

DYNAMICS OF  
SOCIAL FORMATION  
AMONG THE  
LEPCHAS



D.C. ROY

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# PREFACE

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Enlistment of Scheduled Tribes in India is primarily an administrative affair guided often by pragmatic and political considerations. Categorisation of Scheduled Tribe, therefore, need not and cannot be identical to that of the theoretical concept of tribe. As a result many a time conflicting results are obtained by the simultaneous application of these two principles. The question of what is tribal (from an academic point of view) about Scheduled Tribe (as per administrative decision) can therefore be taken up for more serious consideration.

Most of the academicians in India have accepted Constitutional branding of Scheduled Tribe as tribe. The economy of these Scheduled Tribes has been widely cited as examples of tribal economy of the respective tribe without judging their corresponding theoretical concepts. Other related tribal studies (like tribal culture, tribal demography, tribal history, tribal law, tribal politics, tribal religion etc.) centre around the people recognised as scheduled tribe presupposing their tribal identity.

The present book is departure from the existing trend. We have tried to identify a tribe after critically examining the nature of its society. Two theoretical concepts have been considered relevant: 'social formation' or 'socio-economic formation' (as propounded by Marx) and 'social embeddedness' (as developed by Polanyi).

Although Marx propounded the concept of social formation but he did not specify details about the tribal social formation. However, combining the existing literature on tribes and the Marxian mode of production, we have tried to reformulate the concept of tribal social formation. Karl Polanyi's concept of social embeddedness is much relevant in the distributional aspect of society. Economy does not determine society; society does not determine economy. They are mutually dependent. Karl Polanyi's concept of reciprocity and redistribution are connected with pre-industrial economy while market exchange is related to industrial economy. Concepts of other social scientists particularly economic anthropologists

like Malinowski, Firth, Sahlins, Dalton, Bohannan, etc. have also been discussed in brief.

From the simple binary classification of capitalist and non-capitalist societies, we have ultimately classified any agriculture based society as capitalist farming and peasant economy. Depending on the modes of production (i.e. forces of production and relations of production) a peasant economy can again be classified into tribal peasantry, feudal peasantry etc. In this book we have examined both the components of modes of production of agriculture-based economy of the Lepchas. Different aspects of agriculture like land, labour and capital have been critically examined. The distributional aspects of agricultural produce have also been carefully discussed in order to identify the market orientation and the nature of the society.

The theoretical aspects of the nature of the society have been examined with the Lepchas, a lesser known scheduled tribe of Darjeeling district of West Bengal. Existing literature on the Lepchas are neither systematic nor sufficient in the sense that they are nothing than the preparation of an economic catalogue of the people who have already been officially recognised as tribe. The present study on the Lepchas is intended to be a departure from the established trend where we have not plotted merely the present state of their economy but tried to examine the concept of social formation with them. Without pre-supposing their tribal identity, the present study examines the production and distribution of the agriculture based Lepcha economy and came out with some interesting results.

The book as a whole is undoubtedly challenging in handling both the theoretical aspects of tribal social formation and examining it with field data collected from among the Lepchas of Darjeeling district. It is interesting to come out with some new aspects of tribal society. I would appreciate the readers for realising the spirit of challenge and innovativeness as carried out in the book.

The researches and the scholars on tribal studies might find some new angles in the book while handling the problems associated with the tribes. The book is diagnostic and ends with some areas where further studies on tribes in general and on Lepchas in particular can be carried out. All my efforts will be fruitful if someone tribes to enhance the work in the direction initiated in the book. Suggestions are heartily welcomed whereas all limitations were with the author.

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In connection to my service I have been posted at Kalimpong, a subdivision of Darjeeling district of West Bengal in 1987. Since then, I felt keen interest about the land and the people of the region. Among the different communities (Nepalis, Tibetans, Bhutias, Limboos etc.) living in this hill track, Lepchas attracted me the most and I started enquiring and writing about them for different magazines, newspapers and seminars. My haphazard and unsystematic work got a concrete theoretical shape under the efficient guidance and supervision of Dr. Bani Prasanna Misra, retired Professor, Centre for Himalayan Studies, North Bengal University and Dr. Rajat Subhra Mukhopadhyaya, Professor in the Department of Sociology, North Bengal University. Without their proper guidance, constant encouragement, untiring efforts, sympathetic advice, the present work could not have been completed in the present form. Although I could not fulfil their aspirations, still I like to keep on record my sincere respect, gratitude, honour and indebtedness to both of them.

