



**BETWEEN
SIKKIM
AND
BHUTAN**

INDIRA AWASTY

Between Sikkim and Bhutan

(The Lepchas and Bhutias of Pedong)

Indira Awasty



B.R. PUBLISHING CORPORATION
DELHI-110052

Awasty, Indira, 1938-

Between Sikkim and Bhutan : the Lepchas and Bhutias of Pedong/Indira Awasty. — 1st ed. — Delhi : B.R. Pub. Corp. ; New Delhi : distributor, D.K. Publishers' Distributors, 1978.

xi, 128, [8] p. : ill. ; 23 cm.

Bibliography : p. 123.

Includes index.

Pedong, the last outpost of West Bengal, bordering Sikkim.

Rs. 40.00 (\$8.00)

1. Ethnology—India—West Bengal. 2. Lepchas. 3. Bhutias.
4. Pedong, India—History. I. Title.

301.295414

DK-78Au-13468

First Edition, 1978

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Distributor :

D.K. Publishers' Distributors,
1, Ansari Road, New Delhi-110002

Publisher :

B.R. Publishing Corporation,
461, Vivekanand Nagar, Delhi-110052

Printer :

Lovely Printers,
4/92, Nirankari Colony, Delhi-110009

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

give them a sense of pride in their peculiar and unique culture. No human being deserves to be a mass produced item. Every person has the right to be, and is, a special entity.

My gratitude goes out to Mrs. Renu Kuldip Singh, who cheerfully accompanied me on my treks and listened patiently to my questionings of the locals. I am deeply indebted to all those who so readily imparted to me their experiences and knowledge. I thank Father Rey, in particular, for his encouragement and for reading through the script and giving me his comments and suggestions.

NEW DELHI,
JULY 1978.

INDIRA AWASTY

To

Father Rey, whose life of dedication to a people who do not belong even to his continent, ought to be an inspiration to us.

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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 nearby 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

influence of political parties and potentials for development would be typical of any fairly remote and inaccessible hilly track.

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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.

Till the middle of the 17th century, the history of this area was probably as vague as that of Sikkim itself. The people of Pedong hold one premise firmly, that the most early inhabitants were the Lepchas. It is not known as to when exactly the Lepchas migrated into this area from the hills of Burma and Assam, though the Lepchas themselves have no tradition of migration. But it is to be assumed that the same wave of Lepchas migration that colonized Sikkim, settled here as well. Lepcha induction into this area, however, must have been in at least two stages. The first wave of settlement must be taken to be when the earliest Lepchas came to Sikkim, since this area was along the path of the Lepchas spilling into Sikkim, parts of East Nepal and lower Bhutan. But, the habitations must have been scanty in number and could even have been of a temporary and migratory nature. Since there were pastures further a field to be explored, it is possible that this was either a staging camp or an area into which an overflow from the main route trickled. This is assumed because apart from there being no signs of permanent buildings or habitations constructed attributable to a Lepcha period, (of which there is no trace in Sikkim either), there is hardly any tradition of the sanctity of rocks, trees and lakes sacred to the *Mun* religion of the Lepchas, in this area. The second wave of Lepcha migrations could be said to have taken place, may be, in the 17th and early 18th centuries. This time from the reverse direction *i.e.* from Sikkim to Pedong. It is possible that the spread of the lamaistic form of Buddhism from Tibet into Sikkim in the middle of the 17th century may have caused some displacement of the Lepchas who might have returned to this area. There is some evidence to support this theory on the Kage ridge where a particular rock is said to be sacred to the Lepchas and where in the thick jungles the Lepchas still retain the old Lepcha hunting rites. The accounts of Father Rey of the Swiss Order of the St. George School also seem to confirm the view that there was some pressure on the Lepchas of an

alien religion of lamaistic Tibetan Buddhism which caused a number of Lepchas to move out of areas in Sikkim outwards.

As in Sikkim, the earliest Lepchas would have had no political boundaries nor a centralized state as such. Religious infiltration of Sikkim from Tibet followed by Tibetans (*Bhotiya*) settling must have gone on for a long time. Recorded history in Sikkim opens at *Yoksam* in 1642 with the installation of *Phuntsving* as the first Chogyal (*Dharma Raja*) of Sikkim. Lamaism came to reign as the state religion of Sikkim. The first theocratic ruler, Phutsog Namgyal, was consecrated under Tibetan auspices. At the time, Tibet's spiritual sway extended over Ladakh, Sikkim and Bhutan. Phutsog, known also as Pencho, is said to have conquered and won over the other chieftains in Sikkim. He is variously said to have been a descendent of Raja Indra Bodhi of Himachal Pradesh and is also identified with a Kham Tibetan hero. However, his authority extended from beyond *Phari* in Chumbi Valley, upto the Timar River in Nepal, to near Paro in Bhutan and in the south upto the borders of Bengal and Bihar. Hence, this area of Pedong would have come within the territories of Sikkim and its history would have been linked with the fortunes of that country. It is said that the Chogyal divided the country into 12 regions which were administered through Lepcha Kazis. It is not known whether this area of Pedong had a Kazi of its own, or was under the jurisdiction of the Rhenock Kazi. The Lepchas who were living in settlements, consisting of a few extended families, were probably not governed by a Chief or a King as such. There is a concept of kingship existing among the Lepchas. But this is of a mythical order. In practice, it is doubtful whether the tribal organization was headed by a warrior chief as an institution. According to vague Lepcha legends the first Chief was of divine origin who acted as a Bumthing (a medium between humans and Gods) as well. One of his descendents—

Tikung-tek, blessed an influential but childless Tibetan, one Je-khye-bumen, with the gift of children. After the children were born, the Tibetan is said to have returned to a place near Gangtok to give thanks to Tikung-tek and to swear eternal friendship between Bhotias (Tibetans, *Bhot* was the Indian name for Tibet) and Lepchas. From talking to residents of the Pedong area, it appears that the Lepcha's political organisation was limited to a small area of a settlement in which the *Mun* or *Bumthing* (Lepcha priest, who could frequently be a woman) supported by a council of elders had the highest authority. In this area, there is a persistent and often repeated legend about a great warrior—one Gebu-Achuk. But since "Achuk" means brother, he may not have been a "Chief" or a "King" but a brave and strong warrior who led punitive expeditions against the Bhutanese and the Nepalis. It may have been a later tendency to elevate in retrospect celebrated heroes to the title of king.

The history of Sikkim progresses to the second Chogyal—Tensung Namgyal—in 1670. He shifted his capital to Rabdentse. It is from about 1700 to 1717 that this area of Pedong might have parted from the history of Sikkim. It is said that the successor of Tensung Namgyal was Chokdar Namgyal (born of the second wife of Tensung, a Sikkimese lady), who succeeded his father at a young age. His elder sister, daughter of the Tibetan wife of his father, conspired to ascend the throne. She is said to have invited or hired a Bhutanese force to place her on the throne. Chokdar is said to have been rescued by a loyal councillor and escaped to Lhasa. In the meanwhile, the Bhutan army, which perhaps came from the direction of Paro, successfully gained the then capital of Sikkim—Rabdentse—for 8 years. In about 1707, Chokdar was reinstated as the Chogyal of Sikkim through Tibetan intervention. At the return of Chokdar to Sikkim, the Bhutanese withdrew to east of the Teesta River. But they retained their military position at Dumsong Fort.

Dumsong Fort and its neglected ruins form the highest point on the Pedong Ridge—between Algarah and Pedong. At this point of time the area of Kalimpong and Pedong must have passed irrevocably to Bhutanese control. The Bhutanese and Nepalis are recorded to have made a number of incursions and raids into Sikkimese territories in the reigns of Chokdar's successors—Gyurmed and Phutshog. But that would be of concern to the historians tracing the history of Sikkim.

The stories of the warrior chief Gebu-Achuk may pertain to this period or earlier times or a later age. But tales of this Gebu-achuk and his valour and mysterious strength are recurrently told and firmly associated with the forts at Dumsong and Dalimjong (just beyond Labha) 25 kms away. He is also said to have fought the Nepalis armies at a Lake near the Nepal border. Historically the Nepalis became active against the Sikkimese provinces only after the rise of Prithvinarayan Shah, in about 1752 or so. However, the various legends connected with the Lepcha, Gebu-achuk, are recorded here.

It is not clear whether the forts at Dumsong and Dalimjong were constructed by the Sikkimese or the Lepchas or by the Bhutanese in the wake of their first advance into Sikkim in the early 1700's. It is possible that the Chogyals of Sikkim did make some rudimentary defensive fortifications. It appears most likely that though Dumsong and Dalimjong may have been the scene of encounters between Lepcha and Bhutanese forces, but that the fort constructions, renovations and improvements must have been Bhutanese handiwork.

The story of Gebu-Achuk as told by Mr. James Isaac Bhutia, a pentacost preacher, whose father was a Bhutia and whose mother was a Lepcha is recounted here. The action is stated to have taken place about 100 years before the British came, at Dumsong Jong the capital of the

Lepcha "King". The Bhutan "King", Sakachung, is said to have fought the Lepcha "King", Gebu-Achuk, at Dumsong. The Bhutanese defeated the Lepchas several times and killed their leader on several occasions. But each time, Gebu-Achuk's body was disposed off, he came alive again to face the Bhutanese with renewed strength the next morning. This transpired a number of times, till the Bhutanese "King" chopped off the head of the strange Lepcha and his body was thrown away in the far off valley beyond Dalimjong—on the border of Bhutan. Here it is said that the pieces of Gebu-Achuk's body became mosquitoes. The superstition is that whenever any Bhutia wearing a Bakhu goes on that route to Bhutan, he is sure to die, unless he makes a sacrifice of a fowl to the spirit of Gebu-Achuk. The Bhutias firmly believe this story and hold it to be truth.

Most Bhutias and Lepchas know of the story but the details are blurred. The fear of the soul of Gebu-Achuk haunting the Bhutias travelling to Bhutan has remained. The Kazi of Sakyong (a Bhutia of Bhutanese origin) had yet another version of Gebu-Achuk. There was an evil spirit who resided in the body of a king in Tibet. This evil spirit acting through the king caused the head of a lama to be cut off every now and then. The Tibetan lamas, through their magical incantations and devil dances, found out in whose body the evil spirit was residing and caused the death of the king and thus the extermination of the evil spirit from Tibet. The same evil spirit was then re-incarnated in Bhutan, where the divinations of the lamas traced it and dealt with it. The third incarnation of this evil spirit was in the body of the "extra-ordinary" Lepcha king at Dalimjong.

There lived at Dalimjong an old Lepcha king 82 years old and his wife was 76. In their old age they gave birth to a son. This son grew marvellously fast and became fearfully strong. As he grew to be a youth he became

ambitious and wanted to conquer the neighbouring Bhutan territory which was far off from its (Bhutanese) capital. In the meanwhile, reports of the prowess of the Lepcha king's son had been received by the people at Dupajong (Bhutanese fort) composed 50% of lamas and 50% of administrators and others. They discovered, by magical means, that the evil spirit had been re-incarnated in the young Lepcha king. The Bhutanese thought about exterminating this Lepcha. It was feared that this fearful Lepcha would be invincible in battle. Hence a stratagem was planned. A meeting between a Bhutanese officer (deputed to assassinate Gebu-Achuk) and a Lepcha delegation was held at Dalimjong. The lamas praying in the Bhutanese jong had "controlled" the spirit of the Lepcha Gebu-Achuk who was sitting dumfounded and confused. However, his countenance was so ferocious, that the Bhutanese officer designated to kill him was mighty afraid. A stammering and foolish servant of the Bhutanese side, while serving tea, took courage and cut off the head of the Lepcha king with his short sword and threw it away. The head rolled away and fell into a well, from where a voice came saying that it would take revenge. At which the Bhutanese servant cut off his own head and threw it into the same well to combat the evil spirit residing in the Lepcha king. They are said to be battling ever since. The spirit of the Bhutanese servant is said to be neutralizing the effect of the Lepcha spirit. But the place is still full of evil for the Bhutanese traversing that way.

David Foning, an educated Lepcha youth, at Kalimpong, had yet another legend about the might of Gebu-Achuk. The scene was a lake near Nepal, where Gebu-Achuk was facing a Nepalis Army. The Nepali Commander-in-Chief is said to have shot a musket at Gebu who merely brushed off the bullets from his chest and was not hurt. This could be attributed to some armour he was wearing inside. Nepali soldiery were astounded. Then the Nepali Commander who was standing hidden behind a

huge tree was struck by a poison arrow shot by the hero Gebu-Achuk from a mighty bow. The arrow pierced through the thick tree trunk and scratched the Nepali General, who felt faint. The Nepali Commander asked to be taken to his king immediately and reported the consternation in the Nepali army at the mysterious strength of the Lepcha Gebu-Achuk. The Nepali Commander died after making his report. The Nepali King is said to have had a section of this tree trunk with the arrow of Gebu-Achuk stuck in it to be hewn and brought to him. This relic is said to be found in the Nepal museum. I cannot confirm this.

To continue with the history of Pedong area, after conquering the region, the Bhutanese set up an administration. A Dzongpen or military governor, responsible to the Penlop at Paro Dzong was appointed at Dumsong. He had his summer residence at Dumsong Dzong where stables etc., were built to house his horses and military fortifications were completed. A place of worship or Gompa was also erected at Dumsong. Two or three tunnels leading out from Dumsong are said to exist leading to various points 6 to 8 kms. distant. The location of Dumsong fort is ideal from a strategic point of view being commandingly perched on a high ridge with steep escarpments on both sides. It overlooks the Rangpo chhu (*River*) on the Sikkim side. The winter residence of the Dzongpen was at Dalimjong. In the wake of the Bhutanese occupation, settlers from Bhutan moved in. There appears to have been no displacement of the Lepchas. The Bhutias probably settled on unoccupied lands. A fixed amount of tax, after assessment and survey of crops by civil officials was levied and paid by both Bhutias and Lepchas. Subordinate Bhutanese officials and Mandals (village headmen) are said to have been appointed. There was amity between the Lepchas and Bhutias, who lived together peacefully and cultivated the land.

This situation must have continued till the Treaty of Sinchula Pass in 1865 between the British and Bhutan. Bhutan agreed to the cession of the Duars to British India in return for an annual subsidy from the revenues of these areas. The area of Kalimpong was included. The British wanted to be saddled on the main trade route to Tibet from Kalimpong, Kalimpong was important for the defence of Darjeeling, which had been granted to the British in 1835 by Tsugphud Namgyal, the Chogyal of Sikkim, in return for British assistance against Nepali incursions, for an annual subsidy of Rs. 3,000.

Hence in about 1865, this area around Pedong also might have passed into British hands. On this point there is somewhat conflicting evidence. According to the Kazi of Sakyong, the area under review went to the British at the time of the Treaty at Sinchula Pass. But, according to Father Rey of the Swiss Catholic Mission at Pedong, the French Fathers who came here in about 1883, found this to be Bhutanese territory. Either Father Rey is wrong about his dates regarding the establishment of the first Catholic Church in Pedong or else the interest of the British in this particular area was marginal at the time and hence it may have seemed like there was no effective British administration beyond Kalimpong. The next possibility is that this area passed to British possession around 1880.

At this point, one might pause, to consider the story of the road which passes through Pedong. From very early times this was the ancient trade route between Lhasa and Kalimpong. Tibetan traders would have brought wool, yak-tails, hides, pashmina wool, borax, salt, musk, and medicinal herbs. On their return from Kalimpong, they would have carried back cotton goods, woollen goods, matches, soap, needles, tobacco, dried fruits, sugar, hardwares and precious stones. The trade at Kalimpong was controlled by Rajputana and Haryana traders.

The arduous journey from Tibet to Kalimpong was made on ponies and mules through the Jelepla Pass and Nathang. It is possible that besides the Tibetans themselves, a number of Bhutias from Sikkim may have been intermediate trading partners of the Tibetans conveying goods from the Nathula and Jelepla passes to Kalimpong and back to the Tibetan borders. Hence from the earliest times small settlements of Tibetans and Bhutias would have sprung up along the trade route as staging houses, storage points and transit trading centers. There is a small Tibetan community at Pedong whose ancestry can be traced to the Tibet trading times.

During the reign of Maharaja Thotub Namgyal of Sikkim, who ascended the throne in 1874, there was recurrent trouble with Nepali settlers. In agreement with the British, a settlement was reached for limiting areas in which Nepali settlers were permitted. The British were very keen to establish trade relations with Tibet and to demarcate the Sikkim-Tibet border. A Macaulary Mission for Trade with Tibet while proceeding to Tibet entered Sikkim enroute. The Tibetans had become very uneasy about British intentions and the growing British influence, laced with punitive actions in Nepal, Sikkim and Bhutan. Hence, as a warning against the Macaulary Trade Mission being permitted to enter Tibet, the Tibetans invaded Sikkim and established a fort at Lungthu (below the Jelepla Pass on the Sikkim side) 40 kms. beyond Pedong. The Maharaja Thotub at this time was spending the summer at Chumbi. The Macaulary Mission halted and urged Thotub to return to Sikkim. Thotub ignored the summons and the British imposed a penalty on him by stopping the allowance given by the Treaty of 1866. Thotub then made some agreement with the Tibetans at Galing and returned to Sikkim in 1887. In 1888 a British Expeditionary Force was despatched against the Tibetans at Lungthu which forced the Tibetan to retreat back across the Jelepla. In 1890, an Anglo-Chinese

Convention was signed, in which the Chinese acknowledged a British Protectorate over Sikkim and the Sikkim-Tibet border was demarcated.

Of interest to our story is the fact that in order to further British aims to secure trading facilities with Tibet, the British completed an unpaved road to Jelepla in 1879. This road would have generally followed the alignment of the old trade route. This rough road made by the British passed through Pedong, as did the old trade route. The British expedition against the Tibetans at Lungthu went through Pedong in 1888.

Tibetan nationalism was fanned by the ascension of the 13th Dalai Lama in 1880. He was a remarkable person and perhaps wanted to shake off the overweening influence of the Chinese through their Amban (Chinese representative at Lhasa) in Tibetan affairs. Tibetan suspicions regarding the British may have been enhanced after the Convention of 1890, to which the Tibetans refused to adhere not having been consulted in the negotiations for the Treaty. British overtures for trade relations were also spurned by the Tibetans. The British in order to demonstrate their "power" to impress feudatory states like Nepal, Sikkim and Bhutan, could not allow Tibetan intransigence and border infringements to go undealt with. Further, the alleged influence of a Russian Agent—Dorjjeff—with the Dalai, caused anxiety and alarm in British minds over the march of the Russian bear in Asia. Hence in 1903, the well-known Col. Younghusband expedition tried to enter Tibet *via* the North Sikkim route of Gangtok—Tangu and Giaogong, for negotiations. No talks took place and the Tibetans captured two "spies" of the British and jailed them. It was then in 1904, that the famous Col. Younghusband Mission proceeded from Kalimpong to Gaatong (Nathang), to Jelepla, Yatung, New Chumbi, Phari, Guru, Gyantse, Chang Lo, Karola, Negartse, Kamba La, Chacksam to Lhasa. At last in September 1904, a Tibeto-British Convention

was signed recognizing the Sikkim Convention, permitting British trade marts and giving the British a most favoured nation status. Though, however, the Dalai Lama had left for Outer Mongolia at the approach of the British at the gates of Lhasa.

Again, Pedong lay on the route of Col. Younghusband from Kalimpong to Gnatong. The earlier unpaved path had been repaired and the entire British Force to Lhasa passed over this route.

The Nepalis had been pressing against the borders of Sikkim since the 18th century and subsequently many Nepalese had settled in Sikkim. With the injection of the British presence in the regions of Darjeeling, Kalimpong and Pedong, the stimulation of trade between Tibet and British India, the setting up of tea gardens in Darjeeling and the Duars etc., a sizable Nepalis and Sikkimese labour force was inducted. So, it can be said that the Pedong area was injected with Nepalis settlements soon after the advent of the British. Sikkimese Bhutias too would have come in, though from earlier times than the Nepalis.

The British administered the Pedong area from Kalimpong. The system of "mandals" or village headmen who collected taxes and the "mandalis" or village councils was institutionalized. For the first time in the area, "pattas" were given out and land registration was introduced. This was a novel feature. Till this time land was known to be held by certain people but no record as such was kept. This new recording may have led to the distribution of more land in favour of the newer communities since the Lepchas may have been less alert and responsive to the new procedures. No other significant developmental or organizational system was introduced.

An event of consequence in the region of Pedong was the settlement of the Catholic Foreign Mission of Paris.

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 Siliguri 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

that areas for religious penetration were farmed out to the Protestant Church and Pedong was, at the time, outside the pale of interest of the ruling faith of the British. At Kalimpong, Dr. Graham, a Presbetarian Scottish missionary, had already started work.

The French fathers at first simply built a Church and acquired some land and started living at Pedong (construction was started on 6.2.1883). The Church still stands on the main road of Pedong. The first people whom the Fathers met were the Bhutias. By that time, the Lepchas had retreated to the higher jungles and lived chiefly as hunters. The area around Pedong was very sparsely populated and was on the mule track from Lhasa to Kalimpong (Kalimpong was a great trade center till the Younghusband Treaty of 1904, when the trade was limited upto Chumbi valley only). The area around Pedong was inhabited and cultivated for only about 1 kilometre on either side of this track. The determined French fathers, were still intending to enter Tibet. Hence, at Pedong they set out to learn the Bhutia and Tibetan languages. Bhutia was said to be like a dialect of Tibetan. The Bhutia Holy Scriptures were written in Tibetan.

At the time of the French fathers, British troops were said to be moving on this track through Pedong. Father Rey mentions a war between Nepal and Tibet and that the British came to the aid of the Tibetans. This is historically erroneous because the Nepalis invasion of Tibet and the sacking of Tashilumpo took place in 1791. The invading Nepalis were driven back by Chinese contingents aiding the Tibetans. But British troops must indeed have been operating on this track, which had surely been built for military purposes. But it must have been in 1888 that British troops marched to evict the Tibetans from Lungthu Fort inside Sikkimese territory. Soon thereafter Sikkim became a British protectorate and Lhasa's political influence in Sikkim declined though the religious inspiration was

basically still Tibetan.

