

SOME ASPECT OF BHUTIA CULTURE IN SIKKIM

(A Case Study)

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INTRODUCTION

Physical Features :

Sikkim, situated in the eastern part of the Himalayas is the twenty-second state of the Indian Union. It is also the youngest and the smallest state of India. In terms of longitude, the geographical expansion of Sikkim is 88°58" to 88°55'25" East and 27°04'46" and 28°07'48" North latitudes i.e. north of equator. In its area extent of the state roughly stretches for about 112.70 kilometres in north-south direction and for about 64.0 kilometres in its east-west direction. The total geographical area of the state as per census of India is 7096 square kilometers.¹

Sikkim is bounded on the north and on the east by Tibet and Bhutan and on the south by the Darjeeling district of West Bengal and the West by Nepal.

The early inhabitants of Sikkim are the Lepchas who called themselves as Rongpas. Their historical origin is shrouded in mystery. They are said to have come from the east along the foot-hills from the direction of upper Burma and Assam. According to Lepcha Legend the ancient Sikkimese were the Kiratas who also lived in the adjoining Kingdom of Nepal. Mention may be made here that the Kiratas are otherwise known as 'Mon' in da-jong speech. Padmasambhava, devotedly known as Guru Rin-po-che is believed to have come amidst these Kiratas and preached Buddhism among these people who till then were animistic in their faith.

Like other states of India Sikkim is a multi-ethnic, multi-lingual and multi-cultural state. The present ethnic distribution in Sikkim may be shown below according to the census report of 1981 Series 19.

Bhutia	Lepcha	Limbu	Nepali	Sherpa
21,548	22,391	17,922	192,891	10,726

With this brief introduction the culture-study of Sikkim proceeds on personal data collected during the study-tour in May-June, 1993. It is privilege to express indebtedness to the different offices of the government of Sikkim to assist me by providing statistical data and other important information.

1. Encyclopaedia of India, Vol. 14, P.2.

Culture Traits of the Sikkimese in India

MATERIAL TRAITS :

i) Settlements

From the very early period Sikkim was exposed to outside influence. Thus it has been the meeting place of two diverse cultures brought in by the two communities viz the Bhotias and the Nepalese. While Bhutias brought with them a Tibetan cultural life including the language, religion and economic system which was a combination of pastoralism and semi-

settled agriculture, the Nepalese brought with them a part of Nepal's cultural life including the Nepali language, Buddha margi and Shiva margi and settled cultivation especially terraced cultivation.

The Bhutias of Sikkim are ethnically diverse. But assimilation of culture pattern may be traced regarding their physique and features, and way of living.

ii) Language :

The three languages spoken in Sikkim are Nepali, Bhutia and Lepcha. Besides these languages several dialects prevail in Sikkim are Rai, Tamang, Gurung, Mangar, Newar etc. Although these dialects are usually used within the community themselves. There are also speakers of many other languages like Hindi, English, Punjabi, Bengali, Tamil, Telegu, Manipuri and so on, which marks the progress of modernisation. Nepalese is the popular gab for communication in daily lives. Mention may be made here that Tashi Namgyal Academy (Estd. 1906) is the first English School of Sikkim. Sikkim being an important hill area since the beginning of the 20th century, English is in vogue for common people wheresoever English speaking persons have an access. Regarding the speech and language group a separate study is required.

iii) House Pattern:

The Bhutias normally reside in cluster as the Lepchas and the Limbus do. The housing pattern among the Bhutias has drastically changed since iron-rod, stone-chips and cement culture [R.C. Culture] have included inside Sikkim after black-paved serpentine road construction started. In this respect B.R.C., Becon and Gred made claim their unprecedented success in changing the material traits of the Sikkimese for the last few decades.

Jingling sound of the Bells of the mules and ponies on the uneven brittle path are no longer heard. No youth can dream hundreds of pack animals going either upward towards Nathula and downwards towards Lachun. Evidently the housing pattern has been changing fast wheresoever motorable roads enter. However, the traditional house building in Sikkim may be mentioned here.

Most of the houses of the Bhutias and Lepchas are two storied rectangular structures. These houses are constructed on taller-stone foundations and they are often supported by poles made up of tree trunks. The ground floor of each house is partially enclosed where domestic animals are especially cattle are kept. Houses made of wood and bamboo splits plastered with mud. The roof is thatched with reed, straw and bamboo and the walls of these houses are often made up of clay materials. The technique of building houses by the Nepalese is different from that of the Bhutias about which we are not going into detail at present.

