

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

The present study is an attempt to examine the Lepcha, a mongoloid tribe (Gorer 1938 : 35) of the Darjeeling district of West Bengal and Sikkim, as living and moving entity caught in the maelstrom of modernization in a specific eco-cultural context. The enquiry shall centre around primarily to an understanding of the (1) social and cultural perspective which focuses on the Lepcha socio-cultural traditions in the context of their environment, (2) ecological perspective that demonstrates the fundamental functioning of the Lepcha subsistence agricultural system within an increasingly changing environment, (3) economic perspective that considers the transition of a community from hunting-food-gathering and shifting agricultural stage to settled agriculture consequently leading to a complex production system, such features as forms of land management, cash-cropping, wage labour, migration, effect of education on agricultural development and general course of economic development as provided by government and private agencies, and (4) spatial perspective that explores the relationship between geographical features and cultural and economic changes.

Cultural Ecology and Social Change

The theoretical basis of the above framework is derived from the anthropological approach to the study of cultural ecology, which needs some elaboration. Social and cultural anthropologists have long engaged themselves in various ecological studies, i.e. the study of the man-environment relationship. It is clear that both the spread of

knowledge and customs from one people to another, that is diffusion, and the part any element plays in the life of a people, that is its functional relations are extremely important in influencing the final pattern of human life in any one region or among any group.

However, Julian Steward (1955) has added a new dimension to the ecological study through the study of adaptation of specific items of culture to particular environment. This conception reduces ecology to something akin to a research technique. Steward develops a method for recognizing the ways in which culture change is induced by adaptation to environment. The adaptation, an important creative process, is called cultural ecology, a concept which is to be distinguished from the sociological concept, "human ecology" or "social ecology" (Steward 1955 : 5). "Cultural ecology differs from human and social ecology in seeking to explain the origin of particular cultural features and patterns which characterise different areas rather than to derive general principles applicable to any cultural-environmental situation" (Steward 1955 : 36). Social ecology is mainly concerned with the community as its unit of study, not the culture, which rests at least in a secondary position.

Steward's major focus is on social organisation associated with environmental exploitation and its relation to what he calls the "cultural core". The cultural core, a flexible concept, concerns those aspects of culture and social organization that are tied more or less directly to technology and subsistence. Three fundamental procedures of cultural ecology are set forth by Steward. These are analyses of :
(1) the relation between environment and exploitative or productive

technology, (2) the behaviour patterns involved in the exploitation of a particular area by means of a particular technology, and (3) the extent to which the behaviour patterns entailed in exploiting the environment affect other aspects of culture (Steward 1955 : 40).

Cultural ecology is, therefore, a conceptual and methodological tool to study the processes by which a society adapts to its environment. It analyses these adaptations, however in conjunction with other processes of change. The field of cultural ecology encompasses a genuinely wholistic approach, as it includes such factors like, settlement pattern, agriculture, land use, and the social arrangements that are required in land exploitation. It also includes other key cultural features like, demography, population structure and composition, territoriality of societies and inter societal relationships, incidence of disease, inter-marriage and warfare (Steward 1955 : 40-42).

A similar view has also been expressed by Edgerton (1965 : 443). To him ecology is both natural environment and the social setting of the surrounding people, warfare, trade and colonial intervention, while relationships between 'ecology' and 'culture' are complicated and reciprocal, at least some economic adjustments generate predictable and pervasive consequences in social organization, cultural content and even in personality patterns.

Roy Rappaport (1968) has successfully correlated ecology with religion and ritualistic activities. He has documented among the Tsembaga maring horticulturist of New Guinea that ritual behaviour

plays an important role in regulating a number of demographic and ecological variables, like the growth in pig population, the necessity of bringing more land under cultivation, scattering of house sites to bring people closer to outlying fields and to reduce interpersonal conflict. The cycle is reversed by the ritual celebration of a pig festival in which large numbers of animals are slaughtered and community nucleation takes place. Among other things he was able to show that the ritual killing of domestic pigs helps to maintain an undegraded environment, limits fighting to frequencies that do not endanger the existence of regional populations, adjusts man-land ratios, distributes local surpluses of pig in the form of pork throughout the regional population, and assures people of high quality protein when they most need it (*ibid* : 224).

