

Lepcha-Bhutia Relations in Sikkim from mid-Seventeenth Century to mid-Nineteenth Century: A Study of its Historiography

Rupan Sarkar¹

Abstract:

A study of historiography of an incident, in the sense that it is the history of history of the incident induces a new dimension in the discourse. The centrality of the study is shifted from narratives to synchronicity and dia-chronicity and to ideology and culture. Taking the example of Lepcha-Bhutia relations in Sikkim which has meandered through both cordiality and discord I propose to argue in the following pages that the historical construction is not singular.

Keywords: ideology, functionality, Rankean Aphorism, narrative history, culture.

A study of historiography of an incident, in the sense that it is the history of history of the incident induces a new dimension in the discourse. The centrality of the study is shifted from narrativity to (i) synchronicity and dia-chronicity and (ii) to ideology and culture. Taking the example of Lepcha-Bhutia relations in Sikkim which has meandered through both cordiality and discord I propose to argue in the following pages that the historical construction is not singular. A plurality of constructions makes it appear to be more complex in closer scrutiny than as it appears to be uni-directional. The paradigms which appears to have been applied, amidst a couple of the minor and inadequate paradigms resorted to for this purpose, and therefore making this study reasonably interesting are (a) the construction of

¹ Assistant Professor of History, P.D. Women's College, Jalpaiguri,

H.H.Risley¹ and (b) The History of Sikkim.² Another interesting paradigm tends to appear from the article titled '1826: The end of an era in the social and political history of Sikkim' written by R.K.Sprigg in the Bulletin of Tibetology.³ On the basis of the theoretical scrutiny of the three constructions of Lepcha-Bhutia relations one may conclude that the notions engaged respectively are (i) imperial (projecting power struggle), (ii) national (focusing on national interest and homeostasis) and (iii) functional (addressing political consequences). Comparative study of the three 're-constructions' furnish the under-current of 'ideology' and 'functionality' in the writing of history of the incident under examination.

The incidents which took place in the Lepcha-Bhutia relations in Sikkim and which have been used by three authors to narrate their individual version of the story may be first stated in a chronological order:

- (a) The earliest episode of Lepcha-Bhutia relations in Sikkim is stated to be the blessing for a son by The-Kong-Tek and Nyo-Kong-Ngal on the immigrant Tibetan wrestler Gyad-Bhum. The-Kong-Tek has been taken for a Lepcha Patriarch and a wizard and also reputed to be the incarnation of Guru Rinpoche. The blessing having materialized with the birth of a son followed by two more male issues had laid the foundation of Lepcha-Bhutia cordiality in Sikkim. Gyad-Bhum-gSag appointed his third son as the ruler of Sikkim for his kindly disposition. Of the four of his sons namely Tong-du-ru-gi, Sangpodar, Tsechudar, Nima-Gyalpo and Guru Tashi) which he had sired the fourth one succeeded him. The Chohyal dynasty of Sikkim had originated from this son viz. Guru Tashi's son Jowo Nagpo, his son Jowo Aphag, his son Guru Tenzing, his son Phuntsho Namgyal (1604 A.D.) become the first ruler of Namgyal Dynasty.⁴

- (b) After his coronation in 1642 A.D. Phuntso Namgyal appointed twelve Kazis from amongst the chief Bhutia clans and twelve Lepchas as Jongpons (governors of forts) from amongst the chief Lepcha clans of Sikkim.⁵
- (c) The second king Tansung Namgyal having the illicit relation with the wife of a Lepcha official named Tasa Aphong had a son namely Yugthing Arup. He was appointed the head of the Lepcha and later he became Chagzod (army chief).⁶
- (d) During the ruler ship of Chagdor Namgyal (1686 A.D.) Bhutan for the first time attacked Sikkim in the course of a conspiracy of his elder sister Pande Wangpo. The minor king was rescued by Yugthing Tishey (Tasa Aphong) and his son Yugthing Arup was appointed the head of the Bhutias and Lepchas of Sikkim.⁷ In the course of invasion the Bhutan army took Arup as prisoner of war and placed him at the disposal of the Druk Desi. By some magical contrivance Arup impressed the Desi and somehow managed to obtain fair and respectable treatment. During his absence the Bhutan army occupied the Rabdentse Palace for about eight years (1702-1710 A.D.) until, due to intervention from Tibet, Chagdor Namgyal returned to Rabdentse and the Bhutan army withdrew from that place. However, the East-Teesta region of Sikkim such as Damsong, Daling, Jongsa and places near Tongsa La Hill was ceded to Bhutan.⁸
- (e) Soon after, another invasion from Bhutan had occurred presumably induced by one Shal-ngo-Acchok/Gyabo Acchok resulting in the formal occupation of land lying between the Teesta and Rongpo. Acchok is said to be unfriendly to the Chogyal. Being apprehended by the Sikkim army he sought political asylum in Bhutan and encouraged the Bhutan government to initiate the

retaliatory invasion. Acchok is held to have been assassinated by the Bhutan army at Ambiok near Daling Fort.⁹

