

CHAPTER - SEVEN

CONCLUSION

The present study aimed at identifying the social formation or socio-economic formation among the Lepchas. After discussing the theoretical concept of social formation in the introductory chapter, we have discussed at length about the mode of production of Lepcha agriculture in Third, Fourth and Fifth Chapters. The last chapter has been devoted to show how the Lepcha economy is socially embedded.

For identifying Lepcha social formation the following points are worth mentioning :

Economically, the Lepchas are dependent on agriculture. Irrespective of age and sex they are involved in agriculture in different capacities. In the contemporary period the Lepchas have settled down in terrace based cultivation. But it is said that their ancestors were shifting cultivators. A Lepcha acquires agricultural knowledge through practice and involvement. All that are required in agriculture i.e. land, labour, finance, manure, seed, tools etc., are simple and supplied by the households.

Most of the Lepchas are small landowners who manage and cultivate the land of their own. Share cropping is practiced mainly in the cases of institutional (*Gumpa*) lands where the deal has been informally settled. In cases of leasing out of land for particular period or crop, several arrangements of cultivation have been noticed but these have neither been institutionalized nor do they follow any regular pattern.

At the outset individual ownership of land may appear to negate Lepcha tribal character based on the central proposition of Marxist theory that “private property and exploitation are just two sides of the same coin” [Bloch, 1985 : 24]. A tribal society should be free from exploitation and a private ownership of land may extend the possibility of exploitation. But if we visualise the ownership right from the angles of right to use and right to transfer, the ownership pattern of Lepcha lands are not individualistic. In Lepcha society a landowner does not always exclusively enjoy the right to use his own land. The labour (by consuming crop), the neighbours (by using land as pasture or road), the sharecropper (by managing and cultivating) directly or indirectly establish their right to use others’ land. The village level Lepcha organisation uses individual land either temporarily for celebrating different community functions or permanently for constructing road, church, *gumpa* and school. Land is transmitted hereditarily on male lines. In this transmission *moo* (clan) plays an important role. Most of the land in Lepcha villages belong to few *moos*. A system of corporate use and transfer of land within the kin groups is marked among the Lepchas. Against the emergence of such a kin based arrangement, Bloch has offered a reason. He says, “With settled agriculture..... land becomes communal property, specially because of the need to defend it from other tribes” [1985 : 34].

Lepchas depend heavily on household labour for cultivation. Like any other peasant, for Lepchas also “family is the main unit of production” [Thorner, 1963 : 323]. But during peak agricultural season they go for exchange labour within the community itself without keeping any record of details. In Lepcha agriculture the

sources of labour have not been restricted to Chayanov's "non-wage family labours to the family household farm" [Harrison, 1982 : 246 – 247]. It goes beyond the family unit and becomes a community based collective activity. All works are governed and carried out by cherished social values and obligations. This is more a tribal feature than peasant one. The relations between those who work and for whom they work are direct and personal. Unmarried children of both the sexes and the adopted male child are two peculiar potent sources of labour in a Lepcha household.

Lepchas use simple tools and techniques in their agricultural operations. They apply traditional means in exploiting natural resources with minor changes here and there. They do not employ any mechanical tools or power driven appliances except a few manually operated sprayers. Wooden plough, leveller, spade, sickle etc., are commonly used. Technologically, the Lepchas belong to the category of non-capitalist society where they like the "peasant community applied many of the techniques which had previously been used for tribal societies in order to elucidate the community's cultural and social configuration" [Smith, 1995 : 220]. According to some scholars "peasant agriculture is conducted with its own equipment" [Gavin, 1982 : 383]. In case of Lepchas, agricultural equipment may be individually owned but shared by the community.

Lepchas are subject to low level of technological development in agriculture and prefer to stick to their traditional method of cultivation. As a result, the Lepcha economy is 'under-developed'. There is no clear cut work specialisation and division of labour among the Lepchas. And we know that tribal societies are under-developed because specialisation and division of labour are absent among them.

Lepchas carry forward tribal character of 'subsistence economic system' and simple living. Eat, drink and enjoy are the basic motive of their livelihood. Economically, they are more concerned about their present consumption than the future. The concept of saving or hoarding is absent among the Lepchas. We all know that "in a peasant economy the first concern of the production units is to grow food crops to feed themselves" [Thornor, 1971 : 205]. It is equally true in the case of Lepchas.

Our penultimate chapter shows how the Lepcha economy is socially embedded. Their economic organization is intertwined with the social structure. A type of social correlation has been established between the type of socio-economic transactional mode and the degree of social distance. Some institutions like marriage, religion, ethnic association play important role in influencing the Lepcha economy. The social institutions to which he belongs sway Lepcha economic behaviour. Their production organization is intimately related with the social structure.

