

## **CULTURAL EVOLUTION OF SIKKIM : A SURVEY**

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Every human society has its own particular culture which mould people's knowledge, belief and behaviour. The history of mankind reveals that there has always been a process of cultural interchange, cultural flow and cultural stimulation between societies of adjacent countries. Such occurrence is manifested in the cultural evolution of Sikkim.

This paper attempts to trace the conditions under which Lepcha and Bhutia cultures were gradually amalgamated since 15th century and how the culture in Sikkim further diversified with the influx of Nepalese since the late 19th century. It seeks to examine the effect of political development of Sikkim. It attempts to highlight the significance of Sikkim becoming a multi-cultural and polyethnic society. It also focuses on the challenge posed to the cultures in the process of development and modernization. The main thrust of the paper is to emphasize that traditional culture need not be an obstacle to modernization nor modernization led to "washing their original cultural identities". The paper concludes with emphasis that traditional culture could play not only a complementary role but also a facilitator of the modernization and development in the society.

### **Historical Development**

The population of Sikkim is composed mainly of Lepchas, Bhutias and Nepalis who settled down in the land at different periods of history. Lepchas were said to be the earliest inhabitants of Sikkim. They used to practice shifting cultivation and supplemented their income with hunting, fishing, gathering wild fruits and roots for their sustenance. They were known for their extensive knowledge of mountains, forests and their products. As the natural calamities like storms and floods caused death and desolation around them, they worshipped malignant spirits. In fact, originally they were animists by faith. There was no central political authority. In course of time, they started organizing themselves into a clan system and having local Lepcha chiefs to manage their affairs. They seem to have been left to themselves until about the fifteenth century when the Tibetan influx from the north started.

These early immigrants from Tibet came to be known as Bhutias. Through these Bhutias, people in Sikkim encountered with the Tibetan civilization. The Bhutias brought from the north the Tibetan culture, the Tibetan language, the lamaist Buddhism and a combination of pastoralism and semi-settled agricultural pattern.

In mid-seventeenth century, the Namgyal Dynasty was established in Sikkim. The rulers of this dynasty, known as Chogyals, were Tibetan by stock and the first Chogyal was installed as the ruler of Sikkim with the consent of Lepchas in 1642 at Yoksam. They introduced a kind of centralized feudal bureaucracy modelled after the system of Tibet. The ministers and other important officials of the Government consisted not only of immigrant Bhutias but also of local chiefs. Through these feudal bureaucrats, the Chogyals could organize the entire territory of

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their kingdom under one political unit and established the first centralized administration.

There were other ethnic groups such as Limbu, Rais, Mangars, Gurungs and Tamangs who were also early inhabitants of Sikkim. Some of them were animists, others were Buddhists and Hindus.

While the rulers were busy in consolidating the kingdom, the Bhutia Lamas were engaged in spreading lamaism. Gradually, monasteries were established all over the kingdom and they became the centre of religious, political and social life of the people. There were various means of constant infusion of Tibetan influence in the society. The successive Chogyals of Sikkim looked towards the Dalai Lama for guidance and assistance in spiritual and secular matters. Although most of the monasteries in Sikkim were Nyimapa and Kargyupa sects, whereas the dominant sect in Tibet was Gelukpa, They continued to maintain links with their main branches in Tibet and sent monks for higher spiritual training in Tibet. Apart from these links, traditional, commercial and grazing activities across the border between Tibet and Sikkim continued.

The process of assimilation of Bhutias and Lepchas started early days of their contact and grew with the passage of time through conversion to Buddhism and unrestricted matrimonial relations. Most of the Sikkimese Lepchas started speaking Bhuuas language, wearing Bhutia dress, following Bhutia culture and tradition. The assimilation was not one way process. Some of the Lepcha customs and traditions were also incorporated and had become the acknowledged part of the most important festive ceremonies of Sikkim. The adaptation and domestication of Tibetan culture in Sikkim led to the creation of a distinctive frontier culture.

