

Chapter III

The Economy of Lingthem

Introduction

This chapter deals with the economic changes that have come about in the Lingthem village during the last fifty years. An attempt has been made here to go beyond a mere description of the change and continuity: to depict the processes of change and the factors responsible for the same.

The major aspects of economy dealt with here are agriculture, animal husbandry, and non-agricultural economy. Since the original investigators of this village have not dealt with these facets of economy under specific sub-headings it is inevitable that I first reconstruct the picture as it stood in 1937. This is also required because the two books on this village do not necessarily carry the same details, in the same vein, and to the same degree. Gorer has discussed the economy of Lingthem in chapters III and IV, and Morris in chapters IX and XIII of their books.

In this context it may be mentioned that trade has not received much attention in their books. This is the reason why I have not devoted any separate sub-heading to trade. However, the section on non-agricultural occupations shall touch upon the subject of trade also. Hunting and food gathering, on the other hand, occupied a major role in the traditional economy of this village. But these activities having grown economically obsolete and survived only as a form of recreation today no separate section has been devoted to this once important economic pursuit.

Agriculture

The Lepchas have been often described as "poor agriculturists" but the land has always been considered as the most precious possession of them. They are also alleged not to have made the best use of land. But it did not mean that the land meant anything less than their own life.

It is important to know the traditional status of agriculture as practised by the Lepchas not only to understand the bases of such allegations but also to understand the continuity and change that we observe today. This has been done here mainly on the basis of the book by Gorer because Morris does not specifically deal with this subject.

Now let me describe the agricultural state of affairs in Lingthem in 1937. Both Gorer and Morris assert that the Lepchas were never prepared to produce more than what they required and they subscribe this to their (Lepchas') "indolence". They also state that the Lepchas produced whatever they needed. What they seem to have missed to point out, however, is the fact that there was no motivation to produce surplus. The difficult terrain, the precipitous road, and the poorly developed market with no or little demand for food grains obviously created the lack of motivation for them to produce surplus.

The chief crops grown in and around Lingthem in 1937 were wet-rice, dry-rice, buckwheat, maize, cardamom and different varieties of millet (Gorer, p. 90). Of these crops, the cultivation of wet-rice and cardamom had started only in the beginning of the twentieth century. On wet-rice cultivation, the following lines of Gorer may be illuminating:

When the Mandal first learned about this crop (wet-rice) he had experimental terraces made for three years; it was then gradually adopted by the other villagers, as they became convinced of the superior yield of this crop, and the

amount of terrace ground is increased annually
(p. 90).

Like wet-rice cultivation the cultivation of cardamom is supposed to be an importation from Nepal (Gorer, p. 91). But Morris does not agree with this view of Gorer. According to Morris, cardamom was not cultivated in Nepal nor did it exist at least in the eastern Nepal where he had visited (p. 185). But the fact that there is no Lepcha term for cardamom and they use the term alainchi only indicates that this crop is not indigenous to the Lepchas. So far as the introduction of this crop in the village is concerned it was confirmed that some of the villagers, who had to provide free labour to the Maharaja at his palace had brought a few seedlings from the palace garden. The seedlings were gradually multiplied and cultivation began to take a larger scale.

It is clear from the accounts of both Gorer and Morris that while settled cultivation had begun shifting cultivation was also practised. The latter was practised in the upper part of the village or in higher altitudes while the lower part of the village was reserved for settled cultivation. As

a result of the shifting nature of cultivation, Gorer notes that, some of the fields were located as far away as three to four miles from the village (p. 76). Such fields were looked after by one or two members of the family, who lived in the field houses almost permanently. This shows that in the case of Dzongu only the site of cultivation kept shifting but the settlement remained fixed. The way the villagers carried out shifting cultivation may be described here in the words of Gorer:

The clearing of the land is started in the early spring; the women cut down the lower growths with their sickles, while the men climb and lop the bigger trees and saplings. Until recently the trees used to be cut down if possible, but now there is a court order forbidding the destruction of trees. When all the debris has been collected the straight sticks are sorted out and the rest is put into heaps and set fire to, the ashes acting as a loosener and fertiliser of the soil. After burning, the ground is cleared of charred wood and the remaining weeds by hand and is then sown with the main crop. This is done in the simplest manner possible; holes are made in

the ground with a pointed stick and the seed dropped into and round them (p. 93).

On the method of sowing, Morris adds that several grains used to be dropped into each hole without properly covering them with earth. Instead of covering them with earth so that the birds do not pick them away, a ceremony used to be arranged in the evening of the sowing day to prevent the birds from eating the seeds (p. 181).

It may be added that those who owned adjacent plots of forests always cultivated them in the same year. In other words, the sites of forest to be cultivated could be different but the group of people cultivating them would remain the same. The boundary between plots were roughly demarcated with stones and the whole group worked as a team to cultivate the entire area. They were not paid in any form but food was provided (Morris, p. 180).

This account is not fully corroborated by Gorer who says that payment was made in kind at the harvest time. An adult worker was paid about twenty kilograms of rice, a big basket of millet or maize and about twenty kilograms of buckwheat. Besides the first to harvest the dry-rice or the last to

harvest the wet-rice had to make small presents of rice to all the villagers (p. 95).

With regard to weeding, Morris writes that it did not often take place at least in the case of dry-rice cultivation. Nor such cultivation, which took place in distant places, was manured (p. 181). The forests being highly fertile manuring was actually not required.