- (f) After the coronation of fourth Chogyal, Gyur-med Namgyal in 1717 A.D. five Lepchas appeared and claimed to be the incarnation of Tesha-thing, the ancient Lepcha wizard chief. Having failed to substantiate their claim to magical power they are said to have been stoned to death by the Trapas of Pemionchi.¹⁰
- (g) Immediately after this incident another Bhutani invasion is registered in the contemporary records and Shal-ngo Changzod and Nyerchen Ba-gyal (both Lepchas) were sent to repel them and another Lepcha Shal-ngo A-dzin was appointed Jongpon of Sodah.¹¹ During the reign of Gyur-med Namgyal Tisha Bidur, a Lepcha collected some Teshe followers and revolted against the king. Though Bidur sought help from the Mangar Raja he was finally killed along with all the Teshe rebels by the general Yugthing Desit (Lepcha).¹²
- (h) The legitimacy of the fifth Chogyal, Namgyal Phuntso was contested by Shal-ngo Changzod Tamding and his brothers. They assumed power and ruled Sikkim for three years viz. from 1738 to 1741 A.D. The political situation turned out, at this time, to be complicated by rebels and counter rebels by different groups of Lepcha officials. One group of officials led by Changzod Karwang supported the Chogyal, another faction of Lepcha extraction occupied Sikkim being led by Kazisor Jongpon. However peace was restored by Tibet when one Rabden Sharpa was sent by it in 1747 A.D.¹³ The regent Rabden Sharpa made a proclamation, called Mangshar Duma and defined the powers and privileges of the Lepcha Headman titled as Tu-myangs and the Bhutea Jongpons.¹⁴

- (i) The most important event during the reign of Tensing Namgyal, the 6th Chogyal was intermittent invasion of Sikkim by the Gurkhas. From 1775 A.D. the Gurkha invasion, with occasionally repite, had continued to destabilize the administration of Sikkim. While the Nepal-Sikkim relation engendered interest among political analysts the one episode that remains to be equally interesting is the role which some Lepcha military officials had played to resist Gurkha invasion. One such army officers was Changzod Chuthup, the son of Changzod Karwang. Having shown untiring spirit and having continued to fight relentlessly against the invading Gurkha army he had earned from the people the edifying sobriquet Satrujeet and had over-written the chapter on Lepcha-Bhutia cordiality.¹⁵
- (j) However, an incident having taking place in 1826 A.D. and during the reign of Tsugphud Namgyal, the 7th Chogyal caused a rupture in Lepcha-Bhutia relations. The youngest son of Changzod Karwang, namely **Changzod Bolog** (Bolak) continued to defy the authority of the king and **arrogate his power** by using the Red Seal. Three times i.e., in 1819, 1820 and **1824 A.D.** the kazis and Lamas tried to persuade Bolog to renounce his defiance. **Finally**, the king issued order in 1826 A.D. to kill Bolog. The execution of **capital punishment** on Bolog and on his faithful brothers resulted in the migration of the Lepchas from 800 houses under the leadership of his nephews named **Dathup**, Jerung and Kazi Gorok and subjects from Chidam and Namthang to **settle in** Illam in Nepal.¹⁶

II

While the incidents are commonplace in a general narrative of political history what infect tends to be interesting is the historiography of their construction in the three studies previously mentioned. Two prominent trends could be clear discerned from those studies. The third one may not of course be that prominent but it is also significant in a relatively small measure. The shifts in their paradigms may be deciphered now to underpin why they could be so interesting as they tend to be.

1. Narrating the above course of historical development Risley emphasized on several points because he had been examining the issues from the angle of 'struggle for power.' So, in his narratives

- (a) the Lepcha ancestry had been given in all details of their myths and of kinship, treated in as much space as was given to write the narrative of Bhutia fugitives and their history. The different sets of the Lepchas had been stated in details in order to be able to establish that the Lepcha community is not a monolith that struggle amongst the different sets for chief ship was not uncommon. Some of the sets were more inclined towards the rulers of Sikkim for power and prestige than other.¹⁷
- (b) The incidents of conspiracy, revolt, usurpation of power and finally assassination of Changzod Bolog tend to suggest that the dissidents amongst the Lepchas had nurtured the idea of the legitimacy of Lepcha claim to the throne of Sikkim.
- (c) The association of some Lepcha leaders in the Bhutani invasion of Sikkim had been fore grounded with discreteness so that it might under-pin (i)

Lepcha rejection of the Chogyal dynastic rule and at the same time (ii) indicate no legitimacy of the Bhutani occupations of Kalingpong.