When the British contingent passed through Pedong, it was composed of some Irish soldiers. Father Lesaleur of the French mission at Pedong volunteered to go along with the military expedition as a Chaplain. The British had no financial allocation for a Chaplain and hence on the return of the expedition in 1890 or so, 300 acres of jungle land at Maria Basti on the Kage Ridge were given to the French Catholic Mission as compensation for the services of the Chaplain. Father Lesaleur died shortly after returning to Pedong. Thereafter too, on the Young-husband expedition, a father from Pedong accompanied the troops as a Chaplain and performed mass at Yatung.

Father Desgodin and Father Hervagault (from Brittany) went from Pedong to establish a post at Maria Basti by cutting down the trees and cultivating the land. The two French fathers at Pedong were Father Morinioux and later Father Douenel came to join him. One of the French fathers established a Postal Service at Pedong. The old P.O. hut opposite the church is still to be seen. Father Desgodin translated the Bible into Tibetan and is said to have completed a dictionary of Tibetan words into Latin and French. During the period 1885 to 1900, the French fathers mainly cultivated the land. There were about 1,000 people, Bhutias and Nepalis, converted to Christianity. These early convertees dispersed to Darjeeling, Kurseong and Assam.

In about 1900, according to Father Rey, there was a great wave of Nepalis immigration, due perhaps to some form of religious persecutions. Most of the immigrant Nepalis were perhaps from the lower castes, outcastes and those wanted for offences for killing a cow or for marrying a Brahmin girl etc. A few of these early Nepalis immigrants who came in contact with the French Fathers were converted. Say about one-fifth. The Nepalis were more industrious

and thrifty than the Bhutias and Lepchas. They thrived very fast and developed into a very strong, influential and affluent community. Most of the land was bought up by the Nepalis who started off as tenant farmers.

Father Hervagault at Maria Basti, experimented with a communal system of farming like the German Jesuits did in South America. Since the Lepchas had no value for land, the Fathers did not give *pattas* to the Lepchas but farmed on a co-operative basis. According to Father Pious Marcus Mukhiya (Nepali Christian) who is presently the priest at Maria Basti, at the Maria Post at first, 10/12 orphan boys were taken on. These boys were educated and later on the land was given out to them. Gradually most of the original 300 acres belonging to the Church were gifted to Lepchas and later brought by Nepalis from the Lepchas.

At Pedong, the French Fathers started organizing the incoming population. A Co-operative Bank was started and run by Father Douenel. This Father was very popular and known as Lamba Father. He was rather like a 'king'.

According to the accounts of Father Rey, the Pedong area came under British rule only after the Younghusband Treaty of 1905. What he must mean is direct British administration. The religious boundaries were kept till 1932.

A stone building (which is still existing) was built for a school at Pedong in 1911. The St. George's School at Pedong taught in English and Hindi and maintained a very high standard. It was better than any other school at Kalimpong.

A hospital was arranged for by the French Fathers. Both in terms of funds and personnel.

During World War I in 1914 the younger French fathers went back to France. The pioneering fathers had died. There were only two stations here, at Maria and at Pedong. Father Hervagault remained at Maria and old Father Douenel continued at Pedong running the P.O., the bank, the school and the hospital. This arrangement continued till the end of the War, when everything except the school was taken over by the British Government.

In 1927, there were only three French fathers left at Pedong. There was no hope of replacements or replenishments because of the high toll in terms of manpower after the World War. Therefore, the superiors of the French Mission at Paris met with those of the Monastery of St. Maurice in Switzerland. The posts at Pedong and Maria were handed over to the Swiss Order in 1934. Fathers Durel and Gratuze went back to France. Old Douenel was heartbroken and went to the Nilgiris, to the mother house, and died there.

The Swiss Order sent out two priests each year in batches. The first two, who came in 1934, were Father Gianora and Father Fox. In 1935, came Father Schyrr and Father Rey (who has been interviewed and narrated the story being recounted). Father Rey is still here and has returned to Switzerland only 3/4 times on short holidays. Subsequently, two fathers came out every year.

In 1932, the Irish sisters of St. Joseph Cluny from Pondicherry opened a school at Kalimpong. In order to meet their requirements, a Chaplain from Pedong was appointed at Kalimpong. The religious barriers and boundaries were broken, and the Roman Catholic Church began its work at Kalimpong.

The Swiss fathers at Pedong opened another station at *Kashiong* with a school. Gradually, in nearly every village there were schools, being run by the Swiss fathers

i.e. at Pedong, Sakyong, Tendrebong, Sangsey, Kashiong and Maria Basti. In the meanwhile, the Protestants had also opened schools and were engaging in missionary activity in the same areas. Till the advent of Indian Independence in 1947, education in the Darjeeling District was entirely through mission run schools. After 1947, the Protestant schools were taken over by the Government of India, due to difficulty experienced by the Protestants from lack of funds. The Government also opened more primary schools. Since 1965, the Government has taken over the Catholic run schools as well, though the administration of the schools still lies in the hands of the missionaries. The St. George's School at Pedong originally taught Hindi and English. In 1951, it was raised to a High School level *i.e.*, class X. The medium of instruction was Nepali. English was the second language and Hindi the third language taught. In 1977, the Government of West Bengal has substituted Bengali for Hindi. Today the school has about 1000 children including a 100 boarders. The boarders come from Bhutan, Sikkim, Nepal and from the plains.

The Swiss Father Butty started the cottage craft of cheese making at Pedong in about 1940. It occurred accidentally. The Father, in charge of the cash, locked the cupboard containing the money and by mistake took the key and left for Europe on a vacation. Father Butty was left without resources and was hard pressed for money to feed the 40 orphans he had. By experimenting with Swiss recipes he started making cheese. This project was so successful that he sold his cheese to Kalimpong and to the Embassies at Calcutta and Delhi. Later, funds for the orphans were released and there was no urgent need for the cheese trade to feed the children. Father Butty moved to Kalimpong and set up the Swiss Dairy Complex there. Some of the Nepali workers trained by Father Butty have set up their independent businesses in cheese making. In fact, today Kalimpong cheese is famous all over India. Few people realize, it was all started off in Pedong.

The British had extended the Railway system to Siliguri by 1881. Generally, British interest in Pedong must have been as a transit stop. The region's educational, welfare and health services were mostly manned by Christian missionaries. Rudimentary postal and banking services were provided and some sort of administrative and land registration machinery existed. After Independence, this area was inherited by the Indian Republic. Administration has penetrated much more systematically and in the last five years a number of developmental projects have been set up. The impact of the Government will be discussed in a later chapter.

The People of Pedong

The Lepchas

AS has been said before, the Lepchas were the earliest inhabitants of this region. These people have interested anthropologists, writers of history and diplomats. Gorer, Nebriski and De Beauvoir Stocks seem to have observed the Lepchas for periods ranging from six to twelve weeks, in reserves, in Sikkim. Stock's account dates from notes taken in 1925 and Gorer wrote in about 1938. Claude White and Charles Bell too have left accounts of the Lepchas. These too would be based on observations made in the last years of the last century. Mr. V. H.

Coelho, P.P. Karan and W.M. Jenkins have written books on Sikkim and Bhutan and the Lepchas come in for comment.

My account is information gleamed from the above mentioned accounts taken as a base and checked against recent observations made about the Lepchas in the Pedong region. A number of people of different communities have been interviewed and their views are recorded. The Lepchas have not been a conquering people and hence the glare of fame and publicity has not fallen upon them. But it is interesting to note that should the account of Mr. G. Gorer who wrote "Himalayan Village" be taken to present the kind of "original" Lepcha culture, after the influence of Lamaism, then, the impact of intermingling with the Nepalis and the inroads that Christianity has made on the Lepchas, is enormous. It could be a thought provoking study as to what happens to the ethos, culture and identity of a tribe when exposed to new and alien religions and in contact with more vigorous communities and people.

The Lepchas are often referred to as "Rong-pa" or ravine people. It is generally held by historians that the Lepchas migrated into this area in about the 13th century from the direction of Burma and Assam. There is a school of thought which considers that the Lepchas may also have come in from Tibet and Nepal. There are almost two kinds of Lepchas, the Elami Lepchas and the Sikkimese Lepchas. The Elami Lepchas are said to have come from the province of Elam in East Nepal which was part of Sikkim till 1815. These Lepchas are taller and stronger than the Sikkimese Lepchas and there is a slight difference in dialect. Lepchas were to be found in the Chumbi Valley too. According to one account the local name of Yatung is Shasima which is a word of Lepcha origin. According to Father Rey, accounts left by the French fathers who tried to enter Tibet through Burma

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

Lepchas I have seen are as tall as the others, though they may be slighter in built than Bhutias. The Lepchas are said to have a great knowledge about plants, animals and poisons.

The Lepcha language, though said to be 5,000 years old and invented by *Bjyo - Menchy Olong* and *Sayun* (according to Dhendup Lepcha), is hardly spoken today except by the older generation. Nepali has become the *lingua franca* for the region. But a rather beautiful Lepcha script exists and a printing press in Kalimpong has the Lepcha types for printing purposes. The Lepcha script is said to be related to the Tibetan alphabet. To the naked eye, there appear to be flourishes of the Urdu script as well. The Tibetan script appears nearer to the Sanskrit model. Father Rey holds that the Lepcha language is monosyllabic and is a corrupted form of Tibetan. Bhutia too is a form of Tibetan but the Bhutia and Lepcha dialects are unintelligible to each other. The Lepcha script is said to have been intensively studied by General G. C. Mainwaring at the end of the 19th century. According to General Mainwaring, Lepcha was the language spoken by Adam and Eve and hence older than Sanskrit or Hebrew. Mainwaring constructed a Lepcha grammar and dictionary. He died before these were published. Subsequently, a German scholar published a Lepchas cript based on phonetic transliteration published by Grunwedel in Berlin in 1898.

Before Mainwaring, with the establishment of Lamaism in Sikkim in the 17th century, the Lepcha script must have been developed, based on the Tibetan alphabet. The main Lepcha works were Tibetan scriptures translated into Lepcha to facilitate the progress of the Lamaistic religion among the Lepchas. There are, however, references to even earlier Lepcha manuscripts narrating Lepcha mythology and legends which according to Gorer and even Father Rey, were destroyed by the Tibetan lamas in their zeal to

convert the Lepchas. This view of the fanaticism of Lamaism in Sikkim is held by the Christian missionaries. Though the Lepchas themselves have no live memory of such happenings.

The original religion of the Lepchas was "*Mun-Bong-thingism*"—a sort of Zoroastrian monotheism says Dhendup Lepcha. It was a sort of shamanistic form of worship of supernaturals. The religion has been called the *Bon Cult* or the *Mun* religion. Few present day educated Lepchas can relate exactly what it was all about. The Creation is attributed to *It-mo* the ancient "mother", and her husband. The "father" was meant to maintain order after the creation, which was attributed to female deities. The children of *It-mo* were Nazong - Ngyu and Takbo-thing (called Fudong-thing also). Nazong Ngyu had a son "*Tashey-thing*" the most popular form of the male deity. The Lepchas are said to be the progeny of Nazong Ngyu and her brother husband Takbo-thing. The story is played out at the foot of the Mountain Kanchanjunga, which is the sacred mountain of the Lepchas. An annual festival is held in December, during which these days, the main event is archery, in honour of Mount Kanchanjanga. The concept of heaven is *Rum-Lyang*, a place above the sky, where the Rum or Gods reside. Beneath the earth is said to be water, fire and wind (causing earthquakes). There are a great number of evil spirits, demons and devils who live in trees, rocks, mountains etc. The same Gods seem to be good and bad. The first Lepcha man and woman stayed in the "land of Mayel". There are many stories about the first human creations. The Creator also created a number of plants, fish, animals, insects, bamboos etc., for the sustenance of the human Lepchas. The most distinguishing feature of the old Lepcha cult is the conception of the Mun or the Bumthing—who is an intermediary between the Rum and the humans and even the evil spirits. Lepcha sacrifices all seems to be directed towards requesting the spirit to

“go away”. There seem to be no Lepcha temples. The cult seems to be centered around the pronouncements of the Bumthing, who is said to be possessed by a spirit and then makes pronouncements like an oracle in a frenzied state of a trance. There are ancient Lepcha legends telling about the Great Flood and the Tower of Babel and about the *Chi* (local beer) ferment. The method of disposal of the dead body seems to have been by cremation and not burial. There is a belief that the soul of a dead Lepcha is taken *via* underground tunnels to the Kanchanjunga. A guiding spirit invoked by prayers, helps the dead man through the tunnels to Kanchanjunga.

Lamaism was superimposed upon the Lepchas. According to some accounts it was a forceable one. While the Lepchas themselves say that it was a gradual process. The Lepchas seem to have absorbed the new creed of Lamaism while continuing their own practices as well. The Lama, as the priest of the Buddhist religion, and the Bumthing, who is possessed by a supernatural spirit, both found a place without warring with each other. The Gods of Lamaism—Sakya Muni, Guru Rimpoche etc., were accepted by the Lepchas—perhaps by identification with their own Gods. The Lamaism introduced into Sikkim was of the Nyingma-pa or Red Hat sect, which will be discussed later. The main thing to note is that though the Lepchas became Buddhist, they were probably not exclusively and devoutly so. The earlier religion never entirely went out. Lamaistic practices, images, tantric rites and organization of society were added on. No doubt to the disadvantage, gradual elimination and forgetting of the old religion, except the divinations of the Bumthing. Lepcha Bumthing practices have had an effect on the Lamaistic form of Buddhism as well, so much so that the two religions are now indistinguishable.

Christianity hit the Lepchas at the end of the 19th century and a surprisingly large number have been converted.

In the Pedong area, perhaps 80 per cent or more of the Lepchas have become Christians. The reason may be found in the disadvantageous economic and social position in which the Lepchas found themselves after the advent of the Bhutias and the Nepalis. Lepcha society and religion was not organized enough and the Buddo—Mun religion not so firmly believed in to resist the impact of the beneficent material advantages offered by the Christian fold. The effect has been one of confusion confounded. The Lepchas, even though Christians, still continue to believe in “superstitious” practices.

It is difficult for me to give an account of the Lepchas, ethics and codes, their social organization and peculiar manners. At present, most Lepcha's speak in the Nepali language. In customs and social mores they seem to be heavily imitating the Nepalis and Bhutias. Christianity has brought in the benefit of reducing the expenses on marriages, on death and on expensive lama rites in case of illnesses and misfortunes. There are really no entirely exclusive Lepcha settlements in this area, where the Lepcha tribal organization and social customs could be studied in isolation. In dress they wear the European style of clothes or the Sikkimese *Bokhu*. There is not much difference between the construction of Lepcha houses and those of others, except that the Lepcha houses may be of poorer materials.

One does notice that there are no Lepchas living in the Pedong Bazaar area but that they tend to live in the *Bastis*. Even there, the Lepchas own land remote from the main track and in the remoter areas, so to speak. At Maria Basti and at Tendrebong, I noticed that the inhabitants were Lepchas and Nepalis only, no Bhutias. At Kage Bazaar which was said to be a predominantly Bhutia settlement at one time, there are no Bhutias left at all. Only Nepalis live there now. At Kage Bazaar, a majority of *Chhetri Brahmin* Nepalis are the shopkeepers. At Kage

there is an abandoned Gompa built in the Bhutanese style of a Dzong. It is said that the son of the last Lama became a Christian and the family has moved away. At Sakyong, Pedong Bastis and at Kashiong, all three communities are living together—but not entirely intermingled.

I visited one of oldest Lepcha houses still standing at Tendrebong. In this *Basti*, there are 101 houses of which 31 are Lepcha, the rest are Nepali. The house I visited belonged to a Lepcha widow of about 52 years of age. She had 7 sons and a deformed daughter. She had three acres of land around the homestead. Two of her sons lived with her and worked on the land. The others had jobs in the *BSF* and in the cities. The lady herself was working as a house servant with a Nepali family on the adjoining plot. Her husband had died two years ago. The widow had a very gentle, beautiful but sad face. She was healthy but the family did not appear to possess decent clothes. She was dressed like a Nepali with a lungi and short coat top. The Lepcha lady was not unduly shy. The family had become Christian. Father Rey apparently stays in the widow's house overnight during his weekly visits to Tendrebong. The Lepcha woman could not say much about what Christianity was all about. She had an old harmonium and was prepared to sing a Christian song for us. As a concession to her new faith, acquired 15 years ago, a calender with the picture of Christ was hung in the main room or the lamastan. Before converting to Christianity they were Buddhists. According to her, except for 2 or 3 families, all the other Lepcha houses had become Christians.

The Lepcha house of the widow was about 80 years old built four generations ago. The widow and her husband had been born in the same village. Her house was built on four strong wooden stilts placed on huge stones. Half of the foundation was banked up with stones and mud and the other half left open to shelter

cattle at night. The first floor, reached by a short wooden staircase, had a verandah with a wooden railing on two sides. The back of the house was flush with a plot of land, at the back. The walls of the house were of bamboo matting plastered with mud. The slanting roof was thatched. The windows were small and square cut with sliding wooden shutters. There were no curtains. The house had a floor of wooden planks with spaces between the boards due to the timber being old and worn out. The roof was supported on wooden pillars rising from the four corners and with cross beams on the top over which came the thatch. Half of the roof area had a kind of false ceiling forming a loft for storage of grains. The loft was reached by a curious movable wooden log ladder with notches cut out for steps. The ceiling was black with soot from the kitchen fire. The living area on the first floor seemed made up by partitioning the large space into two big rooms in the front, two smaller rooms behind these and a kitchen opening into the backyard. The first room must be the ceremonial room, which housed the Christ calender, the harmonium, a plank bed and a wooden chair. This must be the room for prayers, to receive venerable visitors and for honoured guests to sleep in. The second big room was entirely bare with only a grinding stone. This was the room which was used by the family for sleeping in on the floor on bull hides. Some of the family slept around the kitchen fire. A small room opened out behind the bed room which contained a few boxes piled up. This was the store room-cum-dressing room. The kitchen was the next room where rice was being cooked. Over the fire place was a kind of bamboo swing hanging from the rafters. This was used for storing wood for drying. The rooms had high thresholds built into the door frames between the room but there were no internal doors.

Father Rey, who has worked for 43 years with the Lepchas of this area, started on his impressions about the

Lepchas, by quoting the saying of a venerable old Bhutia that the "Lepchas are a sinking and shrinking race". He said that the Lepchas were to be found in the jungle settlements engaged in agriculture. In the towns they were mainly employed as servants. The Lepchas are characteristically lazy people. They are shy by temperament and it is difficult to make friends with them at first. But once the barriers are down, the Lepchas are very friendly and hospitable and generous to a fault. Lepchas are very fond of drinking "Chi", a millet beer. This excessive habit makes them physically and psychologically weak and economically deeply in debt. Another noticeable phenomenon about Lepchas is that they are socially not well organized and have no strong leadership. This may be the basic cause for their never having resisted any religion or other invasion.

In the earliest times, the Lepchas lived together in village communities, employed in hunting and in a primitive form of agriculture. The apex of society was the Bumthing at first and then substituted by the overweening influence of the Lama. The Bumthing, could be a man or a woman, who went into a trance to cure sickness or decide any quarrels or other defaults or calamities. Lepchas were basically hunters and even now do not like to engage in agriculture. Lhasa came to have a religious tutelage over the Lepcha folk, who had hardly any contact between one settlement and another. They traded by barter, selling meat for clothes, salt and other necessities. Tibetan Bhutias came in the wake of lamanism and though the Lepchas resented its influence, but they could not escape it. The Tibetan lamas were better educated, more forceful and better organized. By the middle of the 17th century, lamaism became the State religion. A few Lepchas may have been initiated as Lamas, but generally the hold of the Tibetan lama and his decrees were all powerful and pervading. Rich Tibetan traders came to have a great grip and influence over the land. Very expensive marriage

and death ceremonies were prescribed. Many Lepcha families were taken away to Tibet as servants. All Lepcha holy books were burnt by the Lamas.

Father Rey holds that there is some peculiarity in the Lepchas blood strain. They live at altitudes of between 3000-6000 ft. They are said to have very little resistance to malaria or extremes of heat and cold. They are exposed to dysentery, worms and malaria. The average life expectancy is about 30 years; it may be a bit higher now-a-days.

Even now, a Lepcha consults the Lama or the Bumthing before going to a doctor when the case is quite hopeless. The Bumthing or socerer and the Lama are both consulted in the village. Among the earliest Lepchas there was some polyandry with two brothers sharing a wife. This may have been due to the isolation in which they lived. Mortality among women was high and a village may have suddenly found itself short of women. Now-a-days, monogamy is generally prevalent. Lamaism introduced very expensive marriage customs. A trusted go-between is appointed by the boy's side to negotiate with the go-between for the girl's parents. For the engagement, the boy has to give the leg of a bull to the maternal uncle of the girl. A lot of Chi, chang or rakshi, provided by the boy, is drunk. At the marriage, the boy kills a fat bull, gives payment in muris (one muri=60 kgs.) of maize or paddy to the girl's parents in addition to ornaments of silver and clothes. The popular ornament is a colliar. Once married, there is a high degree of faithfulness. Morality is very high and strict. Father Rey felt that this may well have been a Nepali Hindu influence. Widows are freely remarried. Lepchas are softer with and kinder to their children than the Nepalis. They do not scold so much. Children and parents are more devoted to each other than is the case with Nepalis. Deeper family ties and unity may be bred by isolation and due to fear of

jungles, devils and animals. There is no excessive pre-occupation with sex, as is maintained by Gorer. Infact, the Lepchas are the most natural people in the world. There is no evidence of "potential spouses" and legitimate cohabitation. Lepchas tend to follow Nepali customs which are very strict in this region. There is no particular sterility among the Lepchas, infact they propogate a lot. There is a high mortality rate due to disease and general weakness of the blood strain. Divorces are uncommon among Lepchas. Marriages are usually arranged and smooth going.