The type and distribution of basic resources comprise only one aspect of an environment - the natural setting. But human populations make up another and no less basic aspects ; every society must adjust to the presence and activities of neighbouring people, just as surely as it must adapt to the quality and distribution of food supplies and raw materials. Thus Barth (1956) attempts a more specific ecological approach to a case study of distribution by utilizing some of the concepts of animal ecology, particularly the concept of niche - the place of a group in the total environment, its relations to resources and competitors. Barth made an elaborate study on the form and distribution of neighbouring ethnic groups in Swat in North Pakistan. Different environmental zones are exploited by sedentary agriculturist Pathans, farmer-herder Kohistanis, and nomadic pastoral Gujars. Pathans are confined to low altitude, where double cropping

can provide the surplus necessary to support a more highly developed economy and political organization. A more secure climate characterises the high mountains, where the Kohistanis practise single crop cultivation and transhumant herding. They were apparently driven into a less desirable area by the militarily stronger Pathans. Gujar nomads mingle symbiotically with both groups, trading milk, meat and manure of food grains and other supplies. They act as a socially subordinate groups using pasture lands that can not for various reasons be made productive by other two groups. Differing political structure, community size and social status characterize each people.

In an other paper Barth (1950 : 338) has stated that cultural change may be described in term of the ecological adaptation towards which it is making since this is a major controlling factor of the change. Barth, in contrast to cultural evolutionists, sees the environment as the controlling rather than limiting factor in change.

Carneiro (1967 : 239) has long emphasized the relationship between complexity and population density, According to him the societies become more complex only by growing larger or that as they grow larger they invariably become more complex. Rather the contention is that if a society does increase significantly in size, and if at the same time it remains unified and integrated, it must elaborate its organization. For Carneiro the elaboration of social structure is a systemic response to stress generated by the multiplication of unit.

Clifford Geertz's agricultural involution was another

milestone in ecological anthropology. His approach is rooted in cultural ecology, but his perspective is based upon the concept of the system (1963 : 14). A system is a set of objects together with relationships between the objects and between their attributes. Instead of focussing upon "reciprocal causality" between two objects or processes, the system focuses upon a complex network of mutual causality. The methods of system analysis are used, first, to define the boundaries and environment of a system and, second, to model its complexity in such a way that system behaviour can be studied and predicted.

The above mentioned studies are only a few among the ecology oriented studies in anthropology which deserve mentioning. Ecological studies in anthropology have only begun to realise their potential and in every respect is in its infancy. But it is already obvious that these studies arise not from a new dogma but from an attempt to widen existing perspectives in the science of man. As our dependency on the physical environment and the effects of disturbing intricately functioning ecosystems become more critically apparent, we need to know more about the varieties of long-standing and successful human adaptation. It is both possible and necessary to gather empirical data on operating social groups, describing their technology of production and distinguishing what variables are effective in their surroundings, and assembling reliable quantitative profiles of production, labour input, rights to resources and consumption. To be convincing that the findings require not only correlations leading to logical functional explanations, but also cross-cultural comparisons and the evidence of historical change.

An ecological approach to anthropology involves studying society as part of a system in which natural resources and environment, technology, the division and type of labour necessary for human subsistence, culture, and social groupings and relationships all constitute interdependent elements of the system; and they are adapted to the environment and vary according to regional or local circumstances.

Morris Ginsberg (1958 : 205) defined social change as, "a change in the social structure, e.g. the size of a society, the composition or imbalance of its parts or the type of its organization. The term 'social change' must also include changes in attitudes or beliefs, in so far as they sustain institutions and change with them".

The field of enquiry is thus very wide. Examples of such changes are the smallness in the size of the family, or rather the domestic unit, which has occurred and is occurring in many societies. Social change is not a mechanical addition or subtraction but the integration of the new among the old. Every advance, therefore, depends on the pre-existing pattern and must fit into it, and in doing so an intrusive element will probably undergo changes itself.

In his article on social change in International Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences (Vol. 14, P. 366), Willbert E. Moore states, "social change is the significant alteration of social structures (that is, of patterns of social action and interaction), including consequences and manifestations of such structures embodied in norms (rules of conduct), values, and cultural products and symbols".

Social structure, therefore, is to be defined as "the continuing arrangement of persons in relationships defined or controlled by institutions, i.e. socially established norms or patterns of behaviour" (Radcliffe-Brown 1960 : 147). A theoretical framework for the analysis of social change must be concerned largely with what happens to social structures. But to be truly dynamic it must allow for individual action and account the aspects of social organization i.e., the actual behaviour by the members of the society. As a member of society, each separate individual is striving to attain his ends, interacting with other members in the process. All of them are largely governed in their behaviour by the set of established basic relationships of the social structure (Firth 1954 : 83).

