup>54</sup> With the growth of education such a trend is rapidly changing among the hill people.

The Brahmin, Chettri and the Indian Muslims of Nepalese and Tibetan origin are not allowed to intermingle with the male members outside the family in keeping with their religious traditions. On the other hand the tribal Bhutias, Sherpas or the Nepalese boys and girls freely mix and should a girl become pregnant the community puts pressure on them to define their union as a marriage after having adopted the girl as a member of their tribe or caste. Among them the Gurungs do not keep the girls and boys separate from each other. They regard the age of procreation for the boys to be fifteen/ sixteen years and for girls to be twelve/ thirteen years and sexual intercourse is permissible. In the hills of Darjeeling the debates in the form of singing songs and *dhan nach* performed during harvests provide an opportunity for the sexes to mix. Illegitimate

children among the Gurungs are not looked down upon but brought up by the child's father as his legal heir. Should a girl become pregnant then the man responsible must marry her or if either of the party refuses then compensation must be paid as in a divorce case. Among the Bhutia society the Sherpa parents do not treat the question of sex as a shameful act and the illegitimate child called the 'themba' child is taken care of by the girl's parents, until the child's father pays compensation or asks for the child at the age of four. The Sherpa woman can get a wealthy husband despite having a *themba* child who is very often adopted by the stepfather. Like the *themba* child the Tibetans treat the *chrubee* child affectionately.<sup>55</sup>

The response towards the commencement and recurrence of the menstrual cycle is varied among the hill folks having different cultural background. The Lepchas, Bhutias and the Nepalese or Tibetan Muslims do not observe pollution during menstruation and go about their normal routine. Some Nepalese tribes and races having Mongoloid background like the Tamangs, Gurungs and Limbus do not regard this cycle as a period of pollution except from the point of hygiene i.e. the women is allowed to enter the kitchen and serve family meals which is unthinkable for the higher caste women but refrains from visiting the place of worship. Gurungs however abstain from sexual contact during this period.

The strict attitudes of Hindu Nepalese have influenced the Rais to a certain extent. Rais consider the period of pollution for five days in which the woman does not perform *pujas* or touch pickled food for fear of contaminating it. Gardening is avoided for the same reason and avoids taking a bath for fear of catching cold as is commonly believed by the locals. Unlike orthodox Nepali Hindu families the Magar girl's first menstruation is not marked ceremoniously. She faces a restriction for fifteen days remaining indoors without touching the food or water containers at home. On the 7<sup>th</sup> day she is allowed to do the farm work after a simple purification with water.

The Brahman and Chettri, Kami and Damais observe strict rules on the onset of the menstruation cycle. The girl attaining puberty has to stay with her relations for a period of fifteen days. No male member is allowed to speak to her. Similar abstinence is

observed for seven days during her second menstruation cycle at home. Thereafter a pollution period of four days is maintained till menopause. Likewise the Sunwars strongly influenced by the Brahman and Chettri keep their daughter in a neighbour's house for a week and can only be brought back after purification rites by the priest. A feast is given at home. The Sunwar ladies maintain a pollution period of seven days thereafter.<sup>56</sup> With regard to the Buddhist Newars like the Chyame and Duiya Newars the ritual of *Barha* that is performed just before the onset of the first menses by the Hindu Newars is not observed. There are two types of *Barha* ceremony that is the *barha tayege* that is performed before the onset of puberty and second is the *Barha-chore-gu* where physical puberty coincides with the ceremony both in Nepal as well as in the hills of Darjeeling. The girls are kept in darkened rooms for eleven days where no male member is allowed to see them. On the twelfth day at dawn they are made to take a bath blindfolded ready to greet the Sun God to whom flowers are offered. The removal of the blindfold completes the purification rites. If the *Barha* ceremony takes place after marriage then the girl is sent back at the onset of her first menses. For the Newari woman there are no strict rules during her menstruation cycle and is allowed to perform all household chores or look after the stalls in the market and after the fifth day there is no pollution of any kind.<sup>57</sup>

