

**1826 : THE END OF AN ERA IN THE SOCIAL AND
POLITICAL HISTORY OF SIKKIM**

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1826 was notable for being the year in which Bolek (or Bho-Lod) was assassinated ; not only was he the Prime Minister of Sikkim but he was also the maternal uncle of Tsugphud Namgyal, the 7th Rajah: and he was also a Lepcha. The details of the assassination are given in two eye-witness accounts, written in the Lepcha language and Lepcha script, 'tsóng tsáng-thúng-sa shu tshuk gum' and 'gyá-mú-nun shu' (National Archive, New Delhi, Foreign Department, Persian, 14 April, 1828, no 190, pp J and M).¹ [At the point xerox copied of the two documents were exhibited]. The death of this leading member of their race brought to an end and era in which the Lepchas had enjoyed influence in the social and political affairs of Sikkim almost equal to that of Sikkimese Bhutias, the race to which the ruling family of Sikkim belonged. This family had begun to immigrate into what was later to be known as Sikkim from Tibet early in the 16th century, four generation before Phuntshog Namgyal ascended the gaddi as the first Chogyal (Dharma Raja), in 1642 (chu-rtá).² After 1826 the royal family chose its consortss from the aristocracy of Tibet and not from among it's Lepcha subjects prior to that.

Status of the Lepchas in Sikkim before 1826:

There is considerable evidence, especially from The Gazetteer of Sikkim (1894/197) and from the typescript History of Sikkim (1908) by the 9th Raja, Thutob Namgyal, and Rani Yeshe Dolma, to support the claim I have made above that the Lepcha component of the Lho-Mon-Tsong-sum (Bhutia-Lepcha-Limbu : three) had earlier played a leading part in the social and political life of Sikkim ; for example, (i) during the reign of the 1st Chogyal the most prominent of the Tibetan Buddhist missionaries in Sikkim, Lha-btsun Chen-po, initiated a Lepcha, Yughthing Tishay, into the mystic rites of Rig-hzin Srog-hgrub, restricted to the three Lamas who had conducted the enthronement ceremony, the Raja, and twentyone others (Maharajah 1908,22); (ii) the 1st Chogyal had not only appointed to his administration twelve Kazis form among the Bhutias but also an equal number of Jongpens from among the leading Lepcha families (Maharajah 1908,21) (iii) the 3rd Raja, Chagdor Namgyal (1700-17), is credited with having devised an alphabet for his Lepcha subjects (Gazetteer 1894,17); (iv) the Lepchas had been powerful enough to drive out the Regent, Taming, and install Namgyal Phuntsog as 5th Raja (1734-80), and obtained a larger share in the administration in consequence (Gazetter 1894,16); (v) it was a Lepcha, Prime Minister Chothup, son of a previous Prime Minister, Karwang, who commanded the southern army of the two armies in the Sikkim defence force that resisted the Gorkha invasion (1775-80) and won the title 'Satrajit' for his seventeen victories in Sikkim Terai (Gazetteer 1894,18)³ and (vi) the Lepcha component of the population of Sikkim had been estimated, at the beginning of the 19th century, to outnumber the Bhutia and the Limbu components by a proportion of five-tenths to three-tenths and two-tenths respectively (Hamilton 1819,118); so the Lepchas might reasonably have expected influence in the state to match that proportion, provided, of course, that they were united as community.⁴

Disunity among the Lepchas

The two eye-witness accounts of the assassination, however, that I referred to at the beginning of this paper suggest that at that time, 1826, the Lepchas were disunited. They name the leader of the sixty or eighty troops dispatched to kill the Prime Minister as lhá-cho or tha-cho eg. 'á-pin-pa-no kón-nun mák-pân so-pân lhá-cho-num lón ('gyá-mú'). The Maharajah's history (1908) identifies 'Lhachos' as 'the father of the Chebu Lama' (p.59). the Cheebo Lama is well known to have been Lepcha: his ancestry, for eleven generations, is given in The Gazetteer of Sikkim (p. 134); and, besides, Surgeon Rennie, in his book 'Bhotan and the story of the Dooar War' (1866), took him to be what he calls 'a Lepcha proper (Mongolian)' as opposed to 'a Thibetian Lepcha' (or 'Sikkim Bhotiah') (pp.270,271,312).⁵

