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ABSTRACT

DEVELOPMENT OF A STRATEGY TO REACH THE
FOLK-BUDDHIST LEPCHA COMMUNITY
OF SIKKIM

by

Joseph Tudu

Adviser: Bruce Bauer

ABSTRACT OF GRADUATE STUDENT RESEARCH

Dissertation

Andrews University

Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary

Title: DEVELOPMENT OF A STRATEGY TO REACH THE FOLK-
BUDDHIST LEPCHA COMMUNITY OF SIKKIM

Name of the researcher: Joseph Tudu

Name and degree of faculty adviser: Bruce Bauer, D.Miss.

Date completed: August 1999

The majority of the Lepchas who live in the land of Sikkim are unreached with the gospel message. A preliminary investigation of current literature indicated that 70 to 80 percent of the Sikkimese are followers of folk-Buddhism. The purpose of this dissertation is to develop a strategy to reach the Folk-Buddhist Lepcha community of Sikkim with the gospel message.

The dissertation traces the historical development of the Lepcha community in Sikkim,,its culture, economy, health situations, and education. Chapter 3 details the beliefs,

practices, and world view of the Lepchas, discusses government restrictions against Christianity in Sikkim, and describes the growth of Christianity among the Lepchas.

Chapter 4 describes the process used in establishing a church among the Lepchas. Social service and educational programs were used to provide points of contact with the Lepchas. The Lepchas' fear of death, suffering, and sickness provided bridges whereby the gospel answers to these questions were welcomed and accepted.

Andrews University
Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary

DEVELOPMENT OF A STRATEGY TO REACH THE
FOLK-BUDDHIST LEPCHA COMMUNITY
OF SIKKIM

A Dissertation
Presented in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Ministry

by
Joseph Tudu
August 1999

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FOLK-BUDDHIST LEPCHA COMMUNITY
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To my wife, Rita Tudu

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	vii
Chapters	
I. INTRODUCTION	1
Purpose of the Dissertation	3
Justification for the Dissertation	3
Definition of Terms	4
Methodology	4
II. THE LEPCHA COMMUNITY OF SIKKIM	6
The History of the Lepchas	7
The Land and the Culture	10
Socioeconomic Status	19
Health and Education	21
III. RELIGION IN SIKKIM	25
Lepcha Folk-Buddhism	26
Lamaism	28
Compulsory under Chogyals	32
Strength Waning	34
Government and Religion	35
Restriction on Christianity Before	
Annexation	37
Religious Tolerance	38
Christianity and the Lepchas	40
Interaction with Christians in General	44
The Adventist Church and the Lepchas	46
Door Opened for Witnessing	49
IV. THE STRATEGY	51
Pre-evangelism Preparation	52
Selection of the Group	53

Principal Tribal Group	53
Receptive to the Gospel	54
Study of the Group	55
Collection of Data	55
Survey of People and Land	56
Contact	56
The Contact Person	57
Visits and Associations with the Group	57
Entry Stage	58
Involvement and Participation	59
Learning the Language	60
Participating in the Culture	62
Sharing the Experience	62
Understanding Basic Assumptions	63
Community Development Programs	64
Health Education	64
Social Service	65
Meeting the Felt Needs of the Group	66
Physical Needs	67
Health and Temperance Ministry	68
Income-generation Programs	68
Intellectual Needs	69
Literacy Program for Adults	70
Literacy Programs for Children	71
Spiritual Needs	72
Deliverance Ministry	72
Prayer Fellowship Ministry	74
Evangelism	74
Presentation of the Gospel	75
In the Language of the People	75
In the Cultural Context of the People	77
Establishing a Community of Faith	79
Formation of Witnessing Group	80
Follow-Up	81
Nurturing	82
Leadership Development	82
 V. SUMMARY, CONCLUSION, AND RECOMMENDATIONS	 84
Summary	84
Conclusion	85
Recommendations	86
Recommendations to Spicer Memorial College	86
Recommendations to the Local Conference	86
Recommendations to the Division	87

BIBLIOGRAPHY	88
CURRICULUM VITAE	93

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The Lepchas of Sikkim are the principal tribe of the land. They are autochthonous to Sikkim, followed closely by the Bhutanese. In 1909, J. C. White listed the population of the Lepchas inhabiting Sikkim as about 6,000.¹ According to the 1931 census report, out of a total population of 109,808 there were 13,000 Lepchas. There has been considerable growth of the Lepchas in Sikkim since 1931 with a 1996 census, reported in the Indian Church Growth Quarterly, listing the population of the Lepchas in Sikkim as 33,000.²

Of this large number 70 to 80 percent practice Lamaism, also known as Folk-Buddhism, connected with the Mahayana form of Buddhism. Mahayana Buddhism has been imposed upon the Lepchas by the government since it is the official religion of the state. The principal tribes of the land

¹J. C. White, Sikkim and Bhutan, Twenty-one Years on the North-East Frontier (London: Edward Arnold, 1909), 86.

²Albert Vasantharaj, "Joshua Project 2000 List India," Indian Church Growth Quarterly, 3 (July-September 1996): 8.

have no option but to follow the religion of the royal family.

It is reported that out of 33,000 Lepchas in Sikkim only 290 have been evangelized, and the rest still do not have a knowledge of the gospel of Jesus Christ.¹

Sikkim is part of the mission field called the West Bengal Section, which is comprised of six districts of West Bengal and the state of Sikkim. Very little, if any, evangelistic work is being done in Sikkim. In fact, from a survey I recently conducted I found that most of the Buddhist communities living in the Himalayan kingdoms of Nepal, Bhutan, and Tibet, which are adjacent to the West Bengal Section mission field, are unreached with the gospel message.

It is hoped and expected that the strategy developed to establish a community of faith among the Lepchas would bring church planting, multiplication, and growth. The strategy used for reaching the Lepcha community of Sikkim furnishes an implementable approach which could be used for reaching similar unreached groups of people in other places.

¹Ibid., 9.

Purpose of the Dissertation

The purpose of this dissertation is to develop a strategy to reach the Folk-Buddhist Lepcha community of Sikkim with the gospel message.

Justification for the Dissertation

Prior to annexation by India, Sikkim was a restricted land like Nepal, Bhutan, and Tibet, where the preaching of Christianity was prohibited. The Seventh-day Adventist Church has made several attempts to establish a Christian community through medical work in the area but was not successful. After annexation by India in 1975, Sikkim became somewhat more tolerant towards Christianity. Though the land is still not open, there are some possibilities for evangelism. But even though the door has been opened a little, not much has been done.

The Lepchas who have not heard about Jesus ought to be reached with the gospel message. Thus, it is a growing concern of the church to reach the Lepchas and other communities, namely the Nepalese, Bhutanese, and Tibetans living in the adjacent countries, who have religious beliefs similar to those of the Lepchas. This strategy may be helpful in working with these people also.

Definition of Terms

Terms frequently used in this dissertation are defined as follows:

Folk-Buddhism is similar to the Tibetan concept of Lamaism. Thus, Folk-Buddhism is a crude form of Buddhism, a mixture of Mahayana Buddhism with local mythology, mysticism, and magic.

Lepchas or the Lepcha community denotes the principal tribal people of Sikkim, who are said to be the original inhabitants autochthonous of Sikkim. The Lepchas call themselves Rong-Kup or Mutanchi Rongkup, meaning "mother's loved one." Here, "mother" is the creator mother, whom the Lepchas call bunoo. Lepchas are also known as monpa by the Tibetans, a term meaning the tribe of the lowland.

Lamaism or Lamaistic Buddhism stands for the form of Buddhism which was brought by the Lamas from Tibet in the sixteenth century. Lamaism is the system of religious and political doctrine which from the fifteenth century ruled Tibet and was later brought to Sikkim.

Methodology

In this research a strategy for reaching the Folk-Buddhist Lepcha community of Sikkim has been developed. In developing the strategy to reach the target group with the gospel message, the Gospel Commission, missiological

principles, and the needs and characteristics of the people were studied.

First, the Lepcha community of Sikkim was studied. Their history was reviewed in order to find out the background of the tribe, their roots, and origin. Beside this, the land and the culture, their socioeconomic status, health, and education were closely studied in order to understand the geographical and sociological conditions of the Lepcha community of Sikkim. Information gathered in this process is reported in chapter 2.

Second, the religion of the Lepchas and their reaction to Christianity were analyzed and evaluated. Consideration was given to whether the Seventh-day Adventist Church could relate to the group, and whether the suggested church-planting strategy could be effective in reaching this unreached people. The results of this part of the study appear in chapter 3.

Third, after considering the barriers and bridges to evangelism, a strategy was designed. This step is reported in chapter 4.

Finally, conclusions and recommendations are presented in chapter 5.

CHAPTER II

THE LEPCHA COMMUNITY OF SIKKIM

This chapter is divided into four major parts. The first part, the history of Lepchas, deals with the historical background and the origin of the Lepchas of Sikkim. The second part describes the land and the culture of Sikkimese other than the Lepchas. The third part describes the social and economic conditions of the Lepchas, and the fourth assesses their health and education. These four parts together give the details about the Lepchas and their community in Sikkim.

Padraig Flanagan rightly asserts that "there is no belief that is not culturally expressed."¹ Thus, in order to discern the visage of God in the belief of the Lepchas, a thorough knowledge about their world, culture, and community is essential.

¹Padraig Flanagan, ed., A New Missionary Era (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1978), 5.

The History of the Lepchas

The Lepchas are popularly held to be the indigenous inhabitants of Sikkim. But questions still linger in the mind of the social scientists as to who the Lepchas are, and where, when, and how they first came to settle in the land called Sikkim. Since there is little written about the early history of Sikkim, the Lepchas have also remained unknown in history. According to R. N. Thakur, several scholars hold that the "history of Sikkim is the history of the Lepchas."¹

Some have attempted to trace the roots of the Lepchas (anthropologists, sociologists, and historians), but there seems to exist no authentic early account of this tribe. The Lepchas belong to Mongolian stock, but social scientists have given conflicting theories regarding the origin of the tribe. Das and Benerjee locate Pamir Pass as the actual home of the Lepchas; they feel that from there they scattered to other regions.² Other writers, in a bid to unravel the history of the Lepchas, look to Assam, or Burma, or to parts of Tibet and China.³ In 1959, a Japanese

¹R. N. Thakur, Himalayan Lepchas (New Delhi: Archives Publishers and Distributors, 1988), 25.

²A. K. Das and S. K. Benerjee, The Lepchas of Darjeeling District (Calcutta: Cultural Research Institute, 1962), 17.