### **3.6. Dowry and Inheritance:**

Strangely enough the institution of marriage is not looked upon as a burden of settling the daughter by marriage through payment of heavy dowry as in the plains, rather for them it is a welcoming event bringing in temporary gains for the girl's family. Women are offered a bride price in various forms like ornaments, money, a new set of clothes and utensils. The bride price depends upon the wealth and status of the groom's family and whether it is the first or second marriage for the bride in question. With regard to inheritance in the Nepali society the Brahman and Chettri women do not have a share in the property of the family but daughters are entitled to gifts from the parents and later her brothers due to the sacred relationship between them. Among the Limbus, Tamangs and Rais the father's property can be inherited by the daughters. Magars ladies even enjoy the 'pewa' or their share of the harvested crops, fruits or fowl given by their parents. The husband has no right over the woman's *pewa*, which is handed from

time to time by her parents. Once married the Magar woman acquires a share in her husband's property and looks after it, like the Lepcha widow, until her sons come of age. The widow however loses this right if she remarries. Among the hill Nepalese the Sunwar women receives dowry from her parents in the form of livestock, clothes and utensils depending upon the economic condition of the parents. While a Newari lady is entitled to her *stridhan* or the movable assets in case of a divorce. No bride price exists for the Kami or the Damai women, neither do they get a share of the property that is divided among the brothers.<sup>58</sup>

Bride price is a must for the Lepcha bride and they enjoy co-equal right over property and authority. No dowry is given for the Tibetan women when they marry unlike the Sherpa women who receive a dowry in the form of land, house, cattle or household items, which is not compulsory. This dowry is the bride's personal property that she can take away in case of the marriage breaking down. Joint earnings of the couple are equally divided but if there are children from the union then the divorced Sherpa woman has no right over it. If the Sherpa, Lepcha, Drukpa or Tibetan woman happens to be only child and the husband cannot meet the demands of the girl's family, then the girl remains in her father's house and the husband lives with her family, till he can pay or earn the money which entitles him to take the bride.<sup>59</sup> Unlike them the Sikkimese Denzongpas of Darjeeling hand over the entire property to the eldest son and the wife has no right over it. The younger brother inherits the property if the deceased brother has no heir.<sup>60</sup>

A bride price is paid by the groom of the Nepali/ Tibetan/ Indian Muslims of the hills called *mehr* in case of a divorce in future. The value of *mehr* depends upon the status of the contracting parties and is the exclusive property of the bride. Dowry is given by the bride's parents but is not regarded as compulsory in the hills. The husband is fully responsible for the maintenance of his family but the women's possession before marriage does not transfer to the husband and they even retain their maiden names. The wives have no obligation to spend on her family out of such properties or out of her income after marriage. Islamic law states that women is entitled to 1/3<sup>rd</sup> of the share of her father's property.<sup>60</sup>

### 3.7. Marriage Customs in the Hills:

If we now consider the nature of marriage customs in the hills it is interesting to note that it is the women who have been responsible for the little traditions followed in organizing a marriage. These traditions were orally transmitted down generations, and have greatly contributed to the cultural symbiosis enjoyed by the hill people. Marriage customs in Darjeeling are of different kinds- by arrangement, elopement of partners called *bhagaunu*, absconding with another man's wife called *jari biwaha*, widow remarriage that is not looked down upon and *bel biwaha* or marriage with the *bel* fruit as performed by the Newar girls before actual marriage. The least expensive way of marriage is elopement and it is rather customary for the boy and girl to run away and hide in a neighbour's house for some days until the boy sends his representatives with silk scarves, sweetmeat and drinks to the girl's house to get their approval and pay a compensation. The acceptance of the gifts symbolizes the permission given by the parents. This is followed by a ceremony of '*dhog bhet*' or introduction of the family members of both parties and blessings conferred upon the couple. The ceremony of smearing *tika* on the forehead of the girl results in actual marriage. The father of the bride may also take away his daughter before this ceremony without any stigma in case of disapproval. If a man absconds with another man's wife compensation or *janikal* has to be paid to the husband as directed by the village elders. Meat and drinks is given to the girl's parents. The most expensive type of marriage is that based upon arrangement, which differs from each other in Darjeeling. An ideal marriage in a Brahmin's family is between two previously unmarried couples not related to each other's clan in any manner. Through negotiations the horoscope of the couple is compared and the bride price is fixed. The groom's parents have to throw a feast before proceeding to bring the bride with all the fanfare including a procession and accompanied by the Damai musicians. The bride's parents receive the party warmly with refreshments. The *swyambar* ceremony or the garlanding of the couples follows this and the girl is given away by the parents in the ceremony called the '*kanyadan*' and the groom is presented with gifts. The next day the bride is taken to her new home and welcomed by the tika ceremony by the mother-in-law.

