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To Dr. Anisa  
with regards  
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## MARGINALIZED AUTOCHTHONES: EPISODES OF SIKKIMESE HISTORY AND THE LEPCHA

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### Introduction

Sikkim is a small Himalayan state with an area of 7096 sq km. It merged with India as 22<sup>nd</sup> state of the union with effect from 26<sup>th</sup> April 1975 by the Constitution of India (Thirty Sixth) Amendment Act, 1975. It comes under administrative and financial jurisdiction of North Eastern Council as its 8<sup>th</sup> member since December 2002 by amendment of the NEC Act. For allocation of Special Central Assistance to Integrated Tribal Development Project, Sikkim has been grouped as one of the 9 states under 'Category A' where substantial areas are predominantly inhabited by the tribes. This is a land of different communities but the major groups are the Lepchas, Bhutias and the Nepalis. Sikkim was originally known as *Nye Mayal Renjyong Lyaang* or in short *Mayal Lydang* meaning "the land of hidden paradise or the delightful region or abode,"<sup>1</sup> by the Lepchas,<sup>2</sup> the autochthones of the region. The Tibetan called it '*bras ljongs*' meaning valley of rice,<sup>3</sup> and the Bhutias call it *Beyul Demo jong*, which means the hidden valley of rice. The present name Sikkim has been anglicized from the Limboo word *Su-Khim*, *Su* means new and *Khim* means 'a house or palace.'

<sup>1</sup> K.P Tamsang, *The Unknown and Untold Reality about the Lepchas*, Kalimpong, 1983.p.1.

<sup>2</sup> The endoethnym of Lepcha is Rong, meaning the beloved sons/daughters of God.

<sup>3</sup> Charles Alfred Bell, *Portrait of a Dalai Lama: The Life and Times of the Great Thirteenth*, Wisdom Publications, 1987, p. 25.

Sikkim is inhabited by many tribes/groups since centuries. After the Lepchas, the Tsongs or the Limboos, the Magars, the Bhutias and others sub-groups of Nepali (apart from Limboo and Magar) came and settled the land. From the reign of the Lepcha chieftains to its merger with India and the emergence of new political dynamics, Sikkim has witnessed many episodes of history, which has markedly influenced and marginalised the real autochthones of the region, called the Lepcha or the Rong. This paper highlights a few such episodes.

### **The saga of Blood Brothers and the Rise of the Bhutias**

Until 1642, Sikkim was inhabited mostly by the Lepchas under chieftainship. The first population census of Sikkim carried out in the year 1891 also reveals that the Lepchas were then the biggest group among 15 different ethnic groups in the state. Table (1.1) below shows that the Lepcha's population was 5762 (18.92%) followed by Bhutia 4894 (16.06%) and Limboo 3356 (11.02%).

**Table - 6.1: Community-wise Distribution of Population of Sikkim-1891.**

Caste/Communities	Males	Females	Children	Total
Lepcha	2362	2399	1001	5762 (18.92)
Bhutia	1966	1960	968	4894 (16.06)
Limbu (Limboo)	1255	1159	942	3356 (11.02)
Gurung	1108	1047	766	2921 (9.59)
Murmi (Tamang)	801	778	1288	2867 (9.41)
Raj/Jimdar Etc.	742	691	587	2020 (6.63)
Khambu	726	648	589	1963 (6.44)
Kami	626	464	580	1670 (5.48)
Brahman	521	372	521	1414 (4.64)
Mangar	363	346	192	901 (2.95)
Chhetri	303	253	273	829 (2.72)
Newar	240	183	304	727 (2.38)
Darji	102	92	93	287 (0.94)
Slaves	124	99	103	326 (1.07)
Misc/including soldiers	350	72	99	521 (1.71)
Total	11589	10363	8306	30458 (100)

Source: H.H. Risley : The Gazetteer of Sikkim , 1894. Fig. in parenthesis shows percentage.

