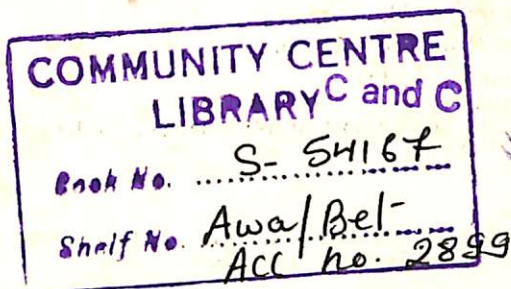


Between Sikkim and Bhutan

(The Lepchas and Bhutias of Pedong)



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Preface

This book has been written during my stay in Pedong from January, 1977 to October of the same year. I, who had never walked a kilometer in my life before I came to Pedong, learnt to walk and climb the mountains around Pedong. I walked to each of the *Bastis* mentioned in my study and talked to as many people as possible in the bastis, in Pedong and Kalimpong. What I have set down in this book are my impressions gathered after talking to Father Rey, Mr. S.C. Dorji (Kazi of Sakyong), Mr. James Isaac Bhutia, Tsering Dorji, David Foning, the Village Level Worker and many many others.

I was most impressed with the breath-taking loveliness of nature in this area, coupled with extremely difficult terrain. As first I felt that lamaistic Buddhism was a sort of degenerated form of a highly superstitious religion practiced blindly by unknowing people. But as time elapsed, I too was drawn imperceptibly to recognize the 'power' of this religion. I felt the vibrations and strange presences in the leech infested dark, dense, damp, gloomy forests. The silences were weird but strangely exhilarating. I never felt terror or fright but I felt drawn compulsively to the toneless dronings of the drums and chants echoing from remote houses on hill sides. I said to myself, this area and these people have rightly and aptly chosen a form of religion to suit their proximity to whatever form the primeval essence takes.

In Pedong, nature can be at its harshest and most beautiful. I felt that if a human being could be close to God or to the source of creation or to some other world force, it was here. I felt that by piercing a veil that eluded me all the time, something would be seen or experienced. The look of patience and timelessness on the faces of the inhabitants, the 'living' yet more or less abandoned Gompas and the light emanating from behind the dull eyes of the locals, made me feel that, if it were at all possible to be at peace with the world, it was here. If I settled here, would I be buried alive? I do not think so. It is like the end of the earth, but it is pulsating. The communications are of another dimension.

I have tried to write about the legends, customs, religion, history and the present state of the people of Pedong and the surrounding areas. There are conflicting views on the strategy to be adopted in regard to the development of backward areas, hilly tracts and primitive agricultural communities. While any society would feel morally obligated to usher in programmes for the material betterment and for the economic uplift of economically

depressed sections of the nation, yet, what is often not catered for, are the peculiar sensibilities, sensitivities and the ethos of different peoples and tribes. It is not realistic to make out a blue-print for economic progress and feel happy about the allocation of funds for the down trodden sectors of the country. What is more important is to know which schemes are feasible and what the most urgent priorities are, and, whether measures instituted and credits released do in fact reach and benefit the lowest denominator on the scale. Then again, the trauma experienced by peoples suddenly exposed to the wiles and machinations of modernization and the upheavals caused in upsetting their cherished values is tremendous. Sometimes some people wonder whether it is at all worthwhile disturbing the peace and serenity of these simple tribal folk by bringing in the competitiveness, selfishness and greed attributable to a materialistic culture.

Perhaps the initiation to the modern age could be more gradual and thoughtfully and honestly applied. What backward areas really need are not vote snatching hardened sharks, but, sympathetic and devoted workers and diligent and impartial administrators. These people ought not to be set upon from the outside. It is inappropriate to instal new values, norms and reforms, from the top. These primitive societies have healthy traditions of democracy, egalitarianism and discipline. It would be best to help these people to help themselves. Local self governing institutions could be strengthened and made effective. Obviously these people in remote areas cannot be expected to have any total conception for their development in relation to a wider region. It is the task of the Administration to work out an integrated plan for district development, employment, education, health and ancillary services. Community development should be encouraged through the participation of the members of that community. Education may perhaps be geared, not to make people feel inferior in their lack of knowledge, but to

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Pedong—The Bamboo Grove

FOR those who might be interested in an adventure which is different, Pedong is the place to visit. Darjeeling and Kalimpong are names which conjure up an image of reputedly beautiful hill stations developed by the British. Darjeeling is well developed for tourist traffic and Kalimpong too caters to internal tourists, but Pedong has no facilities for outsiders to make a short stay at, at present. However, this hardly ever heard of place, Pedong and its neighbourhood, is a most fascinating area. It is the last outpost of the West Bengal administration and adjoins Rishi Khola (*Rishi River*) which is the boundary between West Bengal and Sikkim.