The Chettris of the hills have similar customs and the marriage alliance between the pure Chettris called '*jharra* Chettris' is a simple ceremony. If it is a case of elopement, the couple is required to worship the oil lamp and the brass pot or *kalash* in the presence of a priest. Should the woman be pregnant then even this ceremony is not performed. Widow remarriage is another simple affair in which the marriage takes place with the groom giving the bride a new set of clothes. The marriage of the Kamai, Damai and Sunwar are very much like a Chettri marriage conducted in the Hindu manner in the hills. The Kamis have hypogamous marriages but occasionally heterogamous marriages also take place. Unlike Gurungs the Sunwars do not allow cross-cousin marriages but one can marry his wife's younger sister or the daughter of his wife's brother. A man may marry his elder brother's wife too. After negotiations the parents of the boy send a representative along with gifts consisting of Rs 1, a goat, fowl, millet, salt, mustard oil and some turmeric to be offered to God and the parents of the girl. The married girl visits her natal home after two days and on the sixteenth day food and drinks is sent by her parents to her new home thus solemnizing the marriage.<sup>62</sup>

Marriages among the Gurungs are basically *jat* endogamous but there does exist hypergamous unions too. They prefer to marry within their own tribes and favour monogamous marriages. However polygamy and inter-caste marriages are a common feature in Darjeeling hills. They allow matriarchal cross-cousin relations. After negotiations the matchmaker is sent with gifts by the parents of the boy and the horoscope is consulted for the marriage date. On the main day the groom's party is welcomed and the bride is handed some money called '*saipata*' after which the girl's father has to wash the feet of all the patriarchal kin. The girl is given gifts, money and tika is applied on her forehead. The next day the bride is taken to the groom's house where she has to hand over some money to his sister in order to open the main door leading to the room lit by oil lamps and containing rice filled brass containers. Once the bride crosses the threshold a virgin girl picks up the rice grains in a winnowing plate called '*nanglo*.' Tika is smeared on the bride's forehead and blessings are showered on her. She returns to her parents only on the third day after which the marriage rites are completed.<sup>63</sup>

Magars are endogamous and they prefer to marry the daughter of their mother's brother. The matchmaker representing the boy's parents is sent with a wooden pot filled with curd and this is returned filled up with rice grains are the match has been approved. The meeting of the parents of the couple follows this and the boy's parents offer drinks, fowls, a goat, bread called *saleroti* and vermilion. Should the girl refuse to marry after this, the boy can demand compensation, or if she dies then the boy's family goes into mourning as if she were a part of the family. A day before the final event the '*bhatkurae*' is sent with the necessary requirements for a marriage feast by the boy's parents to the bride's house. On the marriage day the groom and his party are welcomed by the sprinkling of coloured rice, garlands and oil lamps. The couple garlands and applies tika on each other. The bride's father hands over the daughter to the groom who takes her to his place the following day. After a period of three days she is allowed to visit her parents. It is finally only during the *Dasai* festival that the elders bless the couple and the Magar wedding is completed.<sup>64</sup>

Tamangs emphasize on cousin marriage either matriarchal or patriarchal in which negotiations and approval that is sealed with the sending of gifts take place like other marriages in Darjeeling hills. The Tamang marriage party is noted for the sound of the *damphu* and dances along the way. The groom is welcomed with a cup of milk as a token of good omen and is seated besides the bride. Both are given food and milk to drink. This is followed by the *damphu* competition among the Tamangs. The Lama officiates the marriage and a grand feast follows. The next day the bride leaves her natal home and food and drinks welcome her. The couple is made to bang their heads three times; offer food to each other and exchange their chairs.<sup>65</sup> A ceremony of applying tika and blessings seals the marriage.