Lepchas dress like the Bhutias. Though the Lepcha colours are grey and red stripes, while Bhutia colours are brown and yellow stripes. The women wear a kind of long gown held on one shoulder and draped uptil the feet, tied with a waist sash. A blouse is worn over it. The hair is worn in a single plait. I have seen very little jewellery worn—though red and black Tibetan beads are popular. Married women wear red beads.

Lepcha food is simple and characterized by bad cooking—roots are roughly cooked. When out of money, no oil is used in cooking. Then the tea is drunk with salt and milk and sometimes butter instead of milk. Lepchas generally eat the same sort of food as the Nepalis but it is not so well cooked. All Lepchas have cows and drink the milk and sell the surplus milk and butter. For breakfast, fried maize is eaten with tea. At 10 o'clock they eat a maize porridge or boiled rice with lots of chillis. Lepchas are very fond of eating a lot of chillis, this habit causes a number of diseases. The meat curry is not well cooked, which results in their getting tape worms.

One of the dominant characteristics of Lepchas is a lack of foresight. They were careless and carefree people. Lepchas still own a lot of land, but they tend not to work

it with determination. Infact the Lepchas are capable of intense hard work but only under the direction and supervision of a strong leader. In the meanwhile, they tend to spend all their money within a short while and then subsist poorly for the rest of the year and borrow heavily. Lepchas have mortgaged their land for many years on account of borrowing a small sum of money. The rate of interest was very high and it had to be paid in terms of crops. This indebtedness was a very common feature which led these people to a downtrodden state and economic misery. Lepchas tend to take loans for even inessentials, like buying a radio or new clothes. In contrast, the Nepalis started off as servants, labourers and tenant farmers. Due to thrift and hard work, they bought up a lot of land.

Gorer makes out a case of lack of aggressiveness as a trait of the Lepchas based on their isolation, low material development and difficulty in wresting a livelihood. Gorer says that within their society, Lepchas regard men as members of society and not as individuals. I have had no chance of studying this corporate aspect of the Lepcha as a social being. In the Pedong area, he is no more living isolated within his own social group. The impact of the Nepali culture has made heavy impressions. But according to Father Rey, Lepchas do tend to be extremely timid. One Nepali shouting at the edge of a cardamum field being worked by ten Lepchas makes the ten Lepchas scatter like frightened rabbits.

There is no evidence of bonded labour in this region. In very few cases, a Mahajan may requisition the services of a young girl or boy for a few years and set it off against the payment of a debt. But this practice is infrequent and has almost disappeared.

Christian missionaries working among the Lepchas since about 1890 have tried to educate them, give them

medical facilities, teach them cleanliness, better farming methods, provide leadership to fight land disputes, to get mortgaged land returned and generally improve the lot of the people. It must be said to the credit of missionary activity that a lot of useful and dedicated work has gone into ameliorating the lot of these tribals. The Lepchas readily accepted Christianity because it gave a lot of material advantages in regard to medicines, legal help and general morale raising advice. The lamaistic religion was not deeply imbued in these people. Their only contact with religion was the disposal of the dead body by the Lamas. The hold of the lamas with their expensive series of prayers, in addition to back-breaking marriage feast expenses added to the burden of the already non-frugal habits of the Lepchas. Christianity offered a release from all this. More significantly it provided a leadership which was totally lacking.

Today, some Lepchas are in good positions in the administration and in the police. But the majority are still in comparatively depressed conditions with slight improvements in health and education.

I interviewed David Foning, an educated Christian Lepcha young man working as an Assistant to the Estate Manager of the Graham Homes at Kalimpong. He described Lepcha temperament as being sober and shy, they drink a lot but are not violent. They are lazy and easy going, due to the fact that in the beginning land was plentiful and life was not competitive and hence the Lepchas did not have to strive overmuch. Lepchas are very generous, hardy, but not aggressive, pliable and easily influenced.

Foning mentioned the division of Lepchas into a kind of graded tribal hierarchy based upon an ancient story. There was said to be a monster who used to ravage the habitations of the Lepchas. The Lepchas planned to kill this devil through 'Chi'—the potent drink. A number of

jars of Chi were kept at the entrance of the monster's cave. He came out and drank all this and became intoxicated. The Lepchas then rushed at him and hacked him to pieces. Those who struck off his head belonged to the highest caste, and so on. Those who cut off various parts of his body, thereafter came to be known by various names. Some of the names of sub castes were Rum-songmu, Molomo, Namchumo, Sadangmo etc.

David Foning did not agree that there was any degeneration in the Lepcha blood. If there was any, it was due to inter-marriages with other communities. This view is in direct contradiction with that of others, who believe that Lepchas have married within their own stock so much that resistance has greatly gone down. Foning held that morality was very high among the Lepchas. Girls were very shy and not outgoing. The position of women was that of equals with men. The joint family system prevailed. Old people were highly respected. A married daughter who left to live elsewhere with her husband did not share in the parental property and her paternal family would not eat at her house or spend the night at her new home. Inheritance was according to the wishes of parents. Generally divided among male heirs. Lepchas are very romantic people. The harvest dance is symbolic of their fun loving and romantic nature. Marriage is allowed after the third generation. The girls kept their maiden names, being called Mrs. somebody, was a Christian innovation. Premarital sexual relations were not sanctioned by society. He agreed that there is a tradition of "potential spouses". The wives of the elder brothers of a man and the younger sisters of his wife may be potential marriage partners. If a man dies, his widow may be married to the younger brother. But this tradition is now-a-days not enforced if the two persons concerned are not agreeable. But the wife of the younger brother is not allowed to marry the elder brother. The system of levirate and sororate are both practiced. At the death of

a married woman, her family must provide another woman to take her place. Foning held that this was due to the former isolation of the Lepchas and the high expenses incurred by the man at his marriage. Foning was vehement in stating that there was no legitimized adultery and that inheritable spouses did not indulge in free sexual relations. There was a fair amount of inter-marriage between Lepchas and other communities, but more with Nepalis than with Bhutias.

Foning said that the spread of lamaistic Buddhism was a gradual process and all Lepchas came under the influence of Tibetan rites. There was no forceable conversion, nor were the Lepchas conscious of being second class citizens. The old *Mun* religion was not entirely given up and the veneration of the Kanchanjanga continues till today. The two religions coexisted side by side. He agreed about the hold of the Lamas due to the elaborate rites prescribed and due to the forcefulness of the lamas. Christianity has spread very fast and is likely to spread to all Lepchas soon. The reason is that Christianity came at a time when the Lepchas, due to the competitiveness of society, found themselves at a great disadvantage. There was dissatisfaction with the elaborateness of the religious expenses of Buddhism and there was economic deprivation with land holdings being reduced. The Lepchas responded to the leadership and zeal of the early Christian missionaries and took to the faith which offered material advantages and also a stronger faith.

About inter-community relations, Foning held the view that these were good. The Bhutias and Lepchas he maintained were not too far separated culturally or in religion. Nor did the Bhutia deprive the Lepcha of his land. It was the Nepalis who shewdly and slyly took-over Lepcha land. The modis operandi was for a Nepali to come to a large land holding Lepcha and beg to be allowed to cultivate a part of the Lepcha's fallow land.

The Lepchas did only nominal cultivation and vast tracts were left untouched. Being generous, the Lepcha would agree. Soon another and yet another Nepali would appear and the Lepcha would be confined to a small bit of land surrounded by tracts strongly held by Nepalis. When the British dished out land '*pattas*', the Nepalis rushed to get their holdings registered and the Lepchas were slow to register their claims. It appears that due to their thrift, the earliest money lenders may have been the Tibetans and then the Nepalese. A lot of Lepcha land may have gone in mortgage as well. On the whole there was and is no animosity what so ever between the three communities. Infact the greater apprehension is felt about the newer classes coming in from Bengal and Bihar, who have overtaken the Nepalis in riches.

The effect of Christianity has been a mixed blessing. Certainly imparted education, awareness and health facilities to the Lepchas, it has also had the effect of obliterating the uniqueness of the Lepcha civilization. The culture of the Lepchas was woven around their old religion. This religion and even their language is now forgotten by the young Lepchas. The Lepcha Association recently resolved that though some Lepchas may be Christian, but specific Lepcha customs should be revived so as to make for a sort of renaissance. Therefore, while a man may have a Church-wedding but on bringing the bride home, Lepcha customs should be practiced. For instance, the bride is sent to cut wood and to light the cooking fire etc.

Father Pious Marcus of Maria Basti had the story that at the founding of the station at Maria in 1890 the area was found to be uninhabited. Due to some pressures, the Lepchas were migrating from Sikkim to this place. The Lepchas at Maria have no remembrance of their race culture, but the tradition of the Bumthing still persists. The Nepalis came as tenants at first, to whom the lazy

Lepchas were too pleased to give out their land. The Lepchas were generous and voluntarily let out their land. The Nepalis by thrift soon bought up the land. Indebtedness was a great problem among Lepchas who often lost land to pay a small debt. In a few cases enlightened Lepchas took advantage of the recent Government ordinance about remission of rural debts. But in most cases, they were too timid to reclaim their freed land. Even after acquiring their land, they will again go to the Mahajan to borrow money for buying seeds etc. The Government and Co-operative Agencies are often too far away and the procedures too complicated and the Lepcha borrows easily from the local money lender.

A young educated Nepali at Tendrebong stated that the largest single land holding was with a Lepcha. According to him, at Tendrebong the land originally belonged to the Lepchas. The Nepalis only moved into the unoccupied forest lands for which *pattas* were later given by the British Government in about 1907. He confirmed the Bumthing cult of the early Lepchas and that they worshipped snakes and spirits. He felt that the influence of the Bumthing was rapidly waning. Buddhism was a later imposition and never seriously practiced by Lepchas who ate meat and killed animals for this purpose. The early Nepalis settlers found the Lepchas engaged in primitive forms of agriculture. The early Lepchas were mainly hunting for their subsistence. They were very adept at handling bows with every poisonous arrows. They all reared cattle and drank milk. Christianity was readily accepted by the Lepchas for its advantages. But, this too is only nominally adhered to, because they know little of what is written in the Bible. They were relieved by the less expensive child borning, marriage and death ceremonies which the missionaries brought. Earlier on, Lepchas cremated their dead, but the Christians now have burials. Gurung testified to the comparative slowness of mental activity among the Lepchas. He felt that the race would

die out unless there was transfusion of more vigorous blood strains by inter-marriage. There was no discrimination between boys and girls. There was no extra rejoicing at the birth of a son. Monogamy was the practice. No Lepcha had two wives, though a few rich Nepalis may have more than one. Scarcely any marriage among the Lepchas broke up. Gurung talked of classifications among Lepchas along "family" lines. He may be referring to the legend that various families of Lepchas are descendents of the union between certain lakes and mountains.

At Maria Basti the Lepchas still retain their hunting traditions and are still known as the best and fleetest hunters. In about May, the barking deer is ceremoniously hunted. A fierce Goddess is invoked and a vow taken. The deer is chased for days and shot at with bows and arrows. Their fishing methods are peculiar too. The Murdung Khola, in the lean season, is diverted by blocking its course with large stones. In the pond thus formed, small fish are trapped. Another method is to spread nets made of bamboo frames and weighted with lead.

From the data gathered it appears that the Lepchas have responded slowly and hesitatingly to modern innovations. They are fast losing their cultural identity and leaning more towards Nepali social customs. Though modern farming facilities and education are available, they are the slowest to take advantage and the yield on Lepcha land is the lowest. Here again there are complaints that when a Lepcha gets an agricultural loan from the Farmer's Co-operative, he goes and gets drunk first, spends a goodly amount on drink and the rest may be stolen while he lies in a stupor. There are many reports about "poor breeding" which lead to the birth of blind, dumb and handicapped children. The diseases common to all communities in the area are T. B. and other respiratory diseases and stomach ailments.

The Bhutias

“Bhot” was the ancient Indian name for Tibet. Hence all those who came from Bhot or Tibet were called Bhutias. Even those Hindus who traded with Tibet were alluded to as Bhotiyas. The Bhutias in Pedong are of three kinds. The Bhutias from Sikkim are the most numerous. Then there are the Bhutias with family connections in Bhutan. These are those who came and settled at the time of the Bhutanese invasions. These are now less numerous. The smallest category of Bhutias are those with purely Tibetan origins from the days of the trade with Tibet and the great flight in 1959. Of these only a few families remain in Pedong and they are not so well off now. The Tibetan Bhutias are held in the highest esteem for the superiority of their language and education. Tibetan Bhutias engage only in trade. In physical appearance they are built taller and are redder in complexion. The Sikkimese and Bhutanese Bhutias too, no doubt, have their ethnic origins in Tibet as well but through the last three centuries have undergone some transformation in contact with the Lepcha race and culture and by intermingling with the aboriginals of Bhutan. The Bhutanese Bhutias are referred to as *Dukpa*, but there is a very little difference in language or religious practices between them and the Sikkimese.

Bhutias are people of strong physique and stamina. They too have mongoloid feature. They are hardy people and can live at higher altitudes than the Lepchas. They are better farmers and comparatively more thrifty, with a bit more of foresight and awareness. The large majority are lamaistic Buddhists of the Red Hat sect. Their language is a dialect of Tibetan. The Bhutias came into this region in the wake of the spiritual sway of Buddhism in the later half of the 17th century. They came first as lamas and merchants. Gradually they acquired land with the accretion of their economic power.

The Dukpa came with the invading Bhutanese armies. The Bhutias lived on very amicable terms with the Lepchas. The Bhutias are a vigorous people and have made good colonizers. They worked hard on the land and were good traders as well. Though weak at Arithmetic. They were more organized, with energetic leadership and easily established their domination. They are also more hot tempered and less complacent than the Lepchas. As a tribute to the state of their religious development and their mental alertness and cultural identity, it can be said that they have more successfully resisted the inroads of Nepali immigration and the reforming zeal of Christianity. Bhutia land holdings could not be penetrated by the thrift of the Nepalis savings, and only a marginal number were converted to Christianity. Not to say that the Bhutias did not have their ups and downs in the late 19th century. Kage has mysteriously been denuded of all Bhutia houses. The only trace of their having been there at all is the presence of an abandoned Gompa. It is said that many Bhutias died and the rest of their family members migrated elsewhere. Bhutias have pieces of good land and are settled along the tracks.

Bhutia social customs must have formed the basis which the Lepchas felt obliged to follow. In earlier times there was a great deal of inter-marriage between Bhutia youth and Lepcha women who were famed for their beauty. Nepali values must also have had an invidious effect on Bhutia mores and *vice versa*. As is common in this area, engagements are entered into with the help of go-betweens. According to Mr. James, the Bhutia Pentacost preacher and primary school teacher, the time lag between the engagement and the marriage is shorter among Bhutias than with Lepchas. Since the boy's side has to spend a lot of money on the marriage feast, sometimes the couple has to wait for a long time before the man earns enough to cover the costs of marriage. Such engaged couples are allowed to live together in some cases and may

even have children, before the actual marriage ceremony.

Morality before marriage is strictly observed. Divorce is not too difficult. Grounds for divorce are infidelity or a mutual desire to be separated. If the woman seeks divorce, she has to pay the amount spent by the husband at the time of marriage. If another man is involved, the respondent pays the amount to the aggrieved husband. If the woman does not want to marry anyone else but live alone, she does not have to pay anything. A man may take another wife, if his first wife is issueless. If a man lusts after a second wife, he will have to pay his first wife a cut off gift. Marriages break up often, according to James, and no social stigma is attached. There are a number of "illegitimate" children born—children born from cohabitation between the engagement and marriage time lag.

Among Bhutias, women have an equal position with men. There is division of work among men and women. Ploughing, felling of trees and those activities requiring hard physical labour are exclusively performed by the males. Bhutia women were very adept at weaving cloth and durries. The yarn used was sheep wool. This may be a general Bhutia accomplishment, but in this area, there are no crafts practiced at all. There are only a few sheep at Kage and wool is not readily available locally. Lepchas are said to be very skilled at bamboo basket work and rope making. But again in this area there is no commercialization of these skills. The 'price' of a Bhutia girl was said to be double that of a Nepali because of her money earning capabilities as a weaver. Older women are highly respected. Widow remarriage is freely allowed. Inheritance is according to the propensities of the parents, but sons are usually given the first choice.

Bhutia women have traditional pieces of ornaments called "*Khao* and *Jhuru*". The most sought after stone is one which is given birth to by a cow. I have actually

seen such a stone. It may be black and white or brown and white. The Kazi showed me such a stone. It was oblong, grey and opaque in colour with white lines forming eyes. Even the Kazi said that this phenomenon of a cow giving birth to a stone does happen but rarely. But when it does happen it is taken as an extraordinary sign. The traditional Bhutia dress of the Bokhu, is worn by nearly everyone. Western styles of dressing are adopted by the younger people. It appears that the Bhutia Association, like the Lepcha Association, is attempting to take measures to maintain the identity of the Bhutias and to campaign for correct census figures.

Tsering Dorji, a young and progressive cultivator and son of the Kazi, had more light to throw on the social customs prevailing among Bhutias who are predominantly settled in Sakyong. He too felt that social mores regarding marriage and divorce were now commonly adhered to by all the three communities of Bhutias, Lepchas and Nepalis. He said that among Bhutias now-a-days a smaller percentage of marriages were "arranged". Love matches are now the chief means of contracting a marriage. In the case of arranged marriages, usually men from the Gompa act as the go-betweens and make the arrangements. Two men stand as witnesses. All the food and meat for the wedding is provided by the boy's party. Then a sum is arrived at called 'the price of the mother's milk'. This is calculated according to the trouble taken and expenses made on the girl by her mother. This amount is paid by the boy's side. Another feature is introduced here which may be a Hindu influence. The girl's father then usually gives double this amount to the girl. Usually whatever the father wants to give his daughter is given at this time, so as to strength her position in her new household. Later on, the girl usually does not get a share in inheriting her father's property. Now-a-days, parents may even later divide their property equally among sons and daughters, according to their wish.

Divorce is uncommon. In Sakyong there are only three or four instances. There are a few instances of a man having more than one wife. Even childless couples do not usually remarry. If a girl does not like her husband and returns to her parent's home, then the Gompa men who arranged the marriage, go to the girl's parents and ask for her to return to her husband. Should the girl refuse to do so, then her parents have to pay to the boy's family the expenses incurred at the marriage. If the man wants to marry a second time, he has to pay a maintenance to his first wife, but only until she remarries again. Since women do not usually inherit from the paternal property, most women stick it out with their husbands. The mother or "amma" is a glorified and revered personage. The younger brother is responsible for his elder brother's widow. But he is not forced to marry her. The standard of observance of moral behaviour is very high. There is no prostitution in Sakyong. Though there are allegedly plenty of instances in the Pedong *Bazaar* area. Society disapproves of adultery and prostitution.

The family house is given to the youngest son. The elder sons are considered mature and able to look after themselves. The land and livestock are equally divided among all the sons, after the father's death. Usually, the father and all his sons with their families live together sharing the produce and the income from the land, during the father's lifetime. Should the father himself want to divide the property in his lifetime, he has to give land, a full set of bullocks and plough, to the son he is sending away to settle separately.

Bhutias are fond of their drink, but act more responsibly than Lepchas. They have a fairly good standard of living, though they are not as well off as the Nepalis. Taken as a whole, the Bhutias tend to spend lavishly on their clothing; the handspun Bakhu cloth is very expensive and a Bhutia must have 3/4 sets of these. Bhutias spend

a lot on eating as compared to the Nepalis. Hence, the Bhutias may be said to be less frugal than the Nepalis though not as wasteful as the Lepchas. The average Bhutia house is one storeyed with three rooms.

The house of the Kazi, at Mool Sakyong, is one of the biggest and oldest Bhutia houses. There are many modern additions but the main building is as it was. The earliest houses must have all had thatched roofs. An indication of comparative wealth is to have a corrugated tin roof for one's house. The Kazi's house is built three storeys high. High square walls topped by a slanting tin (not original but newly put on) roof. Patterned sliding windows mark the first floor. The ground floor is used for storage and as cattle sheds. The first floor has a wooden verandah on one side, reached by a steep wooden staircase. This is the living area for the family. There are 6/7 rooms, including a kitchen and a room for the family shrine. The main sitting room has painted ceiling edges and the supporting beams are painted with Buddhist motifs and floral designs. Armless divans and Tibetan tables line the windows. These are used to seat guests, and were also being used for sleeping on by the womenfolk of the family. The room where the family gods are housed has a most impressive altar, with images of *Guru Rimpoche* and attendant gods and goddesses. A set of the *BUM* (shortened version of the Kanjur) is also kept. Food is cooked on an enormous fire place, on wood. On a rafter swing over the fire-place, bows are left to dry out. The loft is again reached by the movable notched ladder. The loft is used for storage. The foundation of the entire house is of stone, though not dug into the ground. The retaining walls are thick made of wood and mud plaster. The outer house shell is of wood.

The distinguishing feature about the Bhutias is the observance of their religion—the lamaistic practice of Mahayana Buddhism. With distance from the original

source of inspiration, tradition and learning is tending to fade away. Fewer men are taking to the profession of Lamas and the general laity is less interested in the functioning of its religious institutions. But still, the Gompa is well maintained and does still form the focus of religious and social activity. It might be said that for better or for worse, the identity of the Bhutias will be retained so long as their religion and its functionaries are maintained. The religion of the Bhutias will be described in a separate chapter.

Comparatively few Bhutias have taken to Christianity. It is difficult to give the real reason behind this. There may have been a number of factors operating. The Bhutias are immersed in the lamaistic form of Buddhism, which will be described in a later chapter. Hence they do have an advanced form of a religion of their own and do not need to look to any outside religion to fulfil their spiritual needs. The Bhutias being economically better off than the Lepchas, the material benefits of Christianity would not have been such an attractive proposition. There are also superstitions current among the Bhutias which deter conversion to other faiths. One young Bhutia told me that the power of the tantric deities is such, that should a family convert to another religion, madness follows in every generation of that family.

