

Chapter I

Introduction

In early 1937, a remote village called Lingthem (also spelt as Lingtem, see Morris 1938), which was the private estate of the Maharani of Sikkim turned into a "Lepcha Reserve", was chosen for anthropological study by two British anthropologists. Geoffrey Gorer, the first, had taken anthropological orientation from the celebrities like Margaret Mead, Ruth Benedict and John Dollard. John Morris, the other, was also offered studentship in social anthropology by the William Wyse Foundation at the University of Cambridge for carrying out this research.

They stayed in Lingthem for three months - March to May. Morris was actually called back to join the British army after two months. During their stay in Lingthem they made the local monastery their home, where the villagers dropped by to have a sight of the two white men. They did most of their interviewing at the monastery itself though once in a while they walked around the village too. They rewarded the villagers with silver coins and even donated handsomely for the rejuvenation of the monastery

before they left.

One of the feats that still amazes many anthropologists today is the depth as well as the volume of data they could gather in so short a time: Gorer generated over 500 pages and Morris about 300 pages in print. The former has often used psychological tools to understand the Lepcha culture while the latter's account, though claiming to be meant for lay readers, bears some scholarly observations.

The Himalayan Village, reprinted under the title The Lepchas of Sikkim in 1984, by Gorer and Living with the Lepchas (now out of print) by Morris were both published in 1938. The Second World War caused a gap between the publication of these books and the reviews of the same. From 1950 onwards they have been extensively quoted, corroborated, and also criticized severely by many scholars including the Lepchas. Yet no later scholar has been able to bring out equally rich ethnographic treatise on the Lepchas.

Lingthem, the village with 33 households and 176 persons (179 persons according to Morris, p. 24), has since been known throughout the world. Most of our knowledge about the economy, social organization, sexual behaviour, socialization, etc. of the Lepchas are largely based on the informations culled out from this tiny village. A few Lepcha scholars like

K. P. Tamsang and A. R. Foning revisited this village later in order to refute some of the earlier contentions about the Lepchas. But despite their command over the language lack of anthropological orientation in them was a big handicap.

In Himalayan Village Gorer has discussed the various aspects of the Lepcha society like house, food, economy, religion, social organization, sex, and life cycle. In addition to all this we find scattered throughout the book several life histories of the Lepchas of Lingthem. Chapter XVI in particular deals with four such interesting life histories. The book ends with a note on the Lepcha language and a short vocabulary of the Lepcha words.

Living with the Lepchas by Morris is a different book from Himalayan Village. He also uses anthropological methods of data collection and fieldwork but the narrative style is that of a travelogue rather than a serious academic piece of work. He does not hope many people to read the kind of book that he has written but the lay will certainly find his book enjoyable.

The subjects dealt with in this book include their magic and spells, family life, sex, festivals, etc. He has also provided a comprehensive bibliography which is useful not only to the professional

but also to those who are interested in travelling and mountaineering in that part of the country.

Gorer had published a number of books before his Himalayan Village but it is considered to be one of the most important contributions to anthropological literature (Hutton 1938:28).

Gorer and Morris came to India in the very end of 1936. They spent about two months in Kalimpong struggling with the intricacies of the Lepcha language. After that they left for Gangtok on foot so that Gorer could have "a chance to see something of the country, which was new to him" (Morris, p. 14). Morris was an experienced traveller and had seen the Talung Valley (where the Lingthem village is located) in the spring of 1936, on his way to Mount Everest. The permission to work in Sikkim had initially appeared impossible but the Maharaja finally granted the permission. Even the selection of Dzongu as a site for their fieldwork was suggested by the Maharaja himself though with a lot of warnings. Reaching Dzongu it was primarily the presence of a monastery in Lingthem and the absence of the same in Lingdem that made them choose the former village and not the latter. They had a working knowledge of the Lepcha language but they thought it wise to take interpreters. Sukra Singh

and Dawa who interpreted for Gorer and Morris respectively were both Christian Lepchas from Kalimpong with a rather low opinion about their brethren in Dzongu.