³Thakur, 26.

research team that studied the Lepchas of Sikkim came to the conclusion that "the Lepchas of Sikkim can be declared as the ancestors of Japanese people."¹ But Gorer insists that there is no tradition of migration among this tribe. Their original home is in the valley of Kanchenjunga in the Eastern Himalayas.² Ram Rahul also holds similar views about the home of the Lepchas and says that the original home of the Lepchas is Sikkim itself because "the hills, mountains, and streams of the region have Lepcha names."³

The Lepchas only became known to the outside world after the Europeans visited the region and saw the virgin forests. Their history was said to be systematically suppressed by the Tibetans who were the first foreigners to set foot in the land. And even today, whatever written accounts of the Lepchas are available are the products of Western travellers and journalists. General G. B. Mainwaring, who married a Lepcha priestess and lived among the Lepchas for some time, wrote that "to allow the Lepcha race and language to die out would indeed be most barbarous

¹"A Japanese Theory on the Lepchas of Sikkim," Sikkim Herald 12 (June 1959): 125.

²Geoffrey Gorer, Himalayan Village: An Account of the Lepchas of Sikkim (London: Michael Joseph, 1938), 79.

³Ram Rahul, The Himalayan Borderland (New Delhi: Vikas Publications, 1970), 31.

and inexpressibly sad."¹ Unfortunately, for a long period after Mainwaring's time no serious attempt was made by social scientists to find out more about the Lepchas.

How they came to acquire the name Lepcha is another question. Outside people call them Lepchas, but they do not call themselves Lepchas. Although in the presence of non-Lepchas they may call themselves Lepchas, among themselves they refer to each other as Rong or Mutanchi Rong. In their own company they take pride to identify themselves as Mutanchi Rong or Rongkup, which means "Ravine Flock."² Das and Benerjee maintain that Rong means "dwellers of rocky land" and the term Rong has been derived from the word Rongjong meaning "rocky land full of respectable people."³

Regarding the significance of the term Lepcha, Das and Benerjee, as well as other writers, give two versions. According to the first, it is derived from a Nepali word Lepche, meaning "vile speaker." The second version is based upon the nature of a type of fish found in Nepal called Lapche, which is very submissive as are the Lepcha people, who are also known for their mild and quiet ways. However,

¹G. B. Mainwaring, Dictionary of the Lepcha Language, revised and completed by Albert Grunwedel (Berlin: Unger Bros., 1898), 263.

²V. H. Coelho, Sikkim and Bhutan (New Delhi: Vikas Publications, 1971), 2, 3.

³Das and Benerjee, 3.

there is another view that says that the Europeans gave them the name Lepcha by following the Nepalese name for the tribe Lapche.¹ Gorer also writes that the term Lepcha is said to be a derogatory Nepali term, meaning "nonsense talkers" and is similar to the Russian name for the Germans, nemetski, "the dumb ones."² The neighboring hill people use both terms Lepcha and Lapche. They use the former while conversing with the Lepchas, but the term Lapche is used if the listeners are non-Lepcha or if they get angry.

The Land and the Culture

Sikkim, the twenty-second state of India, is situated in the lap of the Eastern Himalayas. It is bounded on the north and northeast by Tibet, on the southeast by Bhutan, on the west by Nepal and on the south by the Darjeeling district of West Bengal.³ Sikkim has an area of 7,096 square kilometers, measuring 112.65 kilometers from north to south.⁴ It is a mountainous land, rocky and barren, and because of this people do not live in many parts of Sikkim.

¹P. R. Rao, India and Sikkim (New Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 1972), 13.

²Gorer, 87.

³H. H. Risley, Gazetteer of Sikkim (Delhi: Low Price Publications, 1995), 1.

⁴K. S. Singh, ed., People of India: Sikkim (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 1993), 1.

The state has snow covered mountains which are more than 8,530 meters high and which remain covered with snow throughout the year. The lower elevations have cool, grassy meadows, while still further down the slopes there are warm forests and hot, rainy areas. Tropical rain forests grow in the southern river valley, where there is frequent heavy rainfall. The rainfall in Sikkim varies from 200 inches (500 centimeters) to less than 40 inches (100 centimeters) a year.¹

Sikkim as a land has a long history. It became an independent monarchy about 1640, when Penchu Namgyal was crowned *Chogyal* (king).² Sikkim then controlled lands that are now part of Bhutan, India, and Nepal. In 1780, warriors from Nepal and Bhutan invaded Sikkim and seized much of the land. Later Britain defeated the Nepalese in 1814 and restored some of the land to Sikkim.³

In 1861, Sikkim became a protectorate of Britain, which took away much of the power of the Chogyals. Britain gave India control over Sikkim in 1947. In 1959 Sikkim agreed to Indian control of its defense, foreign relations, and vital

¹Robert LaPorte, Jr., "Sikkim," The World Book Encyclopedia (1990), 17:456.

²Rao, 15.

³A. P. Agarwala, ed., Sikkim and Bhutan (New Delhi: M. D. Printers, 1997), 20.

communications. Later, when Sikkim further weakened due to its internal political problems, India gradually took more and more control over Sikkim's affairs. In 1975 Sikkim's legislative body voted for Sikkim to become a state of India. There was opposition from the Chogyal, the ruling monarch, but there was nothing that he could do, because Sikkimese voters had approved the proposed statehood by a large margin. Sikkim thus ended more than 300 years as a monarchy in May 1975 when it became a state of India.¹

Now Sikkim is, like many other states of India, a multi-ethnic, multi-lingual and multi-cultural state. Its population is composed mainly of three ethnic groups: the Lepchas, the original inhabitants of the land; the Bhutanese, believed to have migrated from Tibet in the seventeenth century; and the Nepalese, whose migration from Nepal started in the nineteenth century. Besides these, according to K. S. Singh, there are as many as fifteen other minor communities living in Sikkim.² Together these groups comprise the total population of 406,000.³

The Lepchas, as the original people of the land, had a distinct culture of their own. But with the coming of the

¹LaPorte, 457.

²Singh, 15.

³Patrick Johnstone, Operation World (Carlisle, U.K.: OM Publishing, 1993), 228.

Bhutanese and the Nepalese to the land, they were exposed to two diverse cultures brought by these immigrant communities. The Bhutanese brought with them a part of Tibetan cultural life, including the language, religion, and an economic system which was a combination of pastoralism and semi-settled agriculture. The Nepalese, on the other hand, brought with them a part of Nepal's cultural life including the Nepali language, Hinduism, and settled cultivation, especially terraced cultivation.¹

The Lepchas, though influenced by these communities, retained their own cultural traits, in terms of dress, jewelry, food, language, customs, and traditions.

In Sikkim society the Lepchas are identified by their traditional dress. The cultural dress of the man is called gada. It consists of a long, beautiful striped cloth loosely worn down to the knee, leaving one or both arms free. The trousers which reach to the calf are called phomu. Women wear the dumdyam,² a full-length robe held at the shoulders by a pair of brooches and fastened at the waist by a girdle of silver chain or a simple hand-woven strip of cloth known as the namrek. Over the dumdyam a

¹Singh, 10.

²Thakur, 131.

loose coat called pago is worn. A scarf is tied round the head. Shoes for both men and women are called hlom.¹

Lepcha men do not wear any jewelry except amulets blessed by a monk. On the other hand, women are very fond of wearing colorful necklaces made of turquoise, coral, amber, or simple glass beads (lyak), earrings (nay-kong-), bangles (kaghu), and rings (kakyup).²

Lepchas are not vegetarians; beside their staple food of rice, chapatti, and roasted or boiled maize, they eat all kinds of meat, fish, and birds. It is said that earlier they would eat the meat of monkeys and snakes. But the present generation tends to keep away from these. They also eat various types of tubers and vegetables.³ One of the most important items in the Lepcha's diet is chi, homemade millet alcohol.⁴ A Lepcha who does not drink chi is hard to find.

According to G. Kotturen, there is no caste distinction in the Lepcha society, but they are divided into groups by birth and marriage. They follow community endogamy and clan

¹Singh, 5.

²Ibid., 6.

³Ibid., 91.

⁴Thakur, 131.

exogamy but also allow marital alliances with the Bhutanese.¹

Among the Lepchas there is no polygamy, but they have a levirate custom that a Lepcha man can inherit the wives of any of his elder brothers. At present some men have started keeping more than one wife but it goes against their culture. Divorce is not frequent among the Lepchas; in the event it happens, the children become the responsibility of the father. Marriage among the Lepchas has a special place and is carried out with full ceremony, usually performed by the headman of the village.²

In the Lepcha society women have equal status in terms of decision-making and the control of economic activities. But it is surprising to note that they have not been given the right to inherit either property or children, except in exceptional cases. A woman in the Lepcha community is considered as the one who manages the affairs of the household, sows seeds in the field, and helps with the harvest.³

¹G. Kotturen, The Himalayan Gateway: History and Culture of Sikkim (New Delhi: Sterling, 1983), 125.

²Risley, 55.

³K. S. Singh, The Scheduled Tribes: People of India National Series (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994), 3:690.

The religion of the Lepchas is Lamaism or Mahayana Buddhism. In addition they have an older religious system called the Bon religion or shamanism. In most Lepcha villages and households the Buddhist monastery and monks play an important role, yet even today a strong element of old animistic tradition persists. The Lepchas believe that the bad spirits (mung) reside everywhere, in the trees, bushes, rocks, and rivers. Thus the daily life of the Lepchas is based on an effort to propitiate or appease these mungs with rituals and sacrifices.¹

For the disposal of a dead body, there are three alternative methods among the Lepchas: cremation, burial, or throwing the body into a river.² The method adopted depends on the condition of the deceased and on the Lama's advice. Traditionally the Lepchas used to bury their dead, but with the coming of Buddhism, cremation has become a common practice. If Lamas and nuns die in the wet season the body is thrown into the river, depending on the dictates of the Lama. Lamas are summoned immediately after death to help the soul of the deceased reach heaven.³

¹Singh, People of India: Sikkim, 100.

²Ibid., 97.

³Ibid., 98.

The Lepchas love dance and music, and they are well-known for these. Music occupies a high place in Lepcha social life. Their folk dances are an integral part of their cultural life. They dance the kagey in religious festivals and the pang-lhabso as a seasonal dance. Songs are sung at feasts and marriages in which they use percussion, wind, and string instruments.¹ Both sexes of the Lepchas sing songs and join in the cultural dances. They have their interesting folklore and folk tales, which will be considered in detail in the later chapters of this dissertation.

As a multi-lingual state, Sikkim has as many as fifteen languages,² but the major languages used as trade languages between the various communities are Nepali and Hindi. Beside these, Lepcha, Bhutia, and other languages are also used by the various communities of Sikkim.

Commenting on the language of the Lepchas, K. S. Singh is of the opinion that the Lepcha's language, called Rongka or Rong or Lepcha, belongs to the Tibeto-Burman family of

¹Agarwala, 38.

²Singh, 15.

languages,¹ and has had a great bearing upon the culture of the Lepchas.²

The overall assessment of the culture of Sikkim is that it is diverse in its form. The multi-ethnic communities living in Sikkim have multi-cultural traits, which are vastly different from one another. Yet the various communities and different cultures have lived together for so long that they have assimilated and been influenced by one another.³ The result of this assimilation is that Bhutanese, Lepchas, and Nepalese no longer maintain barriers (except socioeconomic status) between themselves. They accept water and food from each other and permit intermarriages. Marriage between Lepchas and different communities of Nepalese are no longer uncommon. The caste barriers which once existed among these communities are no longer there. Nowadays, they go to one another's marriage ceremonies and eat boiled food and draw their water from a common place.