For the Limbus of Darjeeling hills the rules of exogamy goes by the male side and is supplemented by forbidding inter-marriage between persons descended in a direct line from the same parents as long as any relationship can be traced. In practice however while the rule forbidding marriage within the *thar* (sept) is most strictly observed, there seems to be much uncertainty about prohibited degree. A further complication is the restriction in inter-marriage arising in the *mith* relations i.e. self-made relations.

Members of the Murmi, Lepchas and the Bhutia tribe may be admitted into the Limbu tribe after approval of the tribal council.<sup>66</sup> Some Limbu men select for themselves by employing friends to arrange the price and the preliminaries, sending offering to the girl's parents to gain consent. On the marriage day the bride and the groom is made to sit side by side and the priest called the *phedangko* slaughters a hen and a cock, mixes the blood and sprinkles it so that the couple are blessed with a happy married life.<sup>67</sup>

While the Rais place great importance to marriages outside the family and also the custom of '*bagdaan*' whereby the girl's father or an agnatic kin must declare that the girl is going away thus breaking all ties with the agnatic lineage. The *bijawa* or the priest sanctions the marriage that begins with a feast at the bride's house. In the groom's place the couple have to walk over the freshly washed compound and blood is smeared over the threshold. Homage is paid to the spirits of the ancestors. Vermilion is applied on the bride's head and the *bijuwa* makes them eat fish and drink curd as it is considered auspicious.<sup>68</sup>

The Newars of the Himalayan region have a unique form of marriage, which takes place with the *bel* fruit at a tender age symbolizing their marriage to the eternal Lord Narayana. Thus a Newar is not considered to be a widow when her husband dies but becomes one in case the fruit is damaged. In this ceremony the girl is decked up as a bride and all the agnatic relatives shower her with flowers and rice. She is measured 108 times from top to toe with a yellow thread and it is coiled on her lap. The child is made to eat five mouthfuls of food. The following morning her nails are clipped and vermilion is applied on her head. She is made to go three times around a booth made of banana. The ceremony of '*kanyadan*' and the worship of the paternal aunt end the ceremony. At the appropriate age the *lami* fixes the marriage with the approval of the parents. He is sent with a silver box containing ten betel nuts, vermilion and a new set of clothes to the girl's house. There the family deity is worshipped after which the gifts are accepted and vermilion is applied on the girl's head. The groom's parents sometimes offer cash and sweetmeat called '*lakhamari*'. The bride's father welcomes the party without the groom and the next morning the bride bids farewell to her family by placing betel nuts in their hands. The family deity is worshipped once again and the

eldest male member touches the bride's feet and ties the anklet with the 'bagi.' The bride is carried away and made to worship the family deity of the groom and wash his feet. A bunch of keys are handed over by the mother-in-law symbolizing responsibility. Once again the family deity is worshipped before a feast is given. A visit to the local temple by the couple is a must to obtain blessing for their new life.<sup>69</sup>

The followers of Islamic faith in Darjeeling leave it to the male members to make the first move of asking for the woman's hand in marriage. It is permissible to meet her but the woman takes the decision about the marriage. The age of marriage is eighteen for the boys and thirteen for the girls. A Muslim may not marry his father's wife, daughters, or sisters, nieces or the one who fostered him. Neither should they marry an idol-worshipper. There are two types of marriages- fixed term marriage and permanent marriage. The meeting of parents along with a witness signifies an engagement. The boy's side sends jewellery, sweetmeat, fruits and clothes for the bride. On the main day the two parties sit separated by a curtain and if the bride agrees in front of the *qazi* the *nikhanama* is pronounced and the *mehr* or the bride price is fixed. The groom's relatives welcome the marriage party and the couple pays respect to the elders. The next day the bride's brother pays her a visit with sweetmeat and fruits. On the fourth day the woman may visit her parents accompanied by her brothers. In a fixed marriage the couple may separate or extend the term. In such a case the husband may not wish to bear the daily expense and they do not have mutual rights of inheritance and the *mehr* is not specified.<sup>70</sup>

