1826 was notable for being the year in which Bolek (or Bho-Lod) was assassinated; not only was he the Prime Minister of Sikkim but he was also the maternal uncle of Tshangphud Namgyal, the 7th Rajah, and he was also a Lepcha. The details of the assassination are given in two eye-witness accounts, written in the Lepcha language and Lepcha script, ‘bo"kg bsing-thdung-sa shu tshuk gum’ and ‘ge’md-nun shu’ (National Archiver, New Delhi), Foreign Department, Persian, 14 April, 1828, no 190, pp J and M). [At the point zeros copied of the two documents were exhibited] The death of this leading member of their race brought to an end and era in which the Lepchas had enjoyed influence in the social and political affairs of Sikkim almost equal to that of Sikkimese Bhutias, the race to which the ruling family of Sikkim belonged. This family had begun to migrate into what was later to be known as Sikkim from Tibet early in the 16th century, four generations before Phuntshog Namgyal ascended the gaddi as the first Chogyal (Dharma Raja), in 1642 (chu-nsa). After 1826 the royal family chose its consort from the aristocracy of Tibet and not from among its Lepcha subjects prior to that.

Status of the Lepchas in Sikkim before 1826:

There is considerable evidence, especially from The Gazetteer of Sikkim (1894/197) and from the typescript History of Sikkim (1908) by the 9th Raja, Thutob Namgyal, and Rani Yeshe Dolma, to support the claim I have made above that the Lepcha component of the Lho-Mon-Tsong-sum (Bhutias-Lepcha-Limbu: three) had earlier played a leading part in the social and political life of Sikkim; for example, (i) during the reign of the 1st Chogyal the most prominent of the Tibetan Buddhist missionaries in Sikkim, Lha-bsun Chen-po, initiated a Lepcha, Yanqling Tshashey, into the mystic rites of Rig-chen Strog-bzhrub, restricted to the three Lamas who had conducted the enthronement ceremony, the Raja, and twenty-one others (Maharajah 1908, 22); (ii) the 1st Chogyal had not only appointed to his administration twelve Kazis form among the Bhutias but also an equal number of Jorgens from among the leading Lepcha families (Maharajah 1908, 21); (iii) the 3rd Raja, Chagdor Namgyal (1700-17), is credited with having devised an alphabet for his Lepcha subjects (Gazetteer 1894, 17), (iv) the Lepchas had been powerful enough to drive out the Regent, Tandimg, and install Namgyal Phuntsog as 5th Raja (1734-80), and obtained a larger share in the administration in consequence (Gazetteer 1894, 16), (v) it was a Lepcha, Prime Minister Chothup, son of a previous Prime Minister, Karwung, who commanded the southern army of the two armies in the Sikkim defence force that resisted the Gorkha invasion (1775-80) and won the title ‘Satrapa’ for his seventeen victories in Sikkim Tera (Gazetteer 1894, 18) and (vi) the Lepcha component of the population of Sikkim had been estimated, at the beginning of the 19th century, to outnumber the Bhutia and the Limbu components by a proportion of five-tenths to three-tenths and two-tenths respectively (Hamilton 1819, 118), so the Lepchas might reasonably have expected influence in the state to match that proportion, provided, of course, that they were united as a community.

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Dissunity among the Lepchas

The two eyewitness accounts of the assassination, however, that I referred to at the beginning of this paper suggest that at that time, 1826, the Lepchas were distrustful. They name the leader of the party of eighty troops dispatched to kill the Prime Minister as Tsho-cho or thu-cho or "Tomb-pa-tsho-cho or thu-cho, thu-cho "Khe-bam thu-cho-nam thu-cho" (Khe-bam thu-cho, thu-cho, thu-cho, thu-cho). The Maharaja's history, (1908) identifies Lhakcho as 'the father of the Chepu Lama' (p.59), the Chepu Lama is well known to have been Lepcha. His ancestor, for eleven generations, is given in The Gazetteer of Sikkim (p.134), and, besides, Surgeon Rennie, in his book 'Bhutan and the story of the Doorar War' (1866), took him to be what he calls 'a Lepcha proper (Mongolian)' as opposed to 'a Thakian Lepcha' (or 'Sikkim Bhootia') (pp.270,271,312).

Unforeseen consequences of the assassination

The murder of a leading Lepcha by another leading Lepcha set in train a succession of events that had most serious consequences not only for Sikkimese of Lepcha race but also for the future of Sikkim as a country. I will now consider each link in this chain of events in turn.

i. The murder of the Prime Minister was immediately followed by the flight of some of his close relatives to Lusho, on the border of Nepal (Gazetteer, 1834, 19). When Bho-Lod was assassinated by the Maharaja Tsagghal Namgyal's order, his nephews, the sons of Koesha Kungsha named Dzang and Jerung Benon and Kazi Gerek left Sikkim, taking with them about 800 houses of Lepcha subjects from Chidam and Nangthang and went towards Lusho and settled down there. (Maharajaha 1908,69).

ii. Instead of settling down peacefully these refugee began making incursions into Sikkim: they began the Kotape insurrection and made several raids (Maharajaha 1408,68); and they 'presented to claim Darjeeling as their patrimonial land to raise a voluntary gift of it to Major Lloyd' (Maharajaha 1908,66).

iii. In 1828, because of this insurrection, together with a boundary dispute between Sikkim and Nepal affecting the Ilam area, "the Ootoo boundary dispute" (Pinn 1886,21-6), Capt. Lloyd, as one of the arbiters of disputes between the two countries, penetrated Sikkim as far as Ralchepzang, and was 'estranged in the position of Darjeeling' (Gazetteer, 1834,20).