As reflected in the census, the Bhutias and the Tsongs or the Limboos are the first to arrive the land of the Lepchas alongwith the Magars. Among them all the Lepcha's encounter with the Bhutias, who initially came from Tibet, also known

is Bhot,<sup>4</sup> is said to have "markedly influenced"<sup>5</sup> the history of Sikkim and the Lepcha way of life. This phase may be regarded as the most critical phase in the Lepcha life in view of the fact that the Tibetans after perching into Sikkim from the North, made the gullible Lepchas their blood brothers, speedily converted them into their faith and became their noble masters.

There are accounts which suggest that cultural-religious penetration in the Lepcha community started much before the installation of Chogyal<sup>6</sup> or the Bhutia king who came from Tibet. It has been said that, Guru Padmasambhava, also known as Guru Rimboche, visited Sikkim in 8<sup>th</sup> century A.D. During that period he is said to have prophesized about hidden treasures in Sikkim. A few sources have talked about this particular visit but they lack authenticity; moreover the story looks much legendary and mythical. Although Padmasambhava is much adored and a prominent character in the history of Sikkim, yet having come from the Tibetan Lamas and royal source the story reeks much of a colonial design and as such the veracity of the same is in fact difficult to establish. Having said so one cannot ignore the sea followers of Guru Padmasambhava in Sikkim prevalent since centuries.

The visit by Padmasambhava slowly exposed Sikkim to world outside, and it worked as a goat trail for later visitors especially from Tibet. In the process a Tibetan chief of Kham province in Tibet, Khye-Bumsa visited the land of the Lepchas in 13<sup>th</sup> century A.D. and made a bond with the Lepcha chief, Thekung Tek, which is known as the *Treaty of Blood Brotherhood*. An eternal friendship was made between Khye-Bumsa and TheKong-Tek, "binding the Lepchas and Bhutias in an inseparable bond."<sup>7</sup> "The historical blood treaty, coolly arrested the Lepchas, the yeoman of the soil, under the reign of the Tibetans, the first alien ruler of the region."<sup>8</sup> This treaty therefore, marks the beginning of the end of the Lepcha era and the rise of the Bhutias as the royal masters. After this accord, this advanced group enjoyed the status of blood brothers of the demure Lepchas, which also provided them the right to own land and other such resources. However, the legitimacy of this treaty is also questionable and a section of the Lepchas today do not agree to the story of

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In India and Nepal Tibet was known as Bhot in early days, and therefore, the country lies in its south end as *Bhotanta* or Bhotan/Bhutan. The Bhutias got their name from Bhotay i.e. a resident of Bhot Pradesh. Bhutia is the anglicized form of Bhotay. The Bhutias are also known as *Lhopos* or *Lhopas* which literally means 'people from upper valley.' They are the early Tibetans to have come to Sikkim. They called the Lepchas as *Monpas* meaning 'people from lower valley.'

<sup>4</sup> Rahul, Ram. "The Himālayan Borderland" Delhi, 1970, p-31.

<sup>5</sup> Chogyal also means Dharma Raja, a king having both religious and temporal power.

<sup>6</sup> Halfdan, Siiger, *op. cit.*, p.29.

<sup>7</sup> D.C Roy, *Dynamics of Social formation Among the Lepchas*, Akansha Publishing House, New Delhi, 2005, p. 36.

blood/brotherhood.<sup>9</sup> One of the prominent Lepcha scholars, Foning (1987), notes that the Tibetan's domination over the Lepchas started with the signing of blood brotherhood treaty. He remarks:

A few generations earlier, patriarch Thekung Tek, who was a ' bongthing but never a chief as has been made out, was coaxed into ceremoniously swearing eternal friendship of brotherhood with the Tibetans who were gradually infiltrating into our land. Eventually as a result of this friendship pact, we agreed innocently to accept kings among us and we as a tribe have upheld them ever since.<sup>10</sup>

The story about the ritual performed by the Lepcha chief of Kavi area says that the "Dzo-nga"<sup>11</sup> was invoked so that Kye-Bhumsa may be blessed with a male descendent. Upon their return to Chumbi, the couple had three sons who later became the ancestors of a number of Lhopo lineages, including that of the Sikkimese royal family.<sup>12</sup>

In fact if we see the genealogy of the first Chogyal Phuntsog Namgyal it will trace its origin to Kye-Bhumsa. The second son of this Khye Bumsa, Mi-tpon-rap had four sons, the youngest of whom was Guru Tashe. From these four brothers the four chief families of Sikkim traced their descent.

