

THE PEOPLE AND THEIR ETHNO-HISTORY

The Lepcha though are found in the Darjeeling district of West Bengal, eastern Nepal, western Bhutan and in Sikkim, they regard Sikkim as their home land. They are considered as the aboriginal inhabitants of the hilly portion of the Darjeeling district and of Sikkim (Risley, 1891). They call themselves 'Rong'. Lepcha is a derogatory term given to them by the Nepalis meaning non-sense talkers (Lep-Cha). At all events they are the first known occupiers of this tract. The Lepcha call this area as 'Mayal Lyang' or 'Ney Mayel' which means garden of eden or paradise.

According to 1971 census the total population of Lepcha in West Bengal is 14,568 of which 13,373 is rural and 1,195 is urban. Out of 14,568 Lepchas of West Bengal 8,305 are male and 6,263 are female that is for every 1000 males there are 754 females. In comparison to the other tribal populations of the district the Lepcha have a considerable tendency and love for rural living and rural livelihood. Out of 14,568 Lepchas of West Bengal, 13,536 i.e. about 92.92 percent of the total Lepcha population reside in the Darjeeling district. 91 percent of the total Lepcha of Darjeeling reside in rural areas. Within this district, however, the main Lepcha concentration is in the Kalimpong subdivision. At present roughly about 6,085 Lepchas live in the Kalimpong sub-division, the area under Kalimpong police station serves as the main centre of their concentration, where they account for 36.51% of the Lepcha population of the district (Table No. 4).

According to 1951 census there were 13,756 Lepchas in Sikkim. The current census figures of Lepcha population in Sikkim is not

precisely available, it is known that a sizeable population of Lepchas, almost the same as in numbers of their West Bengal counterpart, live in Sikkim with their main concentration in the Zongu area of north Sikkim.

As per 1971 census Lepchas of the Darjeeling district constitute only 1.73% of the total population of the district. Total tribal population of this district is 108,586, out of which 13,536 is Lepcha, that is 12.47% of the tribal population is Lepcha.

In West Bengal 91.79% of the Lepcha population live in rural area and 8.20% in urban area. But the picture is quite different in the neighbouring tribe Bhotia. About 60.83% of the Bhotias live in the rural area and 39.17% in urban area. The Lepcha have considerable preference for rural living. (1971 census).

Out of 14,568 Lepchas of West Bengal 10,795 are illiterate (male 5,450 and female 5,345) and 3,773 literate (male 2,855 and female 918). Literacy percentage among the Lepcha is as high as 25.89%, which is only next to Bhotias (26.06) in West Bengal.

From Tables No. 1, 2 & 3 it is seen that the Lepcha are rapidly being outnumbered by the immigrant Nepalis in terms of their numerical strength. Due to enormous in-migration in the Darjeeling district the percentage of Lepcha population to total population has come down from 4.00 percent in the year 1901 to 1.73 per cent in 1971. Decline or low rate of growth of Lepcha population in Darjeeling district from 14,910 in 1961 to 13,536 in 1971 could be attributed to the fact that a sizeable number of Lepchas must have

been enumerated as Nepalis. Beside this, there has been an increasing trend among the Lepcha girls to marry the Nepalis. All these factors together are perhaps responsible for the decline in the number of Lepcha population. It also indirectly tells us that the Lepcha community is suffering from an identity crisis.

