

Tribal Consciousness in Darjeeling Hills: A Case Study of Lepcha Community

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Abstract—The Lepcha people are the original inhabitants of the Darjeeling Hills. They were found before the Britishers converted the Darjeeling into sanatoriums and cantonments. But with the establishment of Darjeeling as a Hill station, the huge migration of different communities all over British India and abroad slowly marginalized this community. In this context, the present paper seeks to present an analysis of the external and internal factors leading to the rise of ethnic awareness among the Lepchas and their demand to be reclassified as primitive tribal groups (PTG).

Keywords: Consciousness, Culture, Demands, History, Indigenous, Ethnicity

I. INTRODUCTION

The term 'pitale bhara' is meant as a compliment to the beautiful disposition of the Lepchas and due to this, the Lepchas are the most ancient people in the world, probably, of all ages. A race, which has a very rich and diverse cultural heritage. "They seem the only native people west of the dominion of Jerusalem who term themselves as God's spouse." (Aachuley, April, 2002 :20.) The Lepcha people are natives to the Darjeeling and Sikkim regions. Mayel Lyang is how these people call their land - the dwelling of the Deities. There are various versions of the matter 'Lepcha'. One version has it that it was not the Lepchas but the Nepalis, who rendered them Lapches – meaning vile speakers.

However, they themselves like to be referred to as Rongs or 'Mutanchi Rongkup', which means 'Endearing Sons of the Mother of All'. This does not in any way however, represent their history since some believe that they were given the name Lepcha since it derives from the word 'Lep,' which connotes a well of creation in Mayel Kyong like. It is said that it is the gateway through which the First among the Lepchas Fudong Thing first male and Nuzong Nyu first female were compelled to descend from heaven to earth.

Staying to their migration theme, some scholars like Gorer contends that the Lepchas do not have any migratory myths. Again, Ram Rahul helps us to know that actually Sikkim is the state of origin for the Lepchas since the very geography of the place with hills, mountains and streams is given names in the Lepcha language (Rahul, 1970:31). According to scholars like J.C. White, the Lepchas are a tribe covering the eastern ranges of the Himalayan Mountains including the Assam and Upper Burma mountains (White, 1909: 7). But the situation is contrary to this where the Lepchas state that their forefathers abode lies close to the sacred mountain known as King-tzum-song-bu. In this context, 'King' refers to the uppermost surface of the forehead standing, while 'song-bu' is in the upper limit of the height, i. e. 'the top above us'. They hold traditions of descent from Fudong Thing and Nuzong Nyu, quite in concord with their view that "The people of Darjeeling and Sikkim were always the first to come to the world, the original people of the world who are as ancient as the Himalayas" (Tamsang, 1983:10).

II. INDIGENOUS LEPCHA TRIBAL ASSOCIATION (ILTA)

The Lepchas, who are considered to be the indigenous people of the area, inhabit together with the Nepalis and the plain people of Marwaris, Bengalis, and Biharis. While in the 1920s, no single category existed defining the ethnic identities of the inhabitants of the system, the Nepalese, Bhutias and Lepchas came together as one amalgamation. The three combine to refer to them by clumping them together the 'Nebula'. Modernization and urbanization has opened up new opportunities for education which in turn has changed the literacy level among the Lepchas and enhanced their social mobility at the same time. Along with this was a process of enclaving for which marginalized lower class expectations were catered for. While a greater proportion of the group in rural areas still has much reliance on farming as a main source of livelihood, many have ventured into areas such as education, government employment and business.

It is true that the Lepcha elite, particularly those in professional classes, have made considerable efforts to revitalize their community and have a bent towards using culture in this regard. In the same fashion as the Bhutias before them, that is, the

educated middle class of the Nepalis has also done away with the separate ethnic and linguistic identity of the Lepchas. Rather, they were considered as a subgroup of the Nepali people. Nonetheless, the emphasis of the modern-day chief is on.

The present condition prevailing in the Darjeeling Hills has to some extent turned into a process of tribalism reversion amongst the Lepchas. The groups are eager to garner more borders and unique ethnicity within themselves and to justify themselves as the first settlers in the area. But because of development, images of the surrounding landscape, other than the newly introduced transport and communication methods, are more of a unifying factor among all the groups than they were in the past. These groups have separate ways of life, customs, and language, but there has been such a thing as cultural intermingling and some cultural exchange among them.

But the truth is that despite being able to live peacefully with one another and adopting some practices from the other communities, there is a marked difference in the social and cultural practices. Most of the Lepchas are animistic, actually most of the Lepchas are animists, still however persons practice some Bon Bahadur religion with Lamaist Buddhism. Quite a number of them have also been baptized. Within this group of people, the Buddhist Lepchas, there are complex mortuary rites and the active participation in the construction and upkeep of special buildings for Buddhist activities such as 'gompas' and monasteries. In their marriage practices, they place high bride wealth on their brides alongside great amounts of food and drinks.

Traditionally, a Lepcha woman wears, in addition to a lower garment called "Domdyam," a blouse. A Domdyam is a cloth piece in cotton or silk wrapped around the waist and then poetically pinned on the left and right shoulder.

Men wear a garment called "Dompra," a long cotton gown that wraps around the body. It keeps the arms free and reaches the knees. They also don a Lepcha headdress known as "Somoak," made from thin cane strips. The world has overlooked the Lepchas due to their small population. Now, the Lepchas aim to establish their