C.De. Beauvoir Stocks has placed genealogical tree showing descent of the Sikkim Maharajas which clearly shows their lineage with Khye-Bumsa.<sup>13</sup>

#### **Geneology of Rulers of Sikkim**

Zhal-nga-guru ( A Tibetan)

↓

Jo - Khye - Bumsa

↓

Mi-tpon-rab

↓

Guru Tashe

↓

Zhal - Nga - A - Phag

↓

Guru Tenzing

<sup>9</sup> See also History of Sikkim by Maharaja Thotub Namgyal and Maharani Yeshey Dolma, 1908, p.13-14. As per the account "A Tibetan, Khe Bhumsa came to Sikkim to seek blessing from Thekong Tek, a Lepcha wizard. After receiving the blessing for offspring a compact is said to have been entered between Khe Bhumsa and Thekong Tek, where blood of a variety of animals were used to smear the feet of the two participant to signify the compact. This act was supposed to bind the Lepcha and the Bhutias as blood brothers." However, there is no documentary evidence to prove its veracity; moreover having come from the Royal source it smacks of royal design. See also, Sonam Rinchen Lepcha (2006) *Pristine Sikkim*.

<sup>10</sup> A.R. Foning, *op.cit.*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 2003. p.8

<sup>11</sup> Dzo-nga in Tibetan means Kanchenjunga

<sup>12</sup> Anna Balikci Denjongpa, *op.cit.*, p.19.

<sup>13</sup> Beauvoir Stocks, *op.cit.*, p.332.

Yun -tsho-Namgyel  
the first Chogyal)

(Source: *C De, Behaviour Stocks Folklore and Folk Tales of the Lapchas of Sikkim, 1920*)

In fact the coming of Khye-Bumsa was a colonial thrust and not what was told in the stories wrapped up in religious halo. History points out that the Tibetan migration was actuated by the infighting between the Red Hat sect and the Yellow Hat sect of the theological kingdom, Tibet. The vanquished Red Hat monks fled in search of safe haven towards south to perch in Sikkim. Three monks of the sect wandered along, and landed in Yuksam; a village in the western part of the present day Sikkim. There they transported Pencho Namgay; effected an alliance with him to proselytize the Lepchas into Lamaism, the Tibetan variety of Buddhism, after his installation as the king of the Kingdom.<sup>14</sup> Thus it can be said that the Bhutia's infiltration took place with a road map and after the realization of their intended design, they "swept aside and subjugated its aborigine, the Lepchas."<sup>15</sup> In the year 1642 the three powerful lamas of Tibet consecrated Phuntshok Namgyal (Pencho Namgay) as the first Chogyal<sup>16</sup> of Sikkim in the place called Yuksam.<sup>17</sup> This marks the era of Bhutia rule in Sikkim which lasted for 332 years. During the reign of Chogyals only a few influential Lepchas were made Dzongpens or the Ministers during initial years but majority of them were pushed to the periphery. Even those who assumed good positions were either forced to leave the position or were treacherously murdered. According to British historian and linguist R K Sprigg (1995), the death of Bholod, the leading member of their [Lepcha] race brought to an end an era in which the Lepchas had enjoyed influence in the social and political affairs of Sikkim, and, after Bholod's murder in 1826 the royal family chose its consorts from the aristocracy of Tibet and not from among its Lepcha subjects prior to that.<sup>18</sup> 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.<sup>19</sup> A deep sense of insecurity among the Lepchas of Sikkim was evident when 800 houses of Lepcha subjects left Sikkim for Unthoo in Illam district of Nepal

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<sup>14</sup> Risley, See "The Gazetteer of Sikkim", 2001 reprint, Low Priced Publication, Delhi, p-ii.

