

CULTURAL ASPECTS OF SIKKIM

-Mrs Rachna Gulati.

Sikkim was known to the Lepcha, the original inhabitants of the state of Nyemac-el or heaven, Tibetan called it Ren-Jong or Den-Jong or the valley of Rice. According to some others the present name is of Nepalese origin meaning 'the new place.'

In the remote past, the Lepchas of Denjong and the Limbu of eastern Nepal farcely mixed with each other. Marriages between the two clans were also common. When a Limbu girl married a Lepcha and arrived at her husband's house, she would call it Su-Him i.e. New House. This word is said to have been corrupted into 'Sukhim' and later as Sikkim. L.A. Waddell, the well known scholar of Buddhism, suggested another derivation from Sanskrit word Sikhim which means crested mountainous country. The term Monpa or the dwellers in the low country is occasionally used to describe the Lepcha inhabitants.

Before I go deep into the cultural aspects let me mention about the people of Sikkim. They are mixed lot, handsome cream skinned Lepchas, the original inhabitants, burly Bhotias who migrated from Tibet centuries ago and are considered true Sikkimese and the ever smiling Nepalese now the majority-who were first settled in Sikkim by the British when they ruled India. The people inhabiting the higher regions more or less lead a nomadic life, while those in the lower altitudes enjoy a more comfortable settled life.

Regarding religion, though Hindu and Buddhism are the two main religions prevalent in Sikkim constituting about 99% of the population, Christians, Muslims, Jains and Sikhs together constitute less than one percent.

Sikkim is to some extent a culturally homogeneous unit. Buddhism being the main unifying factor, Bhotias inhabiting the northern parts and Lepchas in the centre have cultural similarities among themselves but this cannot be said about the west and south of Sikkim. The Bhotias are mostly agriculturists and breed cattle and sheep. They however lead a semi-migratory life having two residences for summer and winter. They possess agricultural plots in both the places. Their village are situated on easily accessible slopes. The Lepchas on the other hand have permanent settlements which require steep climbs and descents. They mostly live on agriculture. The Lamas are the only priests among the Bhots who perform all function from birth to death, while the Lepchas have other functionaries the 'Pidim' and the 'Mun' besides the Lamas. The former are responsible for some of their functions and festivals. Lepchas and Bhutias generally do not intermarry.

There are however, quite a number of common features. A special function is held on the tenth day of every month in honour of the Lord Buddha by both the Bhotia and Lepchas. There are separate monasteries for Lamas and Nuns. There are many other similarities, the house as a rule is the centre of their family-life. Property is divided equally among sons, both follow the customs of bride-price and they practice to a limited extent polyandry and polygamy. The panchyat system is common to both.

Coming to the Handicrafts - The people of Sikkim particularly the Bhutias specialise in weaving and produce fine rugs, carpets and blankets. Sikkim carpets though not produced in sufficient quantity are quite popular in foreign countries. Some delicately carved and beauti-

fully painted table, tools and screens of the typical Sikkimese style are manufactured by them. Besides, there are decoration pieces of papier-machie depicting dragons and other protecting deities. There are also beautiful scrolls with paintings of Lord Buddha, other gods and eight religious symbols of Buddhism. They also manufacture Sikkimese caps and other garments for daily use. Ornaments of various types such as bracelets, rings, necklace made of eight metals with dragons head, supposed to be good for health of the wearer, are also manufactured by them.

Customs and manners differ with Lepchas and Bhutias. Polyandry is permitted through monogamy is usually practised. In case of polyandrous marriages the elder brother only marries the girl who may also be shared by his brother. The later also has the status of a husband. The polyandrous marriages are however becoming rare due to the strifes they lead to among family members. Polygamy is extremely rare.

The Lepchas strictly forbid marriage between near relations and severe punishment is meted out to those who break the rule. Among the Lepchas, three brothers can marry three sisters and all wives are common. Girls marry at the age of puberty.

The age of the bride and bridegroom may be the same or bride may be younger or older by 2 or 3 years.

The marriage customs of the Lepchas are quite interesting. After preliminary negotiations have been conducted by the boy's maternal uncle, it is customary for the parents of the boy to send six bottles of liquor, one scarf and one rupee to the girl's parents. It is followed by presentation of three pigs, one bottle of liquor, one big brass pot, one piece of 'Muga' cloth for the girl's mother and six rupees. The custom is known as 'Ashah'.

The Bhutias marry only among their clan, There is even a territorial restriction that a Lechenpa should marry only a Lachenpa.

Polyandry is the general rule. Though the actual marriage is performed with the eldest brother and the next one, all the other brothers share a common wife. Cousins are not included in this category. Marriage is arranged through negotiations, the paternal and maternal uncle of the boy go to the bride's place to seek her hand. A week later a big function is held at the boys residence where the villagers are entertained to feast, the function is called 'Inchha'.

I would not like to take a long time of my esteemed delegates and colleagues and would like to wind up by saying in short that it is an amalgamation between the culture of India and Tibet and acts like a bridge between the ancient and modern societies of our land.