iv. When he ventured it a couple of years later, Darjeeling was 'recognized by Capt. Herbert as being devoid of inhabitants' (Pinn 1886, 120, citing 'Consultations' of the Supreme Council of India, no.2(1835): According to Capt. Herbert this was because about ten years previously, 1,206 able-bodied Lepchas forming two thirds of the population of Sikkim, had been forced by the pressure of the Raaj to fly from Darjeeling and its neighbourhood and take refuge in Nepal (Darjeeling 1847,38).

v. The Governor General, Lord Bentinck, then wrote to the Raja proposing 'the cession of Darjeeling to the British Government offering to you such an equivalent as may seem to both parties to be reasonable' (Pinn 1886, 121, citing 'Consultations', no.11,385).

vi. The Raja agreed to an exchange of territory: 'Also if from friendship Darjeeling from Ahra (? ) Dungee north be given to me, then my Dewan will deliver to Major Lloyd under my red seal of Darjeeling that he may erect houses there.' (Pinn 1886,122, citing 'Consultations' 1835:6 April).

vii. In reply the Government refused the Raja's request: '[Darjeeling is an uninhabited tract', but 'Darjeeling is a fertile and populous district'] (Pinn 1886,125, citing
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vii. Lloyd then wrote to Government as follows, implying that the Raja had agreed to cede the tract unconditionally:

‘Sir,

I beg leave to report that in August last the Sikkim Rajah’s officers forwarded to me the grant of Darjeeling in the form which I had requested him to draw it out. In fact, the very paper I had forwarded to him was returned with his seal affixed as I had requested he would do’ (Pinn 1891,126, citing Consultations. 9 November, 1839) [At this point a facsimile copy of the Darjeeling grant (written in Lepcha and Hindustani) was exhibited, together with the map ‘The Darjeeling tract’, enlarged from Pinn 1891,22].

ix. ‘Thus the seeds of an ever-growing hostility had been sown. From that time on the Rajah was waiting for his present equivalent to the Darjeeling tract’ (Pinn 1891,129).

x. In 1849 Dr. Hooker and Dr. Campbell, while travelling in Sikkim with permission of Government and the Maharajah, were suddenly seized and made prisoners’ (Gazetteer 1894,20). “The serious punitive action taken was the annexation of the Terai and the portion of Sikkim hills bounded by the Rammah and the Great Range on the North, by the Tista on the East and by the Nepal frontier on the West” (Darjeeling 1947,39) [At this point the map showing the Darjeeling tract, enlarged from Pinn 1891,22 was again exhibited]. Thus, through conquest the boundaries of Sikkim were reduced, in 1850, to those familiar to us today.”

Conclusion

I offer this series of ten linked misfortunes as my justification for claiming that the consequences of that political murder, within the royal family, in 1826 were most grievous, not merely for the Lepchas, who suffered more from those consequences than either of the other two races of Sikkim, the Bhutias and the Limbus, but also for Sikkim as a country.

NOTES

1. I am indebted to Dr. M. Aris for copies of these two documents, probably the earliest datable texts in Lepcha in existence.

2. For earlier kings, of Lepcha race, in what was later to become known as Sikkim of Roy Choudhary 1980: ‘The Sikkim History apart, a number of Lepcha chronicles that have been compiled from time to time, and whose some very rare manuscripts are preserved in the Library of the Sikkim Research Institute of Tibetology, are very useful as source material for Sikkim History. Legends of the Paauas [sic] (kings) is one such manuscripts which was written sometime in the late eighteenth century describing the rule of different Lepcha kings in Sikkim’ (232). Possibly this Lepcha text was the source for Mainwaring’s reference to four Lepcha kings, tur-ve-si-no, succeeded in turn by tur-ding, tur-tse, and tur-tse-po-no (Mainwaring 1876,57). On tur-ne-si-no of also Chengling 1907: “They conquered a Lepcha
king of Kuruseong. In the battle field of Gidde hill Turbe Pano, the Lepcha was slain. But before his death, the Kirat chief Raja Hang Rai who had invited king Lo Hang Sen of Mokwanpur to invade Bijaypur town was also killed in the battle field in 1608 A.D. (II,91).

3. Cf Roy Choudhary [1980]: “Whole treating the history of Sikkim from 1700 to 1860 the author shied light on many unknown chapters in Sikkim history. It was never known except among the Sikkimese as legend, the Chuthup (Satrajit) was a great military general and that it was to his military skill that the Sikkimese owe their independence in the wake of Nepali invasions until the Sikkim History brought it to the notice of non-Sikkimese” (230/1).

More fortunate, perhaps, in this respect has been Satrajit’s brother Namgyel Tshiring; his contribution to the history of Sikkim and to the status of the Lepcha has been preserved for us by his title “Densapa”. Namgyel Tshiring was the ancestor of the present Barmok Kazi Dorze Dadul: he was also called “Den-chap”, from having acted as Regent of Sikkim during the Raja’s absence, and the title is said to be still continued in the family” (Gazetteer 1894,32).


5. This link between Lhacho and the Cheeboo Lama as father and son has, incidentally, a special interest for me personally, because my wife’s grandfather, David Macdonald, claimed that the Cheeboo Lama’s brother Phup (or Phurbu) Tshering (after whom one of Darjeeling’s oldest tea-gardens is named) was his maternal grandfather, in which case Lhacho would be my grand father-in-law’s maternal great grandfather.

6. Formerly, at its greatest extent, the boundaries of the new kingdom were Dula La in the north, Shingsa Dzayag, Walung, Yangnag Khangchen, Yarlung and Tamur Chorten in the West, down along the Arun and Dad Kosi rivers, down to the Maha Nodi Nusulbari, Titalia in the South. On the east Tagong La and Tang La on the north” (Maharajah 1908, 21), of also Gazetteer 1894, 1-2.

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