So here by social change I mean the overall changes that have taken place in the Lepcha society. But first of all I consider the changes which occurred in their subsistence patterns i.e., the culture core (Steward, 1955). My basic intention is to use the methodological expertise of 'cultural ecology' as a heuristic device for studying social change. Because the main and most obvious effect of environment on a primitive people, is of course upon their economy - on how they gain a livelihood - and it is through the economy the environment most influences social relations (Lienhardt 1964 : 41). Since the non-human environment is always conditional relative to the technology, social orginazation, and cultural values of human societies (Moore 1978 : 20). The dimension to the study of people and their environment which particularly concerns social anthropologists as distinct from ecologists or geographers is man's adaptation to their environment which greatly influences not only material culture

but also systems of ideas. Again while considering the Lepcha society I have also considered the neighbouring societies like Nepalis and Bhotias because the environment of any one ethnic group is not only defined by natural conditions, but also by the presence and activities of the other ethnic groups with whom it cohabits (Barth 1956 : 1079).

So the social change must be regarded as an epiphenomenon of a great variety of processes in combination. Most of the salient constraints on the course of change will be found to be social and interactional and will derive from the existing social and ecological system within which change is taking place (Barth 1967 : 663).

As far as social change is concerned, the impact of social environment is probably more important than the impact of the non-social environment. For any period likely to be analysed sociologically, the non-social environment of land, water, air, fauna and flora will usually be much the same at the end of the period of change as at the beginning. Therefore, the non-social environment will have had its effect on the social system before social change begins. Moreover, changes due to the non-social environment - for example, the presence or depletion of some resources - are frequently due to social action, to cultural change, or to change in the social environment. Nevertheless, changes in the non-social environment, however, they themselves were caused, do sometimes require adaptive social changes.

A closely related problem is the temporal aspects of

ecological adjustment, the dynamics of the historical processes under which adaptation operates. A people's history takes place within a broader social context of other people ; a most significant element in the environment of a society, is the community of societies of which it is a part (Goldschmidt 1965 : 403).

In the present study, I have tried to take the help of various concepts and methods of ecological studies in anthropology. I have not discarded the historical approach, origin of social and cultural institutions, though of course more emphasis have been given to the economic institutions. Change is often viewed through time perspective.

Though social change refers to changes in the social structure, the explanations have not been kept too rigid to include only the structural or radical changes alone. Organizational changes (changes in ways of doing things) have also been incorporated ; organizational change involves some change in the social relations and hence in social structure.

Again, throughout the study and analysis, no hard and fast differentiation is maintained between social and cultural change because of an intimate relationship between the two. Our discussion implies that a model that explain economic growth must consider non-economic as well as economic aspects of human behaviour. This is seen also from the fact that the economic state of a society is closely related to its social state, and that the forces that bring change in one aspect also bring some sort of change in the other aspects too.

The above mentioned approach has been applied to Lepcha community because the Lepcha community is one which is closely dependent upon the land and the seasons. Primitive communities exist in such a state of dependence; and in primitive communities we find it possible to describe concurrent regularities of man and nature in such a way as to include much of the life of the people and to describe the unique character of that people (Redfield 1960 : 29).