At the community level a strong sense of fraternity and interdependence is maintained through social process of production and distribution. They follow the strong kinship obligations in social and economic spheres of life like in transfer of landed property, distribution of agricultural produce and reciprocal labour exchange. *Moo*, as the highest order of kinship, plays an important role in holding landed property and its transmission.

Now, considering all these several aspects of their agrarian character, Lepchas can be identified as 'tribal peasants'. In our introductory chapter we have

grouped all societies under the simple binary classification of capitalist and pre-capitalist. Any pre-capitalistic society is basically based on agriculture and its economy can be identified as 'peasant economy'. All settled tribes due to their dependence on agriculture are likely to fall under the category of tribal peasants. The other types of peasantry like feudal peasants etc. are rare among the tribes. The Marxian concept of 'primitive communism' is a concept of the past and is no more practiced by any community. Same is the case with Sahlin's 'band' where they normally moved from one place to another in a group. By now, most tribes have settled down and behave like peasant. So tribe as a separate category should preferably not be used for wild speculation. Ghosal's observation of shifting from tribe to peasant among the Lepchas [1990: 208-219] is neither plausible theoretically nor carries much significance.. Lepchas are peasant looked at from their economic behaviour and practices but they are tribes as well from their social attitude and interaction.

In addition to tribal peasantry, some rudimentary elements of capitalism have also been observed among the Lepchas in production and marketing of modern cash crop. Like capitalist farming, production of cash crop is guided by profit motive and they in some respects act like a farmer. The outlook and behavioural pattern of the Lepchas differ in case of the production and distribution or exchange of food and cash crops. Even the same individual behaves differently in producing these two types of crops.

Let us now specify the elements of capitalist farming and tribal peasant mode of production in Lepcha society.

Three villages have accepted three different crops as their cash crops : gladioli in Mani Gumpa, vegetables in 5th Mile Lepcha Gaon and cardamom in Pochaok. Peculiarly, each of the three villages has been specialised in the production of one crop where the production of other two varieties is absolutely nil. But there is no reason to believe that all three crops cannot grow in all three villages which are located in almost the same geo-climatic conditions. As against this, all the villages are homogeneous in the production of food crop - paddy, maize and millet are the three common crops among the Lepchas. Both food and cash crops are grown in all the villages.

Land under cash crop is organised and managed by the educated young Lepchas while food crop is grown by the comparatively elderly persons with traditional outlook. Very recently, some young Lepchas have started leasing in land on contractual basis either by paying cash or kind. These lands are used absolutely for the production of cash crop. In case of traditional share cropping, food crop is most common. The traditional monocrop has been replaced by multi-cropping, which includes modern variety of cash crops. More and more lands are being brought under the cultivation of cash crops at the cost of food crop.

Lepchas employ wage labour from outside the community and the village for the modern cash crop. The rate of wage varies as per age and sex. But they cultivate food crops with reciprocal exchange of labour where labour of any age and sex from within the village is treated equally. In addition to the obligation to reciprocate labour, each household needs to entertain all those who extend labour with tiffin and lunch. But no such customary arrangements are there to regulate the interaction with

the wage labour. The work timings for exchange labour are not rigidly fixed while wage labour works for standard eight hours a day. Further, as against exchanging human labour for bullock, Lepchas have started using bullocks on rent. Bullocks need to be served with fodder etc. in the traditional system but no such obligations are maintained with the cultivation of cash crops.

Both females and children take active part in carrying out different processes of traditional cultivation. As there is no specialisation of work all are absorbed in agriculture either as principal or subsidiary sector of their engagement. On the contrary, almost all works are assigned to the young males in connection with the different agricultural operations of cash crop. Females and children are, thus, released from the land used for cash crop and are found to concentrate exclusively in the cultivation of food crop. A sort of division of labour has been created on the basis of age and sex in operating cash crop.

The requirement of finance is very negligible for the food crop because of which the households or the community are generally capable of supplying it of their own. Cash crop needs more capital and the Lepchas, in many cases, manage it from outside sources like traders and middlemen who indirectly charge interest on their capital. As against domestic manure and seed, Lepchas use chemical fertiliser, pesticides and HYV seeds for cash crop. The indigenous tools and implements are sufficient for food crop while they use some, although as yet negligible, mechanical device like spraying machine for the new crops.

Traditional *taphu-tungfri* (measuring vessels) system is used for taking accounts of the crops cultivated. The area or productivity of land is measured in

terms of *taphu-tungfri* of crops grown in the field. Any intra-community transaction of crops like loan, payment of labour, measurement of seed is done with this indigenous system. On the other hand, the standard metric unit is used to measure all the cash crops.