Now let me describe briefly the nature of cardamom cultivation as narrated by Gorer and Morris. It is interesting to note at the very outset that though recently introduced this crop had, by 1937, attained an important place in the socio-cultural life of the villagers. A deity was already assigned by them to look after the welfare of this crop. This deity, known as Elai-gi-nyou was supposed to dislike the presence of menstruating women (Gorer, p. 238). Morris adds that "the cardamom fields should never be used as latrines" (p. 185). Such beliefs being common in Nepal, he guesses that these must have been brought by Tempa who had lived among the Nepalese for years (pp. 185-86). In this regard, it is also to be added that each cardamom field had an erection called Mung-li or devil's house which looked like a square house standing on

bamboo legs. This house was erected for accommodating a devil called Thy^ak-Dum which was known for causing damage to the cardamom plants (Morris, p. 186).

The cardamom seedlings were planted during March to April and started bearing fruits from the third year. Morris notes that after the sixth year such plants were rooted up (p. 185). This plant was weeded during March or when it flowered, April when the cardamom fruits started taking form, and finally in October when its harvesting started (Gorer, p. 94).

Even in 1937 cardamom was essentially a cash crop. The villagers sold this crop to the Marwari traders living in Mangan, who had been given the monopoly of this trade by the Maharaja. In this context, Gorer has deplored the presence of the Marwari traders in Mangan. To quote him:

Since the kanya (Marwari) have the cardamum (sic) monopoly and collect the selling tax the Lepchas cannot take their produce elsewhere; and it is questionable if it would pay them to do so, for against the higher prices obtainable in Gangtok and Kalimpong must be set the cost of portorage. As with many such crops the price is often higher at the end of the season than at the beginning but the kanya will not

let them wait on the market; at the beginning of the season they send representatives to their debtors claiming immediate payment, and threatening court proceedings if the cardamum is not forthwith handed over (p. 114).

In fact, Gorer has devoted about ten pages (113-22) of his book to illustrating the plight of the cardamom growers in Dzongu.

From the above account it is clear that the transition from shifting to settled cultivation had set in and so was the transition from consumption oriented agriculture to cash crops. This is quite significant and speaks of their innovativeness in view of the fact that the role of the state with regard to agriculture was confined to levying taxes. It was the same indifference of the state to develop its people that was responsible for the vulnerability of the Lepchas vis-a-vis the Marwari traders.

Let me now discuss the changes that have come about in the field of agriculture in Lingthem since it was last studied by Gorer and Morris.

To take up the crops first it may be pointed out that certain crops like dry-rice and buckwheat have almost completely vanished while other crop like wet-rice has witnessed a remarkable disappearance

of varieties. It is said that there were about twentysix varieties of wet-rice earlier but now they do not grow more than a couple of varieties. The dry-rice also had at least five major varieties but now it has been completely abandoned.

The wet-rice cultivation is no doubt a major preoccupation of the villagers even today with 81.6 acres or 21.4 percent of the total cultivable land under it. (The unirrigated area in the village is 244.5 acres or 64.2 percent of the total cultivated area. The fallow/waste land is only 55 acres or 14.4 percent of the total land owned.) But even those few traditional varieties of this rice are being threatened to be obliterated by the high yielding variety seeds. The villagers are aware of the superior taste and flavour of the traditional varieties but the high yield of the hybrid seeds has not remained unnoticed. The better-off Lepchas in the village, however, seem to have preferred to continue growing the traditional varieties even today. Many of them do use chemical fertilizers but they have preferred to continue with the seeds they had inherited. Similarly, very few villagers have been found to be growing new varieties of maize seeds.

However, there has been a remarkable change in the methods of sowing and cultivating the various crops from what prevailed in 1937. Of all the major crops it is only maize that is sown. But today the maize seeds are not dropped into the holes made by the dibbler but dropped along the furrows made by the plough. Such seeds cannot be picked up by the birds because when another furrow is made alongside the displaced earth automatically covers the seeds dropped in the earlier furrow. Thus, not only are the seeds protected from the wild birds but they grow in rows allowing better share of air and sunlight. The spacing of the maize seedlings is done during its weeding at the height of about six to eight inches.

The seeds of other crops like wet-rice and millet are first sown in nurseries and transplanted when they are of adequate height. The optimum height for the transplantation of rice seedlings is about eight to ten inches and that of millet about four inches.

Except the terraced fields other fields previously required extensive preparation before sowing the seeds. The clearing of forests and shrubs is not required today because the cultivable land is not left unused for more than three months

in a year. But except for maize and millet cultivation the preparation of land, particularly for wet-rice cultivation, is rather costly.

For maize cultivation, the clean ground is first ploughed and manured, followed by pulverization of the earthen boulders with the help of forks. After this they sow the seeds in the furrows made by the plough.

For the cultivation of millet the maize stumps are first uprooted and the top soil upturned. The millet seedlings are immediately planted into the soil at a space of about three inches. The weeding is done after the seedlings attain a height of about six inches. The harvest takes place in the month of November or December depending on the altitude.

It is the wet-rice cultivation which requires elaborate preparation of land. After the maize stumps are uprooted in the month of July the terrace edges and walls are sliced off with the help of spades. After this, ploughing is done, which is immediately followed by the raising and repairing of the terrace edges so that water is possible to retain on the terraces. The sliced off grass is let to decompose for about a week after

which the transplantation of the rice seedlings takes place in a festive manner. On the transplantation day a pair of oxen are engaged to pull the rake on the terrace and spades to clean the sides. This is followed by the levelling of the terraces with the help of a wooden piece fixed with a long bamboo handle. Once this is done the transplantation, which is normally done by the females, takes place.

