

Chapter II

The Village

Before introducing the Lingthem village, it is desirable that the Lepcha reserve called Dzongu, the North District of Sikkim where it is located, and Sikkim in general are briefly introduced. This would help the readers to understand the village better.

On the map of India, Sikkim appears as a small rectangular spot bounded by Tibet on the north, Bhutan on the east, Nepal on the west, and the Darjeeling district of West Bengal on the south. Though it is written that Sikkim had a much larger territory before, by 1890, following about two centuries of intermittent wars with Nepal on the west and Bhutan on the east, its territory had shrunk to its present size.

It lies between 27° and 28° North latitudes and 88° and 89° East longitudes. Stretched from north to south is about 113 kilometres and east to west is 64 kilometres. The total area of the State is 7299 square kilometres. Being a mountainous terrain, its elevation ranges from 1200 to 2,800 feet above sea level. It is divided into

four districts: East, West, North and South. Each district is further divided into sub-divisions which in turn are divided into revenue blocks.

Sikkim has a chequered history. Until 1641, when Phuntsog Namgyal was consecrated as the Chogyal or "king of righteousness", the Lepcha king called Turve Pano is known to have ruled over the country. Even during that time the whole of Sikkim was but probably not populated entirely by the Lepchas. The Chumbi Valley and other areas in North Sikkim did probably have some Tibetan population and on the west, the eastern Nepal which until then was a part of Sikkim, was populated by the Kirantis. But it was certainly the Lepchas who were in control of the affairs in Sikkim as a whole. This is clear from the following line of Mainwaring:

The Lepcha language which had, hitherto, been the language of the whole country of Sikkim, which all Tibetans, Butias, or others who entered the country acquired and spoke, in which under the role of Colonel Lloyd, business was carried on, and justice in the English Courts administered, in the character of which, decrees and documents were written and recorded (1876: XIII-IV).

But after 1861, the Lepchas began to lose everything one after another. Their language came under heavy influence of the Tibetans (Sprigg 1982:16-31). And this remained so even after the immigration of the Nepalese from the west. This was because the Lepchas were concentrated in the North district of Sikkim where the Nepalese were not permitted to settle. Those who were outside this district were affected by the rapid spread of the Nepali language though culturally they were largely tied to the Tibetans.

A major reason for all this is perhaps the lack of political power in their hands from 1641 onwards. Under the long rule of the hereditary, theocratic rule of the Namgyals, the Lepchas could seldom raise themselves to the level of kahlons or ministers. Even among the kazis (landlords) there were very few from the Lepcha community. On the top of that such Lepcha aristocrats having often married Bhutia women took pride in identifying themselves with the Bhutias. There are, of course, instances in which the Bhutias also pressurized on the Lepchas to be identified with them. In this regard, the instance of Sonam Tshering Lepcha, the ex-speaker of the Sikkim Legislative Assembly, may

be cited.

Under the Chogyals, lamas enjoyed considerable privileges and influence but the Lepchas were never allowed to become the top-ranking monks in Sikkim. Instead the lamaist training of the Lepchas was imparted through the Tibetan language and this continues even today though some of the Lepchas have now begun to resent this imposition on their culture and language.

From twentieth century onwards the Lepcha-Bhutia alliance in Sikkim and the neighbouring Darjeeling hills became prominent due to a common threat they perceived in the wake of the large-scale Nepalese immigration. The cultural proximity between the Lepchas and the Bhutias had already developed by then. This was the rallying point for these two communities but the loser in the tussle between the Lepcha-Bhutias on the one hand and the Nepalis on the other was obviously the Lepchas. The Lepcha land was not only alienated to the Nepalis but also to the Bhutias. And with land the very existence of the Lepcha culture and identity was threatened.

Dzongu: The Lepcha Reserve

Dzongu is the only place where the Lepcha land has not been alienated to another community. Though the Lepchas of Dzongu have come under the spell of the Nepali language particularly after the 1950s it is the only area where the Lepcha language is still actively used in every Lepcha family. The influence of the Tibetan language and culture is also perceptible there yet this is the only area where the traditional Lepcha life and culture are still alive.