If one were to travel from Kalimpong to Rhenock, in East Sikkim, one would have to travel about 42 kilometers on a narrow winding hill road, by a private taxi jeep or by a Sikkim National Transport bus. Approximately 12 kilometers on the outward journey is Algarah, the seat of the BDO—the highest ranking civil functionary in the area. This is a largish centre for trade converging from the Labha and Pedong areas. Beyond Algarah, the road suddenly opens out through a fog curtain into a picturesque little bowl formed by the Namchalakha or Kage Ridge and the Algarah—Pedong Ridge, both descending steeply into the Rishi Khola. Through this bowl runs the Murdung Khola, a local rapid stream, which joins the Rishi Khola just at the Rishi Bridge. Pedong is the most populous *Bazaar* on the main road and the only commercial center, if it can so be designated, in this area upto Rhenock. Pedong is 21 kilometers from Kalimpong and is situated at an altitude of about 5,100 ft. above sea level. Seen from Rhenock, Pedong looks like a conglomeration of huts strung around the forehead of the crest of the hill rather desperately holding on.

From Pedong the northward vista displays the Aritar Ridge, the high feature of Salami, the mountain ranges of North Sikkim and the three pimpled peaks of Gamuchin—the border with Bhutan. The border with Tibet at Nathula and Jelepla would not be more than 60 kilometers across the most rugged looking mountains.

The Pedong bowl itself seems to have been formed by the Murdung Khola having carved a narrow passage between the two ridges, rising steeply on either side of the Murdung bed at about 2,500 ft. to raise their crest lines to between 6,000 to 7,000 ft. above sea level. The Pedong ridge is thickly forested and remains foggy for most of the year. From the crestline, the ridge drops steeply till Pedong Bazaar is reached. From Pedong downwards to the Murdung Khola the descent is more gradual and the

land is extensively cultivated. The Kage ridge is thickly forested and precipitous at the higher levels and again makes for terraced cultivation at altitudes from 5,000 ft. downwards. But this Kage ridge at the Rishi Khola end, seems to get more sunshine and less fog. The whole view from Pedong, to use a cliché, is like a picture postcard. Narrow terraced fields in varying shades of green, dotted with white huts with red roofs, bottle green dark forbidding areas of forest land and brown land slides like dried up wounds. Giant trees along the crestline form curious shapes, one like an elephant waiting patiently.

It rains and is misty from June to October of any normal year. The rainfall is quite excessive and would be in the region of approximately 150 inches to 200 inches in a year. The hill sides are a series of gurgling streamlets and small waterfalls which come tumbling down in a hurry to merge with the Murdung Khola. The rocks of the mountains appear to be soft and not quite settled down. There are frequent landslides during the rainy season and there is a great problem of soil erosion. The winters are cold but not unbearably so. It does not snow, but the ranges twice removed have heavy snowfall.

The areas discussed in this study would be Kage Basti, Maria Basti and Duppa on the Kage Ridge and Pedong, Sakyong, Menchu, Tendrebong and Kashiong on the Algarah—Pedong Ridge. The population of the area is approximately 10,700. The inhabitants are nearly all engaged in agriculture. The chief crops cultivated are rice, ginger, cardamum, wheat, maize and millet with oranges at the lowest altitudes. The forest wealth has soft wood trees and fir plantations. Wood from these forests is largely unfit for any worthwhile commercial exploitation and is mainly used as fire wood and also for light house construction and rough furniture. Some areas of the forest trees near Algarah have been farmed out to contractors for the making of soft coke. Bamboos are extensively

grown under 5,000 ft. and most usefully employed for house construction and as irrigation conduits. Every inch of land has been cultivated for food crops and for building homesteads. While the great majority of the people own land, there is no excessive affluence but generally people appear healthy and happy. There is no game in the forests save rabbits and an occasional deer in the Maria Basti dense forests. The inhabitants of the area are composed of Nepali settlers, Bhutias and the Lepchas who were the earliest settlers on this land. Except for the road which runs through Pedong on the Algarah—Pedong Ridge, there are no roads or even well maintained tracks. A stoned track does exist from Pedong to Upper Sakyong to Menchu and Tendrebong, but it cannot be said to be well maintained and remains unbridged at a number of Jhoras (mountain streams). Narrow goat and cattle tracks criss-cross the mountain side to the forests and springs to which men, women and children go to gather wood and fetch water and where cattle are taken to graze. The various *Bastis* or villages are linked by barely discernable lines, very hazardous and rising sharply, traversing through fields and even homesteads.