Sikkim was virtually under the British control for about thirty years after the appointment of J.C. White as the political officer. With the active encouragement of the British, a large number of Nepalis immigrated to Sikkim. Apart from the requirement of manpower for road construction and agriculture development, the British was motivated to counterbalance the Tibetan inclinations of the Sikkimese by flooding the kingdom with Nepali settlers. One of the British Civil Servant stated :-

"Most of all will our position be strengthened by the change which is insensibly but steady taking place in the composition of the population of Sikkim. The Lepchas as has been stated, are rapidly dying out; while from the west, the industrious Newars and Goorkhas of Nepal are pressing forwards to clear and cultivate large areas of unoccupied land..... The influx of these hereditary enemies [Newars and Goorkhas] of Tibet is our surest guarantee against a revival of Tibetan influence"

The theory of hereditary enemy was based on misconception and it was contradictory to reality. Tibetans and Nepalis had long traditional relationship. Buddhism reached Tibet from India through Nepal. The Tibetan Great King Song-tsen Gampo's Nepali queen played significant role in establishing Buddhism in Tibet. She has been held in high esteem by Tibetans. Padmasambhava, Santarakshita, Kamalashila and even Atisa Dipankara stopped and studied in Nepal on the way to Tibet. Nepal preserved the Buddhist scriptures and exposition, sent them to Tibet. Nepali pandits also joined in the translation of Sanskrit work into

Tibetan. Nepal is also sacred pilgrim centre for Tibetans. Further, Hinduism and Buddhism in Nepal exist not only as a separate religions, but also in a synthesized form. As a result, many deities are worshipped by Hindus and Buddhists alike in Nepal.

In the light of these historical intercourse between these two societies, it seems sinister to term their relationship as "hereditary enemies".

Their peripheral difference seems to have been magnified and exploited by the British to achieve their imperial design in Sikkim. Through their theory of "hereditary enemies", British appears to have followed their typical "divide and rule policy" in Sikkim as well.

The Nepalis dress differently, speak different language and worship different religion. They remained a group apart, especially the upper castes like Brahmins and Chhetris. But their mere distinctiveness need not be looked at as a factor of discord in the society. In fact, through them the people of Sikkim could gain the benefit of influence by Indian civilization. The coexistence among them the felling of kinship or belonging together", developed the tradition of tolerance, adjustment and accommodation. Thus, despite the factors of dissimilarity, gradually developed in Sikkim a degree of historic and cultural unity and the common tradition. It was further reinforced with Nepali language becoming the *lingua franca* of the sub-Himalayan region. These psychological substance for oneness and the common tradition enabled the people of Sikkim to withstand the challenges posed by the economic and political uncertainty in the post-British period. Compared to other north-eastern states, Sikkim enjoys the great degree of stability and peace. This could be attributed to its rich cultural heritage.

Since no one of the main ethnic groups in Sikkim became so predominant to completely absorb or submerge the other main ethnic groups, continued to remain as plural society. Thus the term Sikkimese indicates a resident of Sikkim and has no linguistic or ethnological implication.

Unlike its policy in other tribal areas, British did not use the Christian missionaries in Sikkim to carry out "White man's burden of civilizing the babarians". The British perhaps feared that the preaching of Christianity in Sikkim would alarm followers of established religions such as Buddhism and Hinduism and might face adverse repercussion. Thus the activities of the missionaries were confined mainly welfare service in Sikkim.

The political developments in the adjacent countries like Tibet and India influenced the trend of cultural composite of Sikkim. The customary and old established contacts between Sikkim and Tibet had to be ended with the invasion of Tibet by China. It affected particularly the people in the northern Sikkim who were basically traders and herdsmen. It was time immemorial practice that these herdsmen used to take their cattle across the Tibetan border for grazing. The traders earned a good part of their income from the trans-border trade. Such movements of man and cattle had to stop since 1959 when restriction was imposed following the Chinese effective occupation of Tibet. The closure of border with Tibet not only segregated people of Sikkim and Tibet and brought to an end the traditional interaction but also caused the people of northern Sikkim to change their ways of earning their livelihood.

The emergence of militarily and ideologically aggressive China on its neighbour necessiated Sikkim to look towards India for protection. India became its natural ally not

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only because of their long traditional relations but also because of Indian adherence to liberal democracy.

Both the Indian as well as Sikkimese leaders realized the need of rapid social and economic developments in Sikkim to face the challenges of twentieth century. Although the efforts towards modernization and development were initiated under the tutelage of India as early as 1954, the effective acceleration of the processes gained momentum with the merger of Sikkim in 1975. With a span of few years after its merger, "service" and "business" sectors in Sikkim expanded rapidly, thereby creating a vast avenue of job opportunity. As the availability of the local people had been insufficient, and influx of mostly skilled and professional people from other parts of India took place. The expansion of business sectors and market economy also attracted both the businessmen and money from other parts of India as well. The presence of the "plainmen" further diversified the population and culture in Sikkim.