¹Singh, The Scheduled Tribes: People of India National Series, 689.

²G. C. Bagchi, Upper Pedong: A Village Survey Monograph (Calcutta: Cultural Research Institute, 1972), 52.

³S. R. Shukla, Sikkim: The Story of Integration (New Delhi: S. Chand and Company, 1976), 11.

Socioeconomic Status

The socioeconomic condition of Sikkim as a whole depends upon all the communities of the state, namely the Lepchas, the Nepalese, Bhutanese, Marwaris, Biharis, Muslims, and other minor communities. But among them, the Lepchas, the Nepalese, and Bhutanese are the ones performing the major socioeconomic roles and also making up most of the population of Sikkim.

Since Sikkim has an extremely cold, rocky, and mountainous terrain, the major communities, along with other minor ones, are scattered throughout all parts of Sikkim. These communities are each engaged in various occupations to earn their livelihood. No matter in what proportion these communities live in all of the rural districts, they all live side by side with a great many social traits in common.¹

Before the coming of the Nepalese and Bhutanese, the Lepchas had the land and its resources under their control. But when the immigrants came in, they were pushed aside. Being mild and humble people, the Lepchas retreated without retaliation to remote valleys and forest-clad mountains, engaging themselves in their traditional occupation of hunting, gathering, trapping birds and animals, and slash-

¹Nakane Chie, A Plural Society in Sikkim (New Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 1966), 42.

and-burn cultivation.¹ They remained in this situation for two hundred years. During this time many moved and settled in the Dzong area in the northern district of Sikkim. Since then a majority of the Lepchas of Sikkim continue to live in Dzong, with not much exposure to the outside world. They continue in their traditionalism. The state government, in order to preserve their culture, has declared Dzong a "Lepcha reserve," and enforces legal restrictions against other communities trying to settle there.²

The total population of Dzong is 7,745, of which 56 percent are Lepchas. R. N. Thakur says, "The Lepchas who are staying outside of Dzong are relatively modernized. But those who are still living there and other similar places of Sikkim are still backward and out of touch with the modern world."³

Today, the Lepchas living among Nepalese and Bhutanese communities have been reduced to a minority. Most of them are economically poor and are looked down upon by the more advanced communities in the society. As a result they often suffer loss in their business dealings in the market place.

¹P. P. Kearam and William M. Jenkins, Jr., The Himalayan Kingdoms: Bhutan, Sikkim and Nepal (London: D. Van Nostrand Company, 1963), 63, 64.

²Singh, People of India: Sikkim, 11.

³Thakur, 135.

Health and Education

Though Lepchas are generally considered to be people of sound health, they often suffer from influenza, diarrhea, tuberculosis, liver trouble, and other diseases mainly due to a lack of basic knowledge of health. The state government claims to cover the entire population with five hospitals, eighteen primary health centers, and eighty-two primary sub-health centers. It has, however, failed to give much attention to the health needs of the Lepcha people.

The health centers provide a ratio of one primary health center for every four to five villages scattered in the hills. These limited health centers do not reach the people in the remotest area and the hospitals in towns are not equipped well enough to be able to handle complicated cases. Therefore the people have no option but to go to Bengal's second largest city, Siliguri, or go all the way to Calcutta, which is 1,000 kilometers away.

There are serious health problems, particularly among the Lepchas who are living in the remotest part of the state because of a lack of transportation and communication. Another major problem is the unavailability of potable water. The only sources of water are springs, streams, and rivulets, and these are often polluted. Then there are additional problems of malnutrition, unhygienic living, the

evil habits of drinking and smoking among children, youth, and both adult men and women.¹

Talking about the health of the Lepchas, K. S. Singh, a renowned anthropologist, says that "the Lepchas are not exposed to the modern medical care system, and thus their inclination towards it is not very favorable. They believe in traditional medicare systems and thus their attitude towards it is positive. However, they make moderate use of modern medicare."² Their attitude towards family planning is not very positive since they prefer many children in their families.³

The overall literacy rate of Sikkim is only about 20 percent. Even though people favor formal education for both boys and girls, and even though there is one primary school for every two villages and one college in Gangtok, yet only about two out of ten people in Sikkim can read and write.⁴ In the 1981 census, 30.16 percent of the Lepchas in Sikkim were listed as literate.⁵

¹Observations of the researcher.

²K. S. Singh, Sikkim: People of India, 102.

³Ibid., 103.

⁴Laporte, 17:456.

⁵K. S. Singh, The Scheduled Tribe: People of India, 691.

Education has played an important role "in promoting spatial, occupational, as well as vertical mobility" among the Lepchas. The Lepchas who are educated are changing in the areas of food, dress, fashion, and lifestyle. Their income has been raised as a result of their education, with some of them working in salaried jobs and in business. Others of them are teachers, administrators, and political leaders. As a result of their education they are moving ahead in life, becoming more and more politically and socially conscious, and asserting their rights.¹

In spite of all this, the level of literacy among the Lepchas is low and the state of higher education is dismally poor. Not all have the privilege of attending school and college. Many boys and girls are forced to drop out from school and college due to economic reasons. Although education is perhaps the most effective means of helping the Lepchas solve many of their social problems, it is still unavailable for many of them.

In recent years the presence of Christian missionaries in Sikkim has brought considerable change in the area of education. The missionaries have opened schools, and even

¹Thakur, 134.

some of the denominations have been invited by the state government to take over some of the schools.¹

Mathew Moolel reports that the Jesuits of Delhi were asked by the government of Sikkim to provide a principal and take over the only government college in Gangtok. The Jesuits took it over in 1992 and improved it in various aspects--academic, administrative, and infrastructure.²

The Seventh-day Adventist Church has made a similar effort to establish schools in the state. In 1995 a primary school was established by Pastor Joseph Tudu with the help of Pastor Narie Singh, the native missionary who has been placed at Rhenock, a small sub-town in the northern district of Sikkim. The school is now giving favorable service to the community and is educating 195 Sikkimese students. Among them, approximately 40 percent are Lepchas.

¹Mathew Moolel, "Mission to Sikkim: Jesuits in Sikkim," Jivan 14 (March 1993): 10.

²Ibid., 11.

CHAPTER III

RELIGION IN SIKKIM

This chapter deals with the religion in Sikkim, in particular, tracing the original beliefs and practices of the Lepchas, which were variously referred to as Pon (also spelt Bon) or shamanism.¹ A crude form of nature worship, Pon controlled the lives of the Lepchas until the coming of Lamaistic Buddhism from Tibet, which later supplanted the Bon or Pon religion of Sikkim.²

Lamaistic Buddhism or Folk-Buddhism, which is to a large extent a Mahayana form of Buddhism, ruled the people's lives as the state religion for a considerable period.³ This was a period of oppression and tyranny, during which the Sikkimese rulers made the people docile and subservient.⁴ But in the course of time, the charm and

¹Coelho, 3.

²K. B. Bahadur, Caste, Tribes, and Cultures of India: Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Punjab, Jammu and Kashmir and Sikkim (New Delhi: ESS Publications, 1978), 135.

³Ibid., 135.

⁴B. S. Das, The Sikkim Saga (New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House, 1996), 4.

power of Lamaism waned, and with the coming of the British, which brought Christianity through missionaries, it was further weakened.

This chapter traces the details of the advent of Christianity among the Lepchas, brought through the subtle religious invasion of the missionaries, to which the Lepchas could offer no resistance. Thus, the closed land of the Lepchas opened somewhat for Christian mission.

Lepcha Folk-Buddhism

The original religion of the Lepchas was Ponism or shamanism. This was a curious mixture of witchcraft and sorcery, connected with the worship of spirits and ghosts. The common belief among the Lepchas was that the spirits and ghosts existed everywhere, in trees, rocks, on mountain tops, in the skies. These spirits, some good and some evil, had to be worshipped and propitiated with offerings, such as a stone, a strip of cloth, or a branch. Coelho notes that sometimes, in order to appease and expel the evil spirits which brought sickness and misfortune, animals and even human beings were sacrificed on the altar.¹ These fundamentals of Ponism continued among the Lepchas until the middle of the seventeenth century. Then came the transition of the religion of the Lepchas from Animism or Ponism to

¹Coelho, 3.

Lamaistic Buddhism or Folk-Buddhism. According to Waddell, the introduction of Buddhism or Lamaism to Sikkim must have taken place some time in the middle of the seventeenth century, because by this time "Lamaism had become a most powerful hierarchy in Tibet, and was actively extending its creed among Himalayan and central Asian tribes."¹

Initially, Buddhism was pure and simple. "It was ethical and philosophical in thinking and less conservative in its ritual aspect. Its philosophy was based upon the principle of non-violence, called Ahimsha."³ But before it entered the land of the Lepchas from Tibet, it had lost its sanctity. It was no longer a pure Buddhism but had been adulterated by many aspects of Tibetan religion. Hence, the Buddhism which the Lepchas received was corrupt. Further, it became more crude and distorted when it was amalgamated with the local animistic practices of the Lepchas. It was reduced to mere folk religion rather than Buddhism in a real sense. Charles Bell says that the "religion of the Lepchas of Sikkim resembles in many ways the pre-Buddhist faith of Tibetans known as Pon."⁴ Even today, nearly all the

¹L. Austine Waddell M. B., Buddhism and Lamaism of Tibet (New Delhi: Heritage Publishers, 1974), 46.

³Thakur, 92.

⁴C. Bell, The People of Tibet (London: Oxford, 1928), 297.

Buddhist Lepchas observe the traditional animistic practices. Gorer, writing about the Lepchas of Lingthem, says that the services of muns (religious functionaries) are necessary in the life of every Lepcha. They must be present at birth, at marriage, and at the death ceremonies.¹ Thus, in a real sense it can be said that the Buddhist Lepchas are still animists. The religion they practice may be termed as animistic Buddhism or Folk-Buddhism.²

Lamaism

The term Lamaism or Lamaistic Buddhism denotes the form of Buddhism which was brought by the Lamas from Tibet in the middle of the seventeenth century. It is the system of religious and political doctrine which from the fifteenth century ruled Tibet and was later introduced to Sikkim.³ When it came into the land of the Lepchas it exerted a strong influence on the religious and cultural life. The Lepchas in large number were converted to the Lamaism of the Tibetans. Lamaism spread rapidly among the Lepchas in spite

¹Gorer, 230.

²Das and Benerjee, 106.