Unlike an Islamic marriage contract the Lepcha marriages in Darjeeling is a sacred act, exogamous in nature. The marriageable age for them is between twenty-five to thirty years and women are often older than their partners. It is the mediation of the matchmaker called the *peebu* that settles the matter and this stage is known as 'nyombeth.' The engagement ceremony also headed by the *peebu* is called *nyom chitaro thap* and is an interesting ceremony where the boy's party carrying gifts of *chang* or millet beer, a bag of coins and silk scarves asks for the girl using witty metaphors. The acceptance of the gifts seals the relationship. On the wedding day the groom and his men bring gifts of meat, millet beer and money for the girl's mother, grandmother, the

priest and the village headman. The path leading to the bride's house is stocked with a pile of wood symbolizing acceptance and water filled bamboo jars suggesting life and the medicinal herbs to ward off evil forces. The groom and the best men are offered food regarded as auspicious. The *peebu* bends over to sprinkle water over the pile of wood and is followed by a feast. The gifts brought by the groom are laid out on a table. The priest or the *boomthing* blesses the couple and they are made to sip *chang* and *tormas* or oat cakes. The couple repeats the marriage vows and the relatives of the bride depart carrying the gifts given to them.<sup>71</sup>

A Bhutia marriage is fixed with the help of the horoscope. Marriages between the Tibetans are of three types monogamy, polygamy and polyandry. The clan member cannot marry with his own clan nor can first cousins marry except on the mother's side. The marriageable age for them is usually eighteen to twenty five for the boys and sixteen to twenty five for girls.<sup>72</sup> The negotiator or the '*barmi*' takes the gifts to the girl's house and if the match is approved a price has to be paid to the mother for the upbringing of her daughter. The bride's parents give a number of feasts and homage is paid to the Dragon King or the family deity. A man carrying the white flag or the *sipako* and throwing *tormas* to keep the evil forces away heads the bride's party. The escort is allowed to enter and after a while the bride and her people is welcomed. The bride is seated on the right side of the groom and the couple is blessed with silk scarves and gifts before the feast.

Similarly Sherpas cannot marry within their own clan or with Khambas or Yembas who are descendants of slaves from Tibet. The Sherpas propose in a formal manner and if accepted there is a ceremony of having *chang* together and should a child be born, the baby is regarded as legitimate. The final ceremony requires the exchange of silk scarves after which the bride is accompanied by her friends to her new home.

### **3.8. Childbirth and the Period of Pollution:**

The rate of fertility among the hill women is high as children are wanted by the parents to help with the household chores and supplement the family income. A barren housewife has to face the tormenting comments of family members and is regarded as

a curse in Nepalese society. But if a woman never bore any children it is not considered harmful by the Lepchas. It must be said that compared with the other tribes and races in the hills the Lepchas have low fertility and infant mortality is excessively high.<sup>73</sup> For the poor and average hill pregnancy does not bring them respite from the work load at home or from plantation work and they work till the time of delivery.