Decadal Variation

Table No. 1

Lepcha population in different decades in Darjeeling and West Bengal

Year	Total Lepcha population in West Bengal	Decadal variation	Percentage in decadal variation	Total Lepcha population in Darjeeling	Decadal variation	Percentage in decadal variation
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1901	10052	-	-	9772	-	-
1911	9842	-210	- 2.09	9706	- 66	- 0.67
1921	9669	-173	- 1.75	9669	- 37	- 0.38
1931	12719	+3050	+31.54	12101	+ 2432	+ 25.15
1941	12468	-251	- 1.97	12468	+ 367	+ 3.03
1951	13430	+962	+ 7.71	13164	+ 696	+ 5.58
1961	15309	+1879	+14.00	14910	+ 1746	+ 13.26
1971	14568	-741	- 4.85	13536	- 1374	- 9.21

Table No. 2

Lepcha population in different decades in Sikkim

Year	Total Lepcha population in Sikkim	Decadal variation	Percentage in decadal variation
1	2	3	4
1901	7313	-	-
1911	9031	+ 1718	+ 23.49
1921	9021	- 10	- 0.11
1931	13060	+ 4039	+ 44.77
1941	12523	- 537	- 4.11
1951	13756	+ 1233	+ 9.84
1961	N.A.	-	-
1971	N.A.	-	-

Table No. 3

Lepcha population vs general population in Darjeeling

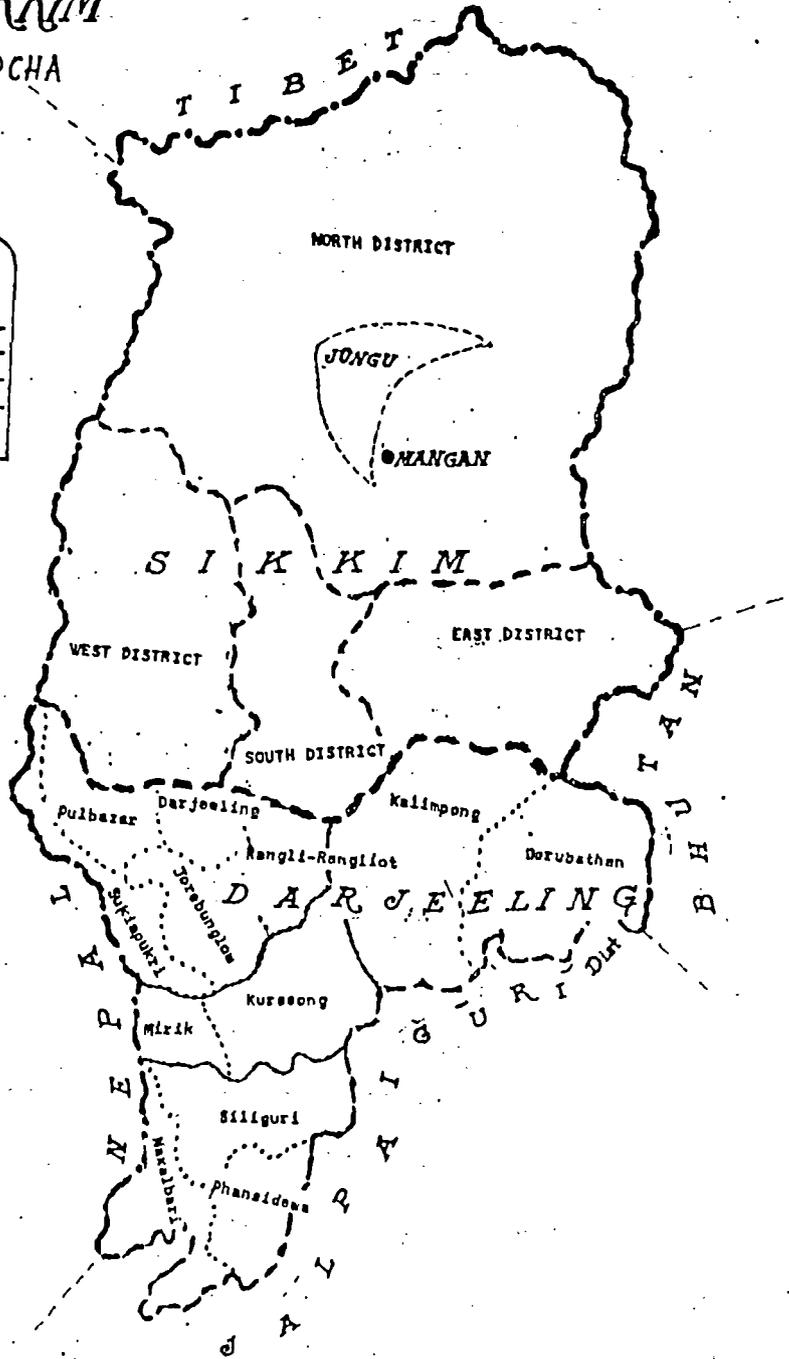
Year	Lepcha population of Darjeeling	Total population of Darjeeling	Percentage of Lepcha population to total population
1	2	3	4
1901	9772	249117	4.00
1911	9706	265550	3.65
1921	9669	282748	3.41
1931	12101	319635	3.78
1941	12468	376369	3.31
1951	13164	445260	2.95
1961	14910	624640	2.38
1971	13536	781777	1.73