It is obvious from the above that the plough is an essential implement for maize and paddy cultivation whereas for millet, wheat and other crops one can do without the plough. Though the plough is normally used only for maize cultivation in the dry fields such cultivation is very much a settled cultivation. The dry fields are not necessarily terraced and in many places terracing does not appear feasible. But since they go on cultivating the same plot of land over and over again such a cultivation may be called settled.

An essential part of the settled cultivation, whether in terraced or unterraced fields, is the mandatory manuring. This always takes place at the time of preparation of the land for maize cultivation though nowadays some chemical fertilizers are

spread in the wet-rice fields when the seedlings are fully grown.

With the settled cultivation the forms of labour exchange have also been institutionalized. The traditional practice of working in groups has been found effective even today and the payment is still made at the time of harvest. The amount of wage paid has obviously increased but the system has continued. It is important to note that in 1937 labourers were hired only for the purpose of carrying cardamom to the Mangan town but today they are hired frequently and for very many purposes, such as for repairing and construction of terraces and houses, ploughing, porterage, and so on.

With settled cultivation, the most remarkable change that has taken place is perhaps the emergence of tenurial relations. It may be recalled here that the Lingthem village in 1937 had no tenurial forms worth mentioning. Each Lepcha family had lands and the whole village worked in the fields as a group. Today, more than 60 percent of the irrigated land is cultivated by the sharecroppers from Nepal on adhia basis in which the produce is divided into equal halves between the landlord and the tenant whereas the former contributes nothing but half of the seeds required for the next season. Even the

cardamom fields are mostly leased out on adhia system to the same stock of seasonal immigrants from Nepal.

The immigrants from Nepal not only constitute the prominent sharecroppers' class but they have also given rise to the class of agricultural labourers and gothals or cowherds. In fact, they form a menial class which is left with almost any work from cultivation to the household chores.

On the other hand, the Lepchas of the village have emerged as a class of petty landlords or non-cultivating owners, no matter how much land they own. They have almost completely abandoned the work in the fields to the Nepali immigrants. Exceptions to this rule are to be found only in the Noom and Panung hamlets, where most of the households are still self-reliant in these matters.

Let me now discuss the changes that have come about in the cardamom cultivation. The first thing that must be pointed out in this connection is the multiplication in the acreage under this crop. In 1937, its cultivation was by no means extensive and it was confined to the altitude below five thousand. But now it is cultivated upto the height of about nine thousand feet. The cardamom plants

can be seen almost everywhere; in the forests, along the streamlets, and all areas which are moist but not terraced. A lot of area which was originally used for dry-rice cultivation has now been brought under cardamom plantation.

Unlike in 1937, there are two varieties of cardamom grown today. The altitudes below about five thousand feet usually have a variety called Golsai, which is bigger and rounder in shape, which fetches better price than the second variety and the bushes of which bear fruits for a longer duration. In the higher altitudes the other variety called Ramsai is grown. Compared to the former, its fruits are smaller, fetches less price, and the bushes do not bear fruits after ten to twelve years. But the advantage of this variety is that re-planting can be possible on the same spot where the old bush was as this variety is not supposed to exhaust the fertility of the soil. On the other hand, Golsai seedlings must be planted on a fresh spot.

The weeding of this crop is done thrice in a year as before: when the shoots strike up, at the time of flowering, and during the harvest. Both weeding and harvesting begin from the lowest altitude moving gradually up. No artificial manuring

is done for this crop: the decomposed shrubs and weeded out cardamom leaves serve as the manure for this crop.

On the socio-cultural front also the changes are significant. While Mung-li was an essential part of each cardamom field in 1937 it is a rare sight today. It is also reported that the restriction on urinating in the cardamom fields is no longer adhered to. But the belief that the menstruating women should not approach the cardamom fields is still there.

A major reason behind the erosion in some of the earlier beliefs of the Lepchas about cardamom is perhaps the fact that this crop is taken care of by the labourers from Nepal whether on sharecropping or otherwise. The spread of Buddhism at the cost of their traditional religion could also be partly responsible for this.

There are certain pros and cons of leaving their cardamom fields entirely to the immigrant Nepalese. Let me recount the pros first. One of the most significant advantages of this is that the Lepchas of Lingthem do not incur the hazards of its cultivation. It is well known that cardamom plantations are infested by snakes, leeches and small

flies besides the fact that the cardamom gas causes asthma. Snake bites are not frequent but whenever they occur the consequence is certain death unless they can reach Sankalang where a Marwari is reputed in the act of de venomization. Leeches are never a botheration and the villagers happily state that the leeches take away the dirty blood and never cause any harm to the body. But the cardamom flies create a lot of skin problems.

The cardamom gas emulsion particularly at the time of smoking it to dry is a sure cause of asthma. This disease is reportedly common, particularly among males who do this work. The problem is perhaps aggravated by the smoking habit of the Nepali labourers, which has been recently rubbed off to the local Lepchas also. This disease almost incapacitates the victims because of the lack of proper medicine and the air pressure in the higher altitudes.

