

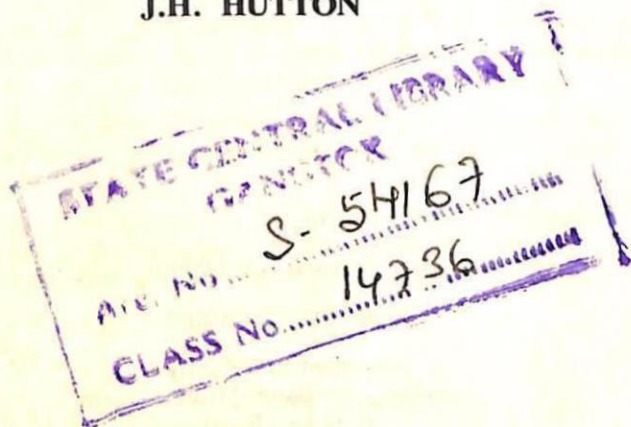
**THE LEPCHAS  
OF SIKKIM**

**GEOFFREY GORER**

# THE LEPCHAS OF SIKKIM

GEOFFREY GORER

*With an Introduction by*  
J.H. HUTTON



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## List of the Inhabitants of Lingthem

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NOTE : This is a list of the inhabitants of Lingthem mentioned in the text and is made to avoid the constant repetition of age, sex, social position and chief relationships in the body of the text. This list is not exhaustive, and only the chief operative relationships are named; further relationships can, if desired, be discovered by inspection of Appendix I, Table 4. Those people most often mentioned in the text have their names printed in capitals. The following social classifications, which are fully elucidated in the text, are used : Muktair, Mandal, *youmi*, *gyapōn* are village officials (see Chapter Five); lama and nun are priests of the lamaist religion (see Chapter Seven); *Mun*, *padem*, *Nandjēmu* are priests of the old Lepcha religion (see Chapter Eight).

The number immediately after the name is the age in years of the person in 1937. Women are designated either by the prefix 'Mrs.' when they are listed immediately under their husband, or by feminine kinship terms. The following abbreviations have been used :

Kinship term in quotes—e.g. 'grandfather'—signifies that the relationship is classificatory and operative.

*d.r.* signifies 'distantly related to' in those cases where a distant relationship is socially operative.

*Ph. pl.* followed by a number signifies that there is a photograph of the person mentioned on the plate of that number. Some people appear in several photographs, but only one is given.

- Adér, 71. 'Grandfather' of Chano, China, Aga (Ph. pl. 25a).  
 Aga, 37. Son of Hlatam, 'brother' of Chano, China.  
 Mrs. Aga I, 37. Mother of three children.  
 Mrs. Aga II, 43. Sterile widow, should be wife of Zumba.  
 Agyung, 29. Adopted son of Serving. Married with one son.  
 Aplung, 29. Brother of Rigya and Gyatso. Son of Ashyok *youmi*.  
 Mrs. Aplung, 35. Formerly stepmother of Tobgé.  
 Ashyok *youmi*, 50. Father of Rigya, Gyatso, Aplung (Ph. pl. 11e).  
 Atyook, 16. Adopted son of Tingkep *youmi*, real son of Ongden, q.v. (Ph. pl. 30).  
 Bahada, 23, carpenter. Son of Ongden, brother of Chanko, Atyook, Kanchok.  
 CHALA MANDAL, 59. Head of village (Ph. pl. 7).  
 Mrs. Mandal I, 28, nun. Sterile. *d.r.* Chélé's wife, Dadool, Kanden (Ph. pl. 19).



