

## Chapter VI

### Summary and Conclusions

The objectives of this chapter are to present a resume of the preceeding chapters and to compare the situation in Lingthem with the situations elsewhere in Sikkim and the district of Darjeeling. An attempt has also been made in this chapter to raise some issues related to tribal society in general and the Lepchas in particular.

The first two chapters do not naturally contain any findings for summarization here. The main body of this thesis is constituted by the three subsequent chapters dealing with economy, social organization, and religion. Therefore, the summarization here relates to these three chapters only. The second chapter also contains a number of informations on the past and the present of the Lingthem village but they are not important enough to be recapitulated here.

The third chapter deals primarily with agriculture, animal husbandry, and non-agricultural

occupations. With regard to the first, the major changes that have occurred in the last fifty years or so may be discussed here. First, there has been a transformation of agriculture from shifting to settled and terraced cultivation, for which credit is given mainly to the immigrant Nepalese. There is also a significant shift from consumption-oriented crops to cash crops like cardamom and ginger. The agrarian character has also changed due to the emergence of new forms of tenure like sharecropping and new social relations of production in which the Lepchas have emerged as landlords and immigrant Nepalese as tenants.

With regard to animal husbandry, the perceptible rise in its economic significance is noted. The animals are no longer the objects of sacrifice only: they are also an important source of income.

On the non-agricultural economy, the most important trend to be mentioned here is the growing popularity of the business and service sectors. However, their business is still confined to shop-keeping with a turnover of hardly one hundred rupees per day and their educational achievement is not enough to make them white-collar employees.

The fourth chapter has dealt with social organization and its three major aspects considered here are family, marriage and kinship. With regard to the first it may be noted that the joint families are disappearing but only in form and not in spirit. However, each Lepcha family today is much more autonomous than the family of fifty years ago.

Regarding marriage, it is found that early marriage is still practised but late marriages, mainly after twentyfive, are growing popular and being accepted as a normal feature. Levirate and sororate marriages are still practised but with the obliteration of sterility from Lingthem and the surrounding villages polygyny is gradually giving way to monogamy. Finally, about acquiring spouses, negotiated elopement, which means elopement with the consent of parents, is found to be rather popular today.

About kinship, not much change is observed. The traditional rules of marriage based on the patrilineal clan membership upto nine generations and matrilineal descent upto three generations are still observed. The relationships of avoidance

and joking have also continued as before. The overall changes in the economy of the village have an effect on the kinship relations but the kinship structure has not changed much.

The fifth chapter on religion has discussed ancestor-worship, Mun-Bongthingism, and lamaism. The first has been found to be affected severely due to the change of crops as well as the cultivators. This form of religion being associated with crops and hunting had to suffer when there was a change with respect to these. For instance, when hunting became obsolete, Pongrum, an important Lepcha deity, was no longer worshipped.

The form of Lepcha religion described here as Mun-Bongthingism, has also been almost wiped out from the realm of their religion. One of the most important factors responsible for this is found to be the spread of lamaism under royal patronage of the Namgyals till as late as 1974. A pro-lamaist discourse had also taken place resulting in the weaning of respect for their traditional priest and priestess. But, most importantly, the form of lamaism which was introduced among the Lepchas was almost identical with Mun-Bongthingism and hence easily accepted by them.

Finally, it may be pointed out that lamaism has almost completely replaced Mun-Bongthingism in Lingthem. There are certain traits of lamaism, which may be compared with the lamas of other Buddhist sects but from the perspective of the villagers they are no more than literate Muns or Bongthings. It is also found that the aspects of lamaism like individualism and the sense of sin were not accepted by the Lepchas without opposing other aspects of it which were compatible with their own traditional religious system.