Lepchas of Darjeeling believe that birth takes place a year or so after marriage and that intercourse immediately after menstruation cycle results in conception. The soul of the child enters from the time of conception. The child's bones are made from the father's body while the mother gives the child blood and flesh. The child is born on the tenth month. Precaution is taken by the parents before delivery of not leaving any work incomplete such as fencing, gardening or knitting. During a solar eclipse the mother is not to touch her womb or twist any articles in fear of giving birth to a deformed child or one who suffers from epilepsy.<sup>94</sup> Lepchas permit sexual contact till the sixth month of pregnancy. The woman fears eating any animal that has been killed by another animal or any deformed fruit. They avoid the jungle at night and any house where a death has occurred recently. The woman should always be in a happy frame of mind and generous in all their dealings. Lepchas have the misconception that pregnancy does not weaken the strength of the woman and a miscarriage is regarded as the work of evil forces for which an animal sacrifice is considered necessary. So in order to avoid miscarriage an offering is made in the seventh month of pregnancy just as the Newars have a pre-delivery ceremony called *bajee nake wanegu* in which the expectant mother is given a feast by her relatives.

Hill children are usually born at home and not in the cowshed as is the usual practice among the Thakuris of Nepal. The family members, the father and the midwife assist delivery. Childbirth is not considered as polluting as in northern India nor are the traditional birth attendants regarded as untouchables, forced to work out of economic necessity. The soles of the woman is rubbed with an iron comb and the water droplets from the winnowing plate is put into her mouth for an easy delivery. Sometimes herbal pills are given to her. The child and the mother are given an oil massage. A tight piece of cloth is tied at her waist to bring her back to shape and fed with soup, millet beer for

increasing breast milk. Sometimes wet nurses are provided if the mother is unable to feed the child. The news of the birth of a child is greeted with a feast among the middle class.

Childbirth is considered to be polluting for a short term of three days but for the Brahmans, Chettris, and Kamis it lasts for eleven days and for Damais it is a twenty-one day period. The Sunwars observe pollution for a period which ranges from three to seven days., Magars for ten days, Tamangs for three to seven days, Limbus for three to four days, Rais for four days, Gurungs for three days, Newars for four to six days and Muslims for seven to twenty six days. During the period of pollution the child's mother is not allowed to touch any water container at home or any utensils. In the naming ceremony that follows the mother's brother plays an important role in blessing the child and blessing the child and offering money. The priest blesses the child with the ceremonious use of an oil lamp to ward off evil. After purification the child is ready to receive the blessing of the God of destiny who is believed to visit the new born at night. The Limbus on the other hand believe that the ancestral *Hang* kings come to establish the destiny of the new born while the Lepchas believe that the visit of the fairy king *Chumdarmit* can change the destiny either in a favourable or unfavourable manner. The pillows of the newborn babies are filled with mustard seeds, which is believed to shape their heads. The Muslims of the hills clip the child's hair on the 21<sup>st</sup> day when the naming ceremony *Halika* takes place. After a month the child is taken to the mosque where prayers are offered and a feast follows at home. The Nepalese of Darjeeling have a 'rice feeding' ceremony called *pasni* held at five months for the girl child .

### **3.9. Impact of the Cultural Diversity:**

So far we looked into all the possible culturally provided spaces and loci of power of the hill women. It should be kept in mind that it was inevitable that sometimes they underwent a change due to the intermingling of culture and reforms introduced by the British. The authorities viewed this cultural diversity in the hills as a disturbing element in the social fabric of the colony as the aborigines Lepchas faced a non-Lepcha society. They reported that in the hills the population consists of Nepalese, Bhutias and Lepchas with a few men from the plains. There were the Hindus, Muslims and some 300 Europeans and other Christians exclusive of the soldiers. Of them the Nepalese were

excellent cultivators and should the Bhutias and the Lepcha not learn the use of the plough, they would in time elbow the other races out of cultivable portions of the District. They were great gamblers and of them the Lepchas were good natured, softer and lazier race than the Bhutias. If not helped they were destined to be turned out of the district by the; most active counterparts.<sup>75</sup> The anxiety is also evident from a letter written by Mr. J. A. Graham. where he lamented and said, "....There are many influences around them these days to destroy their individuality and I am glad that my young friend and fellow worker Mr Gyan Tshering Sitling in through his interest in the language, trying to counteract them."<sup>76</sup> In fact the British authorities were aware of these changes and worried about the debasement of the Lepcha women as a result of immigration. They thought them to be 'naturally, exceedingly, gentle and modest who became the victims of the licentious – the fall of the Lepcha was complete'<sup>77</sup>.