- Mrs. Katel I, 56. Mother of three children. d.r. Chala Mandal.  
 Mrs. Katel II, 18.  
 Kolok Tyong, 15. Son of Datoop, q.v. (Ph. pl. 29).  
 KONDÉ, 16. Daughter of Pargeut. d.r. Datoop, Tafoor (Ph. pl. 29).  
 KURMA, *gyapôn, padem*, 37. d.r. Mrs. Datoop (Ph. pl. 27).  
 Kutt'r, 18, lama. Son of Lumba (Ph. pl. 13b).  
 Lumba *chithembu*, 51, lama. Father of Kutt'r (Ph. pl. 11a).  
 Mrs. Lumba I, 47, *Mun*. Daughter of Pumri, sister of Mrs. Tempa.  
 Mrs. Lumba II, 38. d.r. Mrs. Lumba I, q.v.  
 Mikmar, 13. Son of Chano, brother of Pursang; betrothed, studying to be a lama (Ph. pl. 24).  
 MUKTAIR. Dead father of Tafoor, Chudo; first husband of Mrs. Dunbi.  
 Nahyeun, 41. Bastard son of Dunbi.  
 Nandjému, 66. Elder grandmother of Patek.  
 NARIYA, 30. Adoptive brother of Rigya, son of elder brother of Ashyok *youmi*.  
 Mrs. Nariya, 14.  
 Ongden, 52, lama. Father of Chanko, Bahada, Kanchok, Atyook; brother of Tinkep; 'brother' of Chelim (Ph. pl. 25a).  
 Mrs. Ongden, 22. Widow, very recently married to Ongden.  
 Pankek, 6. Daughter of Dunbi and Mrs. Dunbi (Ph. pl. 21a).  
 Pargeut, 44. Father of Kondé, Tangvoong, old mother a nun, d.r. Datoop, Tafoor.  
 Mrs. Pargeut, 38.  
 PATEK, 17. Head of household of six, including two grandmothers, a *Nandjému* and a *Mun*; brother of Ribu (Ph. pl. 9b).  
 PEMBU, 29, lama. Son of Datoop, q.v. (Ph. pl. 29), father of Dugoo.  
 Mrs. Pembu, 23. (Ph. pl. 29).  
 Pichi, 23. Son of Datoop, brother of Pembu, carpenter (Ph. pl. 28a).  
 Pongring, 83, lama. Monastery custodian. d.r. Jiroong (Ph. pl. 9b).  
 PRUMTU, 15. Daughter of Dunbi and Mrs. Dunbi, lives with half-brothers Tafoor and Chudo.  
 PUMRI, 74, *Mun*. Mother of Mrs. Lumba I, Mrs. Tempa. Recently married second Dorjé Lapoon, being widow of his "uncle" (Ph. pl. 15b).  
 Pursang, 11. 'Son' of Chano, brother of Mikmar.  
 Ribu, 12. Brother of Patek, q.v.  
 RIGYA, 23. 'Brother' of Nariya, whose parents adopted him. Son of Ashyok *youmi*, brother of Aplung, Gyatso (Ph. pl. 26a).  
 Mrs. Rigya, 26.  
 Samblyou, 60. Sister of Mrs. Takal and Mrs. Gongyop, a promiscuous woman at present living with Zumba.  
 SANGKYAR, 36, a cretinous defective. Brother of Satéo, nephew of Gongyop and Thyak Thimbu, with latter of whom he lives.  
 Satéo, 27, a cripple. Brother of Sangkyar, q.v. lives with Chala Mandal (Ph. pl. 17b).

## Introduction

By J. H. HUTTON

(*William Wyse Professor of Social Anthropology at Cambridge*)

★

Early writers on India tell us of a strange people living about the sources of the Ganges, mild and gentle in manners and of blameless life. Some of their other strange attributes are scarcely human, but it is perhaps permissible to recognise in this account of a gentle race living in a remote valley of the Himalayas an echo of some contact with the Lepchas, who differ very remarkably in this quality of mildness from at any rate their more immediate neighbours. No one who has had to deal administratively with the Nepali grazier, for instance, would impute to him an immoderate regard for the property or the predilections of his neighbours, nor is it at all a quality of the Gurkha in general; eastwards, on the other hand, the Bhutanese are not particularly noted for benignity and still less the Daflas and Akas beyond them. To find a cis-Himalayan society in any way comparable to that of the Lepchas in its successful elimination of aggressiveness from its members and the reduction of jealousy to a minimum it would be necessary to go west of Nepal to the districts of Lahaul and Spiti. How far it would be possible to find it there it is not easy to say, for our recorded knowledge of the social and domestic life of the peoples of the Himalayas is scanty. Even the officers of the Assam Government have not yet produced any monograph on any of the tribes on the north bank of the Brahmaputra. Now, however, we are well informed at any rate about the Lepchas, for Mr. Gorè's *Himalayan Village* follows only by two or three months Major C. J. Morris' *Living with Lepchas*, dealing with just the same area and the same individuals as are treated of in this volume.