It is not known exactly when Dzongu was created as a Lepcha reserve though it is quite probable that this was created towards the end of the nineteenth century or the beginning of the twentieth century when it was clear that unless given special protection the Lepchas would completely wither away. The experience in the Darjeeling hills must have enlightened the British political officers serving in Sikkim to propose the Dzongu area to be reserved for the Lepchas.

"Dzongu" is a name given by the Bhutias meaning a place with "nine districts". It falls in the North district of Sikkim, which is the largest of the four districts, covering an area of 4226 square kilometres or 59.6 percent of the total geographical area of Sikkim. This district is

strategically located with Nepal to its west, Tibet to the north and the other three districts of Sikkim to the south. This district is also very sparsely populated with a density of 7 persons per square kilometres according to the Census of 1991 (Provisional). Towards the northern border the population is even more sparse due to geographical and climatic conditions. The average altitude is more than six thousand feet. Human habitation is thus confined to about 25 percent of this district.

Dzongu consists of 13 out of the total 45 revenue blocks under the North district. There is no town, police station or fire station located within Dzongu. The total area covered by this Reserve is 15,845 hectares. The total population according to the Census of 1981 is 7745 including 3414 seasonal labourers from Nepal.

Administratively, Dzongu is divided into Upper and Lower with Barfok forming the boundary of the Upper Dzongu and Heegyathang of the Lower Dzongu. Lingthem, the village chosen here for re-study falls in the Upper Dzongu.

Lingthem in 1937

It is unavoidable here to reconstruct the Lingthem village situated in the northern slope

of the Talung Valley on the basis of the accounts given by Gorer and Morris. The present description of the village is therefore guided by the kind of informations provided by these two anthropologists.

The meaning of the term Lingthem, according to the Lepcha dictionary referred to by Morris, is "a mixture of slope and level, to be out of the perpendicular, to incline, to have bearing outwards" (p. 24). But the village neither has any flat land nor really a gentle slope, which would justify its name. But it is quite probable that its physical features changed over years due to erosion, landslides, etc.

In 1937, Lingthem with 33 households and 176 persons (179 according to Morris, p. 24) was "the biggest village on the Talung side of Zongu, and the second biggest in the reserve" (Gorer, p. 54). Of the 33 houses 14 were above the village monastery and the rest below it, 14 on the east of the same and the rest to the west. There were five groups of four households each, one of three households and the remaining either isolated or in pairs (Gorer, p. 62).

The grouping of the households, according to Gorer, did not "necessarily correspond to any

emotional or kinship ties" (p. 54) and according to Morris, it was "entirely haphazard and in no way based upon relationships" (p. 24). The selection of the sites for making houses was therefore not determined by the proximity of relations: it was instead guided by their belief that such a site must be free from evil influences.

A great deal of the description of Lingthem is devoted to the monastery by both Gorer and Morris. I shall not reproduce the lengthy description here but some of the striking features of this monastery should perhaps be mentioned. For instance, it is interesting to note that unlike the monasteries in Tibet the Lingthem monastery had "no permanent inmates" (Morris, p. 23). Morris further notes that, in appearance, "it is almost identical to the ordinary Lepcha house, except for its greater size, and the broad band of red ochre round its walls, which denotes that it is a sacred building" (p. 19).

About the Lepcha houses, it is noted that they generally consisted of two rooms and an attic though the poor had only one room (Gorer, p. 63). Elsewhere it is noted that the Lepcha houses were all thatched and walls or the floor were made of

either bamboo or timber. The houses used to be constructed on raised platforms supported by huge wooden pillars resting on stone slabs. The vacant space below the platform used to be a multipurpose place: it used to ^{be} storing place for firewoods during the rainy season and for shelter to the domestic animals at night.

Morris records that there were "no shops in Lingthem, no doctor, and no school" (p. 25). The articles which the villagers needed but could not produce themselves, such as cotton, oil, and salt were obtained from Mangan. But it seems that the villagers of Lingthem went to the Mangan town for some other purposes also. This is indicated by Morris's own observation that "they are constantly in and out of Mangan" (p. 17).

It is clear therefore that though a remote and reserved area Lingthem was by no means isolated even in 1937. The narrow and extremely precipitous road connecting the village with the Mangan town was apparently no obstacle to the villagers. It was only a little before 1937 that the bamboo bridge was replaced by a plank bridge with steel supports (Gorer, p. 46).

