

THE RELIGION

Primitive people of all time and ages believe in the existence of superhuman supernatural powers. The inabilities, uncertainties, deprivation from expectations make them believe that there are some supernatural powers who cause all these things. These supernatural powers are conceived in various forms and are categorised or graded with certain specific attributes, which they either try to control or propitiate through offerings including sacrifices to avert danger and natural calamity. This dependence on nature is manifested in the religion of tribal people. According to Geertz (1966 : 4) religion is "a system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic".

In the preceding chapters on economy and social organization we observed that the activities of the Lepcha were influenced, as believed by the people, along with the other factors, by spirits and supernaturals. During shifting cultivation, cardamom plantation or at the time of house construction or in such other activities of exploitation of nature, the Lepcha make sacrifices in the name of spirits. Here an endeavour has been made to comprehend the ways in which religion is understood by the Lepcha. The Lepcha religion particularly the Bon is viewed as a special adaptive feature of the Himalayan region in which the Lepcha live. The frequent experience of disease and death in the hilly and forested habitat have made the Lepcha dependent upon supernatural and spirit world.

The Lepcha religion is a very complicated one because they practise simultaneously two different types of religions. One is the older Bon religion (called after the name of its priest) and the other one is the Lamaism or Tibetan Buddhism which belongs to Mahayana School of Buddhism. The Lamaism or Tibetan Buddhism is a later importation in the Lepcha life. The worship of the people of Mayel, was probably an independent one earlier but now it has become a part of Bon religion and can be perceived in a declining form among the Lepcha of Zongu.

The Chief function of the Mun (female Bonthing) or Bonthing is to ward off the misfortunes and illness caused by devils, which is done partly by sacrifices, especially animal sacrifices, and partly by direct communion with the supernaturals. On the contrary, in Lamaism priesthood and sanctity are acquired by learning and not by inspiration, the sacrifice of animals is considered a heinous sin.

In the belief of an average Lepcha, mountain and forest, rock and stream represent ill defined but formidable powers who threaten mankind with a variety of physical ills and require to be constantly appeased through the agency of Bonthing or any other forms of exorcism. "The snow clad giant Mt. Kanchanjungha, chief among the elemental deities of the Lepcha, who vexes men with storm and hail and sends down avalanches and torrents to wreck their fields and sweep away their homes, has been translated to the milder system of Buddhism, where he figures as the tutors of Sakyamuni (Lord Buddha) himself" (Morris : 1938). But the fact that they receive offerings of meat and millet beer(chi) in addition to the flower,

fruit and rice sanctioned by the Buddhist usage, lends some weight to the conjecture that they belong to a more earlier system.

It appears that in the life of the Lepcha the two religions, Lamaism and Bon, has got almost equal influence. Their belief and rituals are being guided by both, Lamaism and Bon religion. It has got some historical bearing also. In 17th century the Tibetan-Bhotias came to Sikkim and converted the native animistic Lepchas into Tibetan-Buddhism and also established monarchy as a centralised theocratic political system. This conversion did not take place at the individual level, rather it was an obligatory mass conversion automatically enforced upon the subject race (Lepcha) by the King while making Buddhism a state religion. As a matter of fact Buddhism was superimposed over the pre-existing infrastructure of animistic Bon religion. Their involvement in Buddhism is not deep rooted and as serious as it should have been. The common Lepchas participate in many a Lamaistic rituals most of the times without knowing their actual meaning as result of pressure of the Tibetan - Bhotias.

That is why when the Christian missionaries started preaching their religion in the hills of Darjeeling, the Lepcha were first to accept Christianity in large numbers. The percentage of Christians is quite high among the Lepcha of Darjeeling whereas it is almost nil among the Bhotia living in the same region. According to 1971 census more than twentyfive percent(25%) Lepchas of Darjeeling are Christians. In Sikkim since it was a princely state the Christian missionaries were not allowed to enter and thus we find almost all the Lepcha are Buddhist in Sikkim.

Within the scope of this thesis it is neither necessary nor possible to discuss Lamaism in its fullest sense. We shall only confine the discussion on this subject only to the extent it is relevant to the life of an average Lepcha. Because Lamaism or Mahayana Buddhism is a subject of great complexity and to the study of which scholars of world-wide repute have devoted their whole lives.

In Darjeeling as well as in Sikkim the monasteries play an important role in the life of the Lepcha, though perhaps the bondage of a Lepcha with monasteries is much more stronger in the Zongu area than in Darjeeling.