It is important that these findings based on a remote village of a reserved area called Dzongu are compared with the situation elsewhere in Dzongu and outside it. But it must be confessed that there is a limited scope for that because of the insufficiency of comparable data. Some of the books or articles published on the Lepchas living outside Dzongu or within it are based on works done much earlier, in the 40s, 60s or 70s. Besides, the objectives have been often completely different from those of the present work. However, whatever informations are available have been

incorporated here. These informations are not and cannot be used for comparative purposes in true sense. Nevertheless, they give some idea of the Lepchas living elsewhere from Lingthem.

A major contribution to the study of the Lepchas was made by A. R. Foning, a Lepcha himself. His objective was to reconstruct the tradition of the Lepchas on the basis of scripts, personal interviews, and autobiographical notes. He had visited the Lingthem village in the summer of 1946 and found the Lepchas there "of the same mental make-up, of the same physical and intellectual standards, and following the same set of tribal maxims as my other kinsmen outside the 'reserve'" (1987:254). He of course ignored the external changes taking place outside Dzongu due to westernization and education.

There were two important studies on the Lepchas in the 60s, one within Dzongu and another in the district of Darjeeling. As in the case of Foning, the purpose of Siiger's study of Tingvoong in Dzongu was "to collect as much as possible of what remains of the ancient Lepcha culture before it becomes too late" (1967:35). On the

same page, he writes:

As the similarities between the culture of the Jongu Lepchas and that of the Kalimpong Lepchas are more conspicuous than the differences, I have not hesitated to treat them under the same headings.

The other study conducted by A. K. Das in Darjeeling also draws no difference between the Lepchas of Darjeeling and those of Sikkim. This is clearly evident from frequent and extensive references to the works of Gorer, Morris, and Siiger in his discussion. As a matter of fact, Das not only fuses Darjeeling and Sikkim together but also neutralizes the time by referring to the works of Gorer and Morris in the present tense. The only difference that he seems to have observed between the Lepchas of Sikkim and Darjeeling is the absence of the concept of "vanishing" in Darjeeling. For instance, he writes:

(M)y field study in Darjeeling reveals that the Lepchas are neither conscious of any sort of decaying population like Sikkim Lepchas, nor are aware of any sort of chronic sterility among them (1987:104).

A recent study conducted on the Lepchas of North Sikkim by Veena Bhasin (1989) also shows no specific difference between the Lepchas of Dzongu and the Lepchas of Lachen and Lachung valleys. Her objective was of course to study the Lepchas and Bhutias in their own ecological milieu. Ecologically, there are some differences between the Lepchas within and outside Dzongu but socially and culturally the differences are hard to point out.

Finally, the works of Subba may be briefly mentioned. In his earlier work (1985) he has discussed the widening cleavage between the Buddhist and Christian Lepchas outside Dzongu. Such a cleavage is yet to emerge in Dzongu due to the virtual absence of the Christian Lepchas. In another work (1989a) he discusses the Lepcha society and change and deals with economy, social organization, language, and religion. With regard to economy, the phenomenon which distinguishes the Lepchas outside Dzongu from those within it is the alienation of land from the Lepchas to the Nepalis and the Bhutias. Such a phenomenon could probably be repeated in Dzongu also but for its reserved status it has been averted.



With regard to their social organization, Subba observes that there has been a large number of marriages not only with the Bhutias and the Nepalis but also with Bengalis, South-Indians, and Europeans. Such inter-community marriages, on the other hand, are still rare in Dzongu. Subba also notes the change from parallel descent to patrilineal descent and analyses the situation leading to such a transformation. This could not be dealt with in Chapter IV of this thesis because neither Gorer nor Morris have mentioned about this aspect of the Lepcha kinship system. The growing popularity of nuclear families noted by him is, however, observed in Lingthem also.

About language, Subba refers to Mainwaring and Sprigg and shows how the status of the Lepcha language has fallen from a national language to a dialect of a few people. He has also discussed how this language is being revived in Sikkim under the government patronage whereas in Kalimpong the effort to revive this language has been confined to a few villages and individuals. It is agreed by each and every author that the Nepali language has completely dominated the Lepcha language. The situation in Dzongu is not so bad but if the immi-

grant labourers from Nepal remain there for another couple of decades Dzongu may not be much different from Darjeeling in this respect.