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## CHAPTER ONE

# INTRODUCTION

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The Lepchas are found mostly in the state of Sikkim and in the adjoining hilly region of Darjeeling district of West Bengal. The Constitution of India has categorised Lepchas as 'Scheduled Tribe'. The expression 'Scheduled Tribe' may mean either of the following two things. First, it may be held to imply that, in India, all tribes are scheduled or listed under the constitutional provisions. Alternatively, it may imply that some of the tribes are scheduled for the purposes of preferential treatment while others are not. The second possibility is further suggested by the analogy with the other important category of 'scheduled castes' where some of the castes, and not all, are scheduled. But, be whatever it may, there cannot be any denying of the fact that the scheduled tribes are 'tribes'.

Now, the problem of identification of tribe lies with the problem of its definition. Tribe, as is the case with many other terms, may be broadly defined from two different angles. In an instrumental or purposive definition, much about the properties or characteristics of the 'object' is of secondary importance when compared with the objective or interest of the 'subject' who defines it that way. Looked at the other way, when an essentialist definition of tribe is made, there has to be attributes or characteristics or properties or substance inherent within the community so as to identify them as tribe. The administrators are more likely to be preoccupied with the instrumental or purposive definition of tribe while the academicians are usually concerned with the essentialistic definition of tribe. Since Indian categorisation of scheduled tribe is more an administrative business than academic one, many a times conflicting results are obtained by

the simultaneous application of these two principles. The question of what is 'tribal' (from an academic point of view) about the 'scheduled tribes' (as per administrative decisions) can therefore be taken up for serious consideration.

In India much of the discussion on the subject has been presented against the perspective of a 'tribe-caste continuum'. In the western writings on the subject, the binary classification of 'status and contract', 'community and association' or 'mechanical solidarity and organic solidarity', and the like have offered from time to time useful insights. However, even without entering into the debate of whether the tribes should be viewed as a type of society or a stage of social evolution, one may attempt a serious examination of the social formation of the tribes so called. Without being deterministic in a mechanical sense of the term, it is agreed that the economic activities and organisation of any community play a decisive role in the determination of its social formation. At present the mainstream economists appear to be little concerned with the social formation or such kindred questions. Their lack of concern appears justified because the study of comparative economic system has lost their relevance in the face of pervasive homogenising tendencies of capitalism all around. Further, diachronic studies have been handed over to the historians, for, the economists are overburdened with their concern with the present. Also, the classification of economics into micro and macro leaves little space for serious enquiries into the vestiges of earlier formations at the local or regional level.

In the present work, our main objective has been to study the social formation among the Lepchas. In the study of social formation, we start by ignoring people's beliefs and ideas and, instead, look at who produces what and who gets what is produced. "Society viewed as a system for production and distribution, conceived of independently of the actors' representations or justifications of the system, is what has been called the 'social formation'". [Bloch, 1985: 23]. The social formation is to be understood not by just one 'mode of production' but by an articulation of several. For example, in a colonial situation a communal mode of production may coexist with a capitalist one but the capitalist one will dominate over the communal mode.<sup>1</sup>

The study of social formation is, thus, not simply a study of economy<sup>2</sup> of a particular people isolated from the rest. In fact, in many otherwise laudable efforts at studying the tribal economy, this very perspective of social formation is ignored, thereby making a weak representation of the whole. Also, oftentimes, what passes in the name of 'tribal economy' is nothing more than the preparation of an economic catalogue of a group of people who are officially recognised as 'tribe'. The irony is that, in the same or adjoining areas, the same type of study may pass under various labels, such as rural economy, peasant economy or tribal economy depending upon the type of people being studied. The present study of the social formation of the Lepchas is intended to be a departure from the established trend. It is not meant in any way that this is absolutely a new idea. Rather, we shall derive in our present exercise useful insights from whatever literature is there on pre-capitalist economics and those offered by some of the classical economists or economic anthropologists.

### TRIBAL SOCIAL FORMATION

'Tribal social formation' as one form of various other types of social formations (like slavery, feudalism, capitalism, socialism etc.) is supposed to be prevalent among the tribes. There may be as many forms of social formations as the types of society. As most of the academicians in India have accepted constitutional branding of scheduled tribe as tribe, the economy of these scheduled tribes have been widely cited as examples of 'tribal economy' of the respective tribes without judging their correspondence with the concept of tribal social formation. It also poses a conceptual problem where different tribes constitute different types of tribal economy. The good number of other related tribal studies (like tribal culture, tribal demography, tribal history, tribal law and justice, tribal politics, tribal religion etc.) centre around the people recognised as schedule tribe presupposing their tribal attributes on the basis of constitutional recognition.