Mr. Gorè has been at some pains to examine the source of the absence of aggressiveness among Lepchas. He came to the con-



clusion that 'the Lepchas' failure to develop any pattern of external aggression' is to be put down to 'their isolation, their low material development and the difficulty of wresting a livelihood from their environment'. He considers that although these reasons may be adequate for 'the lack of destructive aggression outside their group, the lack inside it cannot be explained in such general terms'. It is permissible perhaps to doubt whether any distinction can be drawn between the causes of a lack of the aggressive disposition outside and inside the group, but the author makes the interesting and attractive suggestion that an important factor in the latter aspect is the immediate and willing satisfaction of all an infant's expressed physical desires accompanied by a considerable degree of physical restraint, as infants spend most of their time 'firmly tied to the back of their guardian', and a refusal to encourage, but rather the contrary, any efforts of the child to acquire bodily technique, speech and physical independence. 'Young babies get no social approval from their attempts to crawl and walk; on the contrary a mobile baby is more likely to be picked up and replaced on its guardian's back, since there it is easier to control.' When, however, Mr. Gorer goes on to trace a connection between the 'partial extinction of self-assertion in early childhood' and the tendency which he points out in Lepchas to judge their fellows in their rôle of members of the society and not as personalities, and to emphasise this impersonal attitude as 'the chief operative factor for the suppression of competition and aggression in adult life' I must confess to scepticism. Instances of this 'impersonal' attitude, e.g. in the case of Katel, will be found on page 271 of Chapter Ten, and I have several times had just the same experience among Nagas and Kukis, where self-assertion and aggression are a *sine qua non*. It seems to me likely that this impersonal attitude, in which men are regarded as members of a society rather than individuals, is a necessary condition of the very corporate society in which such tribesmen live. Such a society, straitly limited in number and rigidly restricted in area, is in many respects, particularly in such activities as cultivating or house-building, and in Naga or Kuki communities of course warfare, dependent for its immediate existence on the spontaneous mutual co-operation of its members. If this is so, it seems unnecessary to hold that this impersonal attitude has any particular connection either with the attitude to children described, or with the absence of aggression among adults. Probably the same impersonal attitude is traceable



in our own society among members of a team, for instance, where the suppression of personal preferences or dislikes is required in the interests of successful combination.

Another aspect of Lepcha life which is almost as striking as the absence of aggression is the apparent obsession of the whole community with sex. I was tempted to suppose that the author of this book had over-emphasised the Lepchas' attitude to sex through an unconscious dramatisation, a journalistic dramatisation, if I may call it so, of a want of reticence on sexual matters of all kinds in a degree quite unfamiliar in his own society. The perusal however of Major Morris' book (and Major Morris is well acquainted with India, so that I can in some measure judge by his standards) shows that I did Mr. Gorer an injustice. At the same time I am rather inclined to feel that the apparent preoccupation of the Lepchas with sex does not necessarily imply that the importance attached to it by them in their lives is proportionately theatrical. One is inclined to wonder whether this consciousness of sex is the cause or the result of the Lepchas' declining population, a decline of which the Lepchas themselves are acutely aware. Probably, if there is any such connection at all, it is by now a vicious circle, but either alternative seems possible. Perhaps the whole complex of want of aggression, sex-obsession and sterility arises from the effects of a long period of undisturbed isolation in an uncovered terrain where no necessity for self-defence against external enemies was experienced. If this be so it should be possible to find parallels for Lepcha psychology in some island communities in Oceania. In spite of what the author describes as their 'fundamentally optimistic character' a certain lack of belief in their own efforts and future seems indicated among the Lepchas by their cynical attitude to their own beliefs; the way in which a rite should be performed, the occasions on which it is required, the correct precaution to be taken in many events are all known, but if they are not followed with any particularity (and commonly, it seems, they are not) well, *Ket ma-nin*—'It does not really matter.'

A similar attitude is suggested by their apparent proneness to suicide and there is ample evidence that the Lepcha is very conscious of his inferiority to the encroaching Nepali in the struggle for survival and of his dependence not on himself but on state protection for his continued existence as a tribe.

It is not then surprising that the Lepchas are a dwindling race, and it is fortunate that someone has been found to study their



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