<sup>15</sup> See Ram Rahul, *op.cit.*

<sup>16</sup> Chogyal means the Dharma raja or the protector of Faith. The king having both spiritual and temporal power. The Chogyalship or the power structure in Sikkim was based on theocratic structure of Tibet.

<sup>17</sup> Derived from Lepcha words, Yuk Mun meaning lama or the priest (Tibetan/Buddhist) and sam meaning three.

<sup>18</sup> R K Sprigg, '1826: The end of an era in the Social and Political History of Sikkim', *Bulletin of Tibetology*, NIT Gangtok, 1995.

<sup>19</sup> See Risley, *op.cit.*, p.19.

immediately after their leader was assassinated by the Lamas of Sikkim.<sup>20</sup> It is said, Bho-lod's cousin, Yuk-Lhat Grup alias tkra-thup (Dathup alias Rathup?), fearing a similar fate, fled from Sikkim and took refuge at Unthoo in Nepal with some 800 of his Lepcha tribesmen."<sup>21</sup> A number of accounts say that after Bolek was assassinated the Maharaja Tsugphud Namgyal suspecting Ra-thup?/Dathup, the cousin of slain leader, for planning a retaliation, 'made a sudden onslaught and slew on several of his (Rathup) relatives,<sup>22</sup> which in turn made Dathup and Jerung Denon and Kazi Gorok left Sikkim taking with them about 800 houses of Lepcha (1200 able bodied Lepchas – according to Capt. Herbert) subjects from Chidam and Namthang and went towards Unthoo and Illam and settled down there.<sup>23</sup> This incident alone illustrates the plight of the Lepchas, the real yeomen of the land.

### **The Gorkhas Expansion and After**

During the reign of Third Chogyal Chador Namgyal i.e. in 1700AD, the Bhutanese attacked Sikkim and took away the Kalimpong region, presently in West Bengal. During the raid many Lepchas were taken to Bhutan as slaves. After the Bhutanese, the Gorkhas from Nepal attacked Sikkim in 1788-89. During this battle also the Lepchas were made to go in the forefront. As a result, this demure tribe once again had to face the brunt as before.

The Gorkha incursion which took place, in the last part of 18<sup>th</sup> century brought in a wave of Nepalese settlers to the zone. In the year 1788 Gorkhas overran many places in west and south Sikkim. The major incursion took place in 1788-89 under the leadership of Purna Ale, a Magar commander and Johar Singh. Many sources have cited that the Nepalese raid on Sikkim was carried under the leadership of Damodar Pandey. However, a few sources reveal that this account is not in consonance with the Nepalese sources. The Nepalese sources of historical records reveal that during the time Damodar Pandey held overall command of Nepalese army. It has also been found that Damodar Pandey did not come to Sikkim but fought with the British in Nalapani, Kumaon and Garhwal region leading the western command.<sup>24</sup> The force under Purna Ale advanced upto Reling and Karmi, now in Darjeeling and Chyakhung in West Sikkim; whereas, another force moved under the commandership of Jahar Singh towards the south-west of river Teesta and occupied many places there. In the process they establish their authority and hegemony especially in these areas, i.e. the southern and western part of Sikkim, leading the mass settlement of Nepali population. Although the brunt of the attack was upon all

<sup>20</sup> See Risley, *op.cit.*, p.19.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p.17.

<sup>22</sup> G.B. Mainwaring, *op.cit.*, p.xii.

<sup>23</sup> Maharaja Thutob Namgyal and Maharani Yeshey Dolma, *op.cit.*, p.60.

see also, Dr. R.K Sprigg, *op.cit.*, p. 12.