Another major advantage of not cultivating cardamom by themselves is that they have been able to take advantage of the spread of education and modernization. Establishing small shops, going for service sector, sending their children to schools and colleges, etc. would certainly not have been

possible if they were engaged in cardamom cultivation. The cash earning of the villagers from cardamom sale and without ever visiting the fields is rather sufficient. The price of cardamom per maund (37 kilograms) varied from Rs.1450 to Rs.1800 in 1987. Though price fluctuation is a normal course the variation is not too great. And since almost every owner of the cardamom field can sell at least about 20 maunds the income should ideally see them through all their expenses. In fact, there are five households which sell about five hundred maunds of cardamom every year.

The cardamom cultivation is so lucrative that even an ordinary labourer from Nepal earns about 25 thousand rupees annually. It is reported that one Limbu sardar from Nepal returns home every year with a sum of over one lakh rupees. It is commonly joked that the labourers reach the village on foot and return on hired taxis all the way upto Kankarvita, a bordering town in Nepal.

But the cultivation of this crop entirely by the Nepalese has some demerits also. The most important demerit of this is their dependence on such seasonal labourers from Nepal. The plight of the Lepchas vis-a-vis the Marwari traders is not as

deplorable today as it is described by Gorar. But still most of the heads of the households in the village being illiterates they are highly vulnerable to the designs of those businessmen. Of course, a growing competition within the Marwari traders has been reported but they still control the market of this valuable crop.

The dependence on the Nepalese labourers is equally unfortunate. In 1987, the Government of Sikkim had envisaged a plan to send back all such labourers from Nepal by the end of December that year but no action followed. If the government had pursued this matter it would have lost a lot of revenue and probably faced resentment from the owners of this crop. Because, it is almost unthinkable today that Sikkim grows this crop without the immigrant labourers.

In Lingthem in particular there was an incidence of driving away some such labourers from Nepal. This occurred in 1975-76, during the regime of the Janata Party led by Kazi Lhendup Dorjee. There was reportedly a demand of the Nepalese in Lingthem for citizenship and right to live in Dzongu permanently. The youths of Lingthem united and first put a curb on the grazing by the cattle belonging to the Nepalese

labourers. They also caught many cattle, killed them, and consumed half of the animals by themselves and left the other half hanging in the field for their owners.

This incident was preceded by a number of conflicts between some Chhetri sharecroppers and the local owners and the latter believed that it was the former who were instigating others to join them in the demand for citizenship. On further exploration, it was revealed that the anger of the Lepcha youths was not against all labourers from Nepal but only against a particular Nepali group called the Chhetris. The villagers are not reported to have any conflict with other Nepali groups like Rai, Limbu, Tamang, and Mangar.

One of the major reasons why the Lepchas of Dzongu have chosen to suspend the demand for recognizing the cardamom as an industrial crop is their dependence on the outside people. If the crop is recognized so they fear that the labourers from outside may get a lot of security while they may only have to bear the burden of tax on them.

Animal Husbandry

The importance of animal husbandry in the economy of Lingthem and even outside is next only

to agriculture. The value of animals increased along with the increase in the land under settled cultivation which is not possible without manuring. The introduction of chemical fertilizers has not in any case undermined the utility of cowdung or animals per se. The White Revolution sweeping over the Darjeeling and Sikkim hills has further enhanced the economic value of animal husbandry.

Even in 1937 Gorer has written that "domestic animals play a considerable role in the life of the Lepchas" (p. 100). The socio-religious ceremonies related to birth, marriage, and death would not be complete without the animals. A major factor for indebtedness of the Lepchas in 1937 is considered by Gorer to be the purchase of animals for such purposes (p. 100).

Gorer writes that ox was the most important animal and a symbol of wealth. Its meat was most esteemed in any feast. It was used for ploughing and only the savage ones were castrated. The milch cows were valued for milk and butter but not mated and no pedigrees were kept (p. 100).

The animals were normally left free to graze in the common forest surrounding the village. But

tethering of animals and feeding them with leaves, salt and powdered grain has been mentioned by Gorer (p. 101). He further writes that each animal had its name and unless it spoilt crops it was not beaten. In the winter, the villagers sent their cattle to graze on their own in the forest a little away from the village. Such animals were not tended but if the owners wanted them they could go to the forest and bring them back without any problem (Gorer, p. 101).

Gorer makes an attempt to explain the lack of confidence among the Lepcha boys in terms of the way they herd their animals. The Lepcha boys, according to him, were never left to their own and were always accompanied by elders whenever they went for tending their animals (p. 101). This observation does not sound very convincing and it is likely that he was pre-occupied with the problem of explaining the lack of confidence in the Lepcha youths. But there is perhaps little^{that} can be done about disposing with the above line of argument. It is nonetheless clear that tending of animals was in any case a rare activity. It is also quite probable that, having suffered a lot due to rampant sterility in the village for about fifty years before Gorer and Morris reached there, they did not

want the few boys in the village to risk their lives specially when they knew that the risk was high.

Gorer writes that the number of animals owned by the villagers varied considerably from one household to another. The average number of animals held was about six or seven (p. 101).

Goats were raised for food and sacrifices. The pigs were also raised for the same purpose. But the meat of the latter was more popular and the number was also larger. The breed of pig they raised was a variety of Himalayan wild pig. The males were castrated at the age of three or four months. Gorer mentions two major reasons for castrating them: to make them less vigorous and secondly, the belief that eating the meat of uncastrated pig would result in sodomy. This belief was governed by the notion of Tamtoom, which represents an inevitable connection between two events (p. 102).