The Objective

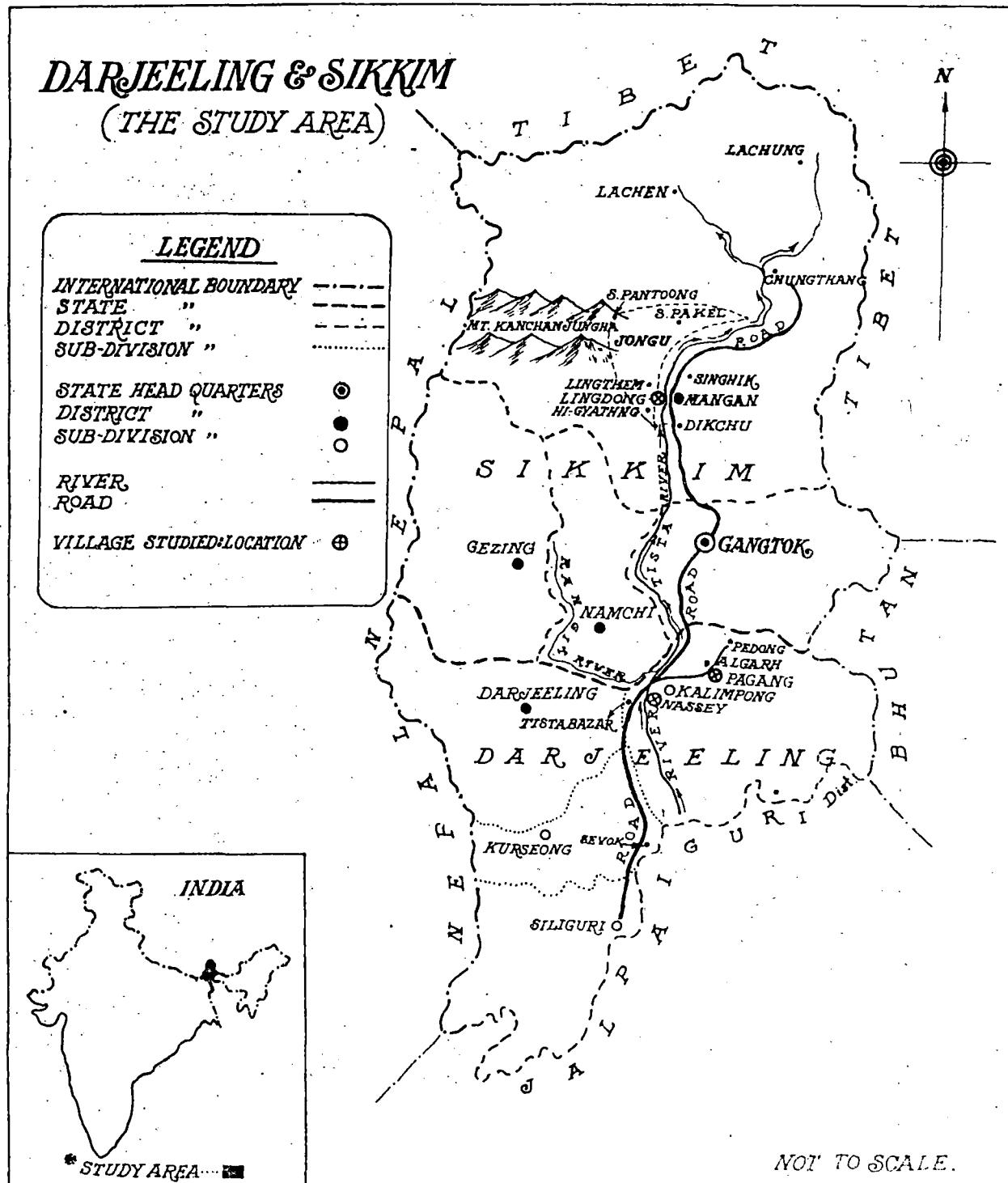
The Lepcha are an indigenous tribe of Sikkim and the Darjeeling district of West Bengal who once held sway over the vast forest and hill areas of this region. With the gradual easterly migration of the Nepalis from eastern Nepal, the Lepcha and to some extent the Bhotia receded in the background, so that the modern socio-political movements in the area is at present almost exclusively dominated by the Nepalis. Their economic backwardness is also considerable. As a society there are signs of the Lepcha disintegrating into numerous groups. Some of them had adopted Christianity while others have been deeply influenced by the Nepali Hindus with whom they maintain a close socio-cultural link. The Lepcha are also loosing their identity as an autochthonous ethnic and cultural group. Intermarriage and various types of interactions at multiple levels with other neighbouring communities, lack of occupational mobility, loss of land to the neighbouring communities, are among many factors contributing to the disintegration of the traditional Lepcha community. In the wake of this traumatic situation it is of considerable interest to find out how the Lepcha are redefining their identity, if at all,

and adapting to the forces of change. The objective of the present study is to know -

- I) the nature of socio-economic and socio-cultural adaptation and institutional changes that have taken place in the traditional Lepcha culture.
- II) the mechanism in which culture change is induced and how it has adapted to the different cultural-ecological situations.
- III) the interrelationship of productive technology i.e. the pattern of subsistence and the environment.
- IV) the extent to which the behaviour patterns entailed in subsistence activities and economic arrangements i.e. culture core (Steward, 1955) affect other aspects of culture such as social, political and religion (idid : 37 - 41).