Now, why Risley had to engage some element of interpretive ness in his narrative may integrated with ideological and political imperatives of the colonial administration. They may not be too many but the few of them which can be identified are indeed significant to regulate academic decisions.

(a) The British India administration was sensitive to security of India in the north. It could not take Chaina and Tibet as reliable political ally. Therefore the intimacy of the Sikkim Royal family with Tibet and Tibetan chief priests had been viewed with suspicion. The consequence of which was the imprisonment of Thutob Namgyal at Kurseong.

(b) To serve the objective of the colonial administration to lay their hands on Sikkim affair it had turned out to be necessary to indicate that (i) neither the Lepchas are united amongst themselves as an indigenous centre of power, nor (ii) their alliance with Bhutia Royal family was free from rival political ambition and from rupture in Lepcha-Bhutia alliance.

2. The History of Sikkim written a decade after the publication of the Sikkim Gazetteer had focused on the following points viz.

(a) Instead of going too much into the details of Lepcha ancestry, as Risley had done, because that might suggests competitiveness for political authority The-Kong-Tek, the Lepcha patriarch was posited as the incarnation of Guru Rinpoche to suggest eclectism. Lepcha Jongpons are always mentioned to indicate that the Lepcha component in the structure of power is not inconsiderable.

- (b) The incidents of conspiracy, dissidence and revolt had been posited as individual's lapse rather than the collective will or decision of the Lepchas. The importance that was attributed to Changzod Karwang and his son Changzod Chuthup (a Lepcha family) had overwhelmed the incident of revolt and assassination of Changzod Bolog, the youngest son of Changzod Karwang and brother of Changzod Chuthup taken for being aberration of ambition for personal power. Sikkim History mentioned 800 houses to configurate migration after Bolog was killed while the Gazetteer gave the figure of 1,200 Lepchas as post-assassination migration statistics. Presumably, the Lepcha and Bhutia population being the same, around 15,000 in 1826 the migration could not be taken to have any serious consequences on the majority of the Lepchas.

The reasons why the Sikkim History had taken moderate view of the incidents relating to Lepchas-Bhutia relations are;

- (a) The Sikkim government required consolidation of power by easing out irritants in Lepcha-Bhutia relations. Sikkim History being written in 1907 after the Kurseong episode, appointment of Claude White in 1889 as the first political officer of Sikkim and colonial penetration in Sikkim had reflected a nationalist ambition to project a united will to contain the colonial ambition.
- (b) The policy of consolidation continued to prevail even in the subsequent years when some important Nepali families were involved in several spheres of government activities. The primary objective of the Sikkim History is to state that 'power' in Sikkim had emerged through a process of assimilation, internalization and consensus. The result of which was homeostasis than homogeneity and unity than discord.

3. The position held by R.K. Sprigg can be surmised from the concluding section of this paper. He wrote, 'I offer this series of ten linked misfortune as my justification for claiming that the consequences of that political murder, within the royal family, in 1826 were most grievous, not merely for the Lepchas, who suffered more from those consequences than either of the other two races of Sikkim, the Bhutias and the Limbus, but also for Sikkim as a country.'¹⁸

(i) Sprigg has taken an eclectic view without employing any critique for the fact that David Macdonald, the grandfather of Mrs. Sprigg had Lepcha connection and from that calculation he turns out to be grand father-in-law's maternal great-grand father of Prof. Sprigg.

III

In the final analysis the narrative furnished by the three texts differ both in tone and temper for ideological and functional imperatives. Even if the incidents remained same the varying dimensions brought into use for the construction of narratives had implied propositional truth function than correspondence. The historiography of the Lepcha-Bhutia relational history tends to suggest that the Rankean aphorism that the 'truth, the only truth and nothing but the truth' meaning correspondence to facts is more metaphysical than logical.

Notes and References

1. Risley, H.H., Gazetteer of Sikkim, 1894, Calcutta, reprint, 1972, 1985.
2. Sir, T. Namgyal and Maharani Dolma, History of Sikkim (type script), 1907, Gantok.

3. Sprigg, R.K., '1826: The end of an era in the social and political history of Sikkim', Bulletin of Tibetology (Seminar Volume) 1995, Gangtok.
4. History of Sikkim, p.1921.
5. History of Sikkim, p.28.
6. *ibid.* pp.34-35.
7. *ibid.* pp.36-37.
8. *ibid.* p.36.
9. *ibid.* pp.38-39.
10. *ibid.* p.49.
11. *ibid.* p.50.
12. *ibid.* p.51.
13. *ibid.* p.58.
14. *ibid.* p.59.
15. *ibid.* p.67.
16. *ibid.* pp.85-90.
17. Risley, H. H. *op. cit.*
18. Sprigg, R.K. *op. cit.* p.90.