It is clearly seen here that the colonial response towards the debasement of the Lepcha, was one of guilt and the authorities forgot their role in opening the floodgates of Darjeeling, where no efficient provision was made, for the survey and demarcation of the leaseholders or for the protection of the native interest. These omissions was bound to have a grave result in Darjeeling as the interest of the cultivating occupants was sacrificed in many instance.<sup>78</sup> In order to create a facade the colonial discourse presented Darjeeling as a paradise and the natives as gentle savages who needed to be rescued by the colonial masters. Lepchas were termed 'a dying race' as these women intermarried outside of the Lepcha tribe and they readily and easily adopted themselves to the husbands lifestyle and mannerisms and their off springs followed their lineage and the customs of Tibetans or Nepalese. The Lepcha women used customs, traditions, furniture, salutation etc. that were foreign to their culture.<sup>79</sup> The Lepcha lady like the other hill women did not hesitate to imitate the various ornaments or dresses worn by the others. Gradually we find the predominance of the comfortable *lungi* and the blouse comfortable to wear while at work. Owing to the increasing influence on the bazaar where piece goods were sold and entire garments were made on the sewing machine the former type of clothes known since the days of Campbell and Hooker were fast disappearing and falling into disuse. Few Lepcha women knew how to make clothes for the members of the family as they used to do in the past. The art of dyes

made of bark, shoot, roots and leaves had disappeared due to chemical dye.<sup>80</sup> Moreover their children adopted the Nepali language as their mother tongue. The colonial observation of the state of the Lepchas as a dying race have been challenged by the Lepchas who are of the opinion that their population did increase although slowly compared to other tribes and races in the hills and cannot be termed as a dying race and they have preserved their traditions, culture and most of all the Ring Rong language in the rural areas.<sup>81</sup>

The Lepchas who were originally animist adopted Buddhism. Looked down by the Tibetans and Nepalese they began to feel more at home with the Christian Missionaries and openness of the Lepcha society paved the way to their quick conversion. The missionaries regarded them to be 'hopeful' people to be brought under their cultural fold and help them spread it.<sup>82</sup> It has already been pointed out before that although the colonial construct emphasized on the difference it also showed the dimming of divisional lines as in this case where the local converts to Christianity were well received by the missionaries. Among the female missionaries it was Miss Golan who translated English fables into Nepali. Similarly the text book committee members namely Miss Gardner, Miss Barry and Rev. Duncan took great interest in education. While Miss Harrington and Mrs. Sutherland encouraged translation of the Bible and organised the Song Festivals of the Macfarlane Church where the natives participated with great enthusiasm.<sup>83</sup> The impact on the hill women was far reaching. There was a gradual awareness about health and hygiene with the spread of education by the Christian Missionaries. In fact all the races and tribes were in awe of the English masters. Leaving behind the women's social circle in their native villages in Nepal or Tibet where they had indulged in chatting, clearing the head of lice; singing folk songs; spinning yarns to their grandchildren or just relaxing to while away their time; they now had to quickly adjusted to the new circumstances, without completely surrendering their cultural values and imbibed new ways. The hill women noted the neatly kept lawns and pretty cottages. They adopted the English crockery instead of the traditional bamboo containers, chairs and table with laced cloth, curtains, better quality bedding and cots and leather shoes instead of going about 'stocking less and unshod'.<sup>84</sup> They found a change in their diet as they was increase in the intake of sugar, tea and vegetables

introduced by the British.<sup>84</sup>The local papers carried advertisement of dental care and optical health.<sup>85</sup> In this way the natives of Darjeeling hills were exposed to the modern changes. It is interesting to note that the majority of the hill women were not the 'Black Skin with White Mask' portrayed by Frantz Fanon or the 'hybrid and mimicry' variety as found in Bengal and expounded by H. Bhaba.<sup>86</sup>