Unforeseen consequences of the assassination

The murder of a leading Lepcha by another leading Lepcha set in train a succession of events that had most serious consequences not only for Sikkimese of Lepcha race but also for the future of Sikkim as a country; I will now consider each link in this chain of events in turn.

i. The murder of the Prime Minister was immediately followed by the flight of some of his close relatives to Unthoo, on the border of Nepal (Gazetteer 1894,19), 'When Bho-Lod was assassinated by the Maharaja Tsugphud Namgyal's order, his nephews, the son of Kotaba Kungha named Dathup and Jerung Denon and Kazi Gorok left Sikkim, taking with them about 800 houses of Lepcha subjects from Chidam and Namthang and went towards Illam and settled down there' (Maharajah 1908,60).

ii. Instead of settling down peaceably these refugees began making incursions into Sikkim: 'they began the Kotapa insurrection and made several raids' (Maharajah 1908,60); and they 'presumed to claim Darjeeling as their patrimonial land to make a voluntary gift of it to Major Lloyd' (Maharajah 1908,61)

iii. In 1828, because of this insurrection, together with a boundary dispute between Sikkim and Nepal affecting the Ilam area, 'the Oontoo boundary dispute' (Pinn 1986-21-6), Capt. Lloyd, as one of the arbiters of disputes between the two countries, penetrated Sikkim as far as Rinchenpung, and was 'attracted by the position of Darjeeling' (Gazetteer 1894,20).

iv. When he visited it a couple of years later, Darjeeling was 'represented by Capt. Herbert to be devoid of inhabitants' (Pinn 1986, 120, citing 'Consultations' [of the Supreme Council of India], no.2(1835). 'According to Capt. Herbert this was because about ten years previously 1,200 able-bodied Lepchas forming two thirds of the population of Sikkim, had been forced by the oppression of the Raja to fly from Darjeeling and its neighbourhood and take refuge in Nepal' (Darjeeling 1947,38).

v. The Governor General, Lord Bentinck, then wrote to the Raja proposing 'the cession of Darjeeling to the British Government offering to you such an equivalent as may seem to both parties to be reasonable' (Pinn 1986, 121, citing 'Consultations.' no.111,1835).

vi. The Raja agreed to an exchange of territory : 'Also if from friendship Dabgong from Ahma (?) Diggee north be given to me, then my Dewan will deliver to Major Lloyd under my red seal of Durgeeling that he may erect houses there.' (Pinn 1986,122, citing 'Consultations' 1835.6 April).

vii. 'In reply the Government refused the Rajah's request'. (Pinn 1986,124): 'Darjeeling is an uninhabited tract'; but 'Dabgong is a fertile and populous district' (Pinn 1986,125, citing

Bulletin of Tibetology

‘Consultations’ no.104).

viii. Lloyd then wrote to Government as follows, implying that the Raja had agreed to cede the tract unconditionally :

‘Sir,

I beg leave to report that in August last the Sikkim Rajah’s officers forwarded to me the grant of Darjeeling in the form which I had requested him to draw it out, in fact, the very paper I had forwarded to him was returned with his seal affixed as I had requested he would do’ (Pinn 1986,126, citing ‘Consultations’, 9 November, 1835). [At this point a xerox copy of the Darjeeling grant (written in Lepcha and Hindustani) was exhibited, together with the map ‘The Darjeeling tract’, enlarged from Pinn 1986,22].

ix. ‘Thus the seeds of an ever-growing hostility had been sown. From that time on the Rajah was waiting for his present equivalent to the Darjeeling tract’ (Pinn 1986,129).