In Kalimpong Tibetan Lamas serve the tribe as priests and preside over all Buddhist ceremonies. The Lepcha themselves rarely become Lamas in Kalimpong, but many of them are exorcists (Bonthing). Whereas in Zongu the Lepcha become Lamas and even reach as high as the post of Dorje-Lapoon, highest order of Lama in Sikkim. In fact in Lingdong every third household have a member who is a Lama. In Lingdong a Lama does not necessarily stay in the monastery. He may be a family man, a cultivator. Only at fixed time he has to attend the monastic ceremonies. The people of Lingdong, jointly with Burfock village, have a small monastery. The oldest monastery in Zongu is the Tulung monastery, where all the villagers of Zongu go to pay their respect in alternate years. In their monasteries the religious practices are guided by Buddhist scripture in Tibetan language. In Sikkim the monasteries play an important role in the socio-religious life of the Lepcha, where almost every act of an individual is guided by monasteries. Most of the

monasteries have huge amount of land for cultivation. These land are cultivated either through share-cropping basis or through obligatory labours given by the household members.

Hierarchy of Lamas and the religious structure of priesthood in the Lepcha monasteries of Sikkim is as follows :-

- (a) Dorjee-Lapoon (Patriarch, the head of the gumpha).
- (b) Omze - Tipa (Chief celebrant - the manager of the gumpha).
- (c) Ochumpa (Assistant of Omze - Tipa)
- (d) Chutempa (Provost - marshal, in charge of monks).
- (e) Chenjpa (Officiating monk).
- (f) Nyepo (Commissariate manager).
- (g) Chinyel (In charge of Kitchen).
- (h) Konsopa (A monk on duty at a special prayer every evening)
- (i) Kunjel (Lamb care taker, sacrificers).
- (j) Tongpa (Conch - shell blower).

A Lama is a distinguished person in the Lepcha society. There is also a difference in appearance between laymen and Lamas. The Lamas have their heads shaved or keep short hair and wear Tibetan dress whereas the laymen wear Lepcha dress and usually keep long hair. The Lamas are usually cremated but laymen are buried. Children of Lama generally themselves become Lamas. Children of laymen can also become Lama. The vocation to become a Lama is determined by the horoscope of the child and thought to be predestined for it. The boy from an early age is brought to monastery ceremonies to make him accustomed to the atmosphere. When the boy is about twelve years of age he is sent to live with a

teacher who happens to be a Lama. The pupil works for the teacher in day time and receives instructions from Lamaist text in the evening. After two years or so, when he completes the basic learnings he is given his loong (qualification) by the teacher. After this the boy is formally admitted into the monastery through a simple ceremony called ditset in which he drinks tea and chi with the Lamas and is presented with a scarf (khada) by the monastery. From now onwards the trainee boy will have to go through a series of stages in the Lamaist hierarchy and only a few could move up to reach the highest order, in a Lepcha monastery, the post of Dorjee Lapoon. Each rise in grade accompanies a monastery feast in which all villagers are invited and chi (liquor) and food are served. Dance and merrymaking continues throughout the night. During the monastic feasts free mixing of boys and girls are a common phenomenon. Negotiation of marriage also takes place in such feasts.

Lamaism has also got a social organisation. The Lamas are arranged in a disciplined hierarchy. The Lamas perform religious ceremonies on behalf of the whole society. In turn it is the duty of the society to lend them some material support. In Tibet this social organisation was extremely important before 1962, the Lamas as an exploiting class possessed great temporal power and peasants attached to monastic land were virtually monastery serfs (Gorer 1938 : 192). At present in Sikkim the Lamas are not as powerful as they were in Tibet, but even then they do enjoy considerable amount of influence and authority in Sikkim and a little less in Kalimpong in the Darjeeling district. Both in Sikkim and in Kalimpong some gumphas (monastery) own land in their names as 'Legal persons'. The monastery at Pagang, name 'Rishi Gumpha', owns about 16 acres of

land. The land is cultivated under the supervision of monastery (gumpha) committee. A portion of the land is also cultivated on share cropping basis. The income from the monastery land is used for the running of the gumpha. In Sikkim monastery land is tax free.