Objectives

The objective of this study is not to challenge the contentions made by Gorer and Morris: the scope of doing so is not there any more. But here is a golden opportunity for making a diachronic study of the Lingthem village. Hence, keeping 1937 as the base year, this study seeks to see what changes have taken place over the last fifty years or so. How are the changes taking place and what factors are responsible for the same? What are the trends towards the future?

The present study seeks to limit itself to three primary aspects of this village. They are: economy, social organization and religion. Though these three aspects do not fully exhaust the contents of the books by Gorer and Morris other diachronic studies show that it is not essential to touch upon each and every aspect in doing a re-study.

My principal aim here is to study social change among the Lepchas of Lingthem. But secondarily I have also discussed the changes outside this village - in Tingvoong, for instance - and in the Lepcha

society as a whole.

Survey of Literature

The Lepchas owe their publicity largely to the European scholars. Some of the well known European writers on them are: Herbert, Campbell, Hooker, Dalton, Mainwaring, Faulmann, Avery, Waddell, Grunwedel, Gorer, Morris, Droiun, White, Mackean, Sherman, Stocks, Nebesky-Wojkowitz, Sprigg, Shafer, Nakane, Siiger, and Hermanns. Professionally, they belonged to various groups like administrators, travellers, botanists, linguists, soldiers, and so on but racially almost all of them were Europeans.

Of the various writers mentioned above Halfdan Siiger in particular has provided a comprehensive survey of literature on the Lepchas right upto 1962 on pages from 17 to 22 of his book. The present survey is largely based on his compilation but it excludes some less important literature mentioned by him and includes others which are not included by him, specially those published after 1962.

According to Siiger, the earliest European reference to Sikkim is that of Ippolito Desideri, who has referred to the existence of Bree-me-jong (or Sikkim) as a province of Tibet. But it was only after J. D. Herbert published "Particulars of a Visit to the Siccim Hills" in 1830 that the world

came to know about Sikkim and its inhabitants.

A. Campbell, a noted administrator and a keen observer of the Himalayan culture and people, has published three important articles which deal mainly with the Lepchas: "Note on the Lepchas of Sikkim with a Vocabulary of their Language" (1840), "A Journal of a quick Trip to Sikkim 1849" (1849), and "Diary of a Journey through Sikkim to the Frontiers of Tibet" (1852). During the same period Joseph Hooker, the famous botanist, published his Himalayan Journals, Vols I and II (1854), which are now the classic travelogues not only on the flora and fauna but also on the people of that region.

The interest to know more about the Lepchas living in Darjeeling and Sikkim was unabated. Thus, E. T. Dalton devoted a whole chapter to the Lepchas in his Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal (1872).

Of the various European scholars it is perhaps General G. B. Mainwaring who took the strongest fancy to the Lepchas. He devoted many years of his life to teaching the Lepchas, which in turn made him one of the most competent European authorities on the Lepcha language. This is clearly proved by his Grammar of the Rong (Lepcha) Language as It Exists in the Darjeeling and Sikkim Hills (1876). In this book, he has used the structural grammatical

principles of Latin as the foundation for his analysis, which was of course impossible and for which he had to bear a lot of ridicule. However, this book is useful not only as a collection of Lepcha phrases and sentences but also as a historical document. The publication of this was followed by B. N. Shaha's A Grammar of the Lepcha Language (1884).

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, L. A. Waddell published an important article entitled "Place and River-Names in the Darjiling District and Sikkim" (1892). In the same year appeared H. H. Risley's Tribes and Castes of Bengal (2 Vols.). Volume II of this book contains an excellent account of the life and customs of the Lepchas. Yet another book that appeared in that year was A. Grunwedel's A Rong-English Glossary. Besides these books a number of articles were also published on the Lepchas.

In 1894, Risley's Gazetteer of Sikkim was published. This was followed by K. K. Das's article entitled "The Lepcha People and their Notions of Heaven and Hell" (1896).

In 1898, A Dictionary of the Lepcha Language compiled by Mainwaring and revised by Grunwedel was published. After this not much work has been done on the Lepcha language as such. With the exception by R. K. Sprigg, who has been carrying out research

on this language there is hardly any one else.