<sup>24</sup> Kumar Pradhan, *The Gorkha Conquests*, Himal Books, Kathmandu, 2009, p.144.

the subjects including the ruler, Bhutia lamas and Kazis, yet, it was ultimately the Lepchas who had to bear the real brunt as the places overrun by the Gurkha force were apparently Lepcha hubs. Further, they were a major force to have been put to war. The Gazetteer of Sikkim records that "it was a Lepcha, Minister Chothup [Chuthup], 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."<sup>25</sup>

Many accounts of European travelers bring to light, the hard times Lepchas of south Sikkim faced during the Gorkha raid. For example, renowned botanist J D Hooker, who carried an extensive research on Taxonomy of plant and its diversity in Sikkim and Darjeeling Himalayas in 1849, has thrown some light on the historical events that took place in south Sikkim in 1780s. In his book *Himalayan Journal* (1854) he has stated that "a considerable stand was made here [Mainam area of south Sikkim] by the Lepchas during the Nepal war in 1787; they defended the pass with their arrows for some hours and then retired towards the Teesta, making a second stand lower down, at a place pointed out to me, where rocks on either side gave them the same advantages."<sup>26</sup> This historical evidence confirms that the Lepchas (were made to) fought and retired to further remote.

Unlike the Tibetans and the Bhutanese, the Nepalese came in numbers and being polygamous, quickly multiplied. For their sustenance they occupied a large amount of available resource including land. The nature lover and gatherer Lepchas thus lost their home subsistence or food products available. The docile autochthones who were already marginalized by the Sikkimese Bhutia regime and the Bhutanese were further pushed to the periphery.

It is said that "...while there had not been much opposition in Sikkim to immigrants coming in from Tibet, there was a powerful body of opinion that foresaw the dangers of allowing unrestricted entry of Nepalese into the country."<sup>27</sup> It is true that there was not much opposition to the coming of the Tibetans as the country then was settled by relatively less people. It is also pertinent to mention that although there was not much opposition to the coming of the Tibetans from the Lepchas yet a lot of resistance was carried by the Magars and Limboos against the installation of Chogyal in Sikkim. Sikkim, by the time of Gorkha raid and the settlement of the Nepalese in last part of 18<sup>th</sup> century, was an established sovereign country with a defined political boundary. It is therefore obvious to have opposition to the settlement which becomes a threat to the ruling establishment or to the people who were in the centre of

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<sup>25</sup> H.H. Risley, *The Gazetteer of Sikkim*, Delhi, Low Priced Publication, reprint, 2001, p.18.

<sup>26</sup> J.D. Hooker, *Himalayan Journal: Notes of a Naturalist*. vol. 1, Natraj Publishers, Dehradun, 1854, p.293.

<sup>27</sup> Nari Rustomji, *Sikkim-A Himalayan Tragedy*, Allied Publishers, New Delhi, p.9.



affairs and held supremacy. As such, the opposition to Nepali settlement was mostly from the ruling class but the brunt was more upon the Lepchas.

Furthermore, like the Bhutias, "Nepalis equally contributed a lot towards the destruction of the historical records and literature of the Lepchas. The historical information obtainable about Sikkim is very meager, and the local records—a very fine manuscript kept at Pemyiongchi—was destroyed by the Gorkhas during their irruption in 1814 [sic! 1788-89]."<sup>28</sup>