Gorer and Morris have not written about the Nepalese labourers in the village but the latter has mentioned about one Tempa Lepcha in the village, who knew the Nepali language and was "a man of some position in the village" (p. 17). Tempa, though a Lepcha was actually an outsider settled in the village after marrying a girl of the village.

It is indeed difficult to think that the Lingthem people were once completely isolated. In fact, it is reported by some knowledgeable informants that even before the Mangan town was established people from Dzongu moved out in search of certain articles like salt, cotton and potteries. On the other hand, there used to be visitors from Tibet carrying various articles including ornaments.

The very fact that they were practising lamaism, no matter to what extent, is enough to indicate that the villagers of Lingthem were open to the Tibetan influence, which could have taken place only through physical interaction. Even otherwise it is quite clear from their language and culture that they must have interacted with the Bhutias living outside Dzongu.

It may be added here that both Gorer and Morris refer to a number of Nepali terms as used by the villagers. This indicates that though the Nepalis had not reached Lingthem the Nepali language had. But in this context a precaution is necessary. It may be remembered here that the two interpreters for them were both fluent in Nepali. This may have influenced their interpretations and given the above impression about the village. Gorer himself was aware that "the (Lepcha) children around Kalimpong at any rate can speak anything except Nepali" (p. 37).

Now the dress of the Lepchas may be briefly described. The original Lepcha dress was a thick piece of woven cloth fastened over one shoulder and tied at the waist with a sash hanging upto the knees. But Gorer had noted that the Lepcha women had "completely given up this indigeneous type of dress in favour of the Tibetan costume, which consists of a coloured, long-sleeved under-bodice, and a dark sleeveless overdress, reaching half-way down the calves and fastened with buttons" (p. 52). About the Lepcha men he found them wearing their traditional dress but their traditional hat was "almost completely abandoned in favour of the birette-like Tibetan hat decorated with coral beads" (p. 53).

Gorer had also observed that only a few women used to weave as most of the villagers wore clothes bought in the Mangan town. The weaving of clothes were almost abandoned but the weaving of mats and baskets out of bamboo barks and reeds, mainly by men, was common in 1937 (Gorer, p. 67). Such articles were mostly for domestic use.

The common food of the Lepchas of Lingthem was rice. They also ate buckwheat after grinding and mixing it with water and baking on the cooking stoves. Millet was generally used for making chi, the local beer. Fish was also occasionally caught in the Talung river and eaten boiled as a relish. But meat was a luxury as they did not kill animals, except at the time of sacrifices or when giving a feast.

There is no end to describing the village as it was in 1937. An attempt has been made in this chapter to deal only with those aspects of the village which have not been discussed in the subsequent chapters of my thesis. In fact, the village will have to be reconstructed again and again throughout the thesis because of the nature of my work.

Lingthem in 1987

Fifty years after, Lingthem is not certainly the same village that was studied by Gorer and Morris. The changes that have occurred so far have been really significant. But in this section I shall devote myself to some of the apparent changes that would strike Gorer and Morris if they had revisited this village after such a long time. The changes in the village and an analysis of the factors contributing to or inhabiting the changes shall be discussed in chapters III, IV, and V.

Let me begin with the boundaries of the village, which were not clear fifty years ago. Lingthem is today surrounded on the north by river Rongnyo Kyong which is also called Kanaka nadi by the Nepalis and Tolungchu by the Tibetans. On the south are the Keem, Bong and Sankalangrum forests. On the east lies the Sankalang river and the Heegyathang village and on the west lies the Lingdem village.

There are six hamlets in the village, namely, Lingthem proper, Noom, Panung, Sankalang, Passingdang, and Mantham (also called Char Mile). Of these hamlets Passingdang is the latest and comprises of the largest number of households.

The main connection with the outside world is still the road that starts from Mangan, crosses the Sankalang bridge and goes across Lingthem. This road was made motorable in 1984 but even today only the stretch from Mangan to the Sankalang bridge is pitched. The stretch of road from this bridge to Lingthem was actually constructed in 1979 but being close to the Talung river was completely washed away by landslides and flash floods. It had to be shifted a little above the river in 1984. The Sikkim Nationalized Transport extended its services to this village from July 10, 1986. There is another road linking Lingthem with the rest of Sikkim. This road passes through Dikchu and Heegyathang village but the road after Dikchu being unpitched and at places highly risky only jeeps and ambassadors ply. This road being longer is used for motorable purposes only when the road via Mangan is damaged or blocked due to natural catastrophe.