³W. L. Reese, Dictionary of Philosophy and Religion: Eastern and Western Thought (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1980), 289.

of the fact that the Tibetans used force to occupy the throne of Sikkim and treated Sikkimese with contempt.¹

Lamaism dates from over a century later than the first entry of Buddhism into Tibet, during which Tantrism (a mixture of Siva-worship and magic) had greatly increased. About the same time the doctrine of the Kalachakra or Supreme Deity, without beginning or end, the source of all things (Adi Buddha smata-bhadra, in Tibetan Kun-tu Zang-po), was accepted by the Lamas.²

According to the traditional account, which Risley cites, Lamaism arose in Tibet during the time of king Thi-Srong De-tsan, the son of a Chinese princess, who reigned in Tibet between 740 and 786, and had inherited a strong prejudice in favor of Buddhism from his mother. He sent his royal representatives to India for books and teachers and started a systematic translation of the Buddhist literature from the Sanskrit to Chinese. He built the first monastery in Tibet. It is said that when king Thisrong De-tsan began to build the first monastery in Tibet, it was disturbed by earthquakes, which were attributed to demons. Thus, upon the advice of the Indian monk, Shantarakhita, the king invited the wizard-priest Padma-Sambhava, a famous sorcerer

¹Thakur, 92.

²Risley, 244.

from the great Indian monastery of Nalanda, to control the demons. With the dorje or thunderbolt and spell from the Mahayana, he defeated and converted the devils. He built the first monastery in A.D. 749, and established the first community of Lamas,¹ the religious monks or priests of Lamaistic Buddhism, who live in the monasteries and perform religious ceremonies for Buddhist Lepchas from birth to death.

Regarding the introduction of Lamaism into Sikkim, there is no exact account of the date when it came into the land. However, there are two common theories which can be taken into consideration. The first theory, as proposed by Doig and Perrin, holds that Tibetan Lamaism was brought to Sikkim by the founder, Guru Sambhava himself, in the eighteenth century.² On his journey to Tibet, he visited Sikkim and its border lands to promote Lamaism. Waddell gives a brief detail of his visit in the following lines.

Although he left no converts and created no building, he is said to have hid away in caves many holy books for the use of posterity, and to have personally consecrated every sacred spot in Sikkim.³

¹Ibid.

²Desmond Doig and Jean Perrin, Sikkim (Calcutta: Oxford and IBH Publishing Company, 1991), 37.

³Waddell, 44.

According to Hooker, Guru Padma Shambhava is believed to have rested on the hill where Tashiding (the most sacred monastery) stands today.¹ Presently, it has become a major pilgrimage center for the Sikkimese, where many wish to be cremated for the swift and happy release of the departed soul.

The second theory of the introduction of Lamaism into Sikkim coincides with the establishment of political institutions in Sikkim in the seventeenth century.² The introduction of Lamaism is attributed to the three Lamas, Lhatsun Chhembo, Dempa Chhembo, and Rigzin Chhembo, who came to Sikkim in 1642 to promote the doctrine of Lamaism. They all belonged to three subsects of the Nyingma sect: Lhatsunpa, Kothogpa, and Ngadalepa respectively. They came in contact with a young man named Phuntshog Namgyal, whom they selected and consecrated as the first religious ruler of the Lepcha land with the title of Chogyal (king) at Yoksom in western Sikkim.³ And thus began the rule of the Lama rulers in the land of the Lepchas, all the while keeping their link with Tibet. Gradually through the years

¹J. D. Hooker, Himalayan Journal I (London: Oxford, 1855), 320.

²Coelho, 5.

³P. R. Rao, 15.

Lamaism became the state religion of Sikkim. Innumerable monasteries have since been built throughout the land.

Compulsory under Chogyals

By the middle of the seventeenth century Lamaism had developed into a widespread and influential religion, both in Sikkim and Tibet.¹ The reason for its widespread growth was the monarchs of Tibetan origin who ruled Sikkim. From the time of the appointment of the first Chogyal in 1642 to the time of its assimilation into the Indian union, Sikkim was an independent Buddhist kingdom ruled by the hereditary rajas or Chogyals.² These rulers, who were not only the secular but also the religious heads and the incarnated guardians of Buddhism, promoted Lamaism at all costs in Sikkim. Their objective was twofold: to rule the land of Sikkim solely and to convert all the Lepchas to Lamaistic Buddhism.

Risley affirms these objectives by referring to the traditional account, which states that the three monks who came from Tibet to consecrate Phuntshog Namgyal as the first ruler of Sikkim made an alliance with him, that he would be made the king of the whole of Sikkim, and would in return

¹White, 18.

²N. K. Bhasin and Veena Bhasin, Sikkim Himalayas: Ecology and Resource Development (Delhi: Kamal-Raj Enterprise, 1995), 6.

enforce the conversion of the Lepchas to Lamaistic Buddhism. Both of these objectives were attained.¹ The Chogyals exerted their power and influence to convert the Lepchas to the Tibetan form of Buddhism. In fact, it was more or less imposed upon them. The new religion and the rulers made a deep impression on the social and economical life of the community.

The land was strongly influenced by Tibet in its religious and cultural life. The mild and easy-going Lepchas, having no other option, readily accepted Lamaism, and thus the Bon religion of the Sikkimese was ousted by the new religion. Later, Lamaism gradually gained control over Sikkim as an independent Buddhist land, and the Lamaistic Buddhism of Tibet became the official religion of the state. It was the religion of the royal family, and thus it was made compulsory for the citizens of the land.²

It was during this period that Lama monks and missionaries found support from the Chogyals to spread Buddhism in the land. Many Tibetan monasteries and temples were built to promote and preserve Lamaism.³ The whole of Lepcha land became Buddhist and during this time its

¹Risley, 285.

²Singh, People of India: Sikkim, 8.

³Coelho, 6.

official religious organization was closely linked with that of Tibet.¹ The land was locked to outsiders. There were no Christian missionaries in the land, and Europeans could not enter Sikkim without a legal permit.²

Strength Waning

The strength of Tibetan Buddhism or Lamaism started waning and began to lose its hold on the land of Sikkim. By the late eighteenth century it lost control as the state religion of Sikkim. The causes of the downfall of Lamaism were threefold, as cited by various writers.

The first reason was the rule of the Chogyals in the land, which was harsh and crude. The people were suppressed and oppressed, and this made them unhappy. B. S. Das states that the Chogyals' rule had a feudalistic approach leaving the vast majority of the people dissatisfied.³ The people wanted to be free from the rule of the Chogyals.

The second reason was the taxation of the Lamas. The Lamas, who were regarded as the guardians of religion, taxed the people heavily for performing ritualistic ceremonies. The poor Lepchas could not cope with the demands of the

¹Trevor Ling, "Max Weber and the Relation of Religious to Social Change: Some Considerations from Sikkim and Nepal," Journal of Developing Societies 1 (1985): 126.

²Bhasin and Bhasin, 6.

³Das, 5.

Lamas. Trevor Ling, comparing the religious expenses of the Hindu Nepali and the Lepchas, says that "the religious expenses of the Bhotia-Lepcha community were much higher than that of the Nepali-Hindu."¹ This caused Lepchas to gradually lose interest in Lamaism.

Then there was the coming of the Christian missionaries along with the British troops, which also weakened Lamaistic Buddhism. The British troops, which had come to rescue Sikkim from Nepali invasion, reduced the power of the Sikkimese ruler. This paved the way for the downfall of Lamaism.

Government and Religion

Sikkim was an independent Buddhist country until it was assimilated into the Indian Union Territory. Prior to the assimilation, the Sikkim government's attitude toward religions other than Buddhism was negative. But now with the annexation of Sikkim as one of the Indian states, the scenario and religious situation in Sikkim have changed. The government has shown a new tolerance in socio-religious matters. Because of this, a significant change in the religious composition of the population has taken place during the past quarter century.²

¹Ling, 245.

²Ibid., 120.

Today, according to an official news release, though Buddhism continues to be the state religion of Sikkim, there is full freedom of worship. Buddhists, Hindus, Christians, Bonopos, and the small communities of Muslims can practice their own faith side by side.¹ K. P. Bahadur says, "There is no stigma attached to anyone for following any particular religion and so, despite the fact that Buddhism is the national religion, other religions exist side by side."²

The Sikkim government has softened its attitude towards other religions and allows the free practice of one's faith. But the fact still remains that Christianity has not been fully appreciated and welcomed in the state.

Although the government gives full freedom to Christians to practice their own faith and carry out welfare work in the land, religious conversion and conducting public meetings are strictly prohibited. In fact, every movement of the missionary, whether indigenous or foreign, is closely watched.³

¹Sikkim Coronation: Coronation Souvenir (Calcutta: Statement Press, 1975), 12.

²Bahadur, 132.

³Based on the information gathered through observation and interviews with the residents of Rhenock in Sikkim.

Restriction on Christianity Before Annexation

Prior to the coming of the British and annexation, since Sikkim was a closed independent Buddhist country, Christianity did not have any access to the land. The land was closed to outsiders and thus missionaries could not enter. Bhasin and Bhasin write that "there were no Christian missionaries in the state at that time and Europeans could not enter Sikkim without legal permit."¹ When Europeans tried to enter the land, they were kidnapped and imprisoned, even after the British had occupied some of the territory of Sikkim and become its arbitrator. This high degree of restriction to enter Sikkim during that period effectively curtailed missionary activity.

Fifteen years after the British had occupied Darjeeling, Dr. Joseph Hooker and Dr. George Campbell, the superintendents of Darjeeling, while travelling in Sikkim with the permission of the British government, were seized and imprisoned by the Prime Minister of Sikkim. This annoyed the British. An army expedition was ordered by the British government to occupy Sikkim. But before the troops could advance, the monarch or raja of Sikkim surrendered and agreed to accept the terms and conditions which the British government demanded. One of the conditions was to abolish

¹Bhasin and Bhasin, 6.

restriction on the movement of travellers. In 1861, the Treaty of Tumlong was signed between Sikkim and the British government.

After this Treaty, the British gained free access to Sikkim. Europeans travelling in Sikkim were cordially received by Lamas and people. During this time missionaries attempted to convert Sikkimese into Christianity.¹

According to B. S. Das, the missionaries, who gained entrance along with the British officers, "converted a few of them to Christianity."² And according to K. S. Singh, more specifically it was the Scottish missionaries who first arrived and converted some to Christianity.³

Largely the heart of Sikkim remained closed to Christianity with Christian mission not having much success. Christianity spread only in those parts of Sikkim territory, namely Darjeeling, Kalimpong, and Pedong, which had come into the hands of the British Government.

Religious Tolerance

Religious tolerance in Sikkim, particularly in terms of Christianity, can be dated to the time of Maharaja Tashi Namgyal who in 1918 brought Sikkim to its peak. He was far-

¹Risley, 249.

²Das, 5.

³Singh, People of India: Sikkim, 101.

sighted and wanted to bring development to the country. He welcomed developmental projects, and the borders were opened for engineers, technicians, doctors, and skilled persons from other areas. S. K. Shukla writes that it was during Maharaja Tashi Namgyal's time that missionaries also were allowed entry into the land-locked territory and converted many poor Lepchas and Limbus to Christianity and introduced ideas from Western civilization.¹ During this time Christianity was tolerated along with other religions in the state.