The religious life of the Lepcha of Darjeeling and Sikkim is very much colourful and appear to be similar in nature. Throughout the year they have festivals, special offerings to a host of deities. A brief list of annual rituals, ceremonies, special offerings etc. is given below :-

TABLE NO. 36
Annual calendar of festivals & rituals

Sl. No.	Name of the festivals/ rituals	Month of performance		Duration
		Lepcha month	Eng. Month	
1.	Nam Bun	Karnith	Dec. / Jan	1 week
2.	Ner-Kakyat	Karnith	Dec. / Jan.	1 week
3.	Loser	Karsong	February	1 week
4.	Chechu	Som	April	1 day
5.	Mane	Glu	April	1 day
6.	Ani	Parvim	July	2 days.
7.	Mong Bree Meno	Parvim	August	2 days.
8.	Lobsong	Glu	September	1 day
9.	Liram	Mar	November	1 day
10.	Layan Chin Thing	Mar	November	1 day
11.	Ongshi	Mar	December	3 days.

A short account of the above rituals and festivals are given below :

Nam Bun : This is the new year festival and usually performed in the first week of the month "Karnith" (December - January). The Lamas chant hymns in the monastery for a week. The main idea behind the performance of the festival is that no evil befalls on them during the coming new year.

Ner - Kakyat : This is also held in the month of Karnith in connection with the new year and the people usually wear new clothes to mark the occasion. This is a part of Nam - Bun ceremony.

Loser : This festival is performed during the first week of the Tibetan new year which starts between February and March according to the Tibetan Calendar and continues for a week and generally held for the same purpose as stated above.

Chechu : The festival is performed on the full moon days, as Lord Buddha was born on a full moon day. The birthday of Lord Buddha which falls generally in the middle of April (Som) is celebrated most vigorously and gorgeously. From the morning till evening the Lamas chant hymns and pray to Lord Buddha for the well being of the people. On this day the villagers go to monastery and they take with them chi and other religious presentations, which include fruit, flower and animals.

Mane : This festival is performed twice in the month of August-September (Parvim - Glu). The Lamas chant hymns in the monastery throughout the day. On the full moon day takbothing, tasething and chuku are worshipped in the monastery. On this occasion some animals (a cow, or goat or fowl) are sacrificed by the Bonthing priest in the village. In the gumpha Lamas read out prayer to the different gods and evil spirits.

Mong-Bree-Meno

: This festival is performed in every house during the day time seeking blessings of Buddha. It consists of sacrificing five chicken (black), and offering chi, eggs etc. to spirits and Bonthing acts as priest over the ceremony.

Liram : In the month of Mar i.e. November - December, the household deity Liram is worshipped by the individual household. Water and pathiyuts (thumba) containing chi is offered, Bonthing worships the early ancestor (thikung) and early ancestress (nikung) and narrates the story of creation and the origin of the Lepcha.

Layan Chin Thing

: This is performed in November - December and popularly known as esikari Puja. Formerly this ritual was only meant for the hunters but now-a-days it is performed by almost all the families.

Ani : This worship is performed in the month of Parvim (July - August) and is meant for avoiding death from snake bites.

Lobsong : Lobsong is worshipped for gods and evil spirits of the village and the ritual is performed in Bhadra Purnima day. This is mainly done for the welfare of the villagers.

Ongshi : This is also a new year celebration ceremony and is performed on 24th December each year. The Lepcha New Year Day. In this day people play with bow and arrow. These seem to be the main festivals of the Lepcha.

An integral part of all Lamaist ritual is that the Lamas chant hymns and mantras throughout the ritual ceremony. The most famous Lamaist prayer is Om mani padme hum ! which is believed to be of great efficacy. Lord Padmasambhava or Guru Rimpoche, the great teacher in occultism, is the principal deity of the Lepcha. He introduced the tantric elements into the Tibetan Buddhism, popularly known as Lamaism. The Lamas as well as the laity attach more importance to the esoteric manifestations in Buddhism. Magic and mystic rites are used more freely. Due to this naive character Tibetan Buddhism, as a higher religion, could not totally replace the earlier and traditional Bon religion. The services of Bonthing and Mun are extremely necessary in the life of every Lepcha. They must always be present at birth, marriage and death of an individual as they are the only essential priests. Throughout life they are

required for cleansing from supernatural danger and for expelling devils. Unlike Lamaism the Bon religion does not have any social organisation and religious offices. The Bonthings and Muns are simply individual priests, who through their possession by a spirit carry out religious functions as required from time to time by the Lepcha. The Bonthings are the ceremonial sacrificers of the animals but a Lama, though can eat meat, should on no account kill an animal.