One of the most striking changes that have taken place in Lingthem in the recent past is the emergence of the Passingdang hamlet as a semi-urban place with rows of shops, school, primary health centre, panchayat office, post office, etc. Some of the shop-keepers there get their supplies from

as far as Gangtok but most of the small shopkeepers get them from the Marwaris of Mangan only. Along with such private shops there is a government subsidised multipurpose cooperative store.

Most of the houses in this hamlet were constructed after 1984 and most of the owners of the houses there have their ancestral houses in other hamlets, which are less accessible. Even before the emergence of Passingdang as a small hat the villagers had to walk down upto this hamlet for going to Mangan. Today the villagers' need to visit this hamlet is more because this hamlet not only serves as a resting place after returning from Mangan but also because the Panchayat President, C. D. Lepcha, lives in this hamlet.

The census of the village taken by me in October 1987 recorded a total number of Lepcha households in the village as 117 and the total population as 732. The total number of males was 356 and that of the females 376. I did not take the census of the non-Lepcha households because of the temporary nature of their settlement.

As far as the settlement pattern of the village is concerned the most remarkable change that has

been noticed is shifting of the houses towards the bank of the Talung river. This has been true not only of the Passingdang hamlet but also Mantham and Sankalang hamlets. The major reason for this is obviously the long stretch of busable road a little above but alongside the Talung river.

Another settlement which still looks alive is Lingthem proper. This hamlet has been able to retain the people largely because of two reasons: the Lingthem school which admits students upto Class VIII and is one of the oldest schools in Dzongu, and the Lingthem monastery, which is the centre of their religious and cultural world. Another major attraction of this hamlet is the annual fete held at the school ground during October.

The increase in the number of households in Noom and Panung has been almost nil. The few new houses seen in these two hamlets are either field houses occupied by the Nepali labourers or those which have come up due to splitting of the joint families.

In none of the six hamlets mentioned above was there any principle of kinship or clan working behind the clustering of the houses. Every hamlet,

which is practically a cluster of some houses, represents a number of ^(clans) p'tshos. In some of the hamlets, the number of households roughly corresponds to the number of p'tshos. But it must be noted that the traditional belief about the selection of sites for making houses does not seem to be very strictly followed particularly in the hamlets like Passingdang and Sankalang. This may be due to a general decline in the belief in their traditional beliefs and an increased acceptance of lamaism. But more important than that is perhaps the business considerations in the selection of sites.

Along such changes, the very symbol of their religious life, that is, the monastery has changed quite a lot. It no longer looks like an ordinary Lepcha house, with its huge structure (though it was bigger than normal Lepcha house even in 1937) and most importantly the stone boundary walls and the gate at the entrance. The killing of animals for sacrificial purposes within the premises of the monastery has long been abandoned under pressure from some awakened youths like C. D. Lepcha, Y. T. Lepcha, and Athup Lepcha who was once a cabinet minister in Sikkim. The roof is no longer thatched and it is difficult to trace out rats today as the

monastery is much better maintained today. A partial credit for this goes to the Ecclesiastical Department of the Government of Sikkim.

Some of the Lepcha houses, particularly in Lingthem proper and Noom, are as traditional as they are described by Gorer and Morris. Most houses however are semi-traditional in the sense that they are neither as in 1937 nor are they modernized completely. True, electricity and drinking water taps can be seen in almost every house but the structure of the house - internal as well as external - are not completely changed. Externally, there are corrugated roofs, glass panes in the windows, panel doors, wooden floors, etc. But the ground floor is still very often used for the same purposes as they used to be before fifty years. Internally also the traditional structure with bedroom and kitchen together is still largely seen. Wooden cots are normally seen but they are meant for the male heads of the households. The use of aluminium utensils is widespread but the traditional bamboo utensils are also seen in many houses.