According to a Christian priest, the Bhutias are difficult to convert because they are a people who like very few disciplines operating upon their personal lives. The tenets of Buddhism are lax enough for them to entertain. No personal restraint or self-discipline is required. According to the alleged death confession of a Bhutia, the Christian religion is too "hard" for the Bhutias to follow. Further, there is a great propensity towards the occult. A "powerful", evocative and a highly emotive religion attracts them most. Perhaps that is a contributing factor to the popularity of the Pentacosts who have an

element of emotion in their practices. I have not attended a Pentacost service myself, but I understand that there is a lot of wailing and emotive substance in their rites. Their baptism is also quite interesting. The person to be baptized is taken to a river and all sorts of unusual ceremonies are alleged to be performed.

The Nepalis

The Nepalis in this region are probably mainly those who have come in from the direction of Darjeeling. They now constitute nearly 70 per cent to 80 per cent of the total population in the area. A lot is known about the Nepalis and hence it is not worth repeating common knowledge. They are mainly Hindus, with a few tribals like the Sherpas and Thamangs following Buddhism and a small percentage are Christians. Nepalis of Chhetri, Pradhan, Gurung, Magar, Rai, Limbu and various other groupings are present in this region. These Nepalis are termed as a backward class according to Government nomenclature. The Sherpas are designated along with the Lepchas and the Bhutias as a Scheduled Tribe. Other classes of Nepali workmen called Kami (*smiths*) Damai (*tailors*) Sarki (*shoe-makers*) have also settled here and are labeled as Scheduled Castes. Among these Sarki, Damai and Kami are also included Indians of other communities from Bihar and Bengal who are plying the same trades and professions.

As has been previously described, Nepali immigration into Sikkim and Darjeeling in general was stepped up in the early 19th century with the advent of the British. In this particular area, the Nepalis may have come in greater numbers in the last thirty years of the 19th century. They came as agriculturists, acquiring land from the Lepchas and Bhutias gradually, after having leased land for farming in the beginning. They might also have taken possession of un-occupied forest areas.

These are extremely diligent people and very thrifty as well. By dint of hard work and good management of money resources and from obtaining optimum yield from the land, they bought up the land originally rented. The successes they registered led to apprehension regarding the fortunes of the other Scheduled Tribes. Even during British days, stringent rules regarding sale of tribal lands to Nepalis were formulated. But the Lepchas were quite careless and thoughtless about long term prospects and readily agreed to part with land in lieu of loans or through outright sales. The Indian Government has legislated such laws that make it difficult for Nepalis and other Indian communities to buy land from the tribals. Land holdings have also been limited to 25 acres per family. The land situation seems to have been frozen, to all appearances. But subterraneously, there might be a lot more land being worked by the stronger communities in repayment of mortgages and debts, than is visible from the records. Exploitation, such as repayment for a maund of wheat borrowed during the lean season to be made by the same amount in cardamum, is not unknown. Christian missionaries have made strenuous efforts to help the Lepchas to pay off their debts and free their land. But even after this, they off tend to borrow again and again. In such a situation it is not possible to lay the blame entirely on the more affluent communities for the misery of the less thrifty people.

The Nepali language holds sway and is spoken by everyone even in the remoter *bastis*. The Nepalis are reported to adhere to their caste and tribal groupings very jealously. There are allegedly many factions among them. They are better educated than the local tribals and quicker in adapting to modern innovations and education. They are obviously adventurous. They do not usually marry outside the Nepali fold. Inter-marriage does take place between Nepalis and Bhutias and some Nepalis tribes (*Rais*) and Lepchas. These are love matches. The strength of the Nepali population is reflected by the popularity of the

Gorkha League as a political party.

Few Nepali residents do not know exactly when and why their families migrated to this area. Generally speaking, the young Nepali generation living here is of the third generation of the original immigrants. Their grandfathers must have been the pioneers.

Mr. Gurung from Tendrebong, who lives on a 5 acre farm, was working in the West Bengal Department of Cottage Industries. He returned to his village to care for his ailing mother. According to him he has no clear idea as to exactly why his great grandfather came to this region. Gurung holds that the Nepalis had not actually dispossessed the Lepchas of their land but cleared additional forest land near the Lepchas settlements. Land not claimed by anyone. The Nepalis just settled down clearing as much land as they needed because there was no Government land in those days. The earliest *pattas* given by the British in Tendrebong are dated 1907 and the Nepalis had been here one generation before then.

The Nepalis are progressive and exceptionally industrious farmers. They have built better houses for themselves. They also have the highest standard of living. Modern appliances like transistor sets are owned by Nepalis. But the Nepalis are thrifty and do not indulge in wasteful and non-productive expenditure. They drink but not to extinction. Their expenses on clothes and food are moderate. However, they are not the wealthiest people in the area. The Marwaris have, by leaps and bounds, overtaken the Nepalis in trade and established themselves as the most monied community. Trading has passed to the Marwari community. The Nepalis are mainly engaged in agriculture, on timber sawing, as porters, as forest guards, in administrative posts, as agricultural labourers and road construction workers. Nepalis have no hesitation or inhibitions regarding work of any kind. It is said that

Lepchas and Bhutias, though they do occasionally work as labourers on roads, are disinclined to do outside jobs. A number of Nepalis from this region are recruited into the Army. On the other hand when recently a recruiting team came specifically to recruit Lepchas, not a single Lepcha was willing to join.

The other Indian communities consist of Marwaris from Rajasthan, Punjabis, Bengalis, Biharis and Muslims. All these form not more than 5 per cent of the total population and are to be found only in the townships, engaged in trades, wholesale business in ginger and cardamum and as general merchants. They operate the business of running of taxis and bus services. They control the textile trade, tailoring, tea shops and bakeries etc.

Position of Women

Bhutan and Sikkim have the same religion operating and till recently both countries had a monarchical form of government. There is a great cultural similarity due to the prevalence of the Red Hat Sect of Buddhism in both countries. In Bhutan "Dzongkhpa" (Bhutia dialect taken from Tibetan) is the national language. Sikkim has taken to Nepali as a sort of lingua franca reflecting the higher ratio of Nepali settlers in relation to the Bhutias and Lepchas. Historically too, Sikkim became a British Protectorate in 1890 and was relatively more exposed to outside influences than Bhutan.

What is intriguing is that while Bhutan is essentially a man's country with women occupying a definitely subordinate position, in Sikkim, and particularly in the area of this study, women enjoy a position of equality with men. In Bhutan, women of the nobility and higher classes have as much influence and education as their male counterparts and hold important offices in the Government. But in general, Bhutanese society is certainly male dominated.

The paradox between the position of women in Bhutan and Sikkim with cultural and religious similarities is very difficult to explain. All the arguments that could be put forth to make women have an inferior status in Bhutan are true for Sikkim with the reverse effect. For instance, women are not allowed inside the inner most chapels. There is no order of nuns in a "lama" predominated social system. Inheritance is not excluded for women but is generally perpetuated in the male line. In Sikkim all these religious disabilities pertain to women, though they are not strictly enforced. There is an order of nuns in Sikkim based at the Rumtek monastery but the nuns have to be ordained in Thailand. In Pedong there are no nuns to be met. The daughter of the Head Lama of the Sangchen Dorji Gompa is very learned in the Buddhist scriptures. But she is not a nun and is infact a divorcee.

Arguments which may be advanced about the high status of women in isolated and primitive societies, hold equally true for Bhutan. In fact, Pedong has not been so very isolated compared to the other parts of Sikkim. It always lay on the main trade route. Women work as hard as men in Bhutan and in Pedong. This has led to an equal status for women in Pedong but not so in Bhutan.

In the Pedong region the status of women is reflected in the very respected position of old ladies and the mother of a household. Women drink *chi* or *tumba* or *rakshi* just as openly and freely as men. It is a common sight after the "haat" to see a husband supporting his staggering wife. Though men drunk is a sight seen oftener. It is considered no disqualification to have borne a daughter. There is no stigma attached to a divorced woman. If a daughter lives with them, parents have no hesitation in gifting land and property to her. In the household, the woman is the final authority. The man will not even invite guests before consulting his wife. There is no occupation that is barred for women. They tend the house, fetch wood and water,

work in the fields and go to the market to sell their wares. More men than women leave the family fold to go away to find jobs in the cities. In the meanwhile, a woman is quite capable of acting as the head of the family and taking decisions.

Due to the isolated nature of the early settlements and the high rate of female mortality, women were paid for by prospective bridegrooms. Buddhism conferred some disadvantages on women in so far as women could not hold the highest religious offices, but this did not seriously detract from the importance of women in secular life. I think that the example of the Lepchas, must have had a great impact on the Bhutias. Among the Lepchas, the religious oracle could be a woman and very often was. The Lepchas and Bhutias in Pedong are very natural people and fairly uninhibited. This is again remarkable considering that in Pedong they have not been very remote from outside influences since the advent of the British. Even the advent of the heavy Nepali and wealthier other Indian community immigrants has not substantially lowered the position of women. In this regard the Nepalis and others have followed the Lepcha and Bhutia view.

At the moment, nearly as many girls go to schools as boys. But the drop out rate for girls must be higher. For the future, it can be predicted that as modernization takes place, the position of women may fall. This will have an economic and fiscal reason. More boys may get educated and thus become more fitted to obtain jobs. At the moment, parents educate their daughters just as eagerly as they do boys.

Infact, a number of educated Nepali and Bhutia young girls that I met were planning to join the Army Nursing Corp. But should the capacity for women to enter the money economy decline, their position in society will correspondingly fall. So far, there are not many jobs to

be obtained in the Pedong region. Money is earned from farming which is a co-operative operation jointly undertaken by the male and female members of a household. The other avenue for earning money is road construction and repair. In this activity too there are an equal number of men and women workers employed.

My forecast may prove to be incorrect should the attitude of society remain resilient and continue to recognize the role of the woman in performing the essential, but unrewarding in monetary terms, chores in the house.

Inter-Community Relations

It must be stated that inspite of the economic disparities between the three major communities inhabiting the region, there is a surprisingly high degree of harmony. It is amazing that there is almost complete absence of inter-community tensions. All three communities are entirely tolerant of each other. There is mutual co-operation in the agricultural effort. Due to superiority in numbers, wealth, education and social graces, the Nepalis are the dominant partners of society. The Bhutias are second in wealth, awareness, social cohesiveness and strength. The Lepchas are the weakest link. But there exists not the slightest animosity towards each other. There is an attitude of benevolent understanding of mutual temperamental lapses. There is no social stigma attached to any race but each community is gaining or loosing by its diligence in the material sense. There are evidences of the Lepchas suffering from a feeling of inferiority. For instance a Lepcha will not readily concede that he is a Lepcha. On the other hand, the Nepalis seem to want to intigrate and will tell you that they are Bhutias. May be the term Nepali has got associated with exploitation and they want to allay suspicions by referring to themselves as Bhutias.

The Lepchas and Bhutias have lived together for three centuries. There is much cultural similarity. The Bhutias could not have exploited the Lepchas very much because the chief agent of exploitation—currency—was not available in those days and land was plentiful. If the Lepchas are now indebted to Nepalis and others, to a large extent it is bad management on their own part and they probably realize this.

The reason for this state of tranquil community relations may be found in the difficult terrain. Life is so hard and the effort of wresting a living from the soil is so engrossing that there is little energy left for recriminations. The task of fetching water and fuel is continuous and everlasting. The land yields small crops after much work. The farms are far away from each other. Except for the Pedong and Kage Bazaar, where there are a cluster of houses, the *bastis* are not a collection of huts. Over an area of say 1000 acres are spread 60 to 100 families, living on homesteads built on their lands. These *bastis* range from 3000 ft to 6000 ft and more. Throughout the day, members of the households are occupied with their chores and there is no time or occasion to sit and chat with the neighbours. The meeting place and centre of activity of every sort is the weekly thursday *Haat* (market day) at Pedong—to which the farmers bring their produce to sell. From far away *bastis* people come to the *Haat* to buy their necessities. At the *Haat*, the wholesalers trade in ginger, rice, cardamum. Traders from Kalimpong put up stalls of colourful textiles, ready-made garments, plastic shoes and chappals. The locals bring dried fish, condensed and compressed cheese, *merchi* (a ferment use in the preparation of *Chi* and *Tumba*) *supari*, fruit and vegetables (of poor quality) grown in the vicinity. Bangles, hair pins, ribbons and *agarbatis* do a brisk trade. The currency which is exchanged finds coins from Bhutan and Nepal. The event is taken advantage of by political parties to make speeches. Or else a

medicine man will be hawking his recipe for stomach ailments.

The social and political organization of the three communities is represented by the Gorkha League for the Nepalis. The Bhutia Association and the Lepcha Association at Kalimpong get representatives from the Pedong and neighbouring areas as well. The Bhutias are organized in religious matters as well. The Gompa is still a going concern, though just about. They have a few influential *Mandals*. The Lepchas still do not have strong leadership. Christian missionaries are the ones whom they look up to. It is to be noticed that educated Lepchas who are doing well, tend to get quickly westernized and cut off their links with their villages and move away in space and in spirit. Lepchas from the *bastis* do not frequent the *bazaar* areas too much.

The Lepcha-Bhutia, Bhutia-Nepali rivalry to be found in Sikkim does not obtain in this area. There has been no politicization of race relations between Lepchas, Bhutias and Nepalis. Being part of West Bengal, no impact can be made on State politics whether there is Lepcha supremacy or Bhutia ascendancy. Infact the area has been singularly free from the machinisations of schemers trying to play off Bhutias *versus* Lepchas *versus* Nepalis. Hence, national parties like the Congress of Nehru and the CPI (M) and regional parties like the Gorkha League are looked up to. Due to the preponderance of numbers, the Gorkha League standing for the interests of the Nepalis, has the greatest pull.

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

material benefits, skepticism regarding religion has inevitably crept in. This perhaps is bred more from ignorance than any irrevocable proof of the falsity of religion. Superstition, lack of piety, greed, the exploitive nature of high priests and degeneration in learning have all contributed to the lack lustre state of disenchantment with belief in religion.

The Pedong area has not remained unaffected by this trend of moving away from a firm and all pervading conviction in religion. In Hindu society and in the erstwhile Tibetan culture, secular life was lived as part and parcel of a religious plan. The whole of the life span was a "Yagya" and a person constantly attempted to live according to the Rule and the ideals of righteousness and goodness. Today, religion is confined to a label of being a Hindu or a Christian or a Buddhist or whatever. The visible signs of it are some ceremonies at birth, marriage and at death. Even births and marriages have been secularized and perhaps it is only in the event of death that the sacraments of religion are still thought to be necessary. In this area of Pedong, since medical facilities are not yet sufficiently and easily available, the lama or missionary priest is also looked upon as a medicine man. Otherwise, there is a growing disinterest in religion. Nor are the religious festivals performed with any pious understanding or any great enthusiasm. It is more exciting to see a movie rather than watch the same Lama dances performed every year. But in times of distress and as a safeguard against the havoc of natural calamity, the gods are still fearfully propitiated. Man's contact with his Maker seems to be limited to spending whatever sums are demanded by the Lama or the Bumthing to say prayers to avert some sickness or misfortune. Priesthood or lamahood is not a profession which is attracting new recruits. The profession itself is falling from its position of eminence and reverence. Scriptures are read without understanding and rites are performed mechanically.

Even so, there are interesting remnants of the lamaistic form of Buddhism as exemplified by the Gompas existing in the area of Pedong. There is a Bhutia Gompa in Sakyong, a Sikkimese Gompa adjoining the Army Camp in Pedong, a Lepcha Gompa in Kashiong and a Tibetan Gompa below Pedong. These Gompas are so designated not because there is any great divergence in religious dogmas and beliefs, though there is some slight variation, but because of their location and the distribution of population. More Bhutias come to the Sangchen Dorji Gompa at Sakyong, more Lepchas and Bhutias pray at Kashiong and so on. No Gompa is exclusively for one section of the community. The Tibetan Gompa is the smallest, reflecting the size of the community. The upkeep of the Gompas is met from the revenues of the land owned by the Gompas. Some Lamas are tenants on these Gompa lands and pay a small amount from the produce of the land towards Gompa funds. Lamas are not paid a salary but they have no difficulty in earning a livelihood. They are paid with food, local beer and money while performing prayers for individual families and by officiating at death ceremonies. It seems that there is enough work for the Lamas. There is no religious school attached to any of these Gompas here for the training of Lamas. When major repairs are required to be made to a Gompa, a wealthy man or woman may donate the amount in order to gain religious merit, or else accumulated Gompa funds may be used.

The state of Buddhism here is interesting, in so far as its original inspiration came from both Sikkim and Bhutan. A curious mixture of traditions and beliefs has ensued. But, thereafter for the last 70 years or more, it has remained isolated and stagnant, cut off from religious progressions at either Gangtok or Thimpu. The community of Lamas has decreased and may gradually become extinct. No eminently spiritual person has come here for a long while to give a renewed stir or direction or correction or enlightenment to religious practices. The present

Lamas attached to each Gompa are carrying on with rites and ceremonies which they remember by custom and by rote. Great learning or theological understanding or spiritual power does not seem to be in evidence. However, religion as practised by the Gompas is still very much a going concern. There is not yet complete neglect and disregard. But there are discernable signs that with the passing away of the presently old generation, the whole system may fade away—like the fate of the Gompa at Kage. The Lamas attached to the Gompa land will try to keep their own utility alive for as long as possible. But a more energetic and concerted effort will have to be made to evoke civic interest in the preservation of culture reposing in the cult of the Gompas.

The Buddhism followed here is the same form of Lamaism based upon Mahayana Buddhism introduced formally into Sikkim in the 17th century from Tibet. A tantric version of Mahayana Buddhism tempered with Pon magical practices and mythology was established by Guru Padma Sambhava in the 8th century A.D. in Tibet at Samye. This school of Buddhism is referred to as the Red Hat Sect. A number of Buddhist treatise from India were translated into Tibetan. Padma Sambhava is credited with having compiled a number of works incorporating local dieties and mystical practices. These were hidden in caves and rocks in Tibet in order to prevent their destruction in the 9th century during the persecution of Buddhists by Lang Darma, a Tibetan king. In the 10th and 11th centuries there was a great revival of Buddhism in Tibet led by the Indian saints—Marpa and Milarepa (founders of Kargyu-pa sect). The Gelug-pa (Yellow Hat Reformist Sect of the Dalai Lama) look back to the teachings of Atisha from India, who travelled and preached at this time in West Tibet.

Gautama Buddha, the founder of Buddhism, lived in the 6th century B.C. and proclaimed his teachings by word

of mouth. But there were no scriptures left by him. Buddha spoke of the four noble truths, the eightfold path and the twelve causes, Samsara, Karma, Arhat and Nirvana. Gautama Buddha's philosophy was based on the truths of pain at birth and death, in old age and in sickness. These were caused by cravings for pleasure and lust. Karma was the effect of actions. Samsara was the field for the operation of the theory of the transmigration of the soul in a cycle of births and rebirths unceasingly. Gautama wanted man to be liberated from this inexorable cycle of Samsara and to attain Nirvana. The remedy was to follow the eightfold path of right thought and action. He did not believe in the Brahmanical practices of sacraments, liturgies, sacrifices, mortifications, propitiatory rites and intermediatories.

After Gautam Buddha, his disciples were divided about the interpretations of the Master's sayings. Councils were held at Raja-Griha, Vaisali and Pataliputra. Inexorably a full fledged religion with all the trappings of a church, a God, a paradise and a soul, developed. The division was expressed into the formation of *Hinayana* (little vehicle) Buddhism who opposed the theistic developments, and the *Mahayana* (Great Vehicle) Buddhism. This latter accepted theism, magic, symbolism, recitation of mantras, modification of Karma by prayers etc. The principle of Bodhisattvas was introduced. The Bodhisattva was one who had reached perfection but renounced Nirvana so as to stay among men and help them, as an intermediary. There were many manifestations of celestial Buddhas and the Logos. Finally, the Tantric cult of Shiva greatly penetrated into this *Mahayana* Buddhism. A connection was made between philosophy and yoga. An ascetic could turn to advantage secret power. A sort of short cut to Nirvana. An energy (in female manifestation) was emanated. Benevolent deities could and did assume terrifying aspects to combat evil spirits. To all these were added "protective deities", demons and furies. This Buddhism passed through

Nepal and got some more flourishes before it reached Tibet.

The Buddha cult now included an Adi-Buddha, his 5 manifestations called Dhyani Buddhas, whose dynamic creations were Dhyani Bodhisattvas. These had their Energies and Shaktis and took on terrifying forms in addition to pacific ones. Once in an epoch, a Bodhisattva would generate a Munushi Buddha—a mortal Buddha like Gautam Buddha. The voidness or Nirvana was a state of uncreatedness or the supramundane Bodhic all-consciousness. The Dharma-Kaya was the highest state of infinity and qualitylessness, as personified by the Adi Buddha's manifestations of Amitabha (Buddha of Boundless Light and source of Life Eternal, Vajra-Dhara etc.). The Sambhoga-Kaya is the state of the five Dhayani Buddhas, who have Divine Bodies of Perfect Endowment. There the pure intellect of the Dharma-Kayas, the essence of the Universe, is reflected. In this category are placed the five Dhyani Buddhas of Meditation (the manifestations of all perfect attributes in one body) and the peaceful and wrathful deities. The third stage was the "Nirmana-Kaya" embodying in human bodies, incarnate wisdom. With this Divine incarnation among wordly human beings immersed in the Illusion called Sangsara, is associated *Guru Padmasambhava*. He is placed in a category of enlightened beings who are reborn, retaining full consciousness, for the instruction and betterment of fellow creatures.