Anyway, from the aforesaid description of traditional house-model of the Bhutia in Sikkim it shows that traditional houses deserve stone-mud-wood culture in the area where rain-fall is not adequate [above 10 thousand feet]. Since the Britishers introduced corrugated tin, presently roofs are in many cases particularly in eastern Sikkim, covered by the corrugated iron-sheets. It means the housing model undergoes changes according to the availability of the building materials carried from plains.

iv) Household Goods:

Not only in housing model, the house-hold goods belonging to different families of Bhutias also vary. Economic position does not always becomes pertinent. For instance, a small tea-bowl of specific model made out of the local wood may be used by a mule-man or by a trader in course of their journey. A rich man may gift his wooden tea bowl differs on the quality of the wood. Here the quality means de-poisoning capacity of the wood. Here, there is little scope for further elaboration.

Clothing :

As regards the clothing each community exhibits their identity by the wear they use. The Bhutia costume for both sexes is called 'Kho'. The kho worn by the male is called the Po-Kho and that worn by a women is called mo-kho. Traditionally, a Bhotia women wears a long loose-sleeved blouse (honju) and underneath they usually wear the 'Kho', Chupa is a skirt-like dress held at the waist by a long piece of belt like cloth called 'Kera'. A married women still at present ties a stripped apron like lower covering named as 'pangden'. The quality of the clothes worn by the man and woman vary according to the economic status of the person ranging from simple cotton to chinese brocade and silk. A Bhutia man underneath the kho wears a double- breasted and high-necked shirt, the tson-ta-ti and pants (gva-ton). For the official dress Bakku, a long-sleeved garment is used. As the male and female folk are in equal sooting among the Sikkimese the tendency of socialisation in dress has now been cheeringly accepted among the youth. Therefore shalwar-kameej, shirt, pant, coat and neck-tie etc. modern dresses have made inroads.

Jewellery :

Sikkimese women love jewellery. The Bhutia woman folk have a preference for Tibetan type of ornaments. Necklace studded with costly stones like Yen, Dhow and Zi is considered to be the most sacred and precious stone. In remote villages ear-rings like bracelets are still used. Necklaces of various designs are called as the khou, the ka-chung, the zuri. The chyap-chyap is worn with khou as a broach. The Bhotia names for different items of ornaments are the ten-darb (ear-ring), the zuku (ring), the den (bracelete) etc.

Food:

The traditional edible food of the Bhutias include the tsampa, the thukpa the dezi and the momo. Apart from a small part most of Sikkimese are non-vegetarian people. They eat fish, egg, chicken, mutton, pork and beef. Sometimes they eat buffalo meat. Dried beef is a delicious food to them. During festivals they make several kinds of sweets and salted refreshments called khabse and fongui amcho. Raksi and Chhang are the popular local brewed alcohol made out of rice and barley, respectively.

2. SOCIAL TRAITS :

Three important occasion in human life like birth, marriage and death play a pertinent role in the growth of social institution of a communitiy. The economic factor of a particular family always conduct these occasions. In respect of a moderate income group having some landed property for cultivation with monthly earning by service or by business is regarded as

the middle income group.

Now, we are discussing the social functions like birth, marriage and death of the middle-class Sikkim-bhotias

i) Birth Ceremony :

After the birth of a baby, both mother and child are cleaned and washed and kept in a separate room, yet no restriction as such is imposed. After three days a priest comes to purify the child, the mother and the house. After the child is born, a little butter is given to the child with one or two drops of honey. From the second day, powdered rice is given to the child with butter. There is a purificational and name-giving ceremony called the Phangsang or Phyakay, on a date fixed a week or so depending on the physical fitness of the mother and child especially according to the astrological calculation by Chipa. Lamas give the name and he is given a scarf (Khada) and some money, depending on the father's economic condition. Friends and relatives are invited for the feast.

ii) Marriage :

Marriage is an important social institution. It plays the vital role towards the establishment of primary social as well as physical relationship between a man and a woman. The rituals and ceremonial aspects of marriage and extent of these ceremonies including the type of marriage vary in different societies and cultures. The marriage in traditional society is more elaborate in rituals and ceremonies. Whereas in modern society, there is a tendency to reduce the number of rituals and ceremonies. Regarding the type of marriage among the Bhotias, the practice of polyandry was prevalent. The system of payment of bride-price is common among the Bhutias by the parents. Preference of marriage within the same ethnic group is very common.