x. ‘_____ in 1849 Dr. Hooker and Dr. Campbell, while travelling in Sikkim with permission of Government and the Maharajah, were suddenly seized and made prisoners’ (Gazetteer 1894,20); ‘_____ the serious punitive action taken was the annexation of the Terai and the portion of Sikkim hills bounded by the Ramman and the Great Rangit on the North, by the Tista on the East and by the Nepal frontier on the West’ (Darjeeling 1947,39). [At this point the map showing the Darjeeling tract, enlarged from Pinn 1986,22 was again exhibited]. Thus, through conquest the boundaries of Sikkim were reduced, in 1850, to those familiar to us today.’⁶

Conclusion

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.

NOTES

1. I am indebted to Dr. M. Aris for copies of these two documents, probably the earliest datable texts in Lepcha in existence.

2. For earlier kings, of Lepcha race, in what was later to become known as Sikkim of Roy Choudhary 1980 : ‘The Sikkim History apart, a number of Lepcha chronicles that have been compiled from time to time, and whose some very rare manuscripts are preserved in the Library of the Sikkim Research Institute of Tibetology, are very useful as source material for Sikkim History. Legends of the Pauaus [sic] (kings) is one such manuscripts which was written sometime in the late eighteenth century describing the rule of different Lepcha kings in Sikkim’ (232). Possibly this Lepcha text was the source for Mainwaring’s reference to four Lepcha kings, tur-ve pa-no, succeeded in turn by tur-sang, tur-yeng, and tur-yek po-no (Mainwaring 1876.x). On tur-ve pa-no of also Chemjong 1967 : ‘They conquered a Lepcha

king of Kurseong. In the battle field of Gidde hill Turbe Pano, the Lepcha was slain. But before his death, the Kirat chief Baja Hang Rai who had invited king Lo Hang Sen of Mokwanpur to invade Bijaypur town was also killed in the battle field in 1608 A.D. (II,91).

3. Cf. Roy Choudhary [1980]: 'Whole treating the history of Sikkim from 1700 to 1860 the author shed light on many unknown chapters in Sikkim history. _ _ _ It was never known except among the Sikkimese as legend, the Chuthup (Satrajit) was a great military general and that it was to his military skill that the Sikkimese owe their independence in the wake of Nepali invasions until the Sikkim History brought it to the notice of non-Sikkimese' (230/1). More fortunate, perhaps, in this respect has been Satrajit's brother Namgyel Tshiring; his contribution to the history of Sikkim and to the status of the Lepchas has been preserved for us by his title 'Densapa' : 'Namgyel Tshiring was the ancestor of the present Barmiook Kazi Dorze Dadul : he was also called "Den-chap", from having acted as Regent of Sikkim during the Raja's absence, and the title is said to be still continued in the family' (Gazetteer 1894,32).

4. According to the 1981 census series-197 Lepcha is spoken by 22,391, Bhutia by 21,548 and Limbu by 17,922 (Sikkim 1993, xv).

5. This link between Lhacho and the Cheebo Lama as father and son has, incidentally, a special interest for me personally, because my wife's grandfather, David Macdonald, claimed that the Cheebo Lama's brother Phup (or Phurbu) Tshering (after whom one of Darjeeling's oldest tea-gardens is named) was his maternal grandfather, in which case Lhacho would be my grand father-in-law's maternal great grandfather.

6. Formerly, at its greatest extent, 'the boundaries of the new kingdom were _ _ _ Dabda La in the north, Shingsa Dagpay, Walung, Yangmag Khangchen, Yarlung and Timur Chor ten in the West, down along the Arun and Dud Kosi rivers, down to the Maha Nodi Nuxulbari, Titalia in the South. On the east Tagong La and Tang La on the north' (Maharajah 1908, 21); of also Gazetteer 1894, 1-2.

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Bulletin of Tibetology

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