

CHAPTER EIGHT

POLITICAL ORGANISATION

It has been said earlier that the Lepcha had neither a tribal nor a clan organisation. But in order to regulate their dealings with the State certain officials were appointed, which constituted their traditional political system. This traditionality of their political organisation persisted in Zongu until recently and perhaps its vestiges can be seen even to-day. But in Kalimpong, since it became a part of British India long ago, it lost its traditional political character soon after this subdivision was annexed from Bhutan. In the following pages traditional as well as modern political system of the Lepcha of Zongu and Kalimpong will be discussed.

Political organisation is a system of regulating relations between groups or members of different groups within the society at large. It is likely that true political organisation begins only with the development of co-operation between distinct and unrelated kinship groups. Ecology and the patterns of culture whereby a people adjust to their environment, undoubtedly plays a large role in the initiation of political systems and in some aspects of their further development. Economic patterns of culture seems also to be linked to political patterns, at least in part (Beals & Hoijer 1965 : 539-62). The political organisation is the set of arrangements by which a public (the public is the persistent social group that forms a unit regulating its common affairs, is a corporate group) regulates its common affairs (Smith 1968 : 194).

Traditional Political System

Zongu, as part of the Maharajah (Chogyal) of Sikkim's private estate, was administered on his behalf by one of the Kazi or hereditary ministers and landowners. The last one was Rhonock Kazi.

Administratively Zongu was divided into fourteen villages, each with a Mondal as its head. There was also a Mukhtiyar in between Mondal and Kazi. The Mukhtiyar was superior to the Mondals. There was but one Mukhtiyar for the whole of Zongu, and his duty was to supervise and co-ordinate the work of the separate village Mondals or headman. The Mondals collected taxes in their respective villages and used to go once in every year with the actual cash to Gangtok, but since most of them were completely illiterate they delivered their accounts verbally to the Mukhtiyar, who recorded them in writing. The Mukhtiyar received no pay but was entitled to a commission of four annas a year for each house on which taxes were paid. He toured all over his district twice each year, when he assessed the tax to be paid on areas newly brought under cultivation. He also registered birth and death. At the end of each tour he reported to Gangtok and rendered his accounts in person. The office of Mukhtiyar was not necessarily hereditary, since it could only be successfully filled by one who could at least read and write.

The post of village Mondal was previously hereditary. If he had no son the office eventually devolved upon the man who married his daughter, but when a man had children some near paternal relative usually succeeded to the post. In addition to their

work as tax collector Mondals had authority to impose fines upto thirty rupees, but a Mukhtiyar might order a fine of sixty. They were also empowered to settle cases in connection with misappropriation of land but there were no such cases in Lingdong since many years. In Chogyal's time Mondals did not receive any pay from the state, but each household was required to give him three day's free labour (or three men for one day) a year. This system was called kurwa.

Every Mondal had under him several assistants known as Karbari. Karbaris were appointed for a period of three years and with the exception of Lamas every one used to take on the duty in turn. The roster goes on indefinitely, so that if any particular man was not called upon during his lifetime the turn devolved upon his son. There was no pay or any other material advantage attached to the office of Karbari, except a certain amount of authority. When a man had retired from the office of Karbari he was eligible for the appointment of Youmi. Numbers of Youmis to be appointed was at the discretion of the individual headman. Whenever any matter cropped up which could only be decided by reference to customary law, the Mondal called in the Youmis to aid him in giving a decision. They were usually very old man and because of this they could decide such matters as whether there was any reason why a particular couple should not be married or if one man ran off with the wife of another what compensation he should be required to pay and so on. The Youmis also with the help of Gyapon tried to settle quarrels and minor cases without bringing it to the official notice of the Mondal.

The chief work on the administrative side of the village

fell on the Gyapon. Each householder in turn has to hold this office for three years, a sort of rotation was established, and people came to know before hand when their turn of office would fall due. The work was distinctly arduous, it entailed the actual collection of the taxes, the summoning of all citizens of ceremonies or organising collective work for a village like bridge or road repairing or carrying loads to the monastery when required, the collection of grain from each house for communal ceremonies and the prevention of crime and quarrelling. A great deal of the Gyapon's time was taken up in communal business at the cost of their own work and cultivation.

The office of Mukhtiyar and Mondal could be held by the Lamas, the other two offices of Youmi and Gyapon could not, as these offices might entail directly or indirectly the slaughter of animals.

Previously at the time of Chogyal there was no per capita tax of land in Sikkim but every houses paid five rupees a year.

The political organization of the Lepcha of the Darjeeling district was different from that of Sikkim, because the district of Darjeeling was annexed from Sikkim and had been made a part of British India before the begining of this century. In olden days the Lepcha of the Darjeeling district had a traditional political system i.e. traditional panch headed by the village head man or Mondal. Each village had their own Mondal. The Mondals with the help of other members (selected on the basis of age and experience) of his traditional panch were solely responsible for maintaining law and order and disputes among the villagers. In the Darjeeling district also the posts of Mondals were in most cases hereditary. The

villagers at a gathering selected a person as Mondal or headman and he continued the office for generations. But if he did not have any son or his son was considered unsuitable for the post, the villagers could select any other person as their new Mondal.

Contemporary Political System

At present the infrastructure of the political systems of Sikkim and Darjeeling district of West Bengal have completely changed with the introduction of modern panchayat system.