Sodomy was highly dreaded and repulsed. This was believed to result in disaster and was equated with incest. Such an act required ceremonial cleansing by a Mun. But this rarely got known to people because they did not talk about it. Gorer also writes that the Tamtoom affected only to the Lepchas and never to other communities (pp. 102-03).

The pigs were known to eat human excreta. Gorer has written about the pigs following the children to the jungle and the need for the elders to accompany them in order to drive away the pigs (p. 103).

The Lepchas also raised dogs, cats, fowls, etc. but these did not occupy a very important position in their economic life.

Gorer has written about the prohibition on both men and women, more particularly on women, to kill an animal. The lamas also could not kill animals nor could they eat them on the same day they were killed. The lay members of the monk's family were, however, free from this restriction (pp. 104-05). If any household had all its members as monks or nuns a butcher would be called to the house and he would be given as free about six kilograms of beef, a smaller amount of pork or mutton, and simply chi in the case of chicken (p. 105).

The ownership of animals by any Lepcha household was interesting too. Like land, animals were ideally the property of the head of the household. But usually the children were given a chicken or a piglet each. They looked after the animals and if

sold the money was supposed to be spent on their clothes but if their private animals were to be eaten or sacrificed the parents needed to replace them (Gorer, pp. 107-08).

Gorer also mentions that such privately owned animals were not set apart from the rest but if the owner was a girl marrying out she was entitled to take her animals along with her. He further writes that "everybody except the very poorest have a few private animals" (p. 108). The examples of Mrs. Datoop and Mrs. Pembu, how they had brought their private animals from their natal families, etc. have been described by Gorer. It is clear from his description of other case studies that both male and female children used to keep some private animals (pp. 108-09).

Gorer has explained the keeping of private animals by the Lepcha children as a mechanism of the Lepcha society to make their children self-reliant. But there were some practical advantages of this system. For instance, this would motivate their children to look after the animals of the household as a whole because, as earlier mentioned, they were never set apart. Secondly, this would

put a check on the parents to sell or eat all the animals of the household. But since this practice was encouraged by the parents the first factor was probably more important than the second. The children who had no schools to attend and no major responsibility on their shoulders were better disciplined in that way. Since fodder was plentifully available in the field and forest around the private animals of the children were in ^{no} way a burden on the parents.

It is passingly mentioned in the beginning of this section that the animals were a must in the Lepcha ceremonies related to the birth, marriage, and death. The dependence of their socio-cultural system on the domestic animals may now be briefly discussed here.

Several months before the marriage the groom's family started preparing for food and animals. The groom must take the hind leg of a pig while going to the bride's house with the bek-bu or go-between. The bridal procession also necessarily consisted of, among other things, a pig (pp. 332-33).

The morning after the arrival of the bridal party two oxen are kept ready. The head, right

foreleg, left hind leg, etc. of the first ox was preserved for the bride's family whereas the second ox was meant for the groom. A sort of altar was made by tethering the second ox on which the Mun placed, among others, a scarf, a rupee, and a big bowl of strained chi, and dedicated the ox to all the gods and recited the story of the origin of marriage. After this narration was over the bride and the groom along with their parties were called near the altar and told that the ox was being sacrificed for love and not quarrel and for blessing children (pp. 334-35).

The second ox was killed after this ceremony was over. The ox was killed with a bow and arrow necessarily by the wife's younger brother or her classificatory younger brother. In case there is no such person to kill the ox and someone else was to do it a fine of Rs.5 had to be paid to the groom's family. After the ox was killed the bride's younger brother poured water over its muzzle and the same was cut up. The meat of this was not consumed at the feast: the head and one of the hind legs would be taken by the bride's family and the rest given away as presents (p. 335).

In short, domestication of animals was more of a socio-cultural activity than an economic one. The degree of attention given by Gorer to the former aspect was probably not accidental but based on the situation as it obtained in 1937. Gorer does mention about the purchase of animals and the indebtedness due to it but the purpose has been mentioned to be religious. In any case it was not a part of the monetised economy as cardamom was.

Despite the fact that the rearing of animals had a socio-religious purpose, the economic consequences of the need to purchase them was significant even in 1937. The owning of a large number of animals was not only a status symbol but also a stable source of income.

With these words, let me now take up the changes that have occurred in the value and practice of animal husbandry. As stated earlier, the increase in the animal husbandry is closely associated with the spread of settled cultivation. Let me briefly dwell upon this relationship here.

With settled cultivation the most important change was the need to manure the fields at least once in a year. Under shifting cultivation the cultivated area used to be abandoned for about eight years in 1937, during which the soil got

enough time for recuperation. But under settled cultivation the land does not get any scope to recuperate naturally and has to be therefore fertilized regularly. And chemical fertilizers being unknown to the villagers till early 70s, cowdung was the only source of manure.

The extension of settled cultivation not only enhanced the value of the oxen, for there was more land to be ploughed, but also the value of milch cow. While oxen are essential for pulling the plough the volume of cowdung produced by the milch cows is many times more. This is perhaps why the number of cows is much higher (69 or 25.2 percent) compared to 55 oxen or 20.9 percent of the total livestock. (The total number of goats is 70 or 26.6 percent and that of pigs is 69 or 26.2 percent. The man-animal ratio in the village is therefore about 1:2 which is quite significant.) Hence, for mere fertilizing the fields if not anything else the rearing of cows and oxen has proved to be essential to the villagers.