And so, the reader might ask that what is so astounding and earth shaking about this small, remote and floating on a magic carpet nook of the world? On the surface of it, nothing. In a jeep it would take 30 seconds to whiz past the Pedong Bazaar and before you could read the inscription on the large building "St. Georges School", the habitations of Pedong have vanished and you are wending downwards towards the Rishi Khola. Nothing exciting, no marvellous edifice but just a serene soft picture of the nearing Kage Ridge with neatly cultivated terraces and gleaming white houses set at distances along the hill. Not even a cluster of houses except at Kage Bazaar in a saddle. If you look up, there is a house or two hanging precariously on the highest and darkest ridges; and some red roofs winking through a forested

area. Clumps of bamboo as you look downwards and along the road side. Oh yes, one would say, this place is aptly named as the Bamboo Grove—Pedong. And if one happened to be staying at the Army Camp just above Pedong, one would hear the howling winds while following the lantern up the high stairs to the commander's hut over which, droops a huge strange tree. The leaves flapping in your face in the chill air of absolute darkness and aloneness, would make you feel like you were entering one of the abandoned castle towers of a haunted place. While in the morning, the terrifying darkness is lifted and a gorgeous hypnotic view spreads itself out to feast one's eyes upon. The woolly tops of green trees and proud ridges have hung around their necks wisps of white clouds like the ceremonial scarves (known as *Khada*).

This little bowl is filled with a sense of history. It lies on the crossroads of history and between the civilizations of Sikkim, Bhutan and India. Little would the unsuspecting traveller realize that through this little vale traversed the most ancient trade routes from Tibet to Kalimpong and along this route passed the labouring troops of the British Army on the historic Younghusband Expedition. This was the farthest and earliest outpost of the Catholic Church in its attempt to penetrate Tibet. This particular area changed hands between Sikkim, Bhutan and British India. This is reflected in the story of the three main communities who reside here—the Lepchas, the Bhutias and the Nepalis. The three communities live in absolute and complete harmony. They brought their religious practices which interacted upon each other and changed the complexion of their respective cultures. The advent of Christianity has had a dramatic impact on the Lepchas. It is interesting to observe and record the fortunes of the various communities with the injection of outside settlers, *i.e.* the Bhutias, the Nepalis, the Christian Missionaries, the Beharis, Marwaris and Bengalis. The effectiveness of the civil administration, the pattern of



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The History of Pedong

IT is difficult to accurately fix dates and definitely relate the march of history in this area. The local inhabitants have only a few vague legends but no clear idea about what happened in the period before the grandfathers of the present adult generation of those about 30 years of age. With the Treaty of Sinchula with Bhutan in 1865, arrival of the French Catholic Missionaries in about 1880, and with the construction of an unpaved track by the British in about 1879 through this area to Jelepla, the region could be said to have opened out into a period of approximate historical recording.

The priests of this French Catholic Mission set up posts in the wake of French colonialism in South-East Asia—in India, Cambodia, Vietnam, Laos, Japan and China—wherever there were French commercial centers. The story of the French Fathers in Pedong was recounted by Father Rey, a priest of the Swiss Mission who succeeded the pioneering French Catholic fathers in Pedong.

A group of French priests at Pondichery and Chandranagor resolved to enter Tibet. For this purpose they first went to the mother house at Hong Kong and learnt the Chinese language. The French fathers had two options regarding reaching Tibet. One way was *via* Burma. They tried this route but the going was so hard as to be beyond endurance and hence they turned back. The fathers then travelled through China on a mule track and entered Tibet *via* Chunking. But the Kham people of East Tibet and the Amdo province were hostile to all foreigners. The French missionaries were repulsed as intruders. So, these fathers came back to Hong Kong and then returned to Pondichery and Chandranagor. Of the members of the pioneering French group of missionaries, only one name is known that of Father Desgodin from Normandy.