DARJEELING & SIKKIM

DISTRIBUTION OF THE LEPCHA

LEGEND

- INTERNATIONAL BOUNDARY - - - - -
- STATE " - - - - -
- DISTRICT " - - - - -
- SUB-DIVISION " - - - - -
- POLICE STATION



NOT TO SCALE.

Physical Traits and Character

The Lepcha are described by all who have written about them as physically of the true mongolian type. They are short in stature, averaging about 5 feet. The women bear towards them the usual proportion. The face is broad and flat, nose depressed, eye oblique, no beard, but very little moustache, complexion olive, and boys and girls in health have generally a reddish tinge which adds greatly to their good looks.

In disposition they are amiable and obliging, frank, humorous and polite. They are superior in morals to their Bhotia and Nepali neighbours, but they are indolent in nature and deficient in energy (Campbell, 1840). They are poor agriculturist in comparison to the Nepalis. Their traditional method of cultivation was slash and burn or shifting cultivation. Now-a-days they freely intermarry with the Nepali Limbus and Sikkimese Bhotias. The Lepcha have their own language and script. According to Grierson's classification Lepcha language belongs to the Himalayan group of Tibeto-Himalayan branch of Tibeto-Burman sub-family of Tibeto-Chinese family.

Myth of Origin

The Lepcha trace their origin from the people of Mayel, situated in one of the inaccessible valleys of Mt. Kanchenjunga. Itupumu, the man and Kumsiting the woman, were born from the two peaks of Kanchenjunga. They created the Lepcha. The first man was called Torbongpu ; the first man Naripu and from them the

Lepcha descended.

Historical Background

Sikkim was colonised by the Tibetans in the seventeenth century, which at that date included the present Darjeeling district. It is said that from Tibet three Red Hat sect Lamas fled to Sikkim due to some internal trouble in Tibet and converted the native Lepchas into Buddhist and created a Sikkimese Tibetan kingdom from which the royal family of Sikkim was descended (Gorer 1938 : 36).

From the time of the establishment of a Sikkimese kingdom, the Lepcha became an inferior subject race, under the domination of the Sikkimese Tibetans or Bhotias, to which society the Maharajah and the big landlords belonged. They drove the Lepcha into the lower valleys and gorges, in Sikkim the best land has been taken by the Bhotias (or Bhutias) and later by the Nepalis who have immigrated into the country in great numbers. In Darjeeling much of the jungle and cultivable land has been turned into tea estates; in this district too there has been very considerable infiltration of Nepalis, coming from their relatively infertile & overpopulated country. They are more industrious and better cultivator than the Lepcha, the Nepalis are continuously displacing them everywhere.