More of land under settled cultivation has also meant less of land for grazing. Today grazing is confined to a few patches of forest in and around the village, though even cultivable lands are grazed after the harvest. But this did not pose any

problem to the villagers. In fact, it is more a boon than a bane because the cowdung needed to be collected at one place, which was possible only when the cattle were stallfed. The cowdung thus collected near the cow-shed are taken to the fields with the help of ^a bamboo baskets.

A large number of villagers have at least a couple of plots lying far away from the village. Such plots are however either under cardamom cultivation or under dry cultivation. The cardamom cultivation need not be manured with cowdung but the dry fields are to be manured. In such cases the villagers are found to have kept at least a pair of oxen in the field houses made on such far-flung fields. Such animals are either looked after by the gothalas or by some member of the family. In most cases, it is the latter who also performed the role of the gothalas.

The above changes in the domestication of animals have not, however, resulted in the extinction of the traditional Lepcha practice of giving each animal a name. Here it should be noted that it is only the cows or the oxen which are named: goats, pigs and fowls are generally not named. Another domesticated animal which always carries a name is the watch dog.

The socio-economic value of the named animals is apparently more than that of unnamed animals. Here a question may be raised about the dog. The dog may have less social value but its economic value cannot be undermined.

The Nepali neighbourers often jocularly comment that the Lepchas use the highest form of honorifics for the dogs and the lowest for their own parents, particularly when they are speaking in the Nepali language. It is also observed that the Lepchas often share the same food with the dogs. While this reflects a close association between the man and the animal in the Lepcha society the dependence of the former on the latter need to be brought out.

In the first place, dogs are a company to them wherever they go. The various hamlets are often a cluster of households but the distance between two houses is often made to appear more by the forests and bamboo grooves. The dogs also look after the fowls and piglets, which normally roam around the house, from the foxes and jackals so abundant in the vicinity. They not only thus protect the domestic animals but also protect the agricultural crops around by chasing away the monkeys which too are profuse. Besides, they take care of the houses

when the owners leave them unlocked and go to the fields or forests. And they are a sure guarantee against burglary.

These are only some of the advantages of domesticating the dogs by feeding the leftovers in the kitchen. But these are enough to explain why dogs are so much cared and loved by the Lepchas.

The cats are also given special care and are allowed to sleep with themselves or their children. The cats are not as useful as the dogs but there are certain works which only the cats can do like catching the mice and rats creating havoc for the granary and the fields respectively. The Lepchas are expert in making traps for mice or rats but it is often said that the very presence of cats at home is enough to keep them away.

The traditional taboo on the killing of animals, particularly by women and monks, is still strongly respected. In fact, even among the lay Lepcha males there are very few who indulge in the killing of animals. Killing of birds and catching of the fishes are however not included within the realm of animal killing. Nowadays the killing of goats and pigs, except for ceremonial purposes, is done by the Nepalese tenants. But the killing of oxen is their

prerogative as they have no religious inhibition as the Nepali Hindus have.

The traditional system of keeping private animals by the children and other members of the family has continued. Today, most of the children go to schools and the expenses towards the purchase of their dress and stationaries are met by selling their private animals. Here, a case may be briefly reported. Nima Lepcha, 14 years, the eldest daughter of C. D. Lepcha, the Panchayat President, had a number of fowls as her private property. A student of Class VI in the Passingdang High School, she once broke into tears when she found out that one ^{of} her _^ hens was sold out to me. The money received by her mother was handed over to her but she was not happy at all. After that incident I used to negotiate with her directly for buying eggs, to which her parents did not at all object.

Finally, it may be noted that the ceremonial value of oxen and pigs narrated above has not in any case dwindled. Even in the cases of elopement or love marriage the formal ceremony follows though with less vigour. The only change that is reported in the case of marriage in the recent past is that

the calf has replaced the ox though some well-to-do families take pride in sacrificing the oxen only.

Now it may be added that the animals they breed today are of superior type. The Department of Animal Husbandry collects hundreds and thousands of hybrid cows from the neighbouring hills of Darjeeling and other parts of Northeast India. Such animals are redistributed to the villagers on the basis of recommendations made by the gram panchayats. This practice has been going on for more than fifteen years now.

The Department of Animal Husbandry also provides hybrid piglets. There is also a well coordinated network of veterinary services which have brought under its purview almost every village even in the remotest part of Sikkim. The veterinary centres not only provide medical facilities but also inseminate the cows, castrate the bulls, goats and boars, and even provide feed for the cattle.

Despite such elaborate veterinary infrastructural back up the mere distance from one village to another has made it difficult, at least in Dzongu, to streamline the production of milk. The villagers of Lingthem, for instance, do not sell their milk

but prepare butter out of it and sell it in the Mangan town and sometimes within the village also. In other words, the Lingthem village, though laden with livestock resources, has not been able to reap the fruit of the White Revolution. But if they did not earn enough from the cardamom they would certainly reach out to reap this fruit.

Non-Agricultural Economy

It is a little difficult to write about the non-agricultural economy of a village which was highly dependent on agriculture. It is even more difficult to separate the non-agricultural economic activities from the agricultural in many circumstances. Lingthem, with very limited division of labour in 1937, did not have clear differences between agricultural and non-agricultural economies. Separating the non-agricultural from the agricultural economy might even look deliberate and artificial.

