

SUMMARY AND OBSERVATION

To sum up this study on the Lepcha of Darjeeling and Sikkim let us recapitulate the main points of observation.

I did field work in three Lepcha villages, situated in different ecological situations through which I have tried to ascertain the socio-economic changes and adaptations that have taken place among the Lepcha during this century. A revolutionary change has taken place in the subsistence sphere of their life. Within a short span of only hundred years or less, they have transformed their subsistence economy from hunting - food - gathering to settled plough cultivation in permanent terraces, understandably there was an intermediate stage of shifting cultivation. In this period of transformation, particularly from shifting to terrace cultivation their animistic Bon religion has been gradually superimposed by Lamaism. I have tried to see how the structuring of society within each of these levels in turn represents organisations of the people for the purposes of subsistence and patterns of interaction among ecology, culture and society as an interdependent whole.

As far as the records show the Lepcha are the original inhabitants of Sikkim as well as of the district of Darjeeling which was at one time a part of Sikkim. Bhotias of Sikkim had come from Tibet in the 17th Century A.D. and converted the indigenous animistic Lepchas into Tibetan Buddhism and established monarchy as a centralised theocratic political system in Sikkim. These immigrant Bhotias freely

intermarried with the Lepcha and the native population was welded to the wider system of the greater Tibetan civilization. The native Lepcha population started to wear Bhotia dress and hold annual festival according to the Buddhist calendar and today, they and the Bhotia constitute one religious and cultural entity, thus producing one of the distinctive frontier cultures within the Tibetan cultural area (Nakane 1966 : 221). In the early part of the 19th Century the Nepalis migrated to Sikkim in waves from their relatively infertile and overpopulated land of Nepal. They worked as a dependent tenant under the Bhotia or Lepcha land lords and gradually made their entrance into the socio-political scene of Sikkim and Darjeeling, ultimately becoming a major force to reckon with. The trilingual setting of the region has given the native people the advantage of social and economic contacts with Nepali and Tibetan speakers. This helps them to interact with different cultures. In such a social system, interaction does not lead to the liquidation of ethnic differences through acculturation, cultural differences persist inspite of interethnic contact and interdependence (Barth, 1969).

In the beginning, the Lepcha could maintain ecological equilibrium with their environment. They lived in the zones of abundant natural resources to support a relatively small population, which they successfully exploited with a low level technology of hunting and gathering. As the number grew, a primitive form of cultivation like slash and burn or shifting hill cultivation was adopted. In course of time as population further increased and the Nepali immigrants settled in the area in large numbers the land gradually become scarce and the Lepcha were somewhat compelled to

take up settled plough agriculture in the terraces and thus began the era of better use of natural resources with an improved technology. But then they could not compete with the immigrant Bhotia and Nepalis. First the Bhotia and later the Nepalis, as a stronger group had intruded in the region in search of better economic prospects. With a higher level of technology they took control of the better resources and the Lepcha subsisted on poorer and scanty natural resources. In Sikkim outside of Zongu reserve the Lepcha possess very little land and in Darjeeling except a few villages in Kalimpong sub-division their control over the natural resources are being minimised by the Nepalis. However this competition for resources acted in a different way in the case of the immigrant Bhotia who had come earlier than the Nepalis. Bhotias were fewer in number and they did not really compete for land rather they controlled the political structure of the region (Sikkim) till its merger with Indian Union in 1975. In the economic sphere they preferred to work more in trans-Himalayan trade and trans-humance than to settle down in one place and till the soil.

In Darjeeling Lepcha lands are passing out to the Nepalis inspite of the Government law banning such transfer, because the Nepalis are purchasing the land in the name of their Lepcha wives, whom they often intermarry in the hills of Darjeeling district. There were about twelve cases of Nepali Lepcha marriages noted in the two villages studied in Kalimpong. To prevent this clandestine transfer of land, stringent laws should be enacted and their strict enforcement ensured. This will help in the restoration of self confidence among the Lepcha. The tremendous amount of in-migration in the hills of

Darjeeling badly affected the ethnic composition, ethnic balance and power structure of the region. In ten years, from 1951 to 1961 (Census of India : Darjeeling district Handbook) about seventyfive thousand people had come as immigrants in the three hill subdivisions of the Darjeeling district, viz. Sadar, Kurseong and Kalimpong. Since the confrontation is amongst various ethnic groups, the problem is more difficult. The interest of other ethnic groups, whether acquired legitimately or otherwise, becomes a relevant factor, and compromises have been made in many cases, even by sacrificing the interests of the Lepcha, though there are best intentions to help the affected people.

Though the Lepcha and Nepalis follow the same technology, Nepalis are able to accumulate more wealth than the Lepcha. Given the same population with the same resources the productivity of the Nepalis is much higher and their consumption is much lower than that of the Lepcha (Nakane 1966 : 236). They have taken for granted their low level of production. Lack of competitive zeal among them does not give rise to any conflict or tension which is generally expected in this type of situation.