Marriage rituals are performed by a Lama at the bride-groom's house and the bride's. The first negotiation is called the Khachang when a marriage is settled and a auspicious day is selected for the betrothal ceremony and relatives of both sides are invited to bride's house, the expenses of the function being borne by the boy's party. In a ceremony called chhesiam, the maternal uncle of the girl and parents are seated on a raised platform. The Lama takes the vessel containing liquor (chang) etc. in his hands, recites a prayer and then distributes among the guests and hosts. Chang is an important item of drink in marriage that is why marriage is called chang-sa.

iii) Death Ceremony :

The Bhutias cremate the dead body in their own cremation ground which is not away from the hamlet. The dead body is kept for a period varying from 3 to 49 days depending on the status of the deceased. After the incident of the death a male-member of the family usually blow a conch shell so that the community could know death-news. Relatives and at least one member of each family of that community comes to help the bereaved family. After consulting the constellation of stars and in an auspicious time the body is embalmed with preservatives and wrapped in cotton or woollen sheets and put into a square coffin and carried on two horizontal bamboo poles. The Lama conducts the final rites. The body is taken to the cremation ground by procession with drum etc. and each member of the procession carries a piece of wood with

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them. The first fire is lit by the Lama, followed by the other villagers or non-relatives. After cremation, they all come back and at night perform religious ceremony. Throughout the period till the end of 49 days Lamas perform different rituals. But the observances of religious ceremonies depend on the financial stability of the deceased concerned.

As regards the high income group low income group further analysis is necessary which has not yet been done fully.

Here Kidu (Skyid-Sdug) which literally means the 'society and organisation' to look after the interest of each member of the community in joy and sorrow plays a vital role in performing the social function of that community. A tendency of democratisation in formation of Kidu may also be deserved in some cases.

In addition the these other important festivals of Bhutias are the Sagadawa (squeritam/smonlam or the Losar, Pang-Lhabsol, the Lasoong and Duchen.

3. Mental/Spiritual Traits :

The Tibetan who came down to Sikkim from the upper region of Tibet, brought with them the Tibetan Mahayana Buddhism otherwise known as 'Vajrayana-Buddhism', which had become the popular religion in Sikkim. It had a great impact in the formation of the socio/cultural and political structural in Sikkim. Mrs. Apama Bhattacharya had elaborately discussed this approach. When the Tibetan came in power in Sikkim, the Lepcha easily accommodated them with peaceful submission. In the course of time the spirit and nature-worshipper and peaceful natured Lepchas were brought under the greater fold of Buddhism by the Tibetan Lamas. Now-a-days, it reveals that barring a handful of Christians the large majority of the Lepchas are Buddhists. Some traces of Bon rituals may also be found among the traditional Lepchas.

Religious Institutions :

There are about 75 monasteries in Sikkim, but the important monasteries from religious and historical sense are located at Pemayangste, Tashiding, Sangacholling, Phensang, Rumtek and Ralang. Dubde monastery is the oldest monastery of West Sikkim. The Pemayangtse (Estd. 1705) is the premier monastery of Sikkim. Besides being the centre of meditation, worship and religious discourses, these monasteries are repository of valuable manuscripts, scriptures, icons and murals.

Though Buddhism is the major religion of Sikkim, the other religions professed by the Sikkimese are Hinduism, Christianity, Islam, Sikhism and Jainism.

Temple :

The Thakurbari at Gangtok was established in 1935. Besides this there are about 50 temples scattered all over Sikkim. There are four Churches at Gangtok and six in other parts of Sikkim. The lone mosque in Sikkim is located at Gangtok.

4. Arts & Crafts :

With reference to the spiritual and mental traits referring to the religious aspects among

the Bhotias the Buddhist visual arts like painting, icon-making, ritualistic design and modelling internal decoration etc. and monastic architecture invite the attention. Some items of the performing art like cham, Rolmo deserve mention in the monasteries.

Among the social function the Lhamo, Yak, Mask dance etc. with sonorous music and orchestra speak about the artistic creativity of the people of the remote hills with high altitude and snowy peak. The domain of dancing in this region includes Barasingha dance i.e. stag dance, kankal dance (kengrus dance) i.e. skeleton dance, Maruni dance and the Tamang dance are most popular and important dance.

Besides them some traditional drama on the Buddhism theme generate warmth among the spectators where no ethnic distinction remains. In this respect the dancers (gar-mkhen) and the Lady dancer (gar-Mkhen-mo) hold a special honour along with the gar-dpon, the director of a play.

It may be added that several musical instruments are in vogue; viz. the

1. damaru (can-teu)
2. Ma-du
3. Sel-khrol
4. Dandi-rna-drum
5. Bal-rna=nepalese drum
6. Mkhar-ma-kettle drum and fort drum.

5. Resume :

It is evident from above that a composite culture has developed in Sikkim for centuries together in which the multi-ethnic traditions continues. It is interesting to note that Sikkim has now been in progress with democratisation as a part of India. In future, Sikkim will set an example how to preserve identity after holding the culture-pattern in various dimensions.

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