The objective of this section is not to make a deliberate distinction between the two. But both Gorer and Morris have devoted a considerable number of pages to those economic activities which are not directly related to agriculture. Among such activities hunting, weaving, carpentry, and trade may be mentioned. The status of each of these activities

in 1937 may now be briefly described.

a) Hunting. It appears from the following words of Gorer that hunting was an important activity of the Lepchas. To quote Gorer:

(I)n former times and still today in the less fertile regions, Lepchas relied on hunting for a great deal of their food; but in Lingthem, and most of the other villages of Zongu game is hunted less and less (p. 84).

He cites two major and one supplementary reasons for the declining popularity of this activity. According to him, the influence of lamaism which made killing of animals a stigma was one of the important reasons while the increased demand for labour in the spreading settled cultivation was another such reason. The cash they received from selling the cardamom also made hunting and selling of skins less profitable (pp. 84-86).

Morris's account on the hunting by the Lepchas of Lingthem and Dzongu is not as analytical as Gorer's. Instead of observing this as a declining activity he writes that the dense forests of Dzongu were full of deers and pheasants by hunting which people could "vary and supplement their ordinary

diet" (p. 192). He makes an exciting and detailed narration of the courses of becoming a hunter too. This may be briefly reproduced here.

Normally a boy starts hunting at the age of fifteen but would not acquire the bow and arrows of his own until he accompanied an experienced hunter a couple of times. He was not in any case expected to get them from his father nor was he supposed to eat the meat of the prey until he killed one hundred animals (pp. 192-93).

Pong-Rum, the god of animals and the patron-deity of hunters, needed to be propitiated with sacrifices in October every year. If this was not done he would have no luck for the whole following year. In addition to this, every time he killed an animal or bird he was supposed to offer the entrails to Pong-Rum. He was also supposed to take care that on his return home no woman saw its head otherwise it would be unlucky next time he went for hunting (p. 193).

There is a detailed account of how the huntings were actually carried out but these are not of my immediate interest here. There are also a number of hunting stories narrated by Morris but they need

not be repeated here. Suffice it to note here that the hunting of smaller animals and for consumption was very much practised by the villagers of Lingthem in 1937.

Today, hunting is a rare activity not because the Lepchas feel less excited about it but simply because the animals have more or less vanished with the trees and forests around. There are some young men in the village who still go for hunting occasionally but it is reported that they have to go much farther and often return bare handed. They acknowledge the fact that they often miss their prey due to lack of skill which in turn is a result of lack of regular practice.

Hunting today is, if anything, a source of recreation only. It will not be an exaggeration to state that no matter how poor the villagers are they did not hunt just to satisfy their desire for meat. There is not a single household today which does not have a couple of pigs, some goats and some fowls, if not an ox or cow as well. Most of them domesticate these animals for consumption though at times they may be forced to sell them too.

b) Weaving. This was not only an art but also a craft in the sense that it was a profession for men

and women of Lingthem. But by 1937, this craft had already begun to disappear. For instance, Gorer writes:

Until the beginning of this century Lepchas used to weave all their own cloth, but nowadays only a couple of women bother to weave; people wear instead ready-made and fairly shoddy clothes (p. 53).

Gorer also points out that the ready-made clothes were of poor and thin material rendering the children susceptible to colds and bronchitis. To him, this is one of the probable causes of infant mortality. Three young children of the village had died of bronchial trouble during his three months' stay (p. 53). But the weaving of mats and baskets was very much in practice. To quote him:

Lepchas weave strong and regular mats and baskets out of the bark of bamboo and various reeds, which they employ for a variety of purposes (p. 67).

This work was ideally supposed to be the men's work but even females were engaged in doing this. The females were in fact reported to be better weavers of mats (tuk in Lepcha, p. 67). Weaving baskets was however done mostly by males and during leisure

hours particularly during the rainy season.

Even today, weaving of clothes, mats, and baskets has continued but the weaving of cloths in particular is done for commercial purposes. Two women were found to have continued weaving cloth but the purpose was not to make a dress out of it but to make bags, and belts for their dress. The making of mats and baskets are also continued.

Despite this apparent continuity there are certain differences between weaving earlier and now. For instance, earlier the threads were not easily available but now readymade threads of varying thickness are readily available for weaving. Second, the threads used to be dyed indigeneously before and only a couple of colour combinations was possible but now threads of every possible colour and shade are available. Therefore, attractive colour combinations and designs can be made today.

The Lepcha women seemed to have a natural flair for weaving but the Department of Industries of the Government of Sikkim has not been able to exploit this resource. Instead the Tibetan women settled in Ravangla, Gangtok, and other parts of Sikkim have monopolized this craft completely.

Given the opportunity, training and incentives the women of Lingthem could very well compete with the women from the "roof of the world".

c) Carpentry. With regard to carpentry as a profession Morris makes no mention while Gorer has devoted about two pages to those carpenters who were requisitioned to work in the Palace. Though they also made the houses in the village with simple tools like ban (a long straight sword) and the hand axe, they were apparently not included in the category of carpenters. It is difficult to exclude them but in the absence of any record by either Gorer or Morris there is little scope to discuss about them.

It is well known that it was obligatory on the subjects of Sikkim to supply and to serve as the servants at the Palace but Gorer adds that young men were also trained as carpenters. After receiving the order the Mandal decided which boys to send but consulted their parents for the sake of formality (pp. 120-21). The boys so requisitioned received training at the State Carpentry School and received free lodging and food in lieu of their commitment to go anywhere the state wanted. Gorer cites the cases of two young men of Lingthem, namely Pichi and Bahada, who had returned to the village after comple-

tion of their training (p. 121).