The twentieth century began with the publication of Among the Himalayas (1900) by L. A. Waddell. This book gives an account of his long experience with the Lepchas. In 1927, C. De Beavoir Stocks' Folklore and Customs of the Lap-chas of Sikkim was published. This is a collection of the Lepcha myths and legends. A few songs in the Lepcha language are also included.

Rene De Nebesky-Wojkowitz, an Austrian anthropologist, conducted his fieldwork in Kalimpong and published some valuable papers like "The Use of Thread-Crosses in Lepcha Lamaist Ceremonies" (1951 with Gorer), "Ancient Feudal Ceremonies of the Lepchas" (1952), and "Hunting and Fishing among the Lepchas" (1953).

The Indo-Tibetans (1954) by Fr. Mathias Hermanns has also devoted a considerable part to the Lepchas of the Darjeeling hills. With this ends the list of important writings on the Lepchas by Europeans. Some of the literature cited above are written by eminent scholars but in a style typical of the nineteenth century writers.

The first major work by an Indian anthropologist on the Lepchas is The Lepchas of Darjeeling District (1962) by A. K. Das with the help of S. K. Banerjee.

This book was later revised by Das alone and published under the title The Lepchas of West Bengal (1978).

This book deals mainly with the socio-economic life of the Lepchas of Kalimpong. Das still keeps a keen interest in the study of the Lepchas; his latest contribution being an article in M. K. Raha edited book, The Himalayan Heritage (1987).

One of the latest additions in Lepcha literature is Himalayan Lepchas (1988) by R. N. Thakur. It seeks to explore the socio-cultural aspects of the Lepchas of Darjeeling, Kalimpong, Kurseong, and Sikkim. Another recent work is Veena Bhasin's Ecology, Culture and Change: Tribals of Sikkim Himalayas (1989). This book is written mainly from the cultural-ecological point of view and shows the relationship between man and nature, how and where eco-system and socio-cultural system are interconnected. The study is based on two tribes of North Sikkim: Lepcha and Bhutia.

Some of the Lepcha scholars have also contributed to the already rich volume of literature. Some of them like G. Tshering, and La Tshering Lepcha have written in the Nepali language while others like Sonam Wangdi Lepcha, K. P. Tamsang, and A. R. Foning have written in English. Sonam Wangdi, probably the first Lepcha to have done a doctorate on the Lepchas,

is not found academically active after writing (with Thakur) an article for The Eastern Anthropologist (1981) and has instead accepted a civil judge's post in Sikkim. His elder brother, La Tshering Lepcha, is one of the most knowledgeable Lepchas today though he is also busy with a translator's post he holds in the Sikkim Legislative Assembly. K. P. Tamsang is very widely known among the Lepchas but he lacks historical and anthropological orientation in his writings. Foning who recently passed away was a competent historian but could not remain alive even to see how his book Lepchas: My Vanishing Tribe (1987) was received by the readers.

The only local but a non-Lepcha scholar who has written on the Lepchas is T. B. Subba. Mention may be made of his "Lepchas: From Legends to the Present Day" (1985) and "Dynamics of a Hill Society: Case Study of the Lepchas" (1989).

The Lepchas have otherwise arrested the attention of any writer who visited Darjeeling or Sikkim. Stray and journalistic articles on them are indeed numerous but writings based on systematically collected and verified data are very few.

One of the most criticized contentions made by Gorer and Morris, though outside the scope of the present study, is the Lepchas' over indulgence in

sexual activities. The Lepcha scholars like Tamsang and Foning have counter-argued over this as they thought that such contentions would tarnish the image of the Lepchas as a civilized community.

The two British scholars might have dramatised the sexual behaviour of the Lepchas to a large extent, but a closer reading of their works makes one feel that they had written as objectively as it was expected of them. But what they seem to have lacked and other succeeding writers missed is the explanation for this behaviour. In fact, the explanation is to be found in the socio-economic environment of the Lepchas so neatly described by Gorer and Morris: what they should perhaps have done is to link these two. However, it is possible that having come from the society they have in Europe they saw no need to rationalize the sexual over-indulgence of the Lepchas but none other than themselves owed and could provide a better explanation to this.