Sikkim became more liberal in socio-religious matters when Prince Palden Thondup Namgyal married Sarah Lawrence Hope Cook, an educated young woman from America. The marriage attracted a large foreign presence. When Prince Palden succeeded the throne on his father's death, his coronation was splashed all over the foreign press, especially American.²

Besides this, other factors that paved the way for religious tolerance were the annexation of Sikkim to India and the victory of the Sikkim National Party in elections. When Sikkim was annexed to India in 1975, it entered as one of the twenty-two republican states of India. With that

¹S. R. Shukla, The Story of Integration (New Delhi: S. Chand and Company, 1976), 46.

²Das, 89.

shift in government, democracy was brought into the state. The people were relieved from the tyranny of Lamaism. The government fell into the hands of the ruling party (Sikkim National Party), which was liberal in its stand on religious matters. Sikkim, as an Indian state, softened its attitude on religious matters and permitted religious tolerance in the land.

Christianity and the Lepchas

The Lepchas came in contact with Christianity when the British first set foot in the land of Sikkim. Nepal, in 1774-1775 and again in 1780, invaded Sikkim and extended its hold over the entire Testa basin in the east.¹ The helpless Chogyals or rajas sought the assistance of the British East India Company, who later came and defeated the Nepalese in 1814 and returned the lost territory to Sikkim. In 1815 the Treaty of Segouly was signed between Sikkim and Nepal, accepting the arbitration of the British in cases of all differences arising between these two states. As a result of the treaty the British gained access to the Sikkim palace. In 1817, another treaty called the Treaty of Titalya was signed between these two, and this further

¹Tanka B. Subba, "Lepchas: From Legends to the Present Day," Religion and Society 32 (June 1985): 63.

opened the door for close contact with European missionaries.¹

There was a border dispute again in 1826 between Nepal and Sikkim. The weak and helpless monarch of Sikkim again sought help from the British. The British in pursuance of the Treaty of Titalya consented to protect Sikkim from the Nepalese. In 1828, General Lloyd and Mr. J. W. Grant were appointed to bring about a settlement between these two kingdoms.²

While traveling through Sikkim, these two officers of the British East India Company came across Darjeeling, a beautiful resort, which was then under the Sikkim raja or king. Being impressed by the beauty of Darjeeling, they presented their report showing the great strategic importance of Darjeeling, which could be the commanding business center for the entire region and also the most suitable place for the spread of Christianity.

In the course of time, efforts were made by the British administration to take Darjeeling from Sikkim. For some time the Sikkim monarch was hesitant to give it to the

¹B. S. K. Grover, Sikkim and India: Storm and Consolidation (New Delhi: Manohar Publications, 1974), 14.

²L. B. Basnet, Sikkim: A Short Political History (New Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 1974), 19.

English. But with pressure, it was finally annexed to the British in 1835.¹

After the annexation, the British rapidly developed Darjeeling. The township was laid out. Later on, this was the place from where Christianity spread. Giving an account of the advent and spread of Christianity, R. N. Thakur writes that its advent in Darjeeling dates back to the nineteenth century. Further, giving the details from an unauthored, torn document, he says that it was Reverend William who first established "the Darjeeling Mission." Then came Rev. Treutler, Rev. Stoelke, Rev. Wernicke, and Rev. Nieble. Rev. Nieble remained alone until his death in 1865. He worked mainly among the Lepchas.²

After 1865, according to C. A. Bell, Christianity entered Kalimpong, a small hill town, which was then a part of Darjeeling. Campbell, the commanding officer of the British administration, wrote that the "mission first obtained leave from Major Morton in 1873 to occupy a few acres of land near Kalimpong for mission purposes. It

¹Ibid., 33.

²Details found in an old torn book by an anonymous author, cited by Thakur.

subsequently applied for more land and it was given a lease of 16 1/2 acres for twenty years for mission purposes."¹

The missions established in Darjeeling and Kalimpong were operated by the Protestant missionaries. But later, factional rivalry developed among them and the mission split up. Today MacFarlane Church still stands at the old location.

When the Roman Catholics arrived they first opened their mission station at Pedong, a small sub-town 25 kilometers from Kalimpong. They took a vast area of 718 acres of land at Maria Busty in 1891 and started the work.² It should be noted that Christianity grew rapidly only in these areas during this period, and did not gain much access to the heart of Sikkim since most of the territory remained closed to the missionaries.

During the British period, Protestant work flourished and a considerable amount of good work was done. They opened schools and provided health services. But when the British left, Protestant work waned. Recently, Catholics have come into prominence because of their huge resources and extensive work.

¹C. A. Bell, Final Report on the Survey and Settlement of the Kalimpong Government Estate in the District of Darjeeling (Clarendon: Oxford University Press, 1901), 16.

²Ibid.

Interaction with Christians in General

When Christianity came to Darjeeling, Kalimpong, and Pedong, which were then part of Sikkim, the Lepchas of these places readily accepted it. Though it is not known when the first Lepcha was converted to Christianity, the fact remains that Christianity spread quickly in some areas. Several factors contributed to the fast growth of Christianity in these areas.

1. The British diplomatic policy had manipulated and controlled these territories and the missionaries took advantage of the free access to convert the Lepchas; since the Lepchas were mild and open, their openness paved the way for their quick conversion.¹

2. The Lepchas, who were generally looked down upon by the Nepalese and Bhutanese, felt more at home with missionaries by identifying themselves with the White people, at least in the area of religion.² Moreover, the Lepchas hoped that the Christianity of the White man would give them wealth, power, and prosperity in society.

Latourette writes:

In many instances converts have been moved to accept the faith by the hope of the assistance of the powerful white man or by the belief that Christianity is indissociable from that Western civilization which

¹Thakur, 95.

²Ibid., 96.

they are eager to adopt and that it will bring them the political power and wealth which they envy in the occident.¹

Obviously, it appears that poverty and ill treatment in society caused the Lepchas to be attracted to Christianity. Recently when I asked an educated Christian Lepcha why the Lepchas had accepted Christianity, the answer seemed to be the same. It was the hope for something better in the midst of poverty and backwardness which lured the Lepchas to Christianity.² Das and Benerjee hold a similar view, feeling that Christianity

secured easy access among the Lepchas, mainly due to the backwardness and poverty of the people. They [missionaries] stood by the people whenever they were in precarious situation and helped them with money, food, etc.³

I have reservations about whether it was the monetary and material benefits which led the Lepchas to conversion. I do not feel that this was the most important cause of conversion since some Lepchas who are affluent and better off than their brothers have also adopted Christianity.

Basically, Lepchas were not as poor as several other tribes because they were more or less settled

¹K. S. Latourette, "Mission," Encyclopedia of Social Science, ed. R. A. Seligman, 9:543.

²Based on an interview with an educated Christian Lepcha, at Pedong.

³Das and Benerjee, 107.

agriculturists. Their socio-religious practices, however, used up a large share of income leaving them in poverty.

But as soon as they embraced Christianity, their huge expenditures for observing various ceremonies, rites, and rituals were reduced. Above everything else, Christianity brought blessings to the Lepchas, it uplifted them, educationally as well as economically, and gave them a better lifestyle and status in society.¹ These factors drew the Lepchas closer to the missionaries and their religion, rather than just providing material benefits as is often assumed.

The Adventist Church and the Lepchas

The Adventist Church has completed 106 years of work in India. Since the time of its establishment in 1893 until the present, the church has evangelized almost all parts of India.² But the Seventh-day Adventist Church has done very little to reach the Lepcha people. In the past it made several attempts to establish a Christian community through a medical ministry, but it did not have much success.

In 1950 the church began its work among this group of people in a small way in Kalimpong. R. J. King, Allan Maberly (a pioneer medical missionary in the Himalayas for

¹Thakur, 98.

²SDA Encyclopedia, 1976 ed., s.v. "India."

eight years),¹ and other missionaries were sent to carry out a healing and preaching ministry in the region. A dispensary was opened to give health services to the Lepchas and people from other communities living in the hills of Kalimpong. That work continued as long as the missionaries were there. However, the dispensary was closed down as soon as they left.² Presently there is a junior high school being run under indigenous leadership.

The Adventist Church further attempted to expand its work in Sikkim when in 1975 a clinic under the name "The Himalayan Better Health Clinic" was opened at Deorali.³ The honorable Chief Minister, Kazi Lhendup Dorji, inaugurated the clinic himself, with the hope that it would prove beneficial to the local residents. It was dedicated for the alleviation of suffering and for a program of health education in Sikkim. But before the close of the decade, the clinic was closed. There were no baptisms.⁴

¹Allan Maberly, God Spoke Tibetan (Bangalore: New Life Computer Institute, n.d.), 3.

²P. K. Tamsang, interview by author, January 8, 1999, Kalimpong.

³Sikkim Herald, November 6, 1975, 2.

⁴B. I. Basih, "Chief Minister Inaugurates Himalayan Better (Living) Health Clinic," Southern Asia Tidings, January 1976, 4.

For the next eighteen years the church stopped working in Sikkim and did not resume any activity until 1993, when a man and his wife, who was a nurse, moved to Sikkim.¹ I became directly involved in this field in 1994, when the work in Sikkim was organized under the North Frontier Region.²

Since I was in charge of that field my attention was drawn towards the Lepchas, the original inhabitants of the land who had not yet been reached with the gospel message. The work in Sikkim was accelerated in spite of restrictions from the government, and the years of hard work began to produce fruit. From the nucleus which already existed, a company of believers was raised up. Presently there is an Adventist Church with around forty-five members. A three-acre plot of land was purchased in order to construct a center. But the construction was not allowed because of the restrictive laws of the land not permitting a foreign entity to construct anything other than what would be beneficial to the entire community. Presently the local unit supervising the church in Sikkim is working to change its strategy from religious activities to community development activities.

¹Edison Samraj, The Challenging Years 1990-1995: Images II (Pune: Oriental Watchman Publishing House, 1995), 28.

²Ibid., 33.

Recently, in order to strengthen the work among the Lepcha, an English medium school up to Standard VI was started in a rented building with the help of the local pastor who heads the school.¹ These are the new beginnings of the Adventist Church among the Sikkimese or the Lepchas in Eastern Sikkim. It is my hope that soon a cluster of Adventist centers will be developed throughout Sikkim.

Door Opened for Witnessing

The door which was closed for more than 300 years was opened with the abolition of the hereditary monarchy in 1975.² Along with this the power of the Chogyal was taken away by the Indian government. By becoming part of India, Sikkim now must allow free entry for citizens of India.

In the course of time, large numbers of Christian denominations established welfare units in the country. According to the report in Operation World, Christians have grown steadily in numbers despite periods of persecution. Now there are churches belonging to the Church of North India, to Pentecostal groups, and to the Free Church, which was started by Finnish Missionaries.³ Whereas the door is

¹The information was gathered from "1996-97 Statistical Record of the West Bengal Section," the local conference which is supervising the work in Sikkim.

²Shukla, 47.

³Johnstone, 288.

wide open for business, it has been opened only partially to Christianity.