The Methodology

The study has been conducted in the historical as well as social, economic and religious spheres of the Lepcha. In carrying out field studies, villages, as units, have been selected from different parts of Darjeeling and Sikkim. To get an idea of the traditional Lepcha culture, a relatively isolated village in Sikkim (stated to be original home land of the Lepcha) has been studied. Further, two villages have been selected in Kalimpong subdivision of Darjeeling district, where the Lepcha live in a more exposed to modernization processes, one near the Kalimpong town and the other a little away from the town. In these villages with the help of concrete case histories, two sets of people, i.e. one of the present generation and the other of one or two ascending generations have



been interviewed. To get an idea of the Lepcha past I have made extensive use of the available old literature on the Lepcha. The standard ethnographic method has been adopted in collecting data through concrete case histories, supplemented by personal observation as well as open end questionnaires and schedules. Many a information were obtained primarily from observation and through informal interviews, both directed and undirected. Interviews were conducted wherever and whenever the occasion arose - in my camp house, at the house of villagers, or in the yard, in the fields or at the water source. I participated in many socio-cultural events - the approach could be called participant observation - but real participation was a virtual impossibility in most situations. Being an outsider my participation was limited largely to informal social situations, and even there I was usually in the role of guest, invited or uninvited.

All studies in social change should have a base line. For my study I have taken the year 1900 A.D. as the base line because most of the writings on these people date from the begining of this century. Beside the materials collected from old literature and interviewing the old people, to get an idea of temporal changes I have applied a third approach, the spatial one, in which Lepchas living in different villages, one in the traditional spot of Zongu in Sikkim, one near the Kalimpong town and the other in-between the two, have been intensively studied to understand the spatial dimensions in the processes of change.

The Lepcha in Literature

The literature dealing with the Lepcha are scanty in

number, piecemeal in the nature and excepting a few mostly are travalogue in character.

One of the earliest studies on the Lepcha in English is of Dr. A. Campbell's (1840) - "Note on the Lepchas of Sikkim with a vocabulary of their language". He described them as poor agriculturists, nomadic in nature, who subsisted on wild roots fruits and tubers. He also stated that the Lepcha were Buddhist in religion and bury their dead.

Dalton (1872) has also provided us with some information on the Lepcha of Sikkim and their customs etc.

Risley (1891 : 10) also expressed his views about the Lepcha. According to him most Lepchas of that period professed to be Buddhist, however it was clear that at no very distant time their sole belief was a shamanistic animism. Conspicuous traces of this faith still survive among them, imperfectly hidden by their veil of Buddhistic usage. To him Lepchas were peace loving and indolent in nature.

Waddell (1899) pointed out that Lepchas were rapidly loosing their identity before the tide of the emigrants from the more active and civilised tribes who had lately swept in great waves into their country. He had also stated about the role of environment in the formation of their character and described them as a born naturalist.

Among the authors of this century the writings of Donaldson (1900), Morris (1938) and Gorer (1938) should be specifically

mentioned. Mrs. Donaldson gave an exciting tale of travel and adventure in Sikkim. Morris's book covers the origin of the Lepcha, Lamaism, magical practices, religious ceremonies, etc.

However, the most authentic study of the Lepcha was done by Geoffrey Gorer - "Himalayan Village - an account of the Lepchas of Sikkim". This is an ethnographic account of the Lepcha of Sikkim as it existed in the village of Lingthem in Zongu area. His study is mainly centred on religion - animistic Bon and Tibetan Buddhism, with special reference to the personality formation of the people. Gorer writes, "As a society, with its unique conglomeration of attitudes, the Lepchas are certainly disappearing, for their culture presupposes a homogeneous interlocking community, and this as well as their complete suppression of competition and aggression, cause an inevitable breakdown of their culture in any mixed community" (1938 : 37).

Nakane's (1966) analysis of the plural society of Sikkim threw light on the interrelations of Lepcha, Bhotia and Nepalis. She observes that the Lepcha population of Sikkim now speaks Bhotia language, wears Bhotia dress and holds annual festivals according to the Buddhist calendar (ibid : 221). The Lepcha and the Bhotia constitute one religious entity and share many cultural traditions, whereas the Nepalis remain outside of this common Lepcha-Bhotia heritage. A. K. Das (1978) of the Cultural Research Institute of the Government of West Bengal has brought out a short hand book on the Lepcha of Darjeeling district only. This book contains a general account of the history, life and culture of the people.

So far all the studies on the Lepcha are basically from general ethnographic point of view. The only exception being the study of Gorer mentioned above. But this again is concerned primarily with religion and personality structure of the people. This study though has adopted ethnographical technique of data collection is nonetheless different from other studies so far done on the Lepcha. It is a purposive ethnography of a people in a changing ecological context. Here the economy in the ecological context has been seen as the mainstay of the culture with social, religious and political aspects of the life geared to it. Besides, in this study the territorial boundary between Darjeeling and Sikkim, so far as the Lepcha are concerned, has been ignored. The Lepcha of the two areas have been considered as one ethnic group.