Diachronic Studies: A Brief Survey

The study of social change has been a major obsession of the anthropologists all over the world for the past one century. A large number of them have considered diachronic studies useful for understanding the complexity of social change. Hence, numerous diachronic studies have been conducted by

anthropologists some of whom are forerunners in the field. A brief survey of some notable studies of this kind is made here.

We, the Tikopia (1936) by Raymond Firth is one of the classics of anthropological research. The study was done in a Polynesian island of the Western Pacific from July 1928 to July 1929. In this book the author deals with the social organization of the Tikopeans, more specifically with their kinship system. His is an empirical study conducted in the native language but the presentation of data has been within a broad theoretical framework.

Firth conducted a re-study ("dual-synchronic" in his own word) of the Tikopeans during 1952-53 with the help of a research assistant called James Spillius, a Canadian anthropologist who had some field experience in the north-west coast of the United States. Spillius stayed in Tikopia for seventeen months and Firth for five months (March to July 1952). The result of this book was published in 1959 and was titled as Social Change in Tikopia: Restudy of a Polynesian Community after a Generation (1959). In this restudy Firth mainly deals with social changes due to external contact and ecological changes. His major contention in this book is that changes are more organizational

than structural in character. In his restudy he found that new opportunities had cropped up but the choices of the Tikopeans were limited by their environment as well as the values and symbols of their society.

In the concluding part of the book, the author points out that apart from being an analysis of a sector of Tikopia's social history, the book may have certain predictive value in understanding the directions of future changes. It may help to foresee what may happen to other small oceanic societies when they are exposed to the Western influence.

Another important anthropological work restudied is that of Robert Redfield. His Tepotzlan: A Mexican Village: A Study of Folk Life (1930) is based on the author's fieldwork conducted in 1926-27. This book tries to understand the Mexican folk society through Tepotzlan, a simple Mexican village.

Tepotzlan was later restudied twice by Oscar Lewis, thereby qualifying for the term "trichronic" rather than diachronic study. First he went there in 1943 and published his Life in a Mexican Village: Tepotzlan Re-Studied in 1951. In 1956-57, he went there once again to see what changes had occurred since his last visit in 1943. This work was published in the year 1960 under the title, Tepotzlan: Village

in Mexico.

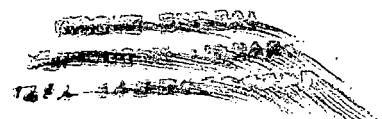
In this book a wide range of changes in Tepotzlan have been chronologically discussed. The period of change discussed starts from the tenth century A.D. and the Toltec Empire to the present. The main focus of the book is on the life of the Mexican peasants. He mainly deals with economy, social organization and the life cycle, though he has also analyzed their feelings, motivations and values. In the last chapter he gives an account of the change as Tepotzlan is introduced to electricity, motorable roads, buses and even formulae for bottle babies.

Death of a Witch (1983) by G. M. Carstairs is the study of change in a small village of Rajasthan between 1950 and 1951. It shows how a small, tightly knit but not always harmonious community of Rajput farmers in Sujarupa has reacted to the pressures of modernization.

Carstairs first went to the Sujarupa village in search of material for a research project in the first half of 1950. But the village and its inhabitants later meant far more to him than just that. he was adopted as a dharam bhai or ritual brother by two women of the village and was thus uniquely

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placed to watch its progress. It was he who in 1967 introduced the radio to the villagers, thereby enabling them to listen to broadcast about agriculture. Since then the farmers have adopted new methods of cultivation, which have gone a long way in raising living standards of the people there.

The villagers were however suspicious about modern medicine and are considered by the author as slow to accept modern education also. Even in 1981 many men and all women were still illiterates.