As a consequence of rapid development, the influence of western culture is increasingly felt in recent years in Sikkim mainly due to the expansion of modern education and exposure to massmedia.

### Effect of Modernization

The development efforts and modernization brought about multidimensional transformation in Sikkim. The standards of living reflects in terms of per capita income, production of primary as well as secondary goods, spread of health and education services, widening of the network of communication, generation of power, etc. have all shown significant increase. These transformation brought about great impact on the traditional social systems and cultures of Sikkim.

One of the noticeable changes is seen in the life-style of the people. They could have higher standard of living not only due to development activities but also due to the liberal aid given by the Central Government. In fact there is air of affluence in the society. They have westernized in their style of living. They have changed their food habits as well, with the Chinese, the Indian and the western dishes are quite popular nowadays. Some of the ladies still wear their traditional dresses but for males, their traditional dresses have become only ceremonial dresses.

Not only their style of living and appearance, their whole attitude has undergone change due to spread of modern education and exposure through mass-media. So their socio-cultural behaviour have also undergone change. A.R. Foning states :-

"Our boys have always topped and carried away prizes for the Beatles type quarters and band groups. In short we have become and have converted ourselves into sort of quasi-Europeans".

There is no doubt that the development and modernization brought about a great deal of comfort and luxury. It also led to deterioration of moral and value system. Value such as hard work, perseverance, honesty, simplicity, pursuit of learning etc. are misplaced. They are becoming more and more individualistic and materialistic in outlook. Their sense of social good is wethering away and feeling of personal gain is creeping in.

With the decline of traditional society, hold of religion over the people is also weakening. The attitude of younger generation towards religion is either indifference or for some blind followers. This state of affairs is mainly due to the fact that they have no opportunity to

learn about their religion in schools and colleges under modern education system.

It is a normal phenomenon that when traditional society get exposed to the modern world, it instals in them the sense of inferiority and make them join the race of modernization and acculturation with advanced society. But development and modernization, without being firmly rooted in the tradition and culture of the society, would not bring desired benefit. Modernity has no intrinsic value except its powerful utility. It would satisfy the material needs but it would not satisfy the spiritual and psycho-cultural needs of the people. After initial euphoria of modernization, gradually creep in the feeling of rootlessness. Therefore, many societies in the world realized the significance of striking a balance between modernism and traditionalism.

Most theorists of both modernization and revolution had previously predicted the replacement of tradition by modernity as development progressed. In such a preconceived theory of development. Tradition has no function to perform; it is, in fact, considered an obstacle to modernization. However, from the perspective of the late twentieth century, it is clear that neither has revolution completely destroyed tradition as amply evident in the post-communist societies nor has modernization entirely replaced tradition as evident in the Newly Industrialising Asian societies. In fact, in the latter case, tradition has been an invisible handmaiden of industrial revolution. Development processes of these societies manifest that tradition and culture of the people can be significant part of the human resources to be skilfully utilized in the process of development. For example Japanese entrepreneurs made effective use of their society's traditional social structure and value system in the course of industrial development. For example the strong sense of group loyalty that the feudal society had fostered over the ages has been transformed into loyalty to the company one works. Similarly, the traditions of simplicity, hard work, perseverance, religiosity, tolerance etc. of the Sikkimese society could be utilized in the process of modernization and development. To harness these cultural resources, conscientious efforts needs to be made especially by the leading figures within the society.

In Sikkim, a new class of people has emerged in recent years who cut across the boundaries of caste, ethnicity, language and religion. The emergence of this class is facilitated by equality of educational and occupational opportunity. The member of this class are the cream of the society and brain behind all its socio-economic, educational and political activities. The member of this class realized the long-term harmful effect of the blind imitation of western culture and have become conscious of the need to preserve their traditions and cultures. The liberal democracy system in the state provides congenial atmosphere for preserving and developing their distinct identities. It is not only the three main ethnic groups but also various other ethnic groups of Sikkim have been activated to trace their origin, their culture, tradition and history to establish their distinct identity and preserve.

On the other hand, traditions and culture of a traditional society should be subjected to change and modification according to the need of the situation. They should not remain static but should be dynamic. Then only traditional culture and modernization could be compatible and need not remain a poll part or contradictory. Their potential conflict may be diffused through modification and adjustment and their differing roles transformed into complementary ones. Through skilful management by the leading figures within the society, cultural resources could be tapped to be facilitator of the meaningful modernization and development in the society.