Apart from such carpenters serving the state, it was really not a full time job for the village carpenters. Since the use of timber in making traditional Lepcha houses did not require any special training or tools even those who often did carpentry were not formally recognized as so. Their identity as someone's father or brother predominated their identity as carpenters too.

Carpentry is still not developed as full time occupation for any one in the village. Though many Lepcha houses today require finer jobs and hence special tools, there is no whole time professional carpenter in the village. There are but a number of them (three) who assume the duties of a carpenter in the winter and that of a peasant during summer.

d) Trade. Compared to the previous three occupations trade was apparently much more significant going by the attention paid by both Gorer and Morris to this occupation. The kind of trade they were engaged in has been described by Gorer in the following words:

Before the beginning of this century when money was introduced and shops set up in the neighbourhood, Lepchas had to travel abroad

to obtain cloth and thread, salt and metal goods. They used to collect in the forest the red dye-wood called Vyim ... and take that and whatever surplus crops they had upto the Tibetan border, where they would exchange it for salt and wool. Some of the salt they would then take to Darjeeling to exchange for thread and cloth (p. 118).

For security and hospitality in such foreign areas the Lepchas had developed an institution called ingzong which meant a brother relationship. For establishing this relationship a pig had to be killed and its intestines offered to the Lepcha patron-saint called Kumsithing and a feast to be held in which the ingzongs took oath to love and help one another, never think ill of the other, etc. This is to be followed by a rite of Sakyou-faat - the sacrifice of butter (p. 118).

There were a total of 11 ingzongs in the Talung Valley out of which 3 were in Lingthem in 1937. Around that time their relationship with the Nepalese traders was apparently not cordial and they had ingzong relationship only with "Sikkimese and Tibetans, for the exchange of crops and dye-wood for salt, carpets, and metal vessels" (p. 119).

The case study of Chano, 80 years, may provide some further details on the nature and articles of trade during 1930s. He had reached Darjeeling two times and Kalimpong three times and Gangtok several times with eggs. He used to collect eggs in the village at the rate of three annas (18 paise) per dozen and sold them at the rate of 6 annas at Gangtok and 12 annas at Darjeeling. In Darjeeling, he used to get a much higher price during the gatherings at Lebong race course (Lebong was then known as Alibong.) He used to carry as many as 65 dozens of eggs at a time. He also carried some wax (honeycomb) and Vyim (Majito in Nepali) but the police did not allow him to carry these later. He, then began to carry butter which he brought for about 25 paise per seer (a little less than a kilogram) in the village and sold at the rate of Rs.5 per seer in Darjeeling. He also had begun to sell garlic at the rate of 24 paise per pot. He recalls how he used to travel all the way upto Kalimpong and Darjeeling eating fruits and berries, and how he used to be pestered by a Sherpa trade agent of the British government.

Let me now state that trading in the real sense has disappeared completely. What they do now

is better termed as petty business. There are 5 households in the village who have established regular shops in the Passingdang hamlet and sell various articles from groceries to betel leaves. The number of households taking vegetables, fruits and some domesticated animals and their products to the Mangan town is never stable and keeps fluctuating from season to season. But whenever they do so they sell their articles by themselves and return home with articles which they require such as cooking oil, kerosene, foodstuff, and sometimes even beer.

The way cardamom and some oranges are sold to the Biharis and Marwaris of Mangan also cannot be strictly termed as trade. In many cases such businessmen make advance payments at a time when the producers are in dire need of cash and the produce is collected by the labourers hired by the businessmen at the time of harvest.

The four non-agricultural occupations discussed above did not exhaust the sources of their non-agricultural income. A large number of villagers were engaged in the construction of roads and buildings within and near the village.

Conclusion

By way of summing up of this chapter some of

the outstanding changes in the course of last fifty years may be recapitulated. First, it is clear from the foregoing discussion that the form of cultivation has completely transformed from shifting to settled. With no scope for further land reclamation the inevitable choice for intensive cultivation and commercialization of crops have been witnessed. The establishment of various forms of tenure also shows the growing strain on land.

With regard to animal husbandry, it is clearly evident that its economic value has considerably increased with the spread of settled cultivation. Its social significance seems to have been slightly diminished due to the spread of lamaism on the one hand and disappearance of the Muns and Bongthings on the other. But this has been compensated by the disinclination instilled by Buddhism about the killing of animals.

Finally, about the non-agricultural economy it should be mentioned that it is expanding fast. There is a growing urge to go for business and service sectors. The percentage of service holders out of the total workers in the village in 1987 was 11.9 and that of businessmen 1.1. Hence, the trend to hold a government service is not mistaken.

Given the hardships of carrying out agricultural works and the sheer dependence on nature for the harvest, agriculture is being increasingly abandoned by the villagers. The total percentage of workers engaged in agriculture has already come down to 12.1. The land which are being cultivated by the seasonal labourers may be either left fallow or poorly cultivated in case the present flow of them is stopped. On the other hand, the clean clothes of the servicemen, the fixed salary, medical and other allowances, and retirement benefits, are known to all. Above all there is the question of status attached to the service occupation.

Unless the income from the increasingly popular non-agricultural sector is reinvested on agriculture this traditional mainstay of the Lepchas of Lingthem and other villages may be a liability rather than an asset. The villagers have already begun to develop a pessimistic outlook towards the future of their agriculture.