A panchayat (literally a council of five) is a group of elected members of the body which meets to decide case of disputes, look after the developmental works and judicial cases or problems and general welfare of the people. Panchayats have an indispensable role to play in the rural areas, and are supposed to represent interests of all sections of the community. Many activities such as, framing programmes of production for villages, obtaining and utilising governmental assistance for the betterment of the village such as the construction of roads, bridges etc. to improve the standards of cultivation, organising voluntary labour for community works and general assistance in the implementation of economic and social reforms and to settle down the minor disputes among the villagers.

With the change from traditional to statutory panchayat, the function and power of Mondal has lessened. The Mondal has become, now a days, a mere revenue collector. He gets a commission, 10 percent of the total revenue collected.

The Lingdong village panchayat is formed jointly with the neighbouring village Burfock. The two villages have one panchayat but two different Mondals. The panchayat is composed of one president, one secretary, one vice-president, three members (Mondals are the ex-officio members) one Gyapon (the messenger). The office bearers of the posts are unanimously elected by the villagers at a gathering. There is no tier system in Sikkim panchayat and the panchayats have little or no monetory or other powers in comparison to Darjeeling village panchayats. The panchayats of Lingdong is directly under the control of the District Collector.

In Darjeeling the traditional Mondal was statutorily acknowledged by the British administration as the de facto village - official - in - charge of the land revenue system. The Mondals were appointed as such in succession and as the traditional leader of the village with a quasi-judicial authority and influence, had prestige and area of domination not restricted within the confines of his village but sometimes even transgressing the limits of his area of residence and revenue jurisdiction. The fact that Mondal is an important person is established by the election of the Mondal of Nassey as the member of the gram panchayat. But after independence the traditional panchayats or panch in Darjeeling has been replaced by the new multivillage Statutory panchayat system.

In Sikkim it was replaced after Sikkim had become the 22nd state of Indian union in the year 1975. According to the West Bengal panchayat act of 1957 a three tier system of panchayat raj is operating in the district of Darjeeling including the Kalimpong

subdivision, the lowest level of which is the grampanchayat or gram sabha. Three to four villages together constitute a gram panchayat. Each of its village constituencies have their representatives in it elected through adult franchise. The seats of the village in the gram sabha depends on population strength. Again two or three grampanchayats constitute an anchal panchayat. The members of the anchal is elected by the members of the gram panchayat. The last but not the least tier of the panchayat system is the district council or zila parishad, with district magistrate and legislative members of state assembly being the ex-officio members.

Panchayati raj institution has been introduced in the district of Darjeeling in a phased programme. In 1958 gram panchayat and anchal panchayats were introduced in three blocks, Viz. Darjeeling, Pulbazar, Jore-Banglow, Sukia Pokhri and Rongli - Rongliat. Then in 1961 two more blocks viz. Kamimpong I and Kalimpong II were added. Finally in 1964, the remaining five blocks, viz. Kurseong, Mirik, Gorubathan, Siliguri, Naxalbari, Karibāri - Phansidewa were covered by gram and anchal panchayats. Zilla parishad came into existence in November 1964.

The village Nassey along with its neighbouring village Purbang and Peshore come under Nassey gram panchayat which again with Tashiding gram panchayat form one anchal panchayat.

Within the development block II of Kalimpong, Pagang gram Panchayat along with Santook gram panchayat form one Algarah anchal panchayat.. In the election of 1962 there were 10 Lepchas

out of 15 members in the Pagang gram panchayat. But in the next election, which took place in 1978 the representation of the Lepcha community has come down to 7 from 15, though the Lepcha are the numerically dominant group in that area. In the Nassey gram panchayat also the number of Lepcha members has become less in the last election. This trend shows the decreasing interest shown by the Lepcha in the panchayat raj. Because truly speaking the Lepcha of Zongu and Kalimpong are more faithful to their traditional tribal council at the village level headed by Mondal which runs parallel to the statutory panchayat in most of the villages. It appears that the statutory village panchayat which is supposed to be the custodian of power and authority has failed to become an important element of social control. The traditional tribal council headed by the Mondals regulate the intra-tribal and inter-personnel relations and compromises disputes in the village. Only to settle disputes at inter-ethnic level, the help of statutory panchayat is sought for.

The Lepcha show a certain amount of dislike towards the modern statutory panchayat system. It is evident from the non-representation of the Lepcha in the gram panchayats even in the villages where they are numerically dominant. Elsewhere they could not be elected to the gram panchayats due to lesser population strength. The Lepcha prefer to cling to the traditional political system headed by Mondals both in Darjeeling and Sikkim because their aspirations are not fulfilled by the statutory panchayats. They seem to have expected much more from the panchayati raj to safeguard their interest. They believe that the holy power and influence of the Lamas have not been utilised by the modern gram

panchayat. In Sikkim the Lepcha and the Bhotia jointly enjoy some special privilege in the matter of allotment of the legislative assembly seat. Out of 32 seats in the Sikkim assembly, 14 seats are reserved for the Lepcha - Bhotia, though they constitute only 30% of the total population of the state. Moreover, one seat is exclusively reserved for the Buddhist Lamas. This has recently caused some ethnic tension in the polity and power structure of Sikkim.