Finally, Subba's observation that the spread of lamaism is more horizontal than vertical seems to be true of Dzongu also. Had the vertical spread been significant the Lepchas would not probably embrace Christianity so easily outside Dzongu.

Let me now take up some issues which concern the Lepchas in particular and the tribes in general. One of the most important issues that engulf the Lepchas in particular and the tribes in general is detribalization. There are profuse studies on the tribes of India showing how the tribes have been losing their tribal character under the influence of their Hindu or Christian neighbours. There are also a number of studies arguing how the Hindus have also been tribalized to some extent. The consensus in this regard is that it is a two-way process. However my concern here is detribalization and not dehinduisation.

From Chapter V it is evident that the tribal religion of the Lepchas has been considerably affected by the spread of lamaism. Though lamaism

itself is today a major tribal religion there is enough proof to show that lamaism or Buddhism was a later importation by the tribes. The lamaisation or Christianization of the tribes has not found a respectable attention of those engaged in tribal studies. Detribalization in the religious context still largely refers to the picking up of Hindu traits by the tribes.

Even in the latter context the Lepchas have been detribalized to some extent. Many of them take cognizance of the hierarchical structure of the Nepali castes and often look at the scheduled castes from the point of view of the upper caste Nepalis. They liken themselves with the "brass pot" which can be used for any purpose, thereby signifying that they are casteless and they treat all castes equally. But they are often observed to be conscious of the "untouchable" status of the Nepali castes like Kami, Sarki, and Damai.

In this respect, the three major geographical distribution of the Lepchas - Kalimpong, Sikkim, and Illam (Nepal) - should be borne in mind. For various reasons the Lepchas of these three regions have received different influences. For instance, the Lepchas of Kalimpong have been considerably

Christianized and westernized; those of Sikkim have been greatly Tibetanized; and those in Nepal Hinduized or Nepalized. These influences have been noted in terms of language, dress, and customs. Therefore, the detribalization of the Lepchas is multilinear due to the differences in the socio-cultural and political environments of these three major concentrations of the Lepchas.

The second issue that is desired to be taken up here for discussion is whether or not the Lepchas are "vanishing". The word "vanishing" has been used by a large number of writers on the Lepchas. It has an alarming connotation and has considerable appeal in political platforms. The Lepcha leaders, however, have not been found to have capitalised on the power of this word.

It is not very easy to discuss this issue objectively. There are a lot of Lepchas who sincerely believe that they are "vanishing" and something must be done urgently to save this tribe. The past is often glorified beyond its proportions and sought to be repeated now. It may be difficult to change the subjectivity of the people but it is essential that this issue is

examined here as objectively as possible.

With regard to their religion it has already been seen that the traditional religion of the Lepchas characterized by ancestor-worship and Mun-Bongthingism has almost disappeared even from a remote area like Dzongu. Culturally, they are either Hinduized, Christianized or Tibetanized. Though it is difficult to pin point the essential characteristics of the Lepcha culture at any stage of their history, the scholars and lay alike agree that they have lost their 'traditional culture'. Linguistically also it has been found that the Nepali language has replaced the Lepcha language in areas outside Dzongu and even the language of the Dzongu Lepchas has been considerably influenced by the Tibetan and Nepali languages.

Demographically, though their absolute number has been increasing their relative population strength has been decreasing over time. For instance, in Sikkim the Lepchas constituted 18.9 percent of the total population in 1891 but in 1931 their percentage had come down to 11.9 and in 1951 it was further slumped to 9.9 percent (Subba 1989b:127-28). Similarly, in Darjeeling

district the percentage of the Lepcha population to the total population was 4.4 in 1891 but it came down to 3.8 percent in 1931, 3.0 percent in 1951 and 1.7 percent in 1971 (Das 1978:35).