The traditional ovens made of stone and mud and sometimes with only three pieces of stones are not very frequently seen today. Such ovens are

generally fixed outside their houses and used for cooking fodder for cattle or boiling huge quantities of grain for making chi. Some people have built elevated hearths made of bricks and mud or cement and even iron. There are some households where kerosene stoves and electric heaters are also used. Use of charcoal is common too.

If the dress of the Lepchas of Lingthem was highly Tibetanized in 1937, it is considerably westernized today. It is indeed difficult to see any one below the age of thirty wearing even the Tibetanized dress. The educated boys and girls are as a fact completely westernized in terms of dress. Even the male members of the older generation are often found wearing shirts and trousers while some of them wear western dress above the waist and the traditional below it.

It is however to be noted that it is the same western influence which has made the use of the Lepcha upper garment called Thago very popular among the youths. The youths of the village being exposed to video films shown at Mangan and martial arts films being popular Thago, which resembles the upper garment in Korea or Hongkong, found a renewed acceptance.

A major credit for the spread of education in this village goes to the seasonal labourers from Nepal, who have taken up the works which would otherwise have to be done by the Lepcha children also. But this has its ill-consequences also. For instance, the presence of a large number of Nepali speakers in the village has not only proved to be detrimental to the growth of the Lepcha language but has threatened the very survival of it. The situation is further worsened due to the medium of instruction in the schools, which is the Nepali language. Even the few Lepcha teachers are reported to teach in Nepali rather than in Lepcha.

Under the circumstances, the initiatives taken by the Government of Sikkim to teach the Lepcha language upto Class XII throughout the State is welcome. But with the decrease in the use of this language in day to day life it is difficult to expect and ensure encouraging results. The only hope towards the success of this venture of the government is the Lepchas' own initiative and awareness about it.

With the establishment of the Gram Panchayat in 1965, the changes in the village are occurring more rapidly than before. The funds for development

works like the construction of roads, houses, bridges, playing grounds, etc. are now smoothly channelized through the gram panchayat. The panchayat has also been active in bringing about certain reforms in marriage and funeral ceremonies. Such ceremonies are today much less lavish and pompous than it used to be even twenty years back. It is also through the gram panchayat that the villagers have acquired high yielding variety seeds, chemical fertilizers, hybrid animals and loans for making cow sheds, pig styes or other such works. The corrugated and galvanized iron sheets for the roofs are also distributed through the panchayat only.

With regard to health it is difficult to say whether or not the Lepchas of this village are healthier today than what they were in 1937. But it is certainly true that the dangerous venereal disease, which the Lepchas called tanji and which has been casually mentioned by Gorer and Morris, is no more there. The Lepchas had caught this disease during the end of the nineteenth century when they had to render free labour to the Maharaja for carrying loads across the Indo-Tibetan border. Prostitution had evidently grown and flourished along the trade route, causing and spreading venereal

diseases to such free but innocent labourers.

The growth of the population in the village was considerably hampered due to widespread sterility caused by such diseases. On the top of that the villagers of Lingthem suffered from a massive attack of blood dysentery in 1932. Some villagers reported that at least 55 persons died due to this within a period of two months. The death of the children was not counted in it. Some of the families had been completely wiped off by the time one compounder from Singhik reached the village and cured the affected persons. Chano (Chanang by Gorer) Lepcha, 80 years, told me how he went around the whole village with the compounder and how he remembered odour coming out from each house.

The blood dysentery was cured soon but the venereal disease was not. The villagers kept suffering from this disease until 1959. It was in this year, between 3 and 13 February, that a medical team led by Dr. Shanti Gopal Sinha and sponsored by the Government of India camped in the village to treat all men and women in the village. It was only after that the sterility is reported to be completely removed and the villagers gradually started bearing children.

This story is perhaps responsible for the low population of this village even after fifty years. It is understandable that the population of the village would be much higher if they had not suffered from this infectious disease for almost about seventy years in total and about twenty years after the visit by Gorer and Morris.

Today the village is growing not only in terms of population but also changing with the world outside. Two of the villagers have even acquired television sets now. Radios are common and so are wrist watches and jeans trousers. The villagers are aware of what goes on in the political corridors of the Sikkim Legislative Assembly at Gangtok and some even in the Parliament. Few of them were also found discussing the merits and demerits of declaring cardamom as an industrial crop. If anything has not changed in the last few centuries it is perhaps their sense of hospitality.