Vilyatpur 1848-1968: Social and Economic Change in a North Indian Village (1974) by Tom G. Kessinger is a diachronic study of Vilyatpur, a village in Punjab. This study combines the perspectives and methods of the historian and the anthropologist in an attempt to reconstruct the social and economic history of this village. Kessinger has selected a single village to study the processes of migration, commercialization, occupational differentiation, population dynamics, etc. by using the sources of information like records of census, tax and land ownership.

The unit of analysis is the family and the behaviour and decisions of the families constituting the village during the 128 years are his principal concern. He has followed the course of development

over an extended period taking into consideration factors responsible for particular events.

Kessinger has derived historical data on the village from the permanent records maintained in every district in north India for official reference and use in the courts. The principal ones among them were: Jamabandi, Shajra Nasib, Lalkitab, Khanna Shumari, and Pilgrimage records (p. 6). He took interviews with the heads of each family in 1968-69.

He stayed in the village for ten months and spent about 4 to 8 hours with each family, collecting biographical information on each person tracing the genealogy as far back as possible.

The Toda of South India: A New Look (1986)

by Anthony R. Walker is yet another important diachronic study. He first visited the Todas in 1960, while he was a Commonwealth Universities scholar from England studying in Osmania University of Hyderabad. But his first fieldwork was actually done in 1962-63 for his B. Litt. thesis. Then he made several trips to the Nilgiris: in 1969-70, 1974, 1976-77, 1978, 1981, and finally in October 1984. Hence, though not intended so his study in itself could be called a longitudinal study. But

since the benchmark of his study was provided by the classic work on the Todas by W. H. R. Rivers his study is more accurately considered as a diachronic study.

Walker has clearly stated that this book is not a substitute for River's The Todas but the utilization of modern anthropological perspective for a new look at the Todas, revealing them as a section of the Hindu world. He has dealt with the matrix of their society, physical and social environment, social organization, the sacred dairy cult, their passage through life and finally a detailed social history of the community.

Rivers had examined the Toda society as an essentially closed system but Walker not only studied them in historical perspective but also in relation to wider Hindu society - the context, which he believed made much more sense in understanding their old institutions.

After a Century and a Quarter (1960) by G. S. Ghurye is also an important diachronic study. Major Coats had described the picture of Lonikand, a village near Poona, as he found in 1819. He had dealt with, among others, the village structure and functions, the role of various groups and sections

in the society, etc. Keeping his description as the basis, Ghurye offers a refreshing contrast.

A fresh picture of the structure of the village community, its social organization and the changes through more than a century in the social, socio-economic, and religious life of the villagers are competently dealt with by him.

Behind the Mud Walls (1971) by William and Charlotte Wiser is also one of the classic studies in this tradition. The first edition of this book published in 1930 was based on a joint work the couple did in Karimpur, near Agra. Though they were basically missionaries their work was complimented by American Anthropologist as "a classic description of village India". William Wiser died in 1961. So it was Charlotte who wrote down the changes observed in 1960 and visited Karimpur once again in 1970 to see if any further changes had occurred.

According to her, the village had changed negligibly in a span of 30 to 40 years with regard to social institutions like family, caste and religion but the changes in material culture were remarkable. They had begun to make brick houses, grow new crops and even market them. The live-

stock was improved and so were their farming techniques. There was better medical care and so on. In all these matters the role of the developing agencies and the government has been highly appreciated by her.

To the above list of diachronic studies one can add many more. Some such diachronic studies are found listed by G. M. Carstairs in Appendix I of his book. The important point to note is not how many such studies have been published but appreciate the realization by many anthropologists that change is better understood with the help of diachronic rather than synchronic studies.

The seven studies surveyed here not only differ in terms of who conducted the re-study and after how many years but also in the number of trips made in the re-study. The details of change discussed or analysed also vary significantly. There is no uniform method followed in the re-study, whether by the original investigator or by a new one except that fieldwork is an essential part of them. Contact with outsiders has been considered by one and all as one of the most important sources of change. It is also clear that structural and functional changes have preoccupied most of them.