This explanation is given to make for an understanding of lamaism where the importance working backward is first given to the Nirmana-Kaya of the Buddhahood, as embodied in the great teacher. Padmasambhava was called *Guru Rimpoche* (the Jewel or Precious Teacher) and venerated through mystic rituals. To all these doctrines of *Mahayana* involved with tantric yogas was further added Bon concern with spirits or forces occupying fertile and barren places. The magical aspect of tantric *Mahayana* Buddhism appealed to the imagination of the Tibetan,

Sikkimese and Bhutanese minds. In addition, the *Mahayana* development of a theory of collective Karma, which could be transferable and propitiated through the prayer and sacrifice of a Bodhisattva or the doctrine of universal salvation through the sharing of the piety of morally and intellectually superior ones, found great response in the minds of these pastoral people. Hence Padma Sambhava and Atisa are seen as incarnations of the celestial Buddha Amitabha and the Bodhisattva Manjushri. The Red and Yellow sects of Buddhism in Tibet and surrounding areas are based upon differences in esoteric practices and monastic disciplines. For the common people all the monasteries of all sects are equally holy. The Red Hat Sect includes all the earlier schools of Nyingma (Padmasambhava) and the Kargyu (founded by Marpa) Sakya and such. The Yellow Sect called Gelugpa was a sort of reformist movement launched by Tgongkhapa in the 14th century in Tibet. According to this sect, Chenresi or *Avaloketeswara* is reincarnated in the form of the Dalai Lama. Tibetans look forward to successive reincarnations of Chenresi in the form of the Dalai Lama. In the same manner, the followers of the Nyingma (Red Hat), have a series of eight reincarnations of Padma Sambhava. It is also necessary to understand that not only is there a high philosophy of mysticism involving Transcendental Wisdom to gain the void or Nirvana—but the religion is full of symbolism. Every object and painting has a hidden meaning, which to the uninformed may appear to be an array of superstitious and grotesque forms.

The biggest and best maintained Gompa in the Pedong region, is the Bhutia Gompa of Sakyong known as the Sangchen Dorji Gompa built in 1836. Sangchen Dorji was some sort of a Governor or Agent of the Bhutan Government and is credited with having built a number of social services, including a school at Sakyong. The Gompa is built as a two storeyed building with stone masonry at the foundation or ground level. It is a wooden structure

with mud walls and a slanting tin-roof topped by a golden cupola. A flight of steps leads up to the Gompa compound which is on a raised piece of land. The entrance arch to the compound has the symbolic crescent moon with a ball representing the sun. These stand for the open teachings and the transcendental truths of Buddhism. The rectangular building of the Gompa has to be circumambulated from the left to the right side. On a beautiful railing of painted and carved woodwork are mounted 108 well oiled prayer wheels, which the devout move vigorously. On the prayer wheels are inscribed the words "OM MANI PADME HUM" on a metal foil. The significance of the prayer wheel stands for the ushering in of the Cycle of Existence and the Wheel of Law. Religious merit is attributed to the turning of the prayer wheel. Prayer flags mounted on tall bamboo poles on which prayers are block printed dot the country side. These are also said to be equivalent to prayers uttered as they flutter in the wind.

On entering the ground floor of the Gompa are rooms to the right and left which are used as stores and for Lamas to eat and rest in during religious festivals. There is a huge prayer barrel with a thousand inscriptions of prayers. This, when turned by pulling a leather strap from a sitting position, rings a bell at each completed revolution. This is the "Mani Iha-Khang". At this Gompa, the Khang seems to be covered by some kind of a parchment. A short flight of wooden steps takes you up to the entrance of the chapel, beyond which is a wooden verandah used for seating honoured guests on the occasion of the Gompa dance in March. The entrance hall has frescoes common to all Gompas in the region. There is a painting of a hermit meditating under a tree. It is difficult to identify as to who has been depicted and no one seems to know exactly. Then there is a huge representation of the Wheel of Life divided into six compartments. This Wheel seems to rest in the stomach of the fierce looking King of the Dead or *Shinje*, who corresponds to *Yama Raja*. According

to the rebirth doctrine, the soul is consigned to one of the six divisions of the spokes of the Wheel of Life in accordance with the *karmas* of each soul. In the middle of the circle are depicted a *pig*, a *cock* and a *snake* standing for ignorance, lust or desire and anger which are the basic evils which lead to *karma* and the continuation of the cycle of existence. The six compartments which are shown pictorially are those peopled with gods and heavenly beings, another with demi-gods or *Asuras* (Asuras are fallen spirits or rebels who are constantly waging war with the Gods). The third compartment depicts warriors. Yet another has Lamas and holy men. The fifth spoke has animals and insects. The last compartment shows a ghost world.

On another wall, there are depictions of the four Gods of the Directions. These are warlike deities guarding the four quarters of our universe. According to Buddhist cosmography Mt. Meru is the centre of the universe. Around-Mt. Meru, there are seven concentric circles of oceans and seven circles of mountains. Beyond which are the four continents. Below Mt. Meru are various hells. Above Mt. Meru are layers of heavens, thirty-three ruled by Indra and peopled with goddesses and gods, some ruled by Maru and in different gradations till the least sensual ones of Brahma are reached—this being the void of Nirvana. The fifteen concentric circles surrounding Mt. Meru ending in the four continents are guarded by these four kings who are given distinctive colours. The white king is of the Eastern continent and known as king of the *Gandharvas*. The Blue king of the *Kumbhandas* guards over the south. The Red king of the *Nagas* is posted to the west. The Green king of the *Yakshas* presides over the North.

From this entrance landing two doors open out. One is covered with a curtain and a sort of a frilled hanging. This opens into the main temple. The chapel is a large hall supported on magnificently painted wooden pillars. At one end is the altar and at the other end is the seat of the

Head Lama beyond which are doors opening into a narrow wooden balcony. The impression is that of a dark richly crowded room full of wall frescoes and colourful paintings. At the altar end, in a huge glass case, are housed very large images of Guru Rimpoche, two attendant wives, various goddesses, Sangye Muni (Gautama Buddha), some fierce deities, Chenresi and the many headed tantric Manjushri. At the side of the images are open shelves housing 108 covered volumes of the Kanjyur (the Tibetan scriptures) and the 225 volumes of the Tanjyur—which are commentaries. These particular volumes are said to have been recovered from the Dumsong Fort. At a brass altar carved with dragons are numerous water cups, a constantly burning lamp, rice and other offerings, a statue of Shabdrung (a famous Bhutanese saint) and various other articles and musical instruments. Placed on the altar are long folding copper trumpets, skull cups, human femur bone horns etc. Along the walls are placed standing drums on the sides and copper vessels used in religious services. From the roof hang old brocade hanging lamps and a frill of brocade hangings. At the desk in front of the Head Lama's seat are a Dorje and a Bell. The Dorje or thunderbolt is meant to symbolize that person who has realized the transcendent consciousness and has dominion over the world of matter. The bell and the dorje represent the open and secret teachings of the Buddha and are sometimes said to depict the means and the objective of Dharma. The skull cup is used by the Lamas to remind them always that life and death are two sides of the same coin and that death is but the continuation of the journey of the soul. The dragons or serpents represent the Nagas who guarded the ancient scriptures when they were hidden.

The walls are thickly painted and crowded with depictions of the various Buddhas, their incarnations, the shaktis in fearsome tantric postures and the eight incarnations of Guru Rimpoche. The ceiling beams, the pillars and the image case are painted in bright colours of floral

designs. The frescoes on the walls are paintings on cloth stuck to the walls. The various incarnations of Rimpoche depicted are those of Sangye Muni, Gautam Buddh. Pema-june or *Guru Rimpoche*, Guru Pema Gabu, Guru Dorji Thole, Guru Nemayusir, Guru Sakya Singye, Guru Singhe Daču and Guru Lodensuse. There is a curious belief prevalent that Guru Gobind Singh visited Sikkim. He is held in reverence as a reincarnation of *Guru Rimpoche*. This is a curious and confused belief and no Lama seems to be able to explain it with conviction. Historically it appears unlikely that Gobind Singh visited this area. Perhaps Guru Nanak may have come to be venerated, but how this inclusion of a Guru of the Sikhs has entered Buddhism, I was not able to find out inspite of persistent inquiries.

The second door from the landing is decorated with paintings of human skulls and skeletons and terrifying deities. The room is smaller and has some strange vibrations. A smaller case holds a covered deity and two fierce attendants in British period topees. The altar is painted over with huge serpents. This is the room set aside for the gods of the area—Dorje Ramba and Kumthuzam. Whether the inclusion of prayer to these local protective deities was introduced readymade from Tibet or picked up from association with the Lepchas, is not entirely clear. In this room, which was forbidden for women to enter, it is said that magical and high tantric mantras are recited. Ascetics undergoing a course of unbroken prayers for months are assigned this room.

Outside the main Gompa building is a Chworten. This is a structure which is seen not only in Gompa compounds but all over the countryside. It is a conical kind of structure and houses the relics of a holy saint or Lama or a venerated person. With the remains of the great personage are also placed holy books, mantras and other precious articles belonging to that person. The idea is that the spirit of that great person is given a house, so to

speak, so that it does not leave the area and continues to exert a benevolent influence on behalf of the people of the surrounding area. The construction of the chworten symbolizes the five elements of which the body is made. The rectangular lower block means earth. The round globe above it means water. The triangular head-piece with a crescent moon and ball symbolize fire, air and ether. A chworten is often the holiest place of all and going around it three times is said to bring great religious merit. The chworten at the Sangchen Dorji Gompa has an interesting story. The chworten is richly painted and carved around the edges and has freizes of gods on four sides. It is said to contain the skull of the founder of the Kanjur sect—Marpa. This skull was said to be in the possession of a wandering Tibetan Lama who came for a while to this area. The skull had great mystic powers. If it were touched to the head of a person, from the bone dry skull would ooze out drops of water as if in benediction. The local people persuaded the wandering Lama to leave this relic here and built a chworten over it.

Other buildings around the Gompa are a set of six rooms which are set aside for hermits and ascetics to live in. Old men who feel that they have discharged their worldly duties and now wish to spend their remaining days immersed in prayer, can live here. There are two or three old men who are presently living here. They always seem to be chanting prayers on their rosaries and are sometimes reading the holy scriptures. Food for them is provided by the village. At every harvesting, people set aside a bit of grain for these lay people who have renounced the world. Another building houses a big kitchen for preparation of food for the Lamas. A third structure is a kind of a guest house and change room for the Lama Dance.

The most popular religious function is the Lama Dance held on the 10th day of the second month of the

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

religious community are still maintained. He explained that the word Gompa came from the word Kshpo—"Ku" meaning the statue, "Su" meaning the religious community, the students or disciples. Hence the function of the Gompa is to be a place of prayer and a place to learn and to teach. At present the religious community of lamas at Sakyong has dwindled. Lama novitiates have to be attached to a learned Lama for instruction. But less and less people are undertaking to become Lamas. Even the public are now less pious and show less interest in anything religious.

It appears that the eight Lamas attached to the monastery are not paid a salary. They engage in agriculture on Gompa land for their living and perform *pujas* for private people for which they are paid. The Gompa has sixty to seventy acres of land and from the revenue of which repairs and other expenses on the Gompa are carried out. Affairs of the Gompa are looked after by a Committee. Its movable property is kept securely locked away. A *Kane* or resident Lama, like a watchman, is elected each year from among the attached Lamas at the *Guru Rimpoche Festival*. It is his duty to open the Gompa in the mornings, change the water in the cups, light the oil lamp and do prayers to the deities. He then locks up and goes home. In the evenings he comes again to do a few rites. The key of the Gompa remains with him and he is responsible for its security.

All the Lamas of this Gompa are married men with families. There are various grades of Lamas depending on their learning and religious competence. The *kane* type of Lama has very little knowledge. Most of them can read the scriptures which perhaps they have learnt by heart. They are also adept at performing ceremonies for all occasions to ward off misfortunes to propitiate for good luck, to fight off diseases etc. The longest and more elaborate ceremonies are performed at death. For ten days to forty-nine days lamas recite from the holy books. A kind of

death horoscope is cast and a death scroll is put up. From consulting the books, the Lamas decree as to the manner in which the body is to be disposed off and when. Sometimes the dead body is kept for ten days without a cremation. For days afterwards too, prayers are said. This is the Bardo state of forty-nine days between the death and rebirth of a soul. The usual disposal of the dead body is now by cremation, since there is no dearth of firewood in this area. The Lamas while saying these courses of prayers are to be provided with plenty of food and more than plenty of drink—*tumba*. These provisions plus the lamas' fees all add up to be very expensive. The dead body being taken for cremation or burial is placed in a sitting position in a basket and not laid out flat.

There is no dearth of employment for Lamas. Walking around the area, one hears the sound of drums and the tuneless blowing of horns and clappers and a weird chant—from some house or the other. The gods are propitiated to ward off ill luck and ill health. There is no restriction about meat eating. Though the Buddhist is not allowed to slaughter an animal—but he can eat a dead one. They say that this was allowed by *Guru Rimpoche* due to the climatic conditions.

During certain times of the year, in September at Buddha Purnima, for a week there is a collective reading of holy books by teams of Lamas.

The other Gompas in the area are smaller and not so elaborately built as the Sangchen Dorji Gompa. The Sikkimese Gompa is well frequented and it appears that the Lamas here are some sort of specialists at the death ceremony. A number of death scrolls can be seen hanging in the main temple. Repairs have been carried out here as well. The Lepcha Gompa at Kashiong has had extensive repairs done but it is the plainest of all the Gompas that I have seen. The guardian Lama is a Bhutia

and will not open up unless he is assured of a donation.

Lepcha beliefs in supernaturals, the bumthing's magic, lamaistic tantric rituals, worship of God of the Hindu pantheon and even Christian services are all tangled together. Sometimes it is difficult to identify when a ritual or totem is animist or Buddhist. For instance, dotted around the country side at the entrance of homes are to be seen "deus." A "deu" is an elaborate geometric arrangement of coloured threads twisted around a framework of bamboos. About twelve inches to eighteen inches high. White cotton wool is stuck around the edges of the bamboo and thread construction, to signify clouds or snow. The deu is a house for the supernaturals. At the base of the deu are seen mud and flour figures which are representations of supernatural spirits. At the commencement of a religious ceremony or on the occasion of auspicious events like New Year this deu is carved out and set outside the house and before it are placed eatables, grains and chi. The idea is to appease the supernaturals, so that they do not interfere with the work in progress.

Various other charms and magic are conjured up. Herbal medicines are invested with magical formula and given to sick people. Magic can be worked for evil purposes as well. Poisoning is often suspected. There is a deep and irradicable belief in the possession by spirits of human bodies. Spells are said to be cast as well.

Before concluding the subject of Tantric Buddhism as it is practised in the Gompas around Pedong, it might be worthwhile to give an explanation about some of the religious symbols used in the Gompas. The Red Hat Sect of tantric Buddhism which spread to Sikkim in the 17th century was the earliest version of a combination of the Bon religion (earliest primitive religion of Tibet) combined with tantric rituals introduced by Padma Sambhava in Tibet in the 8th century A.D. This was a synthesis

of all the spirits, demons and magical spells of the primitive religion combined with Mahayana and Tantric doctrines. The Nyingmapa Sect rather than the more austere and restrained Gelugpa (Yellow Hat) Sect was brought from Tibet. This was perhaps because the former was closer to the Lepcha's own form of worship and would have been easier to accept.

The differences in esoteric worship between the Sikkimese, Bhutia, Lepcha and Tibetan Gompas around Pedong can be explained in terms of the progression of Tantric Buddhism in Tibet. What is noticeable in this respect in the area of our study is the Sangchen Dorji Gompa. This Gompa has devoted itself to all the lamaistic divinities, with *Guru Rimpoche* as the more actively venerated deity. But the inclusion of Shabdrung, a specifically Bhutanese saint, shows the influence of Bhutan. The small Tibetan Gompa below Pedong must be following the practices of the Yellow Hat Sect. This Gompa was originally erected to minister to the needs of Tibetan nationals who lived in the area. The Sikkimese Gompa above the TCP must have been built to cater for the Bhutias immigrating into the area from Sikkim. This Gompa reflects the slight variations in emphasis between Nyingmapa rites as practised in Bhutan and in Sikkim.

The Lepcha Gompa at Kashiong is interesting because this is the only Gompa in the area giving a co-equal status to Tara. The patron saint of Tibet, Avalokitesvara, was specifically imported from South India. Padma Sambhava is identified as a human reincarnation of Avalokitesvara. Tara, the consort of Avalokitesvara, is a goddess whose origin is probably purely Tibetan. Infact the cult of Tara was learnt by the tantric Indian yogis from Tibetan scholars. The emphasis on Tara, in a Gompa more frequented by Lepchas might be a pointer to the fact that the Lepchas found it easier to identify Tara with their ancient Mun goddesses "It-Mo" and "Nazong-

Ngyu.” “Tashey-Thing” would have been similarly equated with *Guru Rimpoche*. The lack of the utensils and other trappings of the more elaborate Sangchen Dorji Gompa, may not be a mere coincidence. It must reflect the lesser degree of absorption of Tantric Buddhism by the Lepchas. The elaborate ‘rites’ and symbolisms of Buddhism would have not been fully comprehended or even heartily acceded to by the Lepchas.

Similarly, the form of Nyingma pa Buddhism has found flowering in greater detail and elaborateness of rituals in Bhutan. Sikkim in modern times has developed a lot of research in Tibetan theology with the founding of the Institute of Tibetology in Gangtok. But even earlier on, in the 18th and 19th centuries, the influence of the stringent Yellow Hat Sect must have acted upon practices of the Nyingma pa form in Sikkim. This factor again differentiates the Sikkimese Gompa from the Bhutanese Gompa at Sakyong.

The Red Hat Buddhism introduced by Padma Sambhava relied heavily on tantric elements, Bon protective deities and cults synthesized with *Mahayana* monastic arrangements and *Vajrayana* philosophy and wisdom. Padma Sambhava was considered a second Buddha and received even greater honour than Gautam Buddha himself. Padma Sambhava is pictured in his eight reincarnations in different aspects—wrathful, contemplative and relaxed. He is shown in the images as wearing a cap with ear flaps topped with sun and moon symbols and peacock feathers. He holds the dorji or thunderbolt in one hand and a skull cup in the other. A trident decorated with three heads (representing the three *kayas*) and a dart on top always forms part of a *Guru Rimpoche* murti. The dorji is the vajra weapon of the Indian God Indra.

The Kargyu Sect was an offshoot of the Nyingma pa inaugurated by Milarepa and his teacher Marpa in the

11th century. Sankya-pa and Karma-pa were again Sects following the different methods of Milarepa's pupils. These sects were not entirely different but merely developed along the lines advocated by the Indian siddhas, Tilo-pa and Naro-pa.

Atisa also visited Tibet in the 11th century and was the forerunner for the Gelugpa Sect. Atisa tried to make the "vinaya" or doctrinal aspect predominant over the tantra. He tried to introduce reforms. It was Tsong-Ha Pa who in the 14th century was able to establish an austere sect called Gelugpa. This sect eventually became the politically dominant sect in Tibet. The heads of the Gelugpa became identified as reincarnations of the Bodhi-sattva Avalokitesvara or Chen-re-zi. It must be noted here that there is no difference in doctrines or rituals between the sects. These sects only represent differences in emphasis on the various ways to reach the void or nirvana.

The Nyingma pa lamas wear red hats (tantric colour), the Bon or shamanistic priests wear black hats (mystical colour), the Gelugpa wear yellow hats (representing austerity). The colour of the Kargyu is white robes and the Saskya wear multi-coloured robes.

With the large scale settlement of Hindu Nepalis, purely Hindu God (mostly versions of Shiva and Devi), are increasingly worshipped. There appears to be an overwhelming predilection towards awesome divinities and powerful or magical incantations and processes. On the other hand except for the Brahmin Nepalis, the other caste Nepalis are said to be steeped in tantricism as well.

Christianity has been a greatly beneficial boon to the countryside. The schools and medical facilities and other services made available by the missionaries have benefitted both Christians and non-Christians. But it appears that at times the Fathers, with all their patience,

compassion and dedication, are completely bewildered and frustrated by the secretive insistence on the part of the Lepchas to hold with their animist or supernatural beliefs and customs. It does appear that the modern day Lepcha of Tendrebong only wishes to give his dead body to the Christian priest because it is cheaper to do so. But he clings to his practices and cures which involve supernatural invocations and revocations, which the Bumthing in a trance prophesies and prescribes. However, a number of Christian denominations have flourished in and around Pedong. Besides the Catholic church, the Protestant church is represented by the Scottish Mission Church and the Pentacosts have three branches.

5

Pedong and Neighbourhood

THE main tarmaced road from Algarah runs at an altitude of about 5,000 ft along the Algarah-Pedong ridge. Approximately two kilometres before reaching *Pedong Bazaar*, on the left side above the road, are to be seen two or three lovely double storeyed stone cottages. These appears like ideal places for smugglers to hide out in. Mystrified as to whom these belonged to, we climbed up to one of these houses. We came upon a caretaker family living in the kitchen quarter of the main house. The couple said that the house was built by a Gorkha Junior Commissioned Officer of the British army. We toured the double storeyed house built in colonial style with a

large British period wooden staircase. The house had five large rooms on the ground floor with assorted china dishes in one room. The two furnished rooms on the ground floor had dining room and sitting room suites of old furniture. On the first floor were four rooms which were locked. There was, curiously enough, a large chapel with a huge image of the Madonna and Child. Paper and wax flowers adorned the vases decorating the chapel. The caretaker and his wife were reluctant to tell us more about the owner and infact said that they themselves were the owners. There is an abandoned tea estate just above this house and probably the erstwhile manager and staff of the tea estate may have lived in this and the other two similar houses.

