

## A FOCUS ON THE CULTURAL ASPECTS OF SIKKIM

-Jagatpati Sarkar

Culture of a particular locality in Indian may be examined externally and internally. According to Scientists, Culture is a wide term covering the totality of a person or that of a community. In the case of Sikkim it holds a distinction.

Sikkim is a land in the high elevation from above 4-10 thousand feet for human habitation. It has strategic importance for being in between Tibet which is now a part of China and India particularly West Bengal. Actually speaking, Siliguri is a gateway to enter Sikkim. On the other hand Nathula and Jeleppla are the mountains passes to enter Tibet. With the topographical environment Sikkim had developed indigenous culture that requires a critical study. Sikkim is not inhabited by the people who had been in the high elevation of the Himalayas and in dense forest of the locality in between Bhutan in the East and Nepal in the West. Those people are usually called 'MUN' or "MON".

As it would be observed in the chapter related to the historical Chronicles of the State, the kingdom of Sikkim was established in the vicinity of Nepal as a 'New kingdom' by a very brave, courageous, dexterous and dauntless adventurers. It is believed by some scholars that the word Sikkim means in some Nepalese dialect a 'new place'. In all probability it points towards a 'new place' or 'new kingdom' set up by Phuntsog Namgyal during the seventeenth century A.D. on the other hand the people of neighbourly Tibet have been calling it by the name Denzong which means a 'land of rice'. Even in recent days the valley of Tewasta is referred as Be Yul Densong, i.e. a hidden valley producing rice in some of the Tibetan dialects.

The Lepchas who are taken as the original inhabitants of this region by the social scientists who had been calling their habitat by the name of Nyemael of Mayal Nyang, i.e. heaven of paradise to everybody and more so to the simple and unsophisticated folk who live in a pollution free region situated at the breath taking altitude surrounded by awe-inspiring snow clad peaks, and inaccessible mountain ranges. The linguists are nevertheless of an opinion that the nomenclature has in all probability, been derived from a Sanskrit word "Shikhin" which means 'a mountain crest'. The entire geographical area of the State consists of numerous mountain crest running in different directions.

In the Gazetteer of Sikkim H. H. Rishley has given yet another explanation. In his opinion Limbu is one of the dialects spoken in some parts of Sikkim. In this dialect, one finds two syllables, Su and Khim, which respectively mean 'new' and 'place of house'. He further says that when a Tibetan ruler (who probably was the first ruler of the region Phumtsha Namgyal built a palace at Rabdentse, it was obviously called Sukhim and it may be that the territory surrounding, the new palace also came to be recognised as Sikkim.

In a map of the area prepared by Hamilton, the spot where the Rabdentse palace stands is marked with the word Sikkim. According to the Gazetteer, it is to note that 'Kirk Patrick' writing in 1793 speaks of the town and district of 'Sookhim' and of a place Sikkim in the itinerary from Bizapur to Daling and this place would fall somewhere near at the Runject. It is clear, therefore, that the name was originally given to a place and not a country.

The Lepchas entered Sikkim prior to the entrance of the 'Bodja' or 'Bodpa' Tibetans by

## Bulletin of Tibetology

the 11th century A.D. The Lepcha people does not belong to the 'Bodpa' group who were subsequently known as the Bhutias, and became the Indian National. The Lepchas too. The Lepchas and Limbus are too important groups living in Sikkim. One Lepcha legend narrates the Rongpa (literally meaning the inhabitants of river valley tracts), now known as Lepchas, who ethnically form district the Mongolian group.

Still one more legend rooted in the Sikkimese still explains the ancient history in another way. According to this religion God Almighty created a human couple beneath the slopes of the sacred mountain peak Kanchanjunga. It further says that the Sikkim people are the chronological descendants of the said couple. These earliest people came to be known as Lepchas later on while the territory inhabited by them was named as Meyal Nyang. These Lepchas a simple shy and unassuming people who obtained their succour through the activities of hunting, gathering and collection. They were the inhabitants of cold land and thus they could not go naked like the tribals of hot and tropical lands. Besides using the skins of the hunted animals they also wore coarse fibre form the fibrous plants growing the forests.

It is therefore evident that Sikkim culture has its own growth through acceleration from epoch to epoch. The Lepcha had kingdom but they lost when Sikkim kingship was established by the Bhutias. Obviously the culture pattern is not uniform and that requires an analysis as given below.

### External Features:

A. Besides the ethnographic formation of the body, the dress, food habits, housing and other means of livelihood to be examined.

### LIFE STYLE

The people of Sikkim and particularly ruralities live in small houses scattered in villages. The houses by and large are similar to primitive dwelling anywhere. However, the Bhutia and the Lepcha houses are different than the Nepalese houses. The Lepcha and Bhutia dwellings are constructed on taller stone foundations and they are often supported by poles made up of tree trunks. Partially enclosures, basements of these houses are used for tethering animals at night. The Kiratis and Nepalese erect their houses on foundations that go deep underground, they construct separate apartments for their animals. These houses have thatched roofs but their walls are often made up of mud-clay materials. Sometimes a Nepali house is multicoloured. The interiors of their dwelling are kept neat, clean and tidy by the Nepalese. Every year, after the rainy season is over, the floors and walls of the houses are given look through a plaster made up of clay, cowdung and straw. The houses and their courtyards are enclosed by stone walls. Inside the courtyard every household maintains a small kitchen garden in which vegetables, fruit plants and vines (grape) are raised. The Nepalese Kiratis also utilise this space for growing tobacco.