Even though Sikkim is not totally open, Christianity has found its way to the land, and not only to the land but into the hearts of the Lepchas. Many who longed for something better believe that Christianity can bring change to the lives of the Lepchas. Christianity can promote cultural dynamism among the Lepchas; it can emancipate them from the social evils of drinking and smoking and can raise the social value of the Lepchas. Thus, the majority of the Lepchas are now ready to accept Christianity. Having no direct restriction upon the people, the government has been flexible in terms of Christians and Christianity. It can be now said that, more or less, the door is open for witnessing among the Lepchas in Sikkim.

CHAPTER IV

THE STRATEGY

In this chapter, strategies for reaching the Lepcha community of Sikkim with the gospel message are suggested. The major portion of the chapter presents how the Lepcha community, practicing Folk-Buddhism, can be won to Christianity when a big gap exists between Folk-Buddhism and Christianity. I have worked closely with the Lepchas and have come to know their culture, beliefs, and world view so feel somewhat comfortable in presenting step-by-step strategies and methods which I hope will prove effective in reaching this group.

One important innovative strategy for a tribal group such as the Lepchas is the "people movement." A people movement results from the joint decision of a number of individuals--whether five or five hundred--all from the same people. This enables them to become Christians, as McGavran says,

without social dislocation, while remaining in full contact with their non-Christian relatives, thus enabling other groups of that people, across the years after suitable instruction to come to a similar

decision and form Christian churches made up exclusively of members of that people.¹

What really happens in a people movement is that a group makes a joint decision, is taught and prepared, and then baptized. In it there is no "careless accession or hurried baptism."² The whole following strategy is with the aim to create a people movement among the Lepchas.

The very first step taken was to gather information and acquire knowledge about the Lepchas. Surveys and personal contacts were used. The next step involved entering and establishing a base for work among the group through bonding and involvement in their lives. The goal was to help meet the felt-needs of the Lepchas. Several effective measures and programs taken to meet the needs of the group proved fruitful and paved the way for the presentation of the gospel which resulted in the establishment of a community of faith among the Lepchas in Sikkim.

Pre-evangelism Preparation

The initial preparation for evangelizing the Lepcha community of Sikkim began just before I entered the Doctor of Ministry Program. I set out to know them as a people,

¹Donald McGavran, Understanding Church Growth (Madras: Evangelical Literature Service, 1982), 335.

²Ibid., 297.

their life situation, land, culture, religion, world view, and their receptivity to the gospel.

Selection of the Group

The selection of the Lepcha community of Sikkim for evangelism took place in 1994 when I was the one in charge of the mission field called the North Frontier Region, which was then comprised of six districts of West Bengal and the State of Sikkim. The criteria for selecting the group was that the group was the principal tribe of the land, followed Folk-Buddhism, and was receptive to the Gospel.

Principal Tribal Group

The Lepchas are the principal tribal group in Sikkim, who have been living for three hundred years under the slavery of Lamaism (Folk-Buddhism) which was not their religion but had been imposed upon them.¹ This imported religion, though it had exerted influence and converted many to its fold, did not take root in the hearts of the Lepchas.² They indirectly continued in their old traditional Bon religion, which gradually had become a burden for them but they longed for transition. I have been attracted to this group because they had not been completely

¹Indra Awasty, Between Sikkim and Bhutan (New Delhi: B. R. Publishing Corporation, 1978), 32.

²Ibid., 40.

evangelized so I was interested in reaching them with the gospel message.

Receptive to the Gospel

My second criteria for selecting the Lepcha community for evangelism was that the Lepchas are very liberal and tolerant in socio-religious matters. As mentioned earlier, during the time of British rule the Lepchas had shown an openness to the gospel and the result was that many Lepchas were converted to Christianity. Their openness paved the way for the entry of Christianity among them. Today, Lepchas are more receptive to the gospel and are slowly and gradually adopting Christianity. The reason for their acceptance of Christianity is not due to their backwardness and poverty as Das and Benerjee hold,¹ but because of their longing for transition from the religious system of Lamaism which has ruled over them since the fifteenth century.² Another reason for an attraction to Christianity is that the outside settlers who came into the land pushed them aside and thus they were reduced to minority status even though they are the autochthonous of Sikkim. There were times when the Lepchas were looked down upon by the more advanced communities of society. The Lepchas have always had to

¹Das and Benerjee, 107.

²Reese, 289.

suffer and Christianity, at such a time, appeared to them as a means by which they could be helped to have a better life and status in society.

Study of the Group

In order to learn more details about the Lepcha community, their land, life, culture, and custom, a careful study of the group was undertaken through the collection of data and a physical survey.

Collection of Data

Though data collection is basic to strategy and is used everywhere in the world, I consider this as one of the important strategical steps in studying and knowing about the target group.

I collected data through various printed sources such as books, magazines, encyclopedias, periodicals, write-ups, newspaper cut-outs, and any other printed materials that would be helpful to me in understanding the people I was attempting to reach. Since printed sources about the Lepchas are limited, I collected data through general observations, participations, and interviews, in order to know the kind of people I was reaching. I was also interested in the various people groups who were living side by side with the target group.

Survey of People and Land

While collecting data through various printed sources, I also paid an informal visit to Sikkim to survey the real-life situation of the Lepchas, in order to find out if they really did live and believe like the information reported. The survey was conducted during my informal visits.

The information gathered through the survey was very important since it allowed me to become acquainted with life situations of the people today instead of depending on information gathered long ago. Things are constantly changing in a society.¹ The people are changing, their culture, outlook, beliefs, world view, and political situations are all variable factors. The information found in published sources may not always be applicable today. Thus a comparative enquiry using both printed sources and surveys should be followed simultaneously in order to be fully informed about the target group and the land in which they live.

Contact

According to Ponraj, tribals are basically a group-oriented people, among whom the work of witnessing cannot be

¹Viggo Sogaard, Media in Church and Mission: Communicating the Gospel (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1993), 19.

started without proper contact.¹ The Lepchas are a group-conscious people with a strong sense of group identity. Witnessing among them would not be very productive without good local contact persons.

The Contact Person

The initial contact with the group was made through a young man named Pasang Lepcha, who had already heard about the Adventist Church and the Sabbath truth four years prior to my visiting the group. His interest was created by two literature evangelists who had gone to Sikkim to sell health literature in his area. Though he was anxious to know more, he did not know of anyone to contact until 1993, when an evangelist and his wife, who was a nurse, were sent and stationed near Gangtok. He contacted them and invited them to visit his people. The evangelist's visit to the group aroused an interest among the people and a nucleus began to develop. The following year I came in contact with the group.

Visits and Association with the Group

Over the following months, I made periodic visits to the group. The purpose of the visits was twofold: (1) to associate and deepen the initial acquaintance with them, and

¹S. Devasagayam Ponraj, An Introduction to Missionary Anthropology (Madras: Emerald Academic Press, 1993), 108.

(2) to study and observe them more closely to understand and know them better because it was important for me to know the Lepchas before doing evangelism among them. Jonathan Lewis, in emphasizing the importance of knowing the target group, has rightly said that

we need to know them as God knows them and to begin by attempting to meet their need as they see it. When we have done this we will have the potential for communicating the saving power to Jesus in their language and their cultural understanding, and in terms of where they find themselves.¹

Evangelistic activities among any group cannot be begun abruptly or at once without first creating a foundation. Preparation has to be made for one's acceptance by the group. Through periodic visits and association with the group the ground was prepared until I had gained the confidence of the Lepchas to the point where they were willing to allow ministry among them to begin.

Entry Stage

The areas of focus in the entry stage were: involvement and participation with the group, community development among the group, and meeting the felt needs of the group. The main thrust of all of these areas was to lead and move

¹Jonathan Lewis, ed., Work Mission: An Analysis of the World Mission Movement (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1989), 91.

the Lepchas, step by step, from a little knowledge of Christianity to a cognitive knowledge of Jesus Christ.

Involvement and Participation

My entry to the Lepcha group took place not as a minister but as a community worker. The very first course of action which I took as the community worker was involvement and participation with the group in their own situations. This was done to become a part of them, because it is impossible to be a true communicator of the Gospel unless there is participation in the lives of the people.

Although my involvement with the Lepchas was limited due to the nature of my responsibilities, I attempted to be with the group in order to move the Lepchas to the truth. I strongly emphasize that if someone intends to work among a tribal group they must live among them in order to win their faith and confidence. In other words, one must be "bonded" with the people. Thomas and Elizabeth Brewster feel that a person has "to establish a sense of belonging with the people,"¹ which does not happen all by itself but emerges out of love for the people one is attempting to reach.

My involvement with the Lepchas was the result of love and concern for them, otherwise I would not have chosen them

¹E. Thomas Brewster and Elizabeth S. Brewster, Bonding and Missionary Task: In Perspectives on the World Christian Movement (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1981), 454.

as my target group. Devasagayam Ponraj has rightly asserted that,

unless we truly love those to whom we are sent to communicate the gospel, we will not be able to communicate to them the love God has for them, and they will not see this love.¹

Paul Heibert further asserts,

The same love that compels us to understand and identify with the people different from ourselves, requires us to share with them our understandings of truth, of the gospel, and of better life.²

So, in a wider sense, the sense of belonging with the people, is to love, live and involve oneself with the group to become one with them, to identify with them in their context in order to understand them, their language, culture, experience, and basic assumptions. It is necessary to learn the language of the people, participate in their culture, experience what they experience, and understand their basic assumptions of life.

Learning the Language

Learning the language is very important while working with any group of people. I have experienced language-learning challenges while working with the Maltos, Totos, and the Lepchas. Though my learning of the Lepcha language

¹Ponraj, 93.

²Paul G. Hiebert, Anthropological Tools for Missionaries (Singapore: Hagai Institute, 1978), 8.

began with my initial visits and association with the group, I found it difficult to communicate the message without being fluent in it. The Lepchas understood Hindi clearly, but were not comfortable using it. They felt comfortable speaking "Gorkhali," the lingua Franca of the state. In my experience working among various groups, I have found it to be a common trend in India, that though most people understand Hindi, the national language of India, they will not be comfortable unless the message is conveyed to them in their own language.

To create a "sense of belonging" among the group and for effective communication, the language of the people group must be learned fluently. J. Puthenpurakal, commenting on the importance of learning the language of the people, says,

One of the chief items in the missionary's equipment is clearly the language of the people to whose salvation he is destined to devote himself. He should not rest satisfied with a superficial knowledge, but it should be thorough enough for a fluent and elegant command.¹

Languages are learned while associating and building friendships with the target group, and it is done through listening, imitating, and participating in the life of the community.

¹J. Puthenpurakal, Mission: In the Documents of the Catholic Church (Shillong: Vendrames Institute Publication, 1997), 66.

Participating in the Culture

The next level of involvement was participation in the culture of the Lepchas. The Lepchas encouraged and allowed me to become socially involved with them, and as I mingled with them I tried to learn each detail of their way of life: their way of doing things on normal working days, their way of celebrating festivals, their fears and taboos, their social power structure and their decision-making processes. This did not happen in one day but gradually, day by day, until I felt that I was a part of them. This is exactly what it means to participate in the culture of a people. Part of that process involves ridding oneself of one's own culture and being willing to listen closely in order to learn more about another's culture. John Kaleli, speaking from an African context, said that "a missionary must listen and listen and listen" to the culture of the people until it becomes a way of life.¹

Sharing the Experience

By becoming part of the people I not only moved and associated with the Lepchas but shared life's experiences with them by involving myself in their social events such as

¹Paul A. Beals, A People for His Name: A Church-Based Mission Strategy (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1989), 154.

festivals, marriages, and other events. By so doing I not only identified myself with the group but drew the Lepchas more closely to me, which later paved the way for the continuation of ministry among them.