"In their own land the Lepcha psychologically think themselves inefficient in comparison to others. Their lack of competitive zeal indirectly influences their mentality as a losing community in the struggle for existence" (Das 1978 : 258). Objectively, one can see that the Lepcha have lost ground in almost all spheres of life to the Bhotia and Nepalis. In the recent years despite their dynamism in economic and religious sphere their social

structure has remained static and quite unchanged, which has perhaps caused the lack of adaptive capability to the changing circumstances. This is evident from little occupational mobility among them. Due to this lack of adaptive capability the Lepcha could not compete with the Nepalis who are more versatile in this respect. Their deep attachment to land also prevented them from accepting new types of occupation.

In the economic sphere at Nassey, a village situated near Kalimpong town, the Lepcha cultivators use some chemical fertilizers in addition to organic manure. But in Pagang and Lingdong no chemical fertilizer is used. At Nassey cash croppings of various vegetables like cauliflower, potatoe, ginger etc. are done, but in Pagang no cash crop is produced probably due to non-availability of transport facilities. But in Lingdong cardamom is grown because the traders themselves come over to the village to collect the crop. As a matter of fact the production of cardamom as a cash crop has become a part and parcel of Lepcha life in Sikkim. Due to its lucrative cash value many people have started to convert their rice terraces to cardamom fields. This additional cash money earned from cardamom is used by the Lepcha of Zongu in different rituals. They also use a portion of it to modernise their dwelling houses by replacing the traditional thatched roof with galvanised iron sheet, though in the matter of dresses and other social aspects they still follow the traditional way of life. Indications of social changes is somewhat evident more among the Lepcha of Kalimpong though they have less income from cash crops. but in Zongu modernization is hurdled as the income from cash crop of cardamom is spent in religious ceremonies.

So from this we can infer that cash cropping may not always bring social change. The Lepcha of Zongu lag behind their Kalimpong brethren in agricultural techniques, gross production of crops and use of fertilizers etc. Occupational mobility is also more among the Lepcha of Kalimpong. The perspective of cultural ecology developed in the preceding chapters consider not only the natural features of habitat but also the relations between cultures ; the super organic setting (Sahlins and Service 1960 : 49).

The Lepcha are mainly monogamous though polygyny is allowed. It is seen that in Lingdong and other villages of Zongu, especially in upper Zongu, the frequency of polygyny is more. Inheritance of elder brother's widow and sharing of elder brother's wife by younger brothers without being married to her is present in Zongu but absolutely absent in Kalimpong and other areas of Darjeeling district. It is mainly due to the fact that surplus land is available in Zongu in plenty. In agriculture (both terrace and shifting, more particularly in shifting) female labour is much required. In the event of a person having opted for monastic training to become a Lama, his wives and un-married(formally) brother are of great help to look after his house, land and cultivation. Nuclear family is more in Nassey because here the people possess less land to support a big joint family.

In Kalimpong the Lepcha have more or less accepted the statutory village panchayat but in Zongu the influence of Mondals are still much more than the statutory panchayats.

Tibetan - Bhotia influence helped spreading of Lamaism among the Lepcha and the immigrant Nepalis influenced their economic life to a considerable extent. With the advent of British rule vigorous missionary activities started in this region, particularly in the Darjeeling district and a section of the Lepcha was converted to Christianity. The religious conversion to Buddhism among the Lepcha took place in a different fashion. No individual conversion through inducement or preaching occurred. When Sikkim was taken over by the Buddhist Bhotia king of Tibetan Origin the Lepcha subjects automatically adopted Buddhism, which was the State religion at that time. But this conversion was never very deep rooted that is why it was easy to convert a Lepcha from Buddhism to Christianity. The high expense of Buddhist rituals and Bonthing performances in the form of animal sacrifices accelerated the conversion of Darjeeling Lepchas into Christianity. Rather than either Bonthingism or Buddhism or Christianity, a process of religious triangulation is under way. The indigenous cult, centred on spirits and local deities, has been overlaid with Tibetan Buddhism, and this in turn has been challenged by Nepali Hinduism and Christianity.

Some revitalistic movements have started both, in the Darjeeling district of West Bengal and Sikkim especially among the younger generations. Under the leadership of Darjeeling Lepcha Association the people of Nassey have already partially stopped the sacrifice of animals. In Pagang too it is going to be stopped very soon. Through the revivalistic activities of this nature, the Lepcha of Darjeeling are trying to regain their lost ground, so that they can compete with the Nepalis in various spheres of life. An organisation

named 'Mayel Nyam' in Zongu has been advocating that all Lepchas should cultivate their own land and should send their children to schools.

Present day Lepchas are not to be seen as a primitive isolate, as a frontier tribesmen in an ideal sense but rather as a reactant community in the broader framework of Indian civilization, though they practise slash and burn cultivation in some areas and are deeply engulfed in the religious world of Lamaism and spiritism. Their economy is characterised by a structurally developed land tenure system and cash cropping. Their Lamas culturally interact with different centres of Buddhistic learnings. These are the signs of peasantry, evident among the Lepcha. Whether the Lepcha will ultimately be able to maintain their distinct socio-cultural identity or lose in the battle for survival and get absorbed among the Nepalis or Bhotias is difficult to foresee at the present moment. There is some effort on their part recently to maintain their ethnic and cultural distinctiveness. But unless the core element of their economy - the land, is allowed to be retained by them it will be difficult to achieve. Modernization of their agriculture to give them a better sustenance and proper land management may perhaps help them regain their ethnic pride and confidence.