For although it was trendy being quasi European in the urban region for a handful of the population, not all hill women jumped into this bandwagon. The rural pockets were practically untouched by the English mannerisms and the society remained deeply rooted in tradition. This factor was pronounced among the Sikkimese Denzongpas, Tibetans, Drukpas and Sherpas. They not only maintained their cultural identity with regard to their dress, ornaments, language spoken at home, food habits and religion but also intensified it making the Tibetan lifestyle respectable among the Hindu population of the hills. At the same time the mixing of the tribal and Hindu societies resulted in the exchange of cultural forms and rituals e.g. The application of vermilion or the *sindoor ceremony* during marriages were adopted by the Rai and the Limbus, the idea of menstrual pollution was observed by the Rai and the idea of the caste became ingrained amongst them leading to preference for a Rai bride or of a higher caste. Another example is of the Tamangs who are Buddhist celebrating Losar or the New Year along with the Hindu festival of *Dussehra* and the Tamang ladies using the *sindur* and *potae* which has always been part of Tamang culture.<sup>87</sup>This aspect has been criticized by a section of the Tamangs who wish to remain strictly Buddhist in practise.<sup>88</sup> The exchange of culture was bound to take place with the rapid growth in the urban population as well as in the tea gardens. Table number VII and VIII in the Appendix give us an idea of the increase in population in Darjeeling District in the urban and rural areas from 1901-1961.

What is important is that rapid urbanization in the hills resulted in the break down of orthodox social values, norms, customs that hitherto affected the status of the hill women. The joint family system which was once predominant had to break down giving way to the nuclear family due to employment opportunities in the towns. For these women opting out of the joint family resulted in more stress as the work load increased.

They faced the triple burden of childcare, domestic chores and a demanding employment as ayahs. Mothers must have found it difficult to breast feed their babies relying on a bottle feed, reluctantly looked after by the older sibling. These women were kept busy all the time lacking the relief providing spaces given by the traditional village society. Such spaces for the native women were definitely not in the agenda of the British.

Another effect of urbanization was the disappearance of some feudal practices that existed in Tibet and Bhutan like polyandry and concubinage. A very interesting feature is to be noted in a few women's writings in the early twentieth century bearing testimony to their responses to the changing situation. They wrote on the deplorable condition of women and the breaking down of marriages in the urban centres among the rich or due to differences in educational qualification of the couples and differences of age. A great deal of emphasis was placed on female education by H. Pradhan of Darjeeling.<sup>89</sup> Another letter written from Mirik criticized the increasing practice of prostitution in the town proper. The plight of women domestic workers of Darjeeling who found employment in the plain areas was highlighted by a social worker from Kurseong. All these writings by women carried overtones of social awareness among the people. These changes were a definite response to the educational efforts of the colonizer.<sup>90</sup>

From the above facts it can be summarized that there was a shifting of paradigms with regards to various aspects related to the socio-cultural life of both the migrant and the aborigines hill women in Darjeeling, which was on its way to modernization. No society whatever its historical background or social standing can escape modernization which is a universal process and Darjeeling hills was no exception. The rapid influx of varied migrants led to greater interactions between the various communities who came to settle in Darjeeling leading to the emergence of a new cosmopolitan socio-cultural pattern unique in many ways to the hills of Darjeeling. It can be said that the responses of the hill women to the new world amidst the colonial setting forged in them a new sense of identity and unity that would later make a definite mark in society. The emerging picture of the native women is astonishingly one of immense power for quick adjustment, resilience and strength. The traditional societies of the tribal ladies had

already invested in them a sense of social- economic liberty. Such power was unthinkable in western concepts for the eastern women. Their power was further strengthened by their work in the colonial enclave. Lagging back were the higher caste Nepalese women who had some traditional constraints. Yet such visibility of power for the majority of the hill women was evident only within the family structure. The same could not be said of them in the official normative structure prior to independence. The administration, political structure was still a male, colonial bastion. The colonist typified them as an ignorant, subservient and disciplined group completing choosing to ignore the emerging trends of the native seeking an identity.

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