Making friendships and sharing experiences through association and involvement is an important strategic goal which cannot be neglected by one endeavoring to reach the tribals with the gospel message.

Understanding Basic Assumptions

The fourth level of involvement with the Lepchas was to understand their basic assumptions and relationship to the world, life, and God. It was necessary to find out about their fundamental beliefs and ideas that lie unspoken behind their daily conversations.

The Lepchas view the world like an earthen pot which is resting on a tortoise in water. Below the water there is fire and under it a world of wind in which the spirit of the earthquake lives. In fact, the Lepchas are more interested in the creation of plants, animals, and spirits than in the origin of the universe.

The idea and belief of an all-powerful God does not seem to be present in the old Lepcha faith. Their belief in gods, spirits (rum), and evil demons (mung) is very strong.

It is believed that if a man falls, he is troubled by demons or spirits who ought to be appeased by offering a sacrifice.

Among the Lepchas the idea of life is vague. They believe in the cycle of rebirth (reincarnation) like Hindus, that the soul suffers the consequences of its deeds (Karma) in the process of its rebirth. However, they are very fearful about the reality of human suffering and death.

Community Development Programs

After having gained the faith and confidence of the Lepcha through involvement and participation as a social worker, I took the next step of moving the Lepchas gradually through a series of community development programs to educate them to live clean, healthy lives. It is essential that people first be taught about health before leading them to accept the gospel. The programs implemented to achieve these goals were health and social-service based.

Health Education

During this period of involvement and association, I found that the Lepchas suffered from numerous health problems such as unhygienic living, a shortage of drinking water, water-borne diseases, and malnutrition. It became my burden to help the Lepchas overcome these problems. The basic laws of health were taught through education programs

using flash cards and charts in order to bring them to an awareness of healthful living.

Initially the Lepchas did not respond well to the programs as they did not want to change their old ways but persistent effort brought results. A gradual change took place in the lives of the Lepchas. They shunned their old, unhygienic living and suffered less with diseases.

Social Service

The term "social service" may appear as a broad area of work in the community, but I use it in the sense of giving practical, needed help to the people in the area of health and hygiene so they can live a better life.

Just talking about health education programs did not mean anything to the Lepchas until the practical aspects were clear to them. Practical demonstrations were carried out with the help of a team of men from the village. The area surrounding each house was cleaned up. Collecting drinking water from a stream was improved by channeling it through bamboo or plastic pipes. Better sanitary conditions were provided by digging pit-hole latrines using bamboo and tree branches for each house. All these projects did not happen in one day but over a period of time they were finished. These projects played a great role in bringing about changes in the lives of the people. It is true that

"actions speak louder than words." Ken Gnanaken, having a similar view, said, "Witnessing is more than verbalizing. Our words must relate to the actual world of the people they are meant to reach."¹

Words, actions, and examples are the powerful tools (strategy) one can use in cross-cultural witnessing. This method of approach was used earlier while working among the Malto and Toto tribes, and it again brought good results among the Lepchas.

Meeting the Felt Needs of the Group

Usually when we talk about people's needs, it is generally understood in terms of their spiritual needs, but it involves much more than that. One should not forget that "the whole gospel to the whole man" is being presented and that a person's needs are much more than just spiritual or physical. The needs are threefold: spiritual, intellectual, and physical. Balance is missing when only one or two are satisfied. According to Matthew, Jesus preached, taught, and healed (Matt 4:23), a threefold ministry corresponding roughly to the threefold nature of man: soul, mind, and

¹Ken R. Gnanaken, "Church and Culture," Paper presented at the EFI-TC Consultation on the Church in NE India, Shillong, August 1985, 5.

body. It is from such passages that one can understand the expression, "The whole gospel for the whole man."¹

In reaching and meeting the felt needs of the Lepchas, I took a specific and strategic approach to meeting the spiritual, intellectual, and physical needs of the people. Because these three types of needs are interrelated in a person's life, one cannot be considered by itself; all three areas must be addressed.

Physical Needs

Among the human's needs which God gave, physical needs appear to be the first and basic needs of people. These needs include life and the health of the body. Having already met some of the basic needs through health education programs and social-service-based activities, I worked to further fulfill the physical needs of the Lepchas. The most essential physical needs, other than food, were emancipation from bad habits of drinking and smoking and freedom from socioeconomic injustice. To meet these needs, health and temperance and income-generation programs (ministries) were carried out among the Lepchas.

¹Kane J. Herbert, Christian Mission in Biblical Perspective (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1976), 150.

Health and Temperance Ministry

Drinking liquor, smoking, and using drugs are major problems in the state of Sikkim. Both young and old are involved in these evil habits one way or another. The state government is not taking any measures at this time to eliminate these evils.

Through systematic implementation of health and temperance programs (ministries) I attempted to eradicate these evil habits from the Lepcha community. Five-day plans to stop smoking, dramas, and plays were staged to depict the evil habits of alcohol drinking and drug use. Though the results of the programs did not surface immediately since it took time to change the lives of the Lepchas, in the long run the strategy did work.

Income-generation Programs

In addition to the social evils of drinking, smoking, and the use of drugs, the Lepchas suffered many socio-economic problems. Because of their poor economic status, they are often looked down on and exploited by landlords, money lenders, and in some cases the government officials. As mentioned earlier, they looked up to and respected Christianity since it brought them justice, relief, and development. To meet the economic needs of the Lepchas an

income-generation program was implemented to increase the earnings of the community.

Income-generation programs, such as fruit-tree plantation projects, growing vegetables throughout the year, small scale poultry and pottery projects funded by ADRA and local welfare units, were started in the community. The results were not completely successful, but they helped some and showed the care and concern of the Christians for the Lepchas.

In today's context in India, as S. Devasagayam Ponraj says, we are not only called "to preach the gospel but also fight against the social evils in the community whether they are bad habits, like drinking liquor or social injustices."¹

Intellectual Needs

Literacy rates in Sikkim are low with most of the Lepchas living in the remote and scattered hills of Sikkim being illiterate. Recent surveys reveal that only about two out of ten people in Sikkim can read and write.² This includes the target group, both adults and children. After finding out about this important felt-need of the Lepchas, I worked to implement a literacy program for both adults and

¹Ponraj, 181.

²LaPorte, 17:456.

children, teaching them to read and write their own local language.

Literacy Program for Adults

The literacy program for adults as conducted in the Lepcha community was termed a "night school." Since the adults were busy during the day with their various household chores, they were only able to attend night classes.

Since the Lepchas do not have their own script (it had been systematically destroyed by the Tibetans),¹ most of them speak Nepali, the lingua franca of the state and use the Devanagari script for communication.² In the initial stage I helped the target group to learn the alphabet of the Devanagari script through constant practice of reading and writing. Later they began practicing how to read.

The overall objective of the literacy program was to educate and prepare the adult Lepchas for the reception of the gospel. The literacy lessons covered the Bible and health topics, and in this way they learned about God and religion while also learning how to read.

Literacy programs, among any group of people, are essential for evangelism. Through such programs people are

¹T. R. Sharma, "Sikkim Ferkera Herda," Journal of Kanchanjunga 10 (December 1996): 85.

²K. S. Singh, The Scheduled Tribes, 689.

not only presented with the gospel but are taught to read and write, helping them to comprehend and understand modern-day life. K. Sathkeerthi Rao, having a similar view about the importance of literacy, says, "Tribal evangelism calls for evangelists not only trained in theology but also in linguistics."¹

Literacy Programs for Children

The literacy programs for children were carried out with similar objectives: To teach the Lepcha children to read and write so that they would be prepared for formal education and to help them learn about the religion of the Bible through stories and songs.

The methods and media used to teach the Lepcha children were activity-based Vacation Bible School (VBS) and Branch Sabbath Schools (BSS) materials in which they were not only taught to read and write through activities but were also taught Christian religious songs, which proved effective in bringing change to the lives of the children. The children were no longer dirty and arrogant like before but appeared neat and clean with smiles on their faces.

¹K. Sathkeerthi Rao, "Some Recommendation for Rural Evangelism," Indian Church Growth Quarterly 4 (April-June 1982): 221.

Spiritual Needs

People's deepest and greatest needs are spiritual, and are connected with salvation (mukti). People want to be saved either from the power of darkness, or danger, or death. This is a high priority. Those involved in cross-cultural missionary endeavors must first attempt to meet the spiritual needs that concern the target group the most before presenting the gospel.

Among the Lepchas the most important religious felt-need was the need for deliverance from the evil power (mungs) which brought disease and death. To meet this need, the concepts of a power encounter, deliverance, and prayer fellowship ministries were implemented among the Lepchas.

These concepts and ministries, which will be explained in what follows, are meant to lead people to a specific experience in which they change allegiance from their former religion to Jesus Christ.

Deliverance Ministry

Among the Lepchas the fear of evil spirits and demons is very strong. They believe that the spirits are powerful and strong, and if the spirits are not kept happy with offerings they will bring disease, suffering, and death. Whenever a Lepcha fell sick, suffered loss, or went through bad ordeals, they attributed such misfortunes to the power

of the evil spirits (mung) and sought the help of the mun (religious functionary).

Deliverance ministries among the Lepchas proved effective. While I ministered among them there were no cases of casting out of demons. However, healing the sick in the name of Jesus during prayer became a powerful means to win them for Jesus. When they witnessed the healing power of Jesus and realized that Jesus was superior to the magic and power of demons, they gave their allegiance to Christ. Among the Lepchas the fear of death is very prevalent. They were looking for someone who could save them from the face of death. As they were taught about the saving power of Christ, they accepted Him. Their fear of death was an entry point to reach them with the gospel.

In my eighteen years of Christian work I have spent considerable time among tribals (animists) similar to the Lepchas. A common feature which I have found is a search for power, or "power worship" (Shakti). People will not listen to the Christian message unless it is presented in a way to stress "greater power" than what they find in their own worship. In the Indian context, evangelism among any group of people is incomplete without power encounters or deliverance ministries. Roger Hedlund rightly observes: "Frequently the encounter of the gospel in India today is in

terms of power; casting out demons, healing the sick in the name of Jesus."¹

Prayer Fellowship Ministry

A home-to-home prayer fellowship ministry was carried out among the Lepchas to help meet their spiritual needs. When they saw the results of the prayers offered for the sick, they were convinced that the power of Jesus is greater than the power of mung (the evil spirits) whom they had worshipped before. They voluntarily started inviting the team members into their houses for prayer.

The prayer fellowship ministry was carried out simultaneously along with other health-based religious meetings. The prayer ministry proved effective in drawing the Lepchas closer to Jesus and for building up their faith in Him as God.