Any layman can become Bonthing or Mun. It is not necessary for him or her to be predestined for it as in the case of Lamas. No systematic training is also necessary from the childhood. Its vocation comes from inner urge and self power and has to be possessed by spirits or moong. He has to learn the procedures of devil worshipping, sacrificing rituals, and other form of exorcism. For the laymen padem is the first step to become Bonthing or Mun. Padems are less powerful than the Bonthings or Muns, they neither drive away evil spirit nor perform death rituals. To become Bonthing one has to undergo a tutelage for about three years from an experienced Bonthing. When he becomes qualified to control the spirit independently he is given the loong or degree. An ox is sacrificed to mark the occasion. A great number of Bonthing and Mun ceremonies are performed in Zongu for the benefit of individuals and to drive away evil spirits (moong). To get rid of illness and misfortune are the main reasons for such ceremonies. The sacrificed animals are always distributed among the villagers. These sacrifices associated with Bon religion play an important role in community fusion and as a source of protein in the cold climate. The controlled slaughtering of animals under the supervision of Bonthing and Lamas, prevent

uneventful and unnecessary killing of animals. Everybody wants to preserve the livestocks for rituals and ceremonies. This attitude helps in maintaining a balance between human and cattle population. Instead of killing fowls at random this ritual control, force them to save the birds for eggs as a constant source of food supply.

The Mun and Bonthing, thus, in a Lepcha village not only wield a powerful influence owing to their supernatural power to cause and cure diseases of the villagers but have some beneficial role too.

The Lepcha pantheon consists of both divine powers and evil one. The supreme divine powers are rather distant, benevolent in nature which the Lepcha equate with Gods. There are minor benevolent powers like rum (good spirits) who help people in various ways. But the negative powers, the moongs (evil spirits) paly an important role in Lepcha imagination for causing considerable harm and destruction to humankind. These moongs must be counteracted by sanguinary sacrifices. Among the Lepcha the ceremonies of averting nature are more than the rituals of invoking type. The Gods and rums (good spirits) need not be propitiated frequently as they are of benevolent nature and do not like animal blood. But the moongs (evil spirit) are malevolent in nature and do harms. These evil spirits are to be satisfied in order to avert their evil influence.

In addition the these the people of Mayel and Mt. Kanchanjungha are also worshipped by the Lepcha as their guardian deity. The land of Mayel is situated in an inaccessible valley, somewhere behind Kanchanjungha which can not be reached now. The people of Mayel

are worshipped by the Lepcha of Zongu in connection with the crops of dry rice (not in Lingdong), millet and maize. A Mun performs the rituals. Kalimpong Lepchas though aware of the existence of Mayel but they do not worship them in any form. From olden days the Lepcha have been associated with the nature and with Mt. Kanchanjungha. This geographical association is reflected in the socio religious structure of the community.

Christianity reached the hills of Darjeeling in the last half of 19th century. In Sikkim it came at a much later date and the inroad there had been sporadic and very much restricted by the strong influence of Tibetan - Buddhism, as also because they did not receive any patronage from the Chogyal (king) of Sikkim. But in Darjeeling and Kalimpong the preaching of Christianity had been overwhelmingly successful. Inconvenience and hardship could not prevent the clergymen from establishing churches even in the remote areas. Christian Lepchas belong to two sects, Roman Catholic and Protestant in nearly equal numbers. There are also a few individuals following the faith of 'Seven Day Adventists'.

On the conversion to Christianity by the Lepcha, Gorer (1938 : 38) writes, "the conversion of individuals to Christianity seems to have modified the converts' character far more profoundly than the earlier group conversion to Buddhism". The Christian Lepcha are found to be much more prolific in nature and prosperous. The rate of adoption of new agricultural techniques, use of chemical fertilizer and cultivation of cash crops, (other than cardamom and orange) are more among the Christian Lepcha. This is quite understandable in Nassey and other villages of Kalimpong.

The religion of the Lepcha, as evident from the brief discussion in the foregoing pages and also in the preceding chapters, exhibits simultaneous presence of three religious beliefs and practices in a balanced manner. Traditional Bon religion, Lamaism and newly adopted Christianity are co-existing side by side peacefully in the Lepcha society. This has been possible due to the nature and character of the Lepcha and their society, which is non aggressive in nature and tolerant in character.