The determined and undaunted fathers then travelled to Siliguri in 1880. The road from Silliguri to Kalimpong was being built at the time by the British. The fathers probably travelled by bullock carts. On reaching Kalimpong, the French Catholic priests were informed by the British authorities that all British areas were reserved for the Protestant Church. Hence the Catholic Fathers were asked to go elsewhere and move out of Kalimpong. The fathers chose to move to Pedong and set up a post there in 1883. According to Father Rey, at the time this area was still a part of West Bhutan in 1885 or so. This is seriously doubted because the British had already built an unpaved track in 1879 through this area and neighbouring Kalimpong had been taken from the Bhutanese. It is possible

show that they found a number of instances of Lepchas, Mishimi and Lushai tribals as sort of "slaves" of Tibetan Lamas. However, Father Rey is of the opinion that the Lepchas in Tibet were those taken as servants by wealthy Tibetan merchants. Since the language of the Lepchas is said to be akin to those of tribals in Indo-China and Burma and also similar to the languages of the Mishimi, Lushai and Naga tribes of North-East India, it may be that from Burma they came into India along the foothills of Assam. Most probably the Lepchas in Sikkim are from the same stock, but some groups migrated to East Nepal through Sikkim. Due to the higher attitude and climatic conditions, the Elami Lepchas might have grown to a taller stature than the rong—folk in the rest of Sikkim. Differences in dialect are bound to occur when there is a physical separation in terms of distance.

The Lepchas themselves have no tradition of migration. According to an article written by Dhendup Lepcha, a highly educated Lepcha youth, the Lepchas called themselves "Mutanchi-Rong" which means mother's beloved children, whose hearts are white as snow and great as the mountain. According to Lepcha legends their ancestors were the people of "Mayel-lyang" whose boundaries were from the valley of *Rinchonsunga* to *Pro*, *Rochong*, *Ranga*; *Chyu* (Chumbi Valley) *Jol Ashi*.

In appearance, the Lepchas are definitely a mongoloid people. I cannot agree that they have very little resemblance to the Tibetans. Infact I would say that it is difficult to pick out a Lepcha from a group of Nepalese, Bhutias and Lepchas. It is true that there is sometimes an indefinable difference in the features of the Lepchas. They are definitely paler in complexion, have finer and softer features than the others. In the words of Father Rey, the Lepchas have milder features and their eyes are more closed and less open than the Bhutias. Lepchas are more white and less red than the Tibetans. In height, the



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Lamaistic Buddhism

RELIGION

THE distinguishing feature of any society is its religion. Religion serves the spiritual needs of any people, and from it spring the social customs practised by its adherents. Art, literature and architecture in India have originally all been inspired by association with religions. The competitiveness of life in relations between individuals forming a society and the earnestness of battling against circumstances and material conditions is such that an individual can rarely personally practise his religion himself. With the advancement of science, knowledge and

Tibetan calendar (about 2 March) in honour of Guru Rimpoche. This is a three day festival which is a kind of a fair, with eating stalls on the grounds below the Gompa. People from all over the countryside come with their families. They arrive by 11 a. m. and expect to spend the whole day celebrating a kind of picnic. At about 12 o'clock, a lama procession with all the instruments, *drums, horns, trumpets and bells* precede two sacred thankhas and two *murties* of Shabdrung and Rimpoche being taken out into the compound. Here the Head Lama, in his robes of office and a big Lama hat signifying his office, sits. Then eight to ten dancers, dressed in gorgeous brocades and grotesque masks perform four dance sequences. The first is a bull dance in which animal representations appear. Then various dancers with skull masks, and other frightening masks appear to vanquish the evil spirits. After a lunch interval some more dances about a hunter and a deer are performed. Between the dances, a kind of joker, also masked, entertains the audience with his antics. At the entrance are two black masked dancers hopping about and uttering blood-curdling shrieks. These are meant to be keeping away the mischievous spirits. The lamas are entertained to a goodly lunch by the Kazi. Practices for the dances and erection of a covering and seating arrangements etc. are made two weeks ahead. The Kazi moves into the Gompa guest house for a week to supervise all the preparations. The womenfolk of his house prepare all the meals for the lamas and the invited guests. At the end of each day, the Head Lama gives a benediction to each person by placing the sacred *murti* of Shabdrung on each supplicant's head. Some holy water concoction is given to all. This is a day when the Gompa is decked out in all its finery and the people wander about having *darshans*, touching their heads to the ground before the deities in the chapel and place offerings at the altar.

The Kazi of Sakyong is an old man of 76 and it is mainly due to his efforts that the Gompa at Sakyong and the