The basic purpose of cultivation of food crop is to meet the household and social obligations while cash crops are meant for the market. Usually no part of the food crop is exchanged for money while no part of cash crop is used domestically and the entire amount is sold in the market. The basic objective of cultivation of these two variety of crops are thus diametrically opposite. Lepchas fulfil different social and religious obligations with food crop while cash crop is free from such obligations and meet the cash requirement of the cultivator.

Lepchas follow as recommended by Karl Polanyi all the three transactional modes of agricultural produce under three distinct forms – reciprocity, redistribution and market exchange. This again can broadly be classified as (a) ‘socio-economic transactional mode’ comprising of reciprocity and redistribution and (b) ‘economic mode’ like market exchange. It should be noted that while economic mode has little or no social embeddedness, socio-economic transactional mode is socially related. Lepchas cultivate food crops (paddy, maize and millet) mainly to meet up diverse social and economic needs. It is carried forward reciprocally in the form of gift giving between kin and friends and also redistribution in the form of obligatory payment to Lepcha Association and religious institutions like church or *gumpa*. Cultivation of cash crops (like cardamom, ginger, gladioli) is basically oriented towards the economic mode of market transaction.

One can thus witness two different social formations in Lepcha agricultural society : tribal peasantry and capitalistic farming. Their economy is partially barter and partially monetised. They adhere to “non-monetised barter system of exchange economy” [Beteille, 1977 : 12-13] within their own community and go for monetary payment with the outsiders.

But there is no theoretical contradiction in simultaneous existence of more than one social formation in the context of any community. A similar view has been endorsed by Bernardo Berdichevsky who says that a society may be “constituted by more than one mode of production, one mode being dominant” [1979 : 9]. Sometimes, socio-economic formation of any society may apparently contradict with the particular mode of production by which the society is recognised. Socio-economic formation of “other modes beside the dominant mode of production, whether as hangovers from the past or precursors of the future” [Melotti, 1977 : 4] may be present simultaneously. Some has identified this type of simultaneous existence of two or more modes of production as a manifestation of ‘hybrid socio-economic formation’.

The co-existence of different forms of society has also been observed by J.H.Boeke (1953), the Dutch economist, in the context of his socio-economic studies in Indonesia. Beside the ‘homogeneous society’ which is exclusively dominated by one system, Boeke observed dual or plural society where two or more social systems may appear simultaneously but each one can be clearly distinguished from the other. Every society in its progression, will show, beside the prevailing social system, the remains of the preceding and the beginning of the future social style. Boeke

described such types of society as 'social dualism' which is more common among the developing countries. "Social dualism is the clashing of an imported social system with an indigenous social system of another style. Most frequently the imported social system is high capitalism. But it may be socialism or communism just as well, or a blending of them" [Boeke, 1953 : 3-5].

The Lepcha society can be identified as an example of social dualism where "an imported western capitalism has penetrated into the pre-capitalistic agrarian community" [Ibid]. By virtue of their tribal peasant character Lepchas are pre-capitalist. Capitalism has entered into the Lepcha society through production and exchange of cash crop and "have gained its existence in the new environment without being able to oust or to assimilate the divergent social system that has grown up there" [Ibid]. As a result neither of them becomes 'general and characteristic' for the Lepcha society. The co-existence of two separate social systems make their economy a sort of 'dualistic economy'.

But Lepcha social dualism is different from that of Boeke's where the "essence of social dualism is the clash between an imported and an indigenous social system of divergent character" [Ibid]. But in Lepcha society the two separate social systems (tribal peasantry and capitalism) co-exist simultaneously without creating any 'clash'. Lepchas irrespective of their acceptance of or divergence from the imported social system (capitalism) are maintaining perfect harmony in the society without creating any tension among themselves whatsoever. The peace-loving Lepchas have accommodated all changes without ever making any challenge or protest.

A further peculiarity with the Lepcha dualism is that unlike what is generally understood, the divergent social systems are not prevalent in two separate sectors of their society. More specifically, a Lepcha behaves like a peasant when he produces food crop but acts like a capitalist farmer in his cultivation and exchange of cash crop. The same Lepcha performs a dual role and, therefore, dualism need not necessarily occur at the level of two or more mutually exclusive subsets of any society. Lepcha society is thus an example of integrated social dualism where the imported capitalistic farming of cash crop has penetrated into the divergent pre-capitalistic cultivation of food crops, and both co-exist simultaneously without creating any tension or clash in the society. It could have been both interesting and instructive if the Lepcha agriculture were studied against this perspective in detail. But since this study was designed to be diagnostic, it would, it is hoped, serve its purpose if it helps future studies on these people to be more focussed. This is a task which has become important because the veil of 'tribes' has the tendency to make all studies of them monotonous, making it difficult to integrate the existing theories with the varied reality.