### **The British Mediation**

The involvement of the British into the affairs of Sikkim became prominent after 1835, when they landed in Darjeeling through the dubious *Grant of Deed*. They encouraged Nepalese to settle in the Darjeeling and Sikkim. Campbell, who happened to be the ambassador of British India to Nepal, was immediately brought to Darjeeling after its cession to British by the Sikkim raja in 1835. The British needed industrious people to work in their projects like construction of rail, road and sanatoria etc. They found the autochthones Lepchas as "lazy and indolent" and "not a good tax payer"<sup>29</sup> and the industrious Nepalese fulfilled these criteria and thus were invited under the supervision of Campbell. Further, the fast developing Darjeeling hill areas as industrial centre were another attraction, or a pull factor, for Nepali migration in India. The areas were suitable for cultivation of high quality tea, and many tea gardens came up all around. "The success of tea garden owned mostly by the British depended upon the availability of abundant labour. There was an organized attempt to attract labour from adjoining area of Nepal which led to a large-scale migration."<sup>30</sup> Another factor which seemed to have worked for Nepalis was the changing socio-political scenario in the Himalayan Kingdom. The military expeditions intending to consolidate Nepal politically under Prithivi Narayan Saha and his successors, the population explosion and its effect on land holdings, declining economic conditions and food deficiency in Nepal are specially highlighted by scholars as indigenous factors, also called push factors, responsible for Nepali migration. Besides, the emergence of autocrat Janga Bahadur Rana in Nepal, and the suppression of the masses by his clans also led to the migration of Nepalese to this region.

The British involvement in the affairs of Sikkim and their attitude of favoring Nepalese becomes visible again in 1880 when "some Sikkimese fomented trouble between the Bhotias and the Nepalese and skirmishes between the two communities became frequent. As a result in 1880 there were large scale riots in Renok. Deputy Commissioner of Darjeeling, A.W. Paul was sent to pacify the two groups which were to the advantage of the new settlers *i.e.*

<sup>28</sup> Tulsi Ram Sharma, 'Sikkim Farkiyera Hearda' (Nepali), in *Kanchanjunga Journal*, Vol. 8/9 (10), Gangtok, 1970, p. 85.

<sup>29</sup> Darjeeling District Gazetteer.

<sup>30</sup> R N Thakur, *Himalayan Lepcha*, New Delhi: Archives Publishers Distributors, 1988. p.v-vii.

Nepali.”<sup>31</sup> In fact the Taksari Newars, who later on minted the Sikkimese coins, came to Sikkim under the British support. After 1835, they, “a defeated power in Kathmandu valley at the hands of the Gorkhas, moved to Sikkim with their entrepreneurial skills for trading and colonizing under the British patronage and turned themselves to be the Kazi counterpart among the Nepalese in Sikkim,”<sup>32</sup> commonly known as the Thikadars.

Historical evidences, including the gazetteers discloses that a greater migration to Sikkim by people from Nepal took place only in later years after the coming of the British. Writers are of the opinion that “the Nepali migration to Sikkim must be seen in the context of the general Nepali migration to India in the wake of British interest in the Gorkhas as recruits to their fast growing Indian army. Many Gorkhas came to settle down in hilly areas where the climate and topography were similar to their homes in Nepal.”<sup>33</sup>

### **Increasing Nepali population: Threat to the Lepchas**

The Bhutias while entering into Sikkim from the North, called the country of the Lepchas as de-ma dzong (bree-mee-jong as said by Desideri SJ), meaning ‘the land or valley of rice,’ but, historically, “it has been proved that the agriculture [the paddy cultivation and terraced farming] in Sikkim was imported from Nepal.”<sup>34</sup> It is found that the second wave of Nepali settlement in Sikkim began since the reign of Sidkeong Namgyal. In 1867, he granted a lease in his state for settlement of Nepalese as agriculturists. They were skilled cultivators and introduced the cultivation of cardamom.”<sup>35</sup> As such the entry of Nepalese into the region marked the introduction of settled cultivation in Sikkim which opened up different avenues for earning livelihood for this verily industrious people who soon flooded the lower valleys of the country.

In fact the people in power could foresee the strength of Nepalese emerging, which was equally a concern for the Lepchas. The Lepchas were aware of the possible risk to their existence as the Nepali populace multiplied within no time; yet, they could not go up against this new immigration. They knew that the settlement of the Nepalese will shrink the habitat and their right over it, but they were adequately inadequate to resist as they were virtually pushed to the periphery of the margins by the earlier migrants like the Limboos, the Magars, the Bhutanese and the Tibetans and the dominion of the Chogyals and the Kazis.