Methodology

It is desirable here to briefly dwell upon the methodology of studying social change. There is hardly any sociological or social anthropological study that does not deal with some aspect of social change but most studies of change are found made without proper methodological considerations. There seems however no consensus on any appropriate method for this purpose.

In this context Studies in Social Change (1973) based on a seminar organized by the Ethnographic and Folk Culture Society of Lucknow in July 1971 provides some useful methods of studying social change. T. N. Madan, for instance, argues that social change is such a complex phenomenon that it cannot be grasped without communicating with a number of related disciplines. In other words, only an interdisciplinary method can bring about meaningful results in this regard.

In the same book, Gopala Sarana considers a diachronic study as one of the best ways of studying change and adds that the functional approach, which is often alleged to be incapable of understanding change, can significantly contribute to

the same. J. S. Yadava also considers the reconstruction of "zero point" as important in any study of change and argues strongly in favour of the historical approach. Yet another noted contributor, Yogesh Atal, argues that the case study method can combine both the historical and inductive approaches to the study of social change.

The present study being essentially a diachronic study of a village it is desirable here that the pros and cons of such a study pointed out by T. Scarlett Epstein are briefly discussed. In her essay published in Biplab Dasgupta edited Village Studies in the Third World (1978) she brings out, among others, certain important cons of a re-study by a different scholar as in my case. She believes that "wherever possible it is desirable to have the same researcher conduct the later restudy" (pp. 128-29). To her, a new investigator takes time "to develop full empathy for the society he studies" and is not expected to enjoy the trust and respect enjoyed by the first investigator.

These disadvantages of a re-study by a new investigator are fortunately not of much application in my case. I was not only familiar with the Lepcha society but being myself a Lepcha and a

female at that, there was no problem for me to build the rapport and win their trust. And this was unshaken even after they came to know that I was a Christian.

Epstein further notes that in case of a new investigator doing the re-study he/she should contact the original investigator. Much though I would love to do it, my resources would not permit me to contact them in England even if they were still alive. Again, she notes that the new investigator should have access to the unpublished materials, field notes, etc. of the original investigator. This was not possible but the published books by the two original investigators have described every aspect of the Lepchas of Lingthem in such details that looking for further informations was really not necessary.

Identification of the earlier informants is also considered important by her. This was not difficult for me. Some of the earlier informants and almost all of their descendants could be easily contacted as the villagers had shown little spatial mobility.

Finally, she talks of the change in research focus. The previous investigators were interested

in almost everything they saw but I am not so though there is nothing in this thesis which has not been dealt in detail by the previous investigators. As a matter of fact it was essential for the purpose of my re-study to make a reconstruction of the village in 1937. It should also be pointed out that the qualitative style of discussing the change in my thesis is because of the style followed by the previous investigators.

In this regard, it is also important to note the suggestion made by Fredrik Barth in 1967. According to him, the conventional anthropological approaches to the study of social change "do not adequately portray change", whether such studies are synchronic or diachronic. Drawing evidences from Leuriston Sharp's study among the Australians and his own in Northern Norway, Barth argues that social change can be best understood if one looks at social behaviour as "allocation of time and resources". According to him, one should look for "events" of change rather than go for deduction or extra-polation. By studying the "allocation of time and resources" we can observe events generating several significant changes. And he contends that this conceptual tool is helpful not only in describing

change in the economic sector but in "the whole field of social organization" (1967:662).

For reasons best known to the Indian anthropologists, they do not seem to have taken the lead from Barth. The only social anthropologist who has made an attempt to use Barth's conceptual tool discussed above is perhaps T. B. Subba, in his study of agrarian change in Sikkim (1989c).

In the present study, I do not claim to have used Barth's conceptual tool but I have certainly tried to do so whenever I found it possible. This work is primarily based on fieldwork, taking house to house census, genealogical and biographical notes. As regard to language, I used the Lepcha and Nepali languages interchangeably depending on convenience.

My first visit to Lingthem took place in October 1987. I made several trips to this village between 1988 and 1990. In one of these trips a short stay in the Tingvoong village (See Appendix I) was also possible. None of my visits was however longer than a month for various extra-academic liabilities.