Half a kilometre further on, is the Sericulture Centre. A modern looking green building, surrounded by newly built houses on stilts—presumably meant for the staff. A nursery of mulberry trees grows on about 10/15 acres around the Sericulture Centre. Homesteads and terraced fields intersperse the upper and lower reaches of the road. Terraces are painstakingly cut into the hillside. One kilometer before reaching *Pedong Bazaar* is the Traffic Check Post, the Convoy Ground and the Army Camp. Here too, above and below the road are huts and farms wherever it is at all possible to level the hillside into even 6 ft of flat ground. Travelling along the road one does not realize that hidden behind the trees and boulders are small plots of land, reached by very steep climbing tracks. All along the road from the Sericulture Centre are wooden shacks which are ostensibly tea houses but serve local and Sikkim liquor as well. In the evenings, sounds of guitar music are to be heard from houses on the outskirts of *Pedong Bazaar*.

Pedong Bazaar is a collection of shops and houses lining the road in rows on either side. These are double storeyed wooden structures, many of them built on stilts.

Some very old houses with mud bricks in the Tibetan style can still be discerned. The Municipal Hospital, the shops, the Post Office, the Telephone Exchange, the Co-operative Society Office, the St. George's School, the Catholic Church, the Carpentry Centre are all located adjacent to each other. A small stone paved courtyard is left vacant in the middle of the *Bazaar* where the weekly Thursday *Haat* is held. The old Younghusband track runs below the tarmaced road and forms the second street of *Pedong Bazaar*. The shopkeepers and others live in rooms at the back of the shops and on the top of the shops. *Pedong Bazaar* houses only a trading community. A few houses are owned by the richer farmers of Sakyong and the other *bastis*. Open drains run through the two narrow streets and a terrible stench fills the air. The public latrines and dumping ground adjoin the shops in the back street from where the main track to Sakyong begins. The only chakki (flour mill) and a small lathe are also next to these latrines and refuse dump. Most of the time the drains are used as latrines by children and apparently the only method of disposal is the rain water which may wash away the refuse.

Upper Pedong is composed of about 30-35 scattered houses set in fields above the road extending to an altitude of 500-700 ft above *Pedong Bazaar*. These are houses ranged around the helipad and on the far side of the Army Camp above the Traffic Check Post. Tracks leading to the Upper Pedong habitations are rough stepways cut into the hill. These become very slippery during the rainy season. Where there are landslides one has to jump across the crevices, nullahs and jhoras. Accommodation in Pedong Bazaar is very limited, hence, a number of households in the Upper Pedong area rent out rooms. The houses in Upper Pedong are all those of peasants and agriculturists. Just above the Traffic Check Post (TCP) and the Convoy Ground in the small Sikkimese Gompa with hundreds of prayer flags hoisted on poles encircling the Gompa.

Lower Pedong is the agricultural *basti* below Pedong Bazaar and along the main tarmaced road going down to Rishi Khola. There are numerous clumps of bamboo trees to be seen along the road passing through Lower Pedong. Just below the Catholic Church, half a kilometre down the road, are the two big Animal Husbandry Complexes.

To reach Dumsong, the ancient Bhutia ruins of a Dzong, one has to climb up a steep cattle track from the Traffic Check Post. The track winds, skirting the Sikkimese Gompa, to a water reservoir built by the Army, passing a Forest Ranger's cottage to the meteorological hut in a bowl 500 ft above the Army Camp. Cattle, wood cutters and water carriers all come up this way and by other tracks leading from *Pedong Bazaar*, along the landslide area on the far side of helipad, through the Upper Pedong homesteads to this bowl. This is about 500 ft above the road. Then another steep climb of 600 ft takes one up to the crest of the hill and the tree line. Here everyone rests. On the other side of the hill is a dark and dense forest. The reverse side of the hill gets less sunshine and is always dark and damp. The treeline starts from the level of the meteorological office. From the hump of the crest line four tracks fan out. Three tracks go into the jungle and down the reverse side of the hill and meet the road near Munsong, which is a big village. At Munsong is a big cincona plantation. To get to Dumsong one selects the fourth tracks which runs along the crest of the hill towards Algarah. This is a beautiful walk. The climb of another 500 ft is a gradual one along the crest line. Huge redwood trees and gorgeous jungle shrubs, bushes, ferns and flowers grow wild and in thick abundance. As one looks up, the trees are full of orchids and fantastic tree ferns and huge mushrooms. Even around the roots of the trees, tree mushrooms grow in a variety of shapes. Sometimes a branch may have scores of grey coloured shell like tree mushrooms. Orchids bloom bet-

ween May and August. The forest is a glory of white, yellow and red orchids. One cannot imagine that people in the towns pay Rs. 10/- and more for each bloom of these orchid sprays which cluster the tree branches and trunks. There are huge ground ferns which have leaves three to five feet long turned at the ends like snails. Infact the whole leaf is like a twirled up wire and as it grows the twirl opens out into the serrated leaf of the huge green fern. There is another variety of a small plant growing on the ground which has dark green leaves and red berries but no flowers. These remain fresh for a week to ten days when put in a vase.

The tracks are not simple straight carved out gradients. One has to hop from boulder to boulder, climb up roots of trees, put one's feet along hoof holes marked out by cattle and thus literally climb and pull oneself up all the way. The track to Dumsong is matted with leaves and undergrowth and thick moss of astounding shades of green. During the rainy season the tracks are so slippery as to become a nightmare. One just keeps sliding and falling all the time. It is amazing how the locals negotiate these tracks with the heavy loads on their backs. During the dry months of winter, hiking in the area is a strenuous but very pleasant experience. One enjoys the unsullied beauty and majesty of the forests. One wonders why anyone would want to live in an ugly city. But come the month of May and the rains, the leeches become a menace. These are tiny thin things and they infest the forests and any sort of vegetation in millions and billions. If one were to stand still for one whole minute, atleast twenty of them would have crawled up your legs and feet. There are the ordinary leeches and the bigger cattle leeches. One does not feel them climbing up and becomes aware of them only when one feels a wet sensation. On a trek to Dumsong in June, I had atleast 30 of them inspite of having taken the precaution of spraying my shoes, socks and trousers with the repellent *DMP*

oil. It is a horrendous experience to walk in the forests during the "leech months" from May to October. The leeches are everywhere. Dancing on the tracks, on the leafy undergrowth, hanging from the trees. They are just reaching out with their fangs to get hold of something to bite on. The leech walks on its head and tail. It seems to arch the rest of its body then lift the head in a fang like movement and move forward. This thread like pest become bloated after sucking blood and I have seen thick leeches six inches long hanging on to cattle.

People relate stories of horses becoming mad with leeches sticking to their nostrils. The local remedy for obstinate leeches sticking inside the nostrils of a pony, is to ride the pony hard without giving it water for six hours. Then, when the horse is completely fagged out, give it water. The leeches can then be snipped off with scissors. The locals are quite unperturbed by the leeches and just pluck them off as they stick to their feet, legs or hands. Everyone carries salt to pour over the leeches to make them drop off. It is said that a leech must never be pulled out for the bleeding doesn't stop for a long time and a "Naga Sore" (infected and swollen sore) is likely to form.

The local wood cutters, men and women come along these tracks from 4 A.M. in the mornings, thrice a day, to cut and gather wood from the forests on the other side of the hill. Even from far off Sakyong people come up to the Dumsong forests to cut wood. All walk bare feet and the soles of their feet are so thick as to seen like leather. Men, women and children who came to get wood, carry triangular bamboo baskets on their backs. This basket is flat on one side and curved on the outside. The basket is carried by an attached cloth strap fitted on the upper forehead of a person. To avoid friction with the skin and hair of the head, a round bamboo "ring" is put, over which the cloth strap is fitted. Everyone walks bent for-

ward. Women carry loads of between 40 to 50 kgs. Men carry upto 60 or 70 kgs. Children too carry 40 kgs. Not only wood but grass for cattle fodder and water from the springs and water points is carried the same way. A round trip to get wood could be anything between 6 to 10 kilometres.

Dumsong fort is on the highest point on the Algarah-Pedong ridge. The track wends towards the Munsong side of the ridge. The ruins of the Dzong (*fort*) are hidden completely among the thick undergrowth and old trees on the crest line. Unless one scans the area very minutely, it is not possible to locate the ruins. It is not easy to distinguish the layout of the fort, so thickly is it overgrown. One can walk along a hazardous parapet which must form the wall of the entire Dzong. There is a sheer drop of a 1000 ft on one side and a fall of about 30 ft. into the overgrown cavernous rooms on the other side. Trees have grown into what must have been rooms. No roof or ceiling is left. There is a rectangular structure consisting of middle hall and four smaller rooms on four sides. This is my educated guess for I could not walk along the parapet on all the four sides. On one side it is possible to make out the ruins of what might have been a stable and watering point for horses. In a little clearing are the charred remains of lunches prepared by picnickers for whom this must indeed have been a favourite spot to visit. On the ancient trees people have carved out their initials. Dumsong Dzong has an stat feeling. Crickets chirp away madly as no where else in the forests. One feels like snakes must infest the pits which must have been rooms. Though the forest must have snakes but I came across only two snakes along the tracks during my numerous treks. The trees growing into the structure of the Dzong are covered with orchid creepers and the most fantastic shapes in tree mushrooms. The moss is thick like a carpet around the strangely twisted and winding roots of trees. There is an air of desolation. About 200

yards away on another bump on the crestline is another submerged ruin. I guess that this secondary ruin must have been the Gompa of the Dzong. Legend has it that from somewhere within the Dzong. There are three underground passages which lead to points below the Animal Husbandary Centre situated in Lower Pedong. During my explorations I came across the mouth of a tunnel about 300 ft above the Sericulture Centre on a subsidiary track leading down from Dumsong Dzong to the fir plantation. The mouth of what I suspect to be a tunnel must be about 2/3 kilometers from the fort. From the Pedong TCP and along the track that has been described it must be about 4 or 5 kilometer climb up to Dumsong. It would be worthwhile for Government authorities to excavate and restore the ruins of this historic fort. The local people have stories that the present state of delapidation of the fort is due to the British firing an artillery barrage at the fort as a punitive measure against the Bhutanese just before the Treaty at Sinchula Pass.

To come back to *Pedong Bazaar*, which is the hub of activity in the area, the scene is one of lazy inactivity during weekdays. The SNT (Sikkim National Transport) buses stop just beyond the *Bazaar* for a tea break. In front of the Church and School and across the road is a small playfield of the size of a large basket ball ground. Football is a favourite game and village boys play on this little playfield and also on the helipad which is Army property. Once a year, athletics and sports are held under the auspices of the local Mandali, on the play ground at the end of the *Bazaar*.

Haat days at Pedong are Thursdays. People come from all the adjoining hamlets dressed in their Sunday best. The more popular Haat is the Sunday Haat at Algarah. People requiring specialities may even go to Kalimpong. On Sunday the scene is that of happy holiday makers. Jeeloads of people can be seen riding in jeeps, singing

songs, going on picnics or going to Kalimpong. The women are invariably dressed in Bakhus and look smart and clean. The younger men and boys wear very mod western style clothes, denims and sweat shirts. People seem to spend a great deal of money on clothes. A familiar scene on Sundays is one of girls and women sitting out in the sun in the street and picking out lice from each other's hair.

Movies are extremely popular. Whenever the Army runs a show, the news spreads almost without announcement within a matter of minutes. People trek from as far as 10 kilometers away to see a film show and they are so well dressed that it is difficult to recognize them as the road construction workers, wood carriers and farmers that one might have passed during the day.

The other event in the year, besides the Lama Dance in honour of Guru Rimpoche, is the Annual Archery Competition. This is held in late January or early February. It is organized by a local committee. The Army lends the helipad for practices and for the final events. A cup is presented to the best archer on the final day on behalf of the Army Commander, Eastern Command. Each team member wears a Bakhu of his tribal colours. Young men from as far as Kalimpong and even Bhutan come to participate in the competition. Elimination contests are held for a week and only the two winning teams perform on the final day. The year I was there the finalists were a Bhutia team from Sakyong and Prabhat, a Nepali team. The Nepali archers won the day.

Two targets are set up about 200 yards apart. The archers from each team shoot from one end to the other. Every time the target is hit, the team members standing at the target end go into a hopping dance around the target. Every time an archer hits the bull he is presented with a white Khadda (ceremonial scarf) by the chief guest. These Khaddas are hitched around the belt of the

bakhu of the archers. A board keeps the running score of each team as they perform. The Archery Competition is a display of great strength and fantastic skill. Bows are prepared and seasoned over months. The arrows are tipped with the feathers of a special high altitude bird. Most of the arrows and the quivers for them are got from Bhutan. While archery is a national sport in Bhutan, in India it seems to be dying out. Pedong must be one of the very few places where the tradition is still kept alive. The Army has done what it can to encourage the sport. The local administration could do more to develop facilities for this sport. Perhaps the Army could enter a term as well.

The first trek that I made was to visit the house of the Kazi at Mool Sakyong (Middle Sakyong). One takes the main track leading out from the public latrines of *Pedong Bazaar* and keeps going down for about 1500 ft. along approximately 3 kilometres. One can go down merrily and almost run down leaping over boulders and skipping over the numerous joras and streams on the way. Another route to avoid the public laterines would be to go along the stone paved Younghusband track which passes through *Pedong Bazaar* and runs parallel to the main road about 200 ft below it, all the way of Tendrebong. About a kilometer out of *Pedong Bazaar* on the Younghusband track and just below the TCP is the Sanghchen Dorji Gompa. Beyond the Gompa is a big jhora and a small track leads out from the jhora. This also leads to the Kazi's house. It is an exciting experience to explore all the tracks. The track adjoining the Bhutia Gompa involves steep descents and passes through terraced fields and one has to jump down from terrace to terrace. It is all very well during the dry season, but during the rains the tracks are as slippery as though one were walking over ice and in places the slush is very thick.

Nature has been most bountiful in the beauty it has bestowed on the countryside. Waterfalls and gushing streamlets abound. One could imagine oneself as a movie star,

posing before these streams and water drops. Just before the Kazi's bamboo grove is reached, the track splits. One branch goes down to Murdung Khola and the other one leads to the Kazi's house and beyond to the Sakyong Primary School. The section leading through the bamboo grove has an ominous atmosphere and is always dark and dismal. Local legends believe that a spirit inhabits the bamboo grove.

Below Pedong, there is extensive cultivation and the land is flatest in the Mool Sakyong belt. It is impossible to describe the exquisite grandeur of the view of terraced fields which vary in hue during different seasons. The track to the Khola is again most pleasant and fairly wide, littered with bamboo leaves. The Khola would be a descent of another 1500 ft from the Kazi's house and about three kilometers in distance. The Murdung Khola is spanned by a bamboo bridge like a suspension bridge. Beyond the Khola the track climbs up to *Kage Bazaar* and *Maria Basti*. The most gruelling experience, however, is the climb back to Pedong. Climb, climb, climb all the way back, till through sheer exhaustion and breathlessness one sees stars!

I went into a cluster of huts in Sakyong. This was a Nepali settlement. There was a main house which was big. The house was double storeyed and white washed or "lepaid" over with the red mud which is locally available. Large floral designs were painted over the front walls. A number of subsidiary open sheds were constructed to cook meals for the labourers and to thresh the rice and wheat. Separate sheds were made for housing cattle. All houses keep dogs and it is rather scary to get past these dogs, who set up a menacing bark as soon as a stranger approaches. Many a time I turned back and was thwarted from entering a homestead because of the dogs.

A little above the main Nepali, house with a mud

beaten and "lepaid" courtyard, was a very tiny one roomed house. We entered this house through a tiny verandha. It consisted of one room partitioned off into a long narrow kitchen and a sleeping quarter. There was the usual notched wood portable ladder for reaching the corn, wood and food stuffs stored in the false ceiling or rafters of the roof. The long kitchen served as a store-room with a huge grain bin. At the far end of the kitchen was a plank which some members of the family must be sleeping on. The small bedroom had a large wooden plank bed. The beddings were all rolled up and piled up on top of a few tin trunks. The house was made of mud walls and had a thatched roof. The windows were just very small square appertures with no sliding or other apparatus to shut them. Apparently the occupants were not very rich. On inquiry we discovered that the smaller house was a cottage given by the richer Nepali to a family of relatives who were working as share croppers.

To get to the Sangchen Dorji Gompa, one can walk a kilometer along the Younghusband track out of Pedong Bazaar. This is a very beautiful walk, with banked and terraced fields on either side. Bamboos grow in abundance and bamboo leaves litter the track which is fairly wide. One can visit a typical newly built Bhutia or Nepali dwelling, along this track. The house is built entirely of wood, on stilts, and has a tin roof. One enters through a verandah, which is partitioned off at one end to form a kitchen. The main house is entered through a narrow gallery with a room on each side. The room on the right is the formal "Lamastan", where prayers are said frequently by a hired Lama to do "Shanti" or to appease whichever God is malevolent according to the horoscope. This would also be the room to receive visitors in. The other room on the other side of the corridor is the sleeping quarter. The Bhutia, whose shack we visited, was a reservist from the Army and was now employed as a carpenter at the Government run carpentry

centre in Pedong Bazaar, situated below the Church on the road to Rishi Khola.

Just before reaching the Sangchen Dorji Gompa and right in front of the Gompa, is a biggish lake. It could serve as a fish hatchery but the Lama's object to such use of the lake on religious grounds. On the dirty water of the lake are to be seen beautiful lotus flowers. Cardamum fields, ginger fields, rice and wheat fields, whatever the seasonal crop may be, are to be seen everywhere. The cardamum fields are very dark and thickly grown areas. Near the Gompa is the house of a serving Army Officer, Major Dorji. His house has the most beautiful creepers of a kind of wild rose. This isn't a rose really but more like a big *motia flower*, in hues of pale yellow, white and pink. Infact every house grows a few flowers.

The Gompa has been described before. The track continues for about another three kilometers past the Protestant Church, the office of the Junior Land Settlement Officer, the Panchayat House and the Sangchen Dorji School to reach Menchu. Beyond the school the track becomes narrow and there are a number of unbridged jhoras. Another four or five kilometer walk would take one to the outskirts of Tendrebong. Tendrebong is a very large and spread out block spanning the lower reaches of both the Algarah-Pedong Ridge and the lower Namchalaka Ridge on the Algarah end of the bowl. As one walks along the Younghusband track from *Pedong Bazaar* towards Tendrebong, the elephant tree on the Maria or Namchalaka Ridge starts changing its contours and seems to lift up its backside as though wanting to relieve himself. The dense forests of the Maria Basti Ridge are seen clearly with their thick growth. The colours of the forest change with the time of day ranging from various greens to a bluish tinge. A kind of electric current seems to hover before the view of the forest range. The range seems to leap forward like it were being pulled by a magnet. I often

experienced some sort of a mirage whenever I looked at the Maria Ridge from the Menchu end. It might be that I was always fairly tired having trekked nearly six kilometres by then. A number of tracks lead out from near the school into the Khola, which would climb up to Duppa on the lower reaches of the Maria Ridge. Duppa is between the Tendrebong and Kage blocks. Duppa and Kage are separated by the Maria forest. I did not go to Duppa, because a high incidence of TB was reported in the area.

A shorter track to Tendrebong would be to travel by a jeep on the road splitting from the OMC towards Labha. At the point where the road from Algarah to Labha meets the Pedong-Labha road, there is a small culvert. A small track hidden in the foliage under the *culvert* is the main track from Algarah to Tendrebong. This is indeed one of the most precipitous tracks dropping about 1500 ft straight down through a beautiful forest till the "*Forest Basti*" is reached. This is a temporary settlement. Families have been allowed to build shacks without being given pattas for the land. The shacks are shabby and ill constructed temporary sheds. The populations consist mainly of road construction workers. Picking one's way throughout the houses of the *Forest Basti* on a dusty track one hits the upper outskirts of Tendrebong. One has to wade through the edges of the thick loose earth of fields being prepared for cultivation and slide down from terrace to terrace to reach the houses of Tendrebong. We made our base at the house of the Nepali gentleman, Mr. Gurung. From the roadhead to this house must have been a descent of only about two kilometers. But the climb back to the roadhead is a gruelling one.

We visited the oldest Lepcha house of the Lepcha window described before. The tracks leading from house to house at Tendrebong and elsewhere in the *bastis* around Pedong are extremely narrow and hazardous. When the track is 12 inches wide it gives a very good foothold. At

times one gets only a toe hold. At places where there is a small landslide or a water fall which has cut away the track, one has to jump from one end of an eight inch wide track across the chasm to the other side. The locals find no difficulty in traversing these paths and move on these tracks even in pitch darkness.

Tendrebong appears to get a lot of sun. The atmosphere is one of peace, tranquility and lazy warmth. The Catholics have built a small church building. A Lepcha youth has been trained to officiate at the services and also to render first aid. If anyone gets seriously ill, the person has to be carried on an improvised stretcher to Algarah. There is no medical aid readily available in any of the *bastis* in the Pedong area.

The people whom we met in Tendrebong were very hesitant at first to talk to us. Our visit created a scare in the village for weeks afterwards. People were afraid that we might be Government agents. It appears that every-time a Government official visits the area, taxes go up. On being asked at Tendrebong, at Maria, at Kage, at Sakyong and at Kashiong as to how often the SDO or other Government officials visit them, the people were hesitant to answer. On being pressed, they said, some official does come once or twice a year. They talk to the bigger landlords, assess the taxes, have a nice lunch and go away. No one appears to have the courage to complain about anything or to ask for specific facilities. Maybe the communities living in the remote areas want to be left alone. Maybe the poorest and weakest sections do not know how their lot can be improved. Maybe there is no spokesman for them. Maybe no one dares to go against the interests of the wealthier members of the community. Personally, I think that an SDO posted at Kalimpong has too large an area to cover. A prefunctorary visit to every block once a year is not enough. Perhaps the administration in hill areas, should be differently organized. Here there is no great concen-

tration of population, but populations is widely dispersed over difficult terrain. The needs of the people have to be sponsored and followed through by political parties or non-partism associations of the village *Mandlis* or *Panchayats*. The Mandalis need to be reconstituted and made more progressive. Representation as a member of the *Panchayat* depends on landed wealth. The affluent section of the rural sector has a vested interest in keeping the officialdom happy and unaware of the real problems. Then again, any developmental scheme which is put into action would benefit the stronger sections of the rural elite. How then are the poorest of the poor to be benefited? Particularly when they seem to lack the will to improve their lot?