Economic exploitation by the Nepalis coupled with their increasing population as against the Lepcha-Bhutias which became noticeable as early as the beginning of the twentieth century. In an interview with the Lieutenant

<sup>31</sup> R.N.Thakur, *op.cit.*, p.vii.

<sup>32</sup> A.C. Sinha, *Studies in The Himalayan Communities*, Books Today, Oriental Publishers, New Delhi, 1983. p.32.

<sup>33</sup> R N Thakur, *op.cit.*, p.vi-vii.

<sup>34</sup> R N Thakur, *op.cit.*, p.30.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p.vi-vii.

Governor of Bengal in Darjeeling in 1900, Maharaja Thutob Namgyal highlighted the difficulties and gradual dwindling down of the real Bhutia and Lepcha population of Sikkim and begged that, "the government should adopt such measures as to give effect to the word of the late Sir Ashley Eden who had said that although the waste land of Sikkim might be opened to Paharia settlers, yet they should never be created headmen."<sup>36</sup> Thakur (1988) says, "In spite of the efforts of the Maharaja to check Nepali colonial expansion, the Sikkim territory was increasingly exploited by Nepali settlers."<sup>37</sup>

As the Nepali population and settlement grew with new patches of jungles cleared for cultivation new laws were promulgated in order to check the Nepali expansion and to prohibit the land alienation of the Bhutias and the Lepchas. The Chogyal enacted a new regulation on 17<sup>th</sup> May 1917 which is known as "Revenue Order No 1" which reads:

With reference to the order dated the 2nd January, 1897 it is hereby again notified to all Kazis, Thikadars and Mandals in Sikkim, that no Bhutias and Lepchas are to be allowed to sell, mortgage or sublet any of their lands to any person other than a Bhutia or Lepcha without the express sanction of the Durbar, or officers empowered by the Durbar in this behalf, whose order will be obtained by the landlord concerned. If anyone who disobeys this order will be severely punished.

This order however benefitted Bhutias as in the absence of competitors they could get Lepcha land cheaply. However, despite framing the law prohibiting the sale of Lepcha-Bhutia land the increase in Nepali population and settlement continued, as the Bhutia kazis invited the Nepalese to work in their lands. The Administrative Report of the state of Sikkim for the year 1931-32 reveals the increase in Nepali population and need and demand for more cultivable land every year. The Report says:

In recent years cultivation has been steadily extending and more and more demands for throwing open areas reserved for forest continue coming in mostly from Nepali settlers, and it appears that the country has been fully colonized as far as it could be. Further settlement of riots could only be possible at the sacrifice of forest reserved areas."<sup>38</sup>

The Report further states:

"A portion of the country lying in the Teesta Valley north of Dikshu has not been thrown open to Nepali settlers and is specially reserved for the 'hereditary' inhabitants of Sikkim, such as Lepchas and Bhutias; recently Tamangs and Sherpas who are Nepali Buddhists were allowed to settle there, and own land ...."<sup>39</sup>

<sup>36</sup> "History of Sikkim, Part-I, pp.185-186" quoted in R N Thakur, *op.cit.*, p.vii.

<sup>37</sup> Thakur, *op.cit.*, p.vii.

<sup>38</sup> The Administrative Report of the State of Sikkim for the year 1931-32, Kolkata, 1933.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

There are two vital points in this report-i.e. 'specially reserved for the hereditary inhabitants of Sikkim such as Lepchas and Bhutias' and 'Tamangs and Sherpas who are Nepali Buddhists were allowed to settle there, and own land.' The tract mentioned in the report as 'a portion of the country lying in the Teesta valley north of Dikshu' also include the Lepcha Reserve Dzongu,<sup>40</sup> but the report indicates that the Bhutias also had some kind of right to hold in these areas which was otherwise meant only for the Lepchas. Further, the Tamangs and Sherpas, sub-groups of Nepali were also allowed to settle and own land in the forbidden area of North because of they being the Nepali Buddhists. The rationale behind the Lepcha Reserve was to protect the Lepchas and their culture but by allowing other groups to settle in these areas further jeopardize their interest. It must be mentioned that although existing rule permits only the Lepchas to settle in Dzongu, yet, at present a large number of people from outside have been residing due to hydel power projects and other such industries. This has posed a serious threat to the primitive culture of the Lepcha people.