Literature under the heading 'tribal social formation' is rare either in the field of economics or in the other branches of social science. Even Marx who propounded the concept of social formation did not illustrate the application for the tribes in his later writings [Marshall, 1998: 612; Bottomore, 1983: 444]. The Marxian literature did not specify details about the tribal social formation even 'it does not

provide a comprehensive description' of social formation [Bottomore, 1983: 445].

Even then, it is not difficult to attempt a reformulation combining the existing literature on social formation on the one hand and primitive or tribal economy on the other. Often the concept social formation poses some sort of confusion as 'at all events, in actual usage (social formation) refers to two phenomena which are quite familiar to Marxist, and to sociologists of all persuasions—namely the type of society (e.g. feudal society, bourgeois or capitalist society), and to particular societies (e.g. France or Britain as a society) [Bottomore, 1983: 445]. But usually by social formation for all practical purposes we mean the type of society.

In the classical Marxian literature economy is characterised by its mode of production<sup>3</sup>, which again is constituted by forces of production<sup>4</sup> and relations of production<sup>5</sup>. The mode of production determines the base<sup>6</sup> of the society, which together with the superstructure<sup>7</sup> determines the social formation.

The first (or earliest) and original (or natural) form of social formation, in Marxian ideology, is primitive communism. Social formation under primitive communism can be viewed from production and distributional angles. In the production front, the mode of production is based on communal ownership of land and other means of production while the products are distributed on the basis of need. There may be some private property in the form of tools, weapons and personal effects but it denied the presence of money, price, exchange and market. It is a simple type of society where communal ownership, work and living together are attributed by the primitive method of production.

Beside Marx and Engels, some other social scientists particularly economic anthropologists have dealt with the attributes of primitive and tribal economy mainly from distributional angle. The most notable western scholars on the subject are: B. Malinowski, Karl Polanyi, Raymond Firth, Marshall D. Sahlins, Paul Bohannan, George Dalton etc. Some of the Indian scholars who worked on tribal economy are: Andre Beteille, K.S. Singh, S.C. Dube, B.K. Roy Burman, Jaganath Pathy, Ajit K. Danda etc.

The views of some of the above leading scholars can be shown in some kind of morphological continuum<sup>8</sup>:

B. Malinowski (1922):	Urigubu	Kula	Gimwali
Karl Polanyi (1946, 1957):	Reciprocal	Redistributive	Exchange
Raymond Firth (1965):	Primitive	Peasant	Industrial
Marshall D.Sahlins (1965):	Generalised	Balanced	Negative
	Reciprocity	Reciprocity	Reciprocity
George Dalton (1968, 1971):	Marketless	Peripheral	Markets
		Market	

The initial distributional criteria of the above classifications (like Uriguba and Kula of Malinowski, Reciprocal and Redistributive of Polanyi, Primitive of Firth, Generalised and Balanced reciprocity of Sahlins and Marketless and Peripheral Market of Dalton) may be reconciled to get the modern day tribal economic attributes.

Malinowski challenged the existing popular economic view that all human being aimed at maximising their gains describing it applicable only for western developed societies.<sup>9</sup> In primitive societies, on the other hand, products are used to fulfil the moral obligation rather than maximising individual gain. From his experience with the Trobrianders, Malinowski noticed three types of distribution and exchange—Urigubu, Kula and Gimwali. “The first was a form of payment in kind to women and children who had rights in the property of the matrilineage; the second was gift or ceremonial exchange, which might also accompany the third; only the third, simple trade, which was carried on largely with strangers and constituted a very small part of economic activity, could be said to be governed by the motive to maximise gain. Culture, not human nature, conditioned men’s economic conduct.” [Malinowski: 63-65, 81-86, 189-191; Cohen, 1967: 92].

Polanyi introduced the concept of social embeddedness in primitive societies. It has been established that there exists a close relationship between economy and society. “Economy does not determine society; society does not determine economy. They are mutually dependent” [Dalton, 1971: 16]. Economy is embedded in any society and there exists a close relationship of economic activities of individuals with the social institutions to which they belong.