But the socio-economic position of the Lepchas seems to be better than that of the non-Lepchas in the rural areas. A study by Subba on the basis of 41 Lepcha and 193 non-Lepcha households of Tanek village in Kalimpong shows that the position of the former vis-a-vis education, landholding, and income is relatively better than that of the non-Lepchas (1985:67-70). This picture may well be taken as isolated but until further research is done in comparative perspective no conclusive answer can be given in this regard.

The period between 1890s and 1960s was indeed a cursed period for the Lepchas of Sikkim. The venereal diseases had caused widespread sterility and thus affected the growth of population severely. The problem was aggravated due to free sex and community endogamy. On the top of that water-borne diseases like dysentery took the lives of many Lepchas. The situation seemed so alarming that unless it was improved they would have really

vanished from the face of this earth. The Lepchas outside Dzongu were free from such diseases and certainly did not face the threat of physical extinction.

That the Lepchas are gradually losing their community feeling and becoming more and more individualistic is another important issue. It has been discussed in the previous chapters that individualism was lacking in 1937. Community feeling was reassured by the forms of address, the religious system and the need for labourers but due to changes in the economy if not equally so in terms of religion and kinship the corporate feeling is affected to some extent. But this is not really a serious problem of the Lepcha society. The feeling for fellow Lepchas, no matter what their economic status or religious affiliation, is clearly there. I could experience this personally at Lingthem. The enthusiasm and cooperation of the Lepchas whose help I sought was unparalleled. They could perhaps not be equally enthusiastic about helping me in my research if I were not a Lepcha.

Finally, the policy of extending certain institutional privileges to the Lepchas in general

and the policy of reserving Dzongu specifically for the Lepchas may be discussed. The first policy pertains to the scheduled tribes all over India. Hence, no specific remarks are perhaps called for. But reserving a defined geographical area for a particular tribe or a number of tribes is not followed every where in India. The peninsular tribes, for instance, have no such reserved geographical areas and coincidentally suffered much more than the tribes in the northeast India.

A comparison between the Lepchas of Dzongu and those in Arunachal Pradesh may be made. The reservation policy of tribal areas is associated with Verrier Elwin who has written extensively on it. But it should be borne in mind here that Dzongu was reserved much before Elwin ever set his foot on India.

His A Philosophy for NEFA (1959) was a bible for tribal administrators for a very long time. He has been severely criticized for his policy of reservation but what he actually advocated was not to "preserve the tribesmen as museum specimens" (1959:59) but to allow only limited interaction with the outsiders. He thought that the tribes



should not be exposed to the exploitation by the more advanced people from the plains.

This policy of Elwin was supported by Jawaharlal Nehru, the first prime minister of India, and executed by the renowned administrator-scholar, Nari Rustomji. Rustomji not only carried out the above policy but also wrote extensively on it (1971, 1983, 1988). Furer Haimendorf, another famous anthropologist, has also argued in favour of the continuation of the policy of protecting the tribal people of Arunachal Pradesh (1980: 217-18).

Coming to the Lepchas of Dzongu, the reservation policy seems to have benefitted them considerably. Without this policy the land of Dzongu would have definitely passed on to the hands of Sherpas and Bhutias, if not to other Nepalis also. The highly lucrative cardamom fields of this reserve would be the first target of the non-Lepchas. The degree of change would be considerably accelerated but very few Lepchas would gain in this process.

It may be pointed out that even when the area is reserved the outsiders like the Marwaris and

the Nepalis have controlled the economy of Dzongu. While the marketing of cardamom - their major source of cash income - is completely monopolised by the Marwari traders settled in the Mangan town, the labourers from Nepal have made the Lepchas of Dzongu completely dependent on their labour. Without the existing legal arrangements in favour of the Lepchas the situation would certainly be worse.