Evangelism

As the felt needs of the Lepchas were met, and as they were moved and prepared to receive the gospel, the next step was to communicate the gospel. This task required a lot of time, effort, and patience.

There is a vast difference between theory and the actual communicating of the gospel to a people. Presenting

¹Roger E. Hedlund, Mission to Man in the Bible (Madras: Evangelical Literature Service, 1985), 249.

the Good News requires good communication and close involvement in the cultural context of the people. Donald K. Smith has rightly asserted in support of this line of thought that "evangelism takes place only when there is [contextualized] communication and communication takes place only when there is involvement."¹

Presentation of the Gospel

The actual presentation of the gospel was carried out in the language and in the cultural context of the Lepchas, in order to move them towards a knowledge of the Saviour Jesus Christ.

In the Language of the People

For effective communication of the gospel the message should be presented to the people in their own language, which according to McGavran "is the language of the heart."² All scheduled meetings were in their own 'mother tongue'. The people learned to sing gospel songs using their own folk tunes but with biblical messages that drew them closer to the love of God. Arthur Hope, in stressing the importance of presenting the gospel in the language of the people says,

¹Donald K. Smith, Creating Understanding: A Handbook for Christian Communication Across Cultural Landscapes (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992), 23.

²McGavran, 193.

"Every indigenous method of verbal and non-verbal communication should be made use of to get the message of Jesus' love and his sacrifice on the cross understood by the people."¹

In presenting the gospel to the Lepchas in their own language, the help of a translator was used to make sure that the people received the message in their own language. Part of the program of each religious meeting included time for health presentations and time to reinforce the Bible-based literacy program.

Gospel-related adult literacy ministry

Gospel-related adult literacy classes were conducted in Gorkhali among the Lepchas using a basic textbook prepared by the Indian Literacy Society. The literacy classes not only helped the Lepchas learn how to read and write but also taught them character-building stories from the Bible. The object of the adult literacy ministry was to help the Lepchas learn to read the Bible in their own language so that they would come to know the gospel by themselves.

¹Arthur Hope, "Planting Churches Among Unreached People Groups," Indian Church Growth Quarterly 3 (July-September 1996): 8.

Gospel-related health message

The presentation of gospel-related health messages was also effective in helping the Lepchas accept the gospel truth. Through health talks they were gradually prepared to accept Jesus Christ as the Creator God and the Saviour who wants to save them from death. The Lepchas, who have a great fear of sickness, suffering, and death, responded well to gospel-related health talks. This was another entry point for teaching the Bible.

In the Cultural Context of the People

Effective and meaningful communication involves not only the language but also the whole context in which the people live. In other words, effective communication can take place only when the gospel is presented or communicated in the context of the recipient culture. Dybdahl rightly asserts that "the unreached cannot be won unless the gospel comes to them in harmony with their own thought pattern."¹

To the Lepchas the gospel message was communicated to them in their cultural context through folklore, folktales, stories, dance, and dramas. These methods more effectively and meaningfully communicated the Good News.

¹Jon Dybdahl, "Cross-cultural Adaptation," Ministry, November 1992, 14.

Gospel through folklore and folktales

The biblical message was more easily grasped by the Lepchas when it was illustrated by local folklore and folktales.

For example, when the biblical story of the flood was narrated in the context of their own flood tradition, it was of much more interest to them. Their flood story says that in the time of the first ancestors of the Lepchas, Foog-rong and Nazong-nyo, there was a flood which nearly drowned all the people.¹ A few people escaped from the flood in a ship, and after a time the flood subsided.² The flood waters subsided when prayers were offered by the survivors to God.³

In a tribal context folklore and folktales are an effective means in relating to and winning the hearts of people. Fuchs has similar views: "If the missionary can illustrate his teaching with proverbs and folk-tales of local origin, it will be much easier for the new converts to accept the new faith."⁴

¹C. De Beavvoir Stocks, Sikkim Customs and Folk-lore (Delhi: Cosmo Publications, 1975), 59.

²L. A. Waddell, Among the Himalayas (Westminster: Archibald Constable and Co.), 1980, 110.

³Satyen Mazumdar, Folk-lore of the Lepchas (Calcutta: Calcutta Research Institute, 1961), 296.

⁴Stephen Fuchs, "Local Habits and Folk-tales," Indian Missiological Review 12 (March): 26.

Gospel through stories, dance,
and dramas

Story telling, dance, and drama are Indian methods of evangelism. Although I did not experiment with dance and drama among the Lepchas, I believe that they are good methods which could be used among the Lepchas and other similar tribal groups in India.

Story telling has been fruitful in my ministry among the Lepchas. Stories held the attention of the audience, and the response was good in moving them to understand and accept truth.

When communicating the gospel to a particular people, the right forms of expression within their cultural context must be used. Only then can we bring people to the truth in Jesus Christ.

Establishing a Community of Faith

Through different strategic approaches mentioned in this chapter, the Lepchas were gradually moved, step by step, to a fuller knowledge of Jesus Christ and biblical truth. Finally a community of believers was established and organized to form a witnessing community of Seventh-day Adventists in Sikkim. Initially, a nucleus was formed with eighteen newly converted Lepchas, but that group has now grown to over forty-five members.

Formation of Witnessing Group

The next strategic step, which I have not completely introduced yet, will be implemented as soon as witnessing groups can be formed. By involving the new Lepcha members in life-transformation groups and cell groups for inreach and outreach witnessing the Lepcha church can become a missionary church.

Life Transformation Group (LTG)

Now that a community of faith has been established among the Lepchas the next step is to form Life Transformation Groups (LTG) among the believers. The Life Transformation Group will consist of two or three Lepcha members who will meet together once a week for accountability and disciple-making. According to Logan and Cole, a Life Transformation Group is very effective in bringing about spontaneous reproduction of disciple-making in the churches.¹ I am hoping that by using this simple system (LTG) of accountability, that good disciple-making can be accomplished among the Lepcha. The goal is to establish and strengthen the community of faith among them.

¹Robert E. Logan and Neil Cole, Sowing: Making and Multiply Disciples, Tape outline (Tape 3, 1995).

Cell groups

Another type of group which will be developed is the cell group. Cell groups will consist of seven to fifteen members who will move from house to house for their spiritual activities. Cell groups will be the place where the new Lepcha believers will be evangelized, nurtured, equipped to serve, and where members will build each other up. It will be a community where believers are called to be accountable and totally transparent with one another.¹

It is expected that these cell groups will cluster to form future congregations. Congregations are just an extension of the cell group. By clustering together they can assist each other in inreach and outreach activities in the community. Once the congregation is formed by various cell groups in the Lepcha community, the Lepcha believers themselves should work together to carry out inreach and outreach activities, such as nurturing, evangelism, and community service in order to begin new clusters of cell groups. They, in turn, will form new congregations.

Follow-Up

A company of believers has been established in Sikkim. The task of strengthening the newly born Christians must

¹Ralph W. Neighbour, Jr., The Shepherd's Guidebook: Spiritual and Practical Foundations for Cell Group Leaders (Houston: Touch Outreach Ministries, 1984), 198.

follow immediately in order to keep them from falling away. The following steps have been taken to strengthen the members: Members have been nurtured and new leadership has been developed in order to lead the church and help it multiply.

Nurturing

Nurturing is a part of any follow-up program and is very essential for the new members who have just joined the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Sikkim. A full-time pastor and his wife, who is a nurse, have arrived to care for the spiritual needs of the members. Presently, regular house-to-house visits, group prayer meetings, and fellowship meetings are being conducted to build the faith of the new members.

Leadership Development

In the near future leadership development will be started in order to help the Lepcha community become a fully functioning church. The primary method will be to watch for those natural leaders in the various cell groups. When cell group members teach new group members how to pray, how to live healthfully and how to worship and follow God, and when group members show care and concern for those who are afraid and hurting, they will be encouraged to start their own new groups. In this way leaders will constantly be developed

and new groups started. This will also be how new churches will be established among the Lepcha community in Sikkim.

CHAPTER V

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This chapter presents a summary and conclusion of the major points of the dissertation. Recommendations are directed at several areas of Seventh-day Adventist work with the hope that improvements will be made to strengthen the work for tribal peoples.

Summary

Sikkim was once a land-locked Buddhist country where the preaching of Christianity was restricted. But after it became an integral part of India it was more open to Christianity and allowed more religious tolerance.

The state of Sikkim, as per the survey of Operation World, lies within the 10/40 window. Fully 60 to 80 percent of the Lepchas follow the traditional religion of Lamaism (Folk-Buddhism) and have not heard the name Jesus.

The Seventh-day Adventist Church has made several unsuccessful attempts using medical work to reach this unreached people group. For eighteen years SDA work in Sikkim had been halted.

Then in 1993 work was resumed using new methods and new approaches. The years of hard work since 1993 have finally born fruit. From a nucleus of eighteen members the church has grown to forty-five.

Conclusion

It is important to examine the reasons for the success of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in reaching the Lepcha community of Sikkim since 1975. In the initial stage the church failed and had to stop its work for eighteen years. Then in 1993 work began again and was successful in planting a Lepcha church.

In the initial years the church lacked a strategic approach and thus failed to establish a church in the land of Sikkim where Christianity had been restricted.

Now that a Seventh-day Adventist church has been established in Sikkim, it must be realized that there is still much to be done. The gospel needs to be spread to all the people groups of Sikkim and to the adjoining countries of Nepal and Bhutan.

If the church wants to have success in reaching the unreached in these unentered territories, then it ought to sharpen its activities by developing strategic approaches. A hit-and-miss approach will fail. A comprehensive strategy, similar to the one developed to reach the Lepcha

community of Sikkim with the gospel message, will also be effective in reaching the similar unreached people groups in India, Nepal, and Bhutan.

Recommendations

Recommendations to Spicer Memorial College

1. A cross-cultural study center should be opened at Spicer Memorial College to teach how to effectively communicate the gospel to the different cultural groups in India.
2. The learning of regional languages should be included in the requirements of the Religion Department at Spicer Memorial College. Students preparing for ministry among the various regional and tribal groups in India should be encouraged to learn the local languages.
3. The study of demonology and "power encounter" should be included in the practical course work required by Spicer College. Such a course should be taught by missiologists who have had field experience.

Recommendations to the Local Conference

1. Efforts should be given at the conference level to train more pastors and evangelists to work among the tribal people of India.

2. A sufficient amount of community development programs should be carried out by the local conference in areas where direct evangelism cannot be openly carried out.

3. Young converts from tribal groups should be sent to Spicer Memorial College or other theological seminaries for pastoral training so they can return to work among their own tribes.

Recommendations to the Division

1. The Southern Asia Division should concentrate in reaching similar unreached religious communities in the adjoining countries of Nepal and Bhutan and in parts of India.

2. The Division should sponsor pastors and evangelists to be trained in the theological colleges and seminary who dedicate their lives to reach unreached people groups similar to the Lepchas.

3. The Division must set aside some funds for evangelism among unreached hill people tribes in India.

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