To get to Kashiong one has to take a track from behind the St. George's School at Pedong. One passes through the Upper Pedong habitations and then one has to walk along for about 5/6 kilometers just below the top of the Pedong Ridge. Kashiong is on the side of the ridge which drops into Rishi Khola and faces Rhenock. If one kept walking on from Kashiong for another 7/8 kilometres one would join up again at Munsong. The track to Kashiong from behind the St. Georges' School is the upper track. It is, as usual, a narrow path passing over sheer rock cliffs. The mountain is very precipitous over this route, for, there is no cultivable land along this track. There are a number of viewpoints from where there are magnificent views of the Rishi River and the Aritr Ridge. Infact from Kashiong there is a glorious view of the Rangpo Chu and also a vista of Sikkim. Pakyong, which is only about 20 kilometers from Gangtok, can be seen clearly from Kashiong. The school boys, whom we had taken along as guides, told us that a number of men have slipped and died while cutting wood on the cliff above the track. Kashiong itself looked like a rather poor and laxly cultivated village. Crops were grown but the quality of the plants and grain was very poor. The fields were not painstakingly looked after. The inhabitants

looked poorer than in any of the other *bastis* that we had visited. The biggest house belonged to the richest man who was a maker of "merchi", the ferment used in the making of "tumba", the local beer.

The Lepcha Gompa of Kashiong is at the end of the last fold of the range before it turns towards Munsong. The caretaker of the Gompa has a house just below the Gompa and would not open up unless we promised to pay a handsome donation. The caretaker's house was built in the usual style, but it was comparatively big. There were a number of smaller buildings for fowl and cattle and kitchen sheds. The verandah sported a number of framed photographs. The lady of the house was suspicious of us and fairly un-cooperative. While she went to call her husband, we had a peep into her house and were surprised to see a lot of old styled carved furniture inside. Over the door entrance was a pair of horns and some prayer manuscripts under the horns. These horns we were to see on the entrance of the abandoned Gompa at Kage well. The Lepcha Gompa at Kashiong seemed to have been renovated recently. It had a new tin roof. The walls were of mud. It was built on stilts and the Chapel level was reached by opening a hatch door in the ceiling of the ground floor and by going up a wooden ladder. The chapel was quite plain with the minimum of the traditional utensils and lamps etc. There were three big images of Sangye Muni, Guru Rimpoche and Tara.

In the courtyard of the Gompa was an adjoining shack obviously meant for Lamas to rest in during festivals. There was also a chworten donated by an old lady. A great landmark was a village tap near the Gompa which carried a plaque of having been installed in 1975 by the SDO, if I remember aright.

We returned to Pedong by a different route which went from Lower Kashiong along the folds of the ridge

and climbed up near the Animal Husbandry Complex II. This was a better track than the path that we had come by. Passing by the habitations of Kashiong we saw the village Church and School run by Catholic missionaries. We were told the story of an old medicine man who had died a few years ago. Apparently, even according to Father Rey, this man knew of the most unique herbs and could concoct medicines which acted like miracle cures for the most serious diseases. The old man, unfortunately, kept his formulas and knowledge a secret. The reason being that his knowledge was a gift of the gods and he was not allowed to pass it on to anyone else. Not even his son was handed over the father's secrets. There was, I must admit, an air of mystery about Kashiong.

Just below the Animal Husbandry Complex II and along the patch of the Younghusband track which crosses over this section of the hill, there is a huge stone cross erected against the hillside. About 50 narrow steps made of stone masonry lead to the cross. At the base of this cross which is about 15 ft. high there is no inscription. No one seems to know who made this cross and why or whether it marks a grave.

I was always keen to get on to the Namchalaka Ridge and to visit Kage and Maria Basti. I was always told that the track ~~was too~~ long for me to make on foot and that I ought to hire a pony. We set about to make plans as to how one could trek to Maria and be back to Pedong the same day. The main route taken by the locals was the track to Murdung Khola across the bamboo bridge and then climb up the Namchalakha Ridge upto Kage. This involved a distance of perhaps 10 kilometers, a descent of 3000 ft and a climb of 3000 ft on one way of the trip. The round trip in one day seemed as impossibility for me to undertake. Hence we hit upon an ingenious plan. We went by jeep along the Pedong-Labha road and dis-

mounted at Milestone 7 near Labha. From here a track led us up the hill to join with the main track which runs along the entire crestline of the Namchalakha Ridge. Once we reached the crestline of the Maria or Namchalakha Ridge (a climb of about a 1000 or 1500 ft.) from the road, it was an easy track to walk along. Mrs. Kuldip Singh and I undertook this arduous trip accompanied by Vinod Gupta. On the track along the crestline we came across a small pond formed by collection of rain water, at which cattle were drinking. I was looking for a big lake at the top of the Ridge that I had been told about. I have heard that when there were wild animals in the forest that they came to drink from this lake. I didn't find the lake. We must have walked about 5/6 kilometers along the crestline, when the highest point of the Ridge was reached. There were altitude markings at various spots. Near this highest point of approximately 7,500 ft., the track split. One track went down towards the Labha side of the Ridge to the village of Ladaam. The left track descended to Maria. We continued our journey through the cardamum plantations of Upper Maria among the thick jungle of huge trees of the extremely dense Maria forest. The track became narrower and steeper. From the splitting point of the track it was all a descent. We also saw the elephant tree about 500 ft above the track. About an hour later, after going down a distance of about four kilometres, we got a glimpse of the *Maria Basti* settlement. It was an astonishingly pretty sight. A neat cluster of many red roofed buildings set in a rectangular arrangement. Looking at *Maria Basti* one could have said that it was Swiss village. The history of *Maria Basti* has already been recounted.

We were met by Father Pious Marcus. We visited the Church, which is an impressive building. What struck me was the shape of the crosses, which were more like the Coptic crosses. Father Marcus explained that the cross had to be made ornamental because it appealed to the locals. The resident Father at Maria has his little cottage

with a separate building for the kitchen and a latrine. We were surprised to find a convent at Maria. A neat double storeyed building made of stone. The school at Maria Basti is run by four nuns. The children are given milk and a mid-day meal by the nuns. There was a playing field for the school. The children appeared to be healthy and happy. No doubt that a school of this nature in that God forsaken jungle is a boon beyond one's imagination. The missionaries grow their own cereals and vegetables and have a small carpenter's workshop. What amazed me was how these houses at Maria and Kage were ever built. All the material must have been imported from the road-head at Rishi Bridge or from Labha. And it must all have been carried on a manpack basis. For not even ponies can climb up the sheer drop of the Namchalakha Ridge beyond Kage into the Rishi River. Incidentally a track splits from just after *Maria Basti* to go to Chungsing and towards the Rishi River to go to Rhenock over the Aritar Ridge.

From Maria Basti, a couple of kilometers brought us to *Kage Bazaar*. This is almost as big a *Bazaar* as that of Pedong. The largest number of shops were provision stores. Then on to *Kage Basti*. We passed the abandoned Gompa, the walls of which have cracked. It is built in the style of a Bhutanese Dzong. We tried to have the Gompa opened but no one knew who would have the keys. There is a Boy's School and a Girl's School at Kage. These are big buildings with play grounds. One has to cut across the school compounds to get on to the track to Rishi Bridge. From Kage to the Rishi Bridge is one sudden drop and the winding track goes down almost perpendicular and is extremely narrow. Actually there is no track to speak of. One has to find footholds on the stones and the roots of trees. From Kage it took us two hours to reach the bed of the Rishi River. Actually we realized later on that we had descended not to the Rishi River but to the last 100 metres of the Murdung before

it joins up with the Rishi River. The Murdung Khola is extremely fast flowing, as are all the rivers of Sikkim. We crossed over on a bamboo bridge which was broken. The last climb up to the road took away the last ounce of our energy. We met the road two kilometers short of the Rishi Bridge. Looking back at the track that we had come down along, we were impressed with our own achievement. Traversing this long track is a great strain on one's knees. The total track must have been somewhere between 15 to 19 kilometres.

On these various treks, we talked to people and visited their homes. The landscape changes its hues with the seasons. The winter months are dry and the countryside and fields look brown and barren. The peach and plum trees start flowering in about April and so also the wild flowers and gladioli. In May the countryside becomes a pleasing green and early June opens vistas of lucious bounty in nature's drapery for the region. With the onset of very heavy rains from mid-June onwards, the undergrowth becomes overpowering. The fogs so thick and persistent as to become stifling. The relatively fog free months are between November and March. In the months of July and August, the sun is rarely seen and the rain falls mercilessly and incessantly. There is an over abundance of water in the jhoras. Streamlets are formed out of the tracks and pathways.

Crops are planted according to the seasons. Maize and wheat in the winter months. Rice, ginger, dals just before the rains. The fields are prepared often by burning the stubble of the maize fields. Cardamum, the little that the plants produce, is harvested in August.

The people appear fairly contented and relatively happy. Life is extremely hard, but the locals are very hardy and strong. There is no absolute grinding poverty such as one hears of in Bihar, though there are serious

problems of the intake of adequate nutritive food. Yet, I don't think that any family owing land in that area could entirely starve itself to death. There is no overcordiality or instant friendliness to strangers. In the *bastis*, strangers are viewed suspiciously as intruders. In the settlements along the road, people are atuning themselves and imitating the machinations of making a quick buck. Political parties do whip up awareness, but not with a view to improving the lot of the people, but only to canvass for votes. The only truly social welfare agency operating in the area, is the Church.

Impact of Government and Administration

THE profile of the average farmer family in the region under discussion would be that of a family of five to eight persons belonging to three generations living in a family homestead and tilling the land. The average homestead does have a pair of bulls for ploughing and a couple of cows for milk. A few hens are kept. Pigs are nearly always reared and fed on the millet used for making tumba and on other scraps. In the older houses the animals are housed under the main living room, *i.e.*, between the stilts upon which the house is constructed. In the newer and renovated constructions, a temporary shed of thatch and bamboo is constructed adjacent to the main

house. Bee-keeping is also engaged in by some people. The rafters and false ceilings of the main house are used for storage and for drying of foodgrains. A house has usually three rooms including the kitchen, sleeping quarters and a ceremonial lamastan which is also used for storage of valuable articles and the overflow of foodgrains. Every household has a small plot around the house where a few vegetables are grown. Invariably there are a few fruit trees—peaches, plums or pears and bananas and oranges around the house. A few flowers, gladioli, hibiscus, lilies, ponsettias, and orchids are tended carefully. Bamboos are invariably grown in clusters. The chief wealth of the landed gentry lies in their bamboo groves.

The main activity of the household consists of working on the land, preparing it, ploughing it, planting, weeding and reaping. Women and children chiefly and men also, expend an enormous amount of time and energy in fetching water from sources three to five kilometers distant. Cutting and fetching wood from the jungles which are fast depleting and stocking up such fuel is almost an obsessive and ceaseless and full time activity. Cattle are taken out for grazing by older children. Older children, girls and boys, perform a lot of the hard labour involved in fetching water and wood for fuel. Women also make atleast two trips a day towards the jungle infested with leeches for water and wood over steep, slippery and unformed tracks.

The main crops cultivated are rice, wheat, maize, millets, cardamum, ginger and oranges. Pulses are grown for home consumption. The different crops are eaten in rotation. But the preference is for rice, which is grown most extensively. Wheat does not register a high output. Very few families have a surplus of foodgrains left over to sell. Millet is not favoured for eating but is used for making Chi or Tumba. Cardamum was till recently the chief cash crop but some peculiar disease has decimated

the output to less than 10% of its optimum yield. No amount of pesticide application has improved the situation. Ginger is a new and successful entrant and has replaced cardamum as the chief money earner. Due to the nature of the terrain, the battle is a hard one to farm on small cultivated terrachs. The area is very vulnerable to landslides and soil erosion, particularly the higher areas. Irrigation for cultivation depends on the abundant rainfall, on jhoras and seasonal streams and perennial springs. Methods of agriculture are labour intensive, using an old fashioned wooden plough drawn by bullocks. Very few people use chemical fertilizers. Those who have farms of below five acres are given it free by the government and hence they are the largest users of such fertilizers. Organic manure is used mainly for ginger and wheat cultivation.

The wholesale trade in ginger, cardamum, wheat and rice is concentrated in the hands of a few merchants at *Pedong Bazaar*. These are also the same men who lend money to the farmers for buying seeds etc., and at harvest time the accounts are squared up. It is suspected that more often than not the farmer gets the short end of the stick. Great fluctuations in the prices of ginger and cardamum, depending on production, makes for another element of uncertainty for the farmers.

Pedong Bazaar is mainly a trading center for the disposal of the grains and agricultural farm commodities produced around the region. In return, textiles and general store items, tailoring shops etc., cater for the elementary needs of the people. Transportation of ginger and cardamum and a passenger taxi service to Kalimpong is also owned by a *Pedong* merchant.

The breakdown of population in terms of communities is as follows, according to the last census carried out in 1971. The total population of *Pedong* including the *Bazaar* area and the agricultural *bastis*, is 2,558 persons.

Of these, 191 persons belong to Scheduled Castes—like *Kamis* (smiths), *Damai* (tailors) and *Sarki* (shoe-makers). These people are of Nepali and Bihari origin. The Scheduled Tribes, include Sherpas, Bhutias and Lepchas, and add up to a total of 566. The other castes, including Nepalis, Marwaris, Biharis, Bengalis, Punjabis and Muslims, comprise the rest of the total number. Of this group, the Nepali element makes up 75 per cent of the total. Marwari and other Indian communities are concentrated only in the *Bazaar* area and are not engaged in agriculture but are traders. The literacy rate is about 40 per cent.

In the Sakyong area, which includes Dokyong, all of Sakyong, Menchu and Tendrebong, the total population is 3646 people. The Scheduled Castes are 343, Scheduled Tribes are 1225 and the rest are all Nepalis. Literacy is about 25 per cent. Kashyong has a total population of 1513 of which 30 per cent are Scheduled Tribes and the others are Nepalis. The literacy rate is about 15 per cent.

The breakdown of the population of the entire area shows a slightly higher rate of males compared to females. (This could be one contributing factor for higher morality and less frequent occurrence of men remarrying). Nepalis and other Indian communities constitute about 75 per cent of the total population. Other Indian communities being only about 5 per cent and engaged exclusively in trades, trading or government service. No one of this section is engaged in agriculture. Only 25 per cent of the total population are Lepchas and Bhutias.

Regarding land holdings, according to Mr. Narpersad Rai, a village level worker, the general situation roughly is such that 65 per cent of all families own land. 30% of families are share croppers or tenant farmers. There are hardly 5 per cent families who are engaged as entirely landless labourers.

Average land holdings are 1 to 1.5 acres per family for 30 per cent of all land owners and share croppers. Five acres or so are held by 50 per cent of the total group. Farms of 10 acres or above are operated by about 20 per cent of the farming population.

Among the tribals, 80 per cent Bhutias own land. 15 per cent may be share croppers and only four per cent are landless labourers. Average one acre holdings are with 25 per cent of Bhutia farmers; 5 acres with 60 per cent; 10-15 acres with 25 per cent of Bhutia families.

Among Lepchas, 90 per cent own land, 4 per cent may be share croppers, 2 per cent or 3 per cent only may be employed as landless labourers. One acre holdings are with only 5 per cent Lepchas; 5 acre farms with 30 per cent and 10-20 acre farms with all the rest of the Lepchas. A peculiar situation exists, where though nearly all Lepchas have land and quite substantial areas, but this is the poorest segment of society. Because of their antiquated methods of farming, lack of initiative or inclination to use innovative methods, lack of foresight, and bad and frivolous expenditure of money resources. Lepchas can generally work as hard as any other community but not when left to their own devices. They have to be guided and directed to work by others. Bhutias too are a little less thrifty than Nepalis.

Due to various Government restrictions on Nepalis, though in overwhelming numbers and extremely industrious and plucky, there are not more than 50 per cent Nepali owners of land. The rest are share croppers and others still engage in felling trees, working on road construction and other government sponsored projects, as forest guards and are hired other casual labour requirements.

Regarding the economic condition of the people, the first fact is that there is not enough money to be

earned from surplus crop output sale. Fifty per cent of all families spend 100 per cent of the money earned from sale of cash crops like ginger, to buy food items to supplement requirement for subsistence to make up shortfall between production of foodgrain crops on their own farms. The rest of the fifty per cent of the population does have a little surplus income after meeting food requirements. Of the surplus money, 25 per cent is spent on children's education. It is worth noting that a very high eagerness is felt by people to educate their children. Fifty per cent of the surplus money is spent on clothes and items of food consumption of a non-basic variety and articles of toiletry etc. 25 per cent of the money earned is saved by the very wealthy farmers. Money saved is usually kept at home. Only 20 men, in Sakyong have postal saving schemes. There is no person with a bank Account among the farming population. There is a Co-operative Bank in Sakyong.

Again, out of the total population, 25 per cent persons are in debt. Borrowing has shifted heavily to the Co-operative Society. But there is still a significant proportion of borrowing from private sources. This is due to the fact that the government rate of lending is fairly high aggregating to nearly 13 per cent with some amount held as a fixed share capital in the Co-operative Society. This is not liked by a villager. Moreover, some collateral or guarantee has to be offered and this is not always possible to obtain. The procedures are quite tedious and require many formalities and many trips. Hence private borrowing is much easier, and quicker.

There are very few people engaged in trades or crafts. In Sakyong, all the people practise agriculture. There are five smiths, three gold smiths, twelve carpenters, fifteen masons and twenty-five helpers in construction. Only one Lama is engaged in handicraft making of masks. All these above people work at their trades only as a spare time activity and the level

of skill is very low. Porters are not an exclusive class. All farmers and spare members of their families do portage work for their own produce and for neighbours in exchange for a meal and some cash payment. There are only two men in Sakyong who have two or four mules for regular porter duties. Domestic work is done by members of the families. Some of the bigger and more affluent households have attached to them some orphans who are brought up in the household and perform domestic labours. There would be twenty such orphan girls and boys in Sakyong. Farming is a highly co-operative venture. It is extremely pleasing to witness the great spirit of helpfulness between all farmers, rich or small. At peak periods of agricultural activities, labour on farms is through mutual help. Neighbouring farmers help each other on a reciprocal basis. In turn, all the men and women engage in work on each other's plots. Here there is no discrimination between rich, poor, Lepcha, Bhutia or Nepali, tenant or owner. There is no case of bonded labour.

It is useful to try to analyse as to the actual money than can be earned [by an average family. Paddy cultivation results in an output of about 10 to 12 maunds per acre. Except for 5/6 families, all others require to keep all their produce of paddy for home consumption. Dals are grown on the raised banks between paddy terraces, also for own consumption. The cash crops are cardamum and ginger. Cardamum, due to incidence of disease, is now yielding only about 2 maunds an acre and the price fluctuates around Rs. 9 per kilogram. Nearly all families sow about 6 maunds of ginger per acre. The average ginger yield is about 30 maunds per acre. Price fluctuates in the region at Rs. 66/- per maund. This represents almost all that a family can hope to earn—plus a bit more by portage in the season at the rate of food plus Rs. 2 per day. A few families living at the lower altitudes near Murdung Khola, grow oranges for sale. For the last five years, the

area has gained in prosperity due to ginger. But it is being noticed that the land under ginger is leaving a high degree of acidity and has to be kept fallow for every alternate crop. It also requires a lot of fertilizer input. Wheat, barley, oats, maize, millet, buck wheat and potatoes are grown for self consumption and there is nothing left over for sale.

Bamboo is grown extensively and is a very versatile product. But bad communications infact no communication has hampered any economic development of this item.

Regarding employment, though nearly every family has land to work on, but not all members of the family can find fulltime employment on the farm. Hence, invariably a number of able bodied men and a few women leave their homes and join the Army or go to the towns to look for gainful employment. The Lepchas are the most reluctant in this respect and hence this may be yet another contributing reason for their relative poverty. There is, therefore, underemployment of agricultural labour which is engaged in seasonal agricultural activity. Under employment is combined with a low output of agricultural produce. The prospects of setting up a business or other trades are quite unrewarding. There is very little buying power with the local inhabitants for anything non-essential. Wholesale trade is already concentrated in few hands in Pedong. These men have capital for investment, money for giving out loans, buying up the produce of the farmers and then transporting it and marketing it at Kalimpong and Siliguri. These few also possess a degree of shrewdness and entrepreneurial ability. There is no scope for expanding any already established trade or generating new demand. All goods are available at Kalimpong and those five per cent of the population who can afford it, go to Kalimpong for shopping.

There is such an apathy in regard to traditional arts

and crafts, that even weaving is not done any more. Knowledge of this craft used to be traditional, but now everyone buys ready made mill cloth and weaving at home has been abandoned. Customary dresses do require hand-made cloth with certain designs. This hand woven "Kheera" and "Yeta" cloth is imported or smuggled from Bhutan, at exorbitant prices. A number of cottage crafts could be profitably developed. Marketing would be a problem, for, there would be no demand locally. Items for cottage craft one could suggest are :

Manufacture of troughs out of bamboo, bamboo beer/soft drink mugs ornamented with nickel bands, and, bamboo sunhats. Masks, clay and papermache figures of Buddhist deities and Tibetan style wooden tables. Standing lamps made on the inspiration of the Gompa drums would be quick selling items in metropolitan cities. Infact a number of articles of daily use of the tribals in the area are very beautiful and unique in design, shape and materials used. But there is absolutely no work being done in cottage crafts what-so-ever.

The highest rate of unemployment is among the educated youth. Having received some measure of education, these young people are not content any more to be farmers. They look for better opportunities, a better quality of life with less hard work, more leisure and greater amenities. There is no scope for the employment or deployment of educated men and women in Pedong except in farming, which is already stretched to its utmost. A few educated people are engaged as primary school teachers.