According to B. S. Das (1983), "The dominance of the Bhutia was so overwhelming that the Lepcha remained the poorest and the most neglected of the people...confined inside the Djongu living the life of indolence and negligence contributing little against the aggressive exploitation of the riches in land and forest."<sup>41</sup> Suresh Gurung (2011) is of the opinion that "slowly but steadily the Lepchas... lost their leaders their land and most importantly their freedom,...territorial confinement of the Lepchas in the seemingly barren and desolate area of Djongu, though in the name of protection, has ruined the community in diverse ways, most significantly in the field of economic and educational advancement."<sup>42</sup>

### **Recent Experience**

The coming of the Bhutias and the Nepalis marginalized the lepchas in many accounts. In recent past especially after its merger with the India union, Sikkim has witnessed a quantum leap in population. The Byaparis or the people from the main land India like the Biharis, the Marwaris, the Gujaratis, and the Bengalis etc now have a significant presence in Sikkim, mainly in urban hubs. They are regarded as the business class in the state and most of the businesses are run by them. Of late, they are moving towards small towns and markets leading to the retirement of small traders from the village areas. This has significantly hampered the economic life of the Lepchas. Many such business class families are Sikkim Subject or residential certificate holders and for them there is no restriction to get trade license etc. Recently, in the eve of Municipality Election, the state government run by Sikkim Democratic Front

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> B S Das, *The Sikkim Saga*, Vikash Publications, New Delhi, 1983, p.5.

<sup>42</sup> Suresh Kumar Gurung, *Sikkim Ethnicity and Political Dynamics, A Tragic Perspective*, Kunal Books, New Delhi, 2011 p.160.

Party brought out a notification on providing residential certificates to many of these settlers from the plains. This has created a sense of insecurity among the local populace of the state. Such policies on the part of the government indicate the rising vote bank of such communities and the pattern of politics and population of this Himalayan region undergoing a complete transformation with the large-scale migration. Today large majority of the population in Sikkim are the Nepalese<sup>43</sup> followed by the Bhutia and other groups mentioned above, who will have a big say in the policy making of the state.

### Conclusion

The Lepchas, indigenous and the largest group till 1891 lost the grip of power since 1642. They lost their land, culture and Language. After the usurpation of throne by the Bhutias, Sikkim entered the phase of history where its language, its culture and its ruling culture emerged as Tibetan, in every form and substance and the relics of the ancient Lepcha civilization lost forever. The coming of the Nepalis further denuded them economically. After Sikkim's merger with India and the subsequent advent of democracy in Sikkim, the majority Nepalis played a prominent role. After the merger of Sikkim with India, the Lepchas were given the status of Scheduled Tribe in 1977 but they are classed under BL.(Bhutia/Lepcha) category, which means they have to compete with the more advanced group i.e. Bhutia. The Nepali sub-groups like the Limboos and the Tamangs are made STs in 2002 and presently state government has been pressing hard for the ST status to all the left out Nepali communities in the state. All these developments have pushed the autochthones Lepchas further interior. Another serious issue is the land alienation. The comparative figure of pre and post merger period shows a huge gap in land ownership of the Lepchas. Although this 'vanishing tribe'<sup>44</sup> has been given the Primitive Tribal Group status by the state government, yet, timely intervention is required to address the issues related to their right and identity. Lepcha language has been considered as one of the oldest languages and hence their culture equally holds special significance. If this is lost, the world will lose a world view, a colour in the portrait of human civilization, without which its meaning would remain incomplete.

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<sup>43</sup> Thakur, *op.cit.*, p. vii.

<sup>44</sup> The term used by Arthur Foning in his celebrated work 'Lepcha my Vanishing Tribe, to denote that the Lepchas are vanishing culturally.