Apart from than small fraction the Sikkimese are a non-vegetarian people. Drinking of Liquor is quit common among the males. Raksi and Chhang are the popular local brews made out of rice and barley respectively. Before taking liquor the Sikkimese sprinkle few drops of it in the air to appease evil spirits. Among dishes Chhau-Chhau, a Sikkimese parallel of the Tibetan Chow-meen is taken on all festive occasions. It is mixture of vegetables and noodles.

The three principal communities dress up in their own and different fashions. The Nepalese women folk tie a cloth, around their waist for a skirt and cover the upper torso

with a blouse. The headgear is called majerro which is a two meter long dupatta. This dress in the Gurkhali dialects is referred to a Gunyu Cholo or Fariya Cholo. Shirt, payjama (trousers) coat and a Nepali cap constitute the dress for male Nepali. The Lepcha and Bhutia women dress up themselves in Bakkhu, a long double breasted gown. This gown is fitted to the body with the help of long cloth piece ties along the waist. Inside the gown a loose blouse with long sleeves is put on. The married womenfolk carry a long apron Pangdan like cloth hanging from the waist. This cloth is often brocaded on both the corners. The women of older generation still put on embroidered caps. On festive occasions Oonjiyoo i.e. a silken coat is put on by those who can afford it. The Bhutia man too wear Bakkhu with long sleeves. They put on trousers also. The Lepchas use the dress similar to the Naga dress. In all probability, since they came to Sikkim after having settled Nagaland for generations they stuck to their old dress. A cap carrying multicoloured feathers of different birds is their headdress. However, with the passage of time it has become difficult to identify people from their dress since many Nepalese flaunt Bhutia dresses and vice versa.

Moreover, with increasing contact with the people from other parts of India. Shalwar kameez shirt, pantaloons, coat, neck tie have made inroads. Educated people now prefer to dress themselves in the western fashion. The Educated female folk now often support bobbed cut hair. Shukla is right when he says 'Thus Sikkim these days is a big cultured laboratory where different blends are being mixed up and a synthetic culture part Bhutia, part Nepali and part Indian - is coming up'.

Sikkimese women love jewellery. The Bhutia women folk have a preference for Tibetan type of ornaments. Necklaces carrying costly stone heads steal the show. The Nepali women like golden necklaces studded with costly stone heads. In remoter areas large earrings looking like bracelets are still used. The women, on the whole, are soft spoken, laborious.

A marriage ceremony among the Sikkimese, irrespective of ethnic diversity is a gala festival for the Sikkimese. Earlier this ceremony was spread over eighteen days but now it has been limited to three days only. The maternal uncle of the bride holds a very prestigious position in matrimonial affairs. At the time of engagement among the youth consent from both the ends is necessary. Only after he has accepted the gifts the engagement stands binding, irrevocable and final. After engagement, the would be bridegroom is required to work with his prospective in-laws. On the day of wedding the would be couple and their parents gather together on a water spring sprouting from beneath a massive monolith. At this spot the bride and bridegroom are blessed and it is prayed that the marriage may be as stable as the massive rock and the couple should have offspring continuously like the flow of the spring. Bride price has to be paid. The price usually consists of milch cattle, a calf, bronze and brass utensils, ornaments, a pony or a horse. The bride is taken to her in-laws a year after the wedding ceremony. On all these occasions the relatives of both the sides are feasted on delicacies and liquor. Till recently divorce had no sanction in this region. Chogyal Tashi Namgyal's wife lived separately but the king could not divorce her.

On the whole the Sikkimese are an honest, laborious and fair looking people. They are well behaved and hospitable. As Singh has commented 'once you are in Sikkim you will be surprised at the grace, courtsey, easy laughter and the *loie de vivre* of the people. If you

## **Bulletin of Tibetology**

are any Sikkimese household to intimated into the mystique of Chhang’.

### **B. Internal Features :**

The mind of the Sikkimese (Dajong) people, in general, appears to be like the Bengalese, the Assamese and the Nepalese. The religious approach is therefore bifurcated, Buddhist and Non-Buddhist. Christianity and Hinduism prevail there through not major. Buddhism belonging to the Tibetan fold laid by Padmasambhava and the Dukpu Kargya and Karmapa features are predominant. A new trend has developed to singularise Sikkim Culture stratum in the context of the modern education. Despite that the Buddhism play an important role in the life style of the general inhabitants of Sikkim.

However the Culture of the inhabitants of Sikkim has taken a composite shape through the present system of education and the nerveline of automobile transport develops in all parts of the small state. Further more the influx of the tourist from all over India and outside has built up an new era in the culture of State. It may not be recorded that revenue of the country depends much either by the grant of the Central Government or by the Tourism. Obviously the mental structure has been changing fast and that can be easily located by the rapid growth in the life style of the Sikkimese. A large number of Indians belonging the Gangetic belt including the Marwaris have developed a combined livelihood with coexistence and cohesion.

The rapid change of the general life may evolve a new perspective a near future when the ethnic consolidation in the Himalayas will be an instance of unity in diversity.