The government administration is organised with the Sub-Divisional Magistrate at Kalimpong. The Block Development Officer has his seat at Algarah, 6 kms. from Pedong. At Pedong itself is stationed a Junior Land Reform Officer, who deals with land boundaries and disputes arising thereof. A village level worker has the job of

overseeing and reporting about all government projects and their working. The JLRO collects revenue through registrations of land and other cesses charged by the government. Every fifty houses are represented by one member at the *Anchal Panchayat*. These members are elected at the Gram Sabhas. The *Mandal* or headman of the Gram Panchayat has the duty of collection of taxes which are agricultural tax for those owning above 3 acres of land, employment tax, road tax and education tax. There is a great deal of grumbling about the number and incidence of taxation, without much visible improvement of public utilities. The *Gram* and *Anchal Panchayats* get some small government grants and do occasionally launch self help schemes like making a small culvert, repairing a track, laying a very tiny irrigation channel or drinking water bamboo conduit etc.

There is a small village police check-post at Pedong manned by one constable, for law and order. There is hardly any crime committed. Theft, rape and connected serious crimes are unknown. The only quarrels are over land ownership and boundaries. Matrimonial quarrels and even land disputes are usually dealt with by the *Mandals* and *Panchayats*. But if the parties are still not satisfied, they go to the JLRO or to the courts at Kalimpong. Drunkenness is very common and is indulged in by men and women. Even little children are given quantities of tumba and other intoxicants from infancy, so that the children are kept quiet while the parents are engrossed in their labours. But drunkenness does not lead to crime and is looked upon benevolently as an indulgence.

It must be said to the credit of the government that there are four primary schools run in the area. With the St. George's High School run by Catholic missionaries at Pedong, there are sufficient educational opportunities.

But the health facilities are distressingly inadequate.

There is a small out-patient hospital at Pedong, intended to cover all the area covered by this study plus Lingsay, Sangsay and some more blocks. The hospital has a doctor and one nurse and hardly any supply of medicines or proper equipment. The majority of patients are women and children and the one nurse is supposed to minister to the needs of this huge area. Obviously the doctor and one nurse cannot travel to such remote and outlying areas. Seriously ill patients have to be carried over 6/7 or even 10 kilometres on bamboo stretchers before even reaching a roadhead. The military have a very small nursing station near Pedong and civilians are treated free of charge. But, here too, the doctor visits for three hours only thrice a week. There is absolutely not enough medical cover for even ordinary ailments for this area. No wonder the local medicine man or woman or Lamas and their prayers are still the chief and often the only method of medication. The Christian missionaries do a wonderful job of travelling to each village at least once a week and giving out medicines. At every church outpost there is a semi-trained voluntary assistant who has a small stock of medicines supplied by the generosity of the church. The medical care provided by the church is of very great succour to sick people of all faiths. The diseases most common are stomach ailments due to the high mineral content of the water, excessive eating of badly cooked meat and chillis. Next come sores and awful skin diseases due to the extremely unhygienic habits of the population. Respiratory diseases, especially TB, have a very high rate of incidence. Blindness is widely prevalent. But people tend to accept their ailments stoically and most die without knowing why. The Lama or bumthing offer heavenly and magical intercession with the gods.

Regarding assistance by government in the development of agriculture, though there may be many plans on paper, but no proper irrigation projects have been ex-

cuted. The farmers depend entirely upon rainfall and water from jhoras. Minor irrigation works of temporary channels from a jhora or a seasonal stream to a private field have been constructed. But hardly two per cent all the land has been helped by these small efforts. The most crucial problem is that of drinking water. The life of the people would be made fifty per cent more comfortable if drinking water pipes were laid and water brought nearer to their homes. These people spend half their lives fetching water and the other half collecting firewood. The village level or other workers do give lectures on seeds and fertilizer use. The Small Farming Development Agency provides facilities of free fertilizers and arranges for loans for small farmers with farms of less than 5 acres. While there are many good intentions but there appears to be a lack of urgency in all these operations, which are half measures anyway. The government seed and fertilizer shop is at Algarah. It is difficult for all farmers to travel over 20 kilometres to get to Algarah. There is a Co-operative Bank, but the interest rate is very high at thirteen per cent and in addition to the obligation to contribute to the shareholding and also to provide colateral.

The state of communications is really very poor. No roads or worthwhile tracks exist except the main road and a bit of the left over Younghusband track. Bridges remain unbuilt over jhoras. If roads and communications were provided, it would considerably lighten the burden of carrying crops on the backs of human beings up to the market and roadhead. It might help the gainful export of bamboo as well.

Electricity is confined to a subzero illumination glow to a few poles and points in Pedong Bazaar. This would be a much longed for service to be provided. Without electric power, not even the beginning of a rural based industry can be dreamt of.

The Government has initiated a few developmental projects with an aim to offer possibilities to farmers to engage in subsidiary occupations which would add to their money incomes. A huge animal husbandry complex has been put up. This is in the nature of an experimental and demonstrative center. Cattle breeding by the Animal Husbandry Center has proved to be successful, in so far as the Government has been able to raise a good breed of cows which produce quality milk. The problem is that even if the farmers do keep the better strain of cows and give them proper feed resulting in higher yield of milk, there is not enough local market for milk consumption to offer any significant earning for the farmer. Lately some confectionery and cheese making private company from Kalimpong had started to send a vehicle to Pedong village to collect the surplus milk. This is a typical example of the problem of development in rural areas of small industries or crafts and the problems of marketing, particularly easily perishable goods. Some ancillary processing units also need to be established.

With respect to poultry breeding and piggery, only marginal success has been registered. The sophisticated chicken feeds are expensive and not easily procurable nor has the uneducated populace understood the intricacies of involved formulae etc. Diseases among the fowls decimate their numbers. For piggery products sophisticated processes are required. Pigs are reared for slaughter and home consumption mainly.

The sheep breeding experiment by the government has been an ill advised venture. There is not enough land for rearing sheep and the climate is too wet. Hence this project is a complete failure.

The latest project set up is the sericulture center. Mulberry trees are being extensively planted. This scheme has a high possibility of success. At this initial stage

there is some resistance due to Buddhist sentiments about boiling the cocoon and thus taking the life of the silkworm. This attitude is likely to be overcome, since those conscientious objectors do not have to boil the cocoon themselves. The only problem is going to be whether the farmers will be able to maintain the temperature controls necessary for the rearing of the worms and whether families have spare premises to set aside for this operation. Also a factory for processing the cocoons will have to be set up in the same area. This requires additional electric power supply.

Serious attention needs to be given to providing facilities of water points so as to make the lives of the local population a bit easier. The other point to be considered is the denudation of forests and the requirement of timber for the needs of the populace. Reforestation takes a long time and the needs for energy will keep growing at a much faster rate. Even reforestation will not be a success unless the population of each block is made responsible for it and till alternate energy sources are provided. People have to cook their food and have to stock up wood for the heavy rainy season when the wood in the forests is too wet to burn and when the tracks are just not negotiable. Forest guards cannot police the forest areas closely enough, to totally eliminate the felling of trees. Denudation of forests makes for longer distances to be covered to get wood and also makes for the area to become even more landslide prone. Whole hillsides have been shorn of their forest wealth. In about five years there will just not be any forest left. Then how will the people in the area subsist? It is not too early to start a search for an alternative fuel source.

Whatever the new source of fuel, it must be very cheap, infact free. Perhaps along with the establishment of the Animal Husbandry Complex, experimental go-bar Gas plants might be set up. I am not sure whether cattle can be reared in large enough numbers to provide

more or less free power for domestic consumption. Nor will it be an easy project because the houses in the bastis are far removed from each other. What other form of fuel can be substituted for timber for kitchen purposes? Solar power is not a likely substitute, for, the sun is rarely seen for six to seven months of the year.

In short, it cannot be said that the government is doing nothing for the population. But common to all dispassionate bureaucratic administrations, the pace is slow and lack-a-daisical. No plans and projects to meet the most important and urgent requirements are taken up first. Some general schemes for implementation in all backward hill areas, irrespective of local relevance or urgency or infrastructural pre-requisites, is drawn up in some august meeting of experts in a metropolis. In Pedong, bamboo based industries ought to be developed. Irrigation and drinking water facilities given top priority, intensive reforestation undertaken, thought given to alternative forms of fuel for domestic use, communications developed, first. The other projects can go on simultaneously. Here again, sericulture, cattle and poultry breeding are likely to be taken up by those with additional and spare resources. A campaign to help and urge the marginal farmer to participate in these programmes has to be undertaken side by side.

It is equally true that everything cannot and should not be left to the government. The people of the area must form really functional and dedicated voluntary committees and groups to inform the lazy, reticent and slow witted co-members of their group. The real pressing problems of the area ought to be pressed before the officialdom. Reforms and reallocation of funds for projects stressed. This is where a vital role could be played by political parties and other non partisan voluntary associations. The Christian missionaries do a great deal of valuable work in assisting weaker sections in respect of

legislation regarding mortgaged lands and by taking the initiative in launching small self help schemes like fish breeding in ponds etc. It is a pity that likewise political parties and other social welfare associations do not get to the grass root problems nor do they get close enough to the people to touch their lives.

Regarding the impact of political parties, the situation is quite interesting. The people themselves are so engrossed with the extremely hard labours of wresting a living from the earth, that they have neither the time nor the energy to understand the implications of power jockeying. For them, the only ideology worth appreciating is the one that promises a better deal for themselves. Philosophies of communism, socialism or democracy have no meaning for people struggling for survival. Moreover being unable to discern any difference between political parties, people tend to support, without real conviction, either a regional and ethnical political grouping or just follow what the leaders tell them. The leaders being the mandal or richer farmers upon whose goodwill depends a lot of employment and extension of loans and credits and who have a long trusted and entrenched position. Second in importance as formers of public opinion are teachers and religious leaders who have the aura of learning and hence evoke respect. On the whole, the people are quite sagacious. Many years of tall promises and nonfulfilment of extravagant claims have made the people skeptical and they keep away from voting in large numbers, unless coerced, influenced or induced to go to the booths. As far as the understanding of the political process is concerned, an anecdote will reveal the utter innocence of the people. A short while ago, there was a lot of speechifying for some local elections. Various parties were in the fray. All patriotic persons were exhorted to cast their votes for the party whose symbol was a plough and bull or some such thing. Came election day. A huge party of sweating constituents was seen

labouring down the hillside, dragging a plough and bull to be cast at the polling booth. When the officials refused to accept this "Vote" of a plough and bull, there was great indignation, for all the supporters of the party felt denied of their right to cast a vote for the party of their choice!

The political parties operating in the region are the Gorkha League, the communist parties, CPI (M) and CPI and the Congress. The Janata Party has not yet made its debut, but I would estimate that over 70 per cent of the people are aware of its formation. At the last general elections, disillusioned by the failure and hollow promises of politicians of the past, there was a general inclination to give a chance and trial to the new Janata Party. Since no Janata candidate was standing, its ally the CPI (M) evoked a lot of support. It must be added, that conservative elements, wealthy landed gentry and the economically strong merchant class were earlier on either supporters of the Congress or were drawn to the Gorkha League for ethnic loyalty considerations. The Communists are the only party who have atleast some local organisation in the area. Generally, the people are wary of the Communists' assertion of deprivation of private land ownership, because most people own land and have obsessive attachment to their land. On the other hand, the people are very easily influenced by whoever takes the trouble to work on them. Of late, the Communist cadres seem to have enlisted teachers and others to propagate for their cause. The locals are swayed away by small temporary considerations of being given Rs. 2 or so each to be induced to attend a meeting. However, the natural astuteness of the villager should not be underestimated.

The other politicians seem to appear on the scene on Haat days and think that their only function is to give high sounding speeches, near election times. The

interest of the politicians is limited to righteous rhetoric. Once elected or defeated, they disappear. Only to reappear, to collect more money and to take up an agitational issue. The real welfare of the people, support for and carry through and implementation of welfare and economic projects is not cared for. The Government is criticized by the opponents, regardless. The elected representatives sit in a rarified atmosphere of glory in the Assembly Chambers far away and are not even approachable to the poor local constituents. Let it known, that this altitude and behaviour is not lost on the people.

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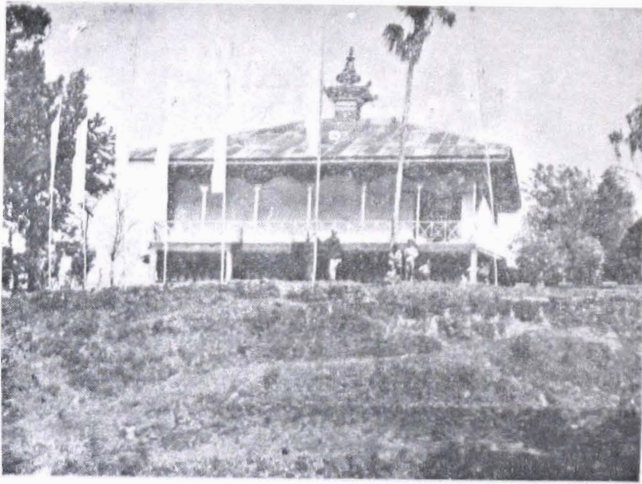
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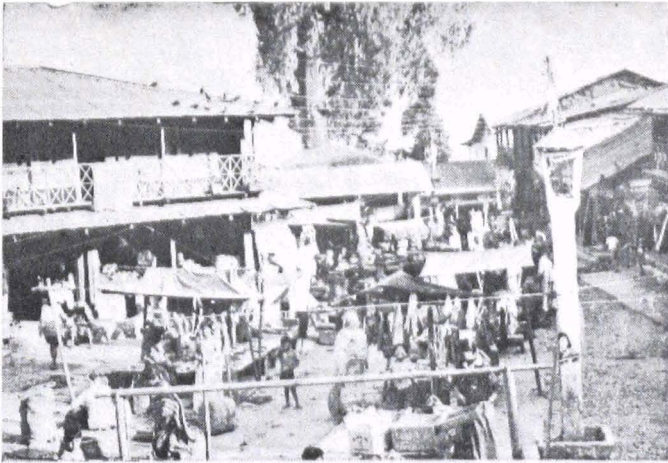
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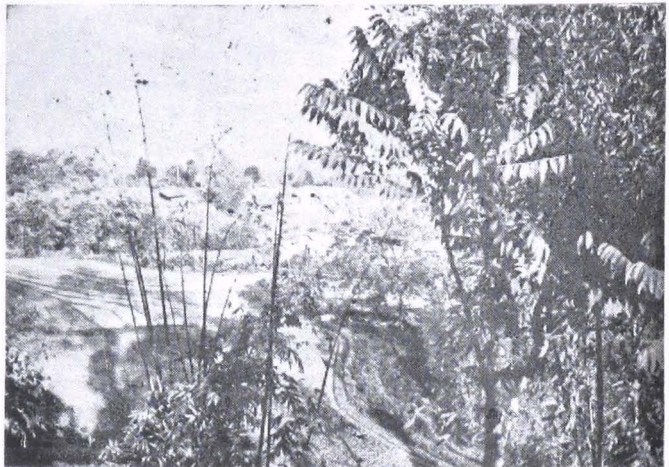


The Hatt stalls in Pedong

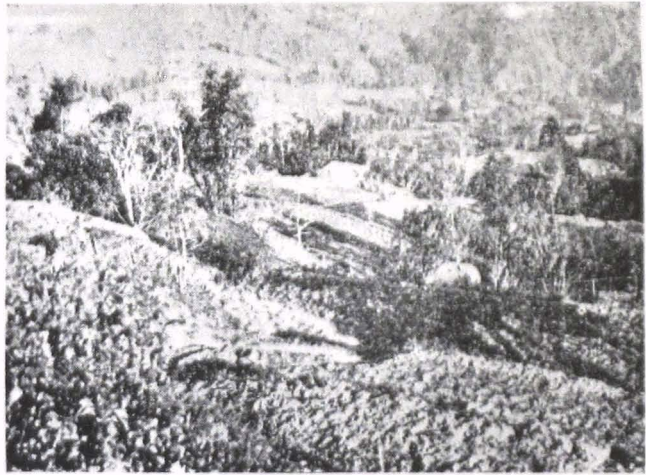


The Haat stalls
in Pedong

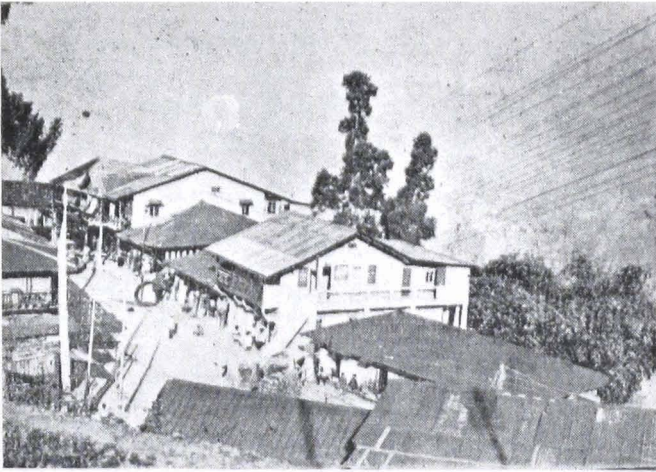
A small
land slide



Views of the
Bhutia Gampa
with the lake in
the foreground.

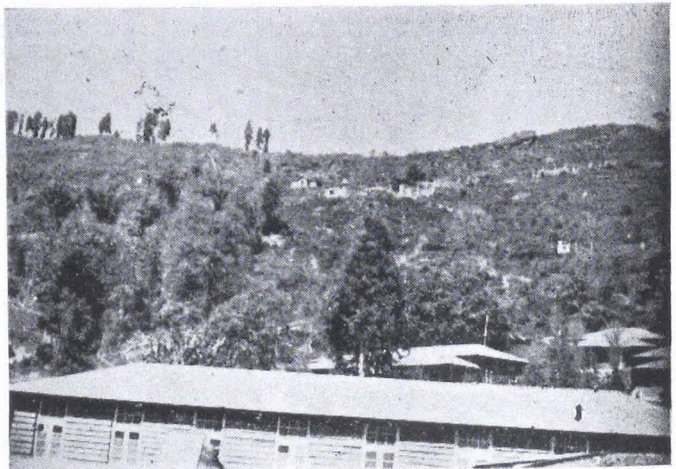


The country-
side in winter

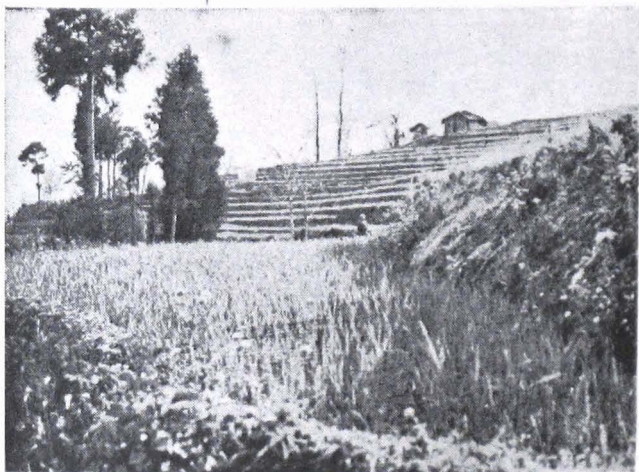


Pedong Bazaar
main stree

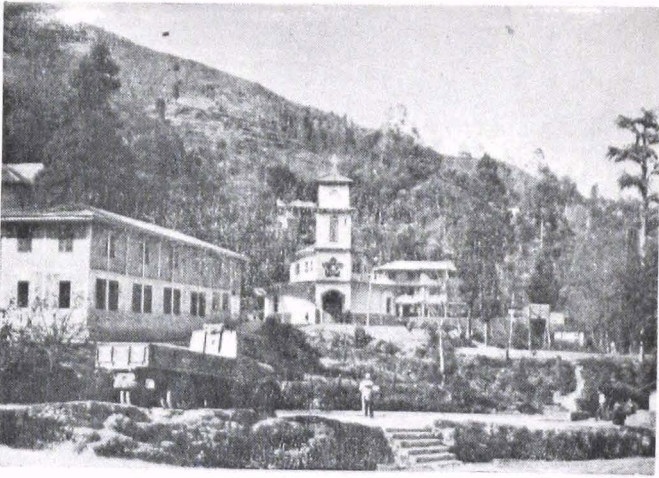
The tree line of
the Pedong Ridge.
To go to samsong,
one trands about 4
kilometers to the
left along the crest
line,



Clumps of
bamboos

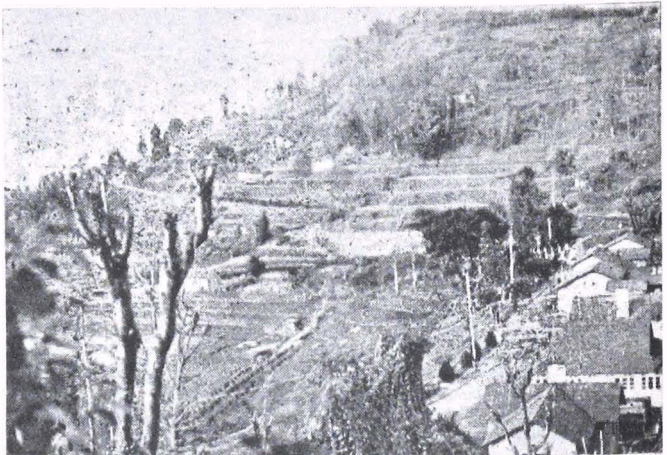


Terraced
Rice Fields



Upper Pedong

Catholic Church
& St. George's
High School





Fishing in the Khola



The Head Lama
& dignitaries at
the Annual
Archery
Competition.



Author (right) with the Lepcha woman (left) & others
at Tendrebong,

A Happy Lepcha Woman