In 1706 what is now the Kalimpong sub-division was taken from the Chogyal of Sikkim by the Bhutanese. In 1780 Nepali Gurkhas invaded Sikkim and a considerable part of Sikkim's territory was taken by them. Finally in 1817 by the treaty of Titaliya between Raja of Sikkim and East India Company, the British

recovered some of Sikkim's territory from the Nepalis and guaranteed Sikkim's sovereignty. Under the above treaty the Raja of Sikkim presented the district of Darjeeling to the Governor General of India and the terai region was annexed from Sikkim in 1835. When the British first acquired Darjeeling it was then reported that the Lepcha formed half of the population of Sikkim. The Kalimpong sub-division of the district was annexed from Bhutan in 1865 (Mitra, 1951 ; Census of India : report).

Today the Lepcha culture in its traditional form is found only in the Zongu area of north Sikkim, where they have retained their originality unaltered by the alien influence of Nepali Hindus and missionaries. The ruler of Sikkim had made this part of his personal estate called Zongu into a Lepcha reserve, where he made a law that only pure-blooded Lepchas may become landowners. This area, unlike the rest of Sikkim, was administered by the private estate office of the Maharajah.

In Darjeeling the Lepcha are in an advantageous position only in the Kalimpong sub-division. After Kalimpong was annexed from Bhutan in 1865 the British Government treated it as a private preserve (Khash Mahal) and did not lease any portion of it for tea plantation, and except for special reasons transfer of land from Bhotias and Lepchas to Nepalis was not allowed.

When the district of Darjeeling was first taken over by the British administration, the district was almost entirely under forest. The only method of cultivation was jhuming or burning down the

forest. This was practised in the interior of the hills by the Lepcha and Bhotias, and on the foothills by the Meches and other aboriginal tribes (Mitra, 1951, Census of India).

British colonisation brought in its train the large immigration of Nepalis in the hills, who were more useful as labourers in tea gardens and more efficient and thrifty as cultivators than the aboriginal Lepcha. However in the terai the tribes from Chotanagpur, immigrated as tea plantation labours. As a consequence the Lepcha and the Tibetan influence remained restricted only in the hills. The reservation of the forest by Government and large influx of Nepalis have further cramped their means of livelihood and jeopardised their natural environment.

The Nepalis, who form more than 60 percent of the present day population of the Darjeeling hills, are primarily descended from immigrants from the neighbouring kingdom state of Nepal. They are a hard working race and more prolific than the Lepcha and I am of the opinion that they will in time occupy the whole of Darjeeling district assimilating the indigenous population. The graveness of the Nepali immigration is understood by the present Government of Sikkim. After Sikkim became a part of India in April, 1975 a ban against any fresh Nepali infiltration in Sikkim was imposed.

The Bhotias or Bhutias (not Bhutanese) inhabiting the Darjeeling district and Sikkim are different from Bhutanese who are the resident of Bhutan.

The Bhotias inhabiting Darjeeling district and Sikkim are

of the following types -

- (1) Sikkimese Bhotias, a mixed race descended from Tibetans who settled in Sikkim some centuries ago and intermarried with the Lepcha.
- (2) Sherpa Bhotias or Bhotias of north-east Nepal and are of Tibetan descent.
- (3) Drukpa Bhotias or Bhotias of Bhutanese origin.
- (4) Bhotias of Tibet or Tibetans. 'Bhot' is the name of a province situated in central Tibet.

Bhotias are basically a trading tribe and their economy is in jeopardy because of the closing of Tibetan border by the Chinese in 1962, when they had to stop their trans-Himalayan trading.

The Nepalis is a generic and blanket term used to cover all the different communities come under it. They have a common language 'Nepali'. Starting from the Brahmins, Chettris to Scheduled Caste like Kami, Damai etc. also come under it.

In conclusion to the chapter I would like to mention that one should take into consideration the fact that the Lepcha live at the interstices of two great cultural and social traditions, Indian Hinduism and Tibetan Buddhism, and between two distinct, ecological and geographical zones, the low sub-tropical valleys and alpine mountain highlands. Their present day economy and culture should be understood in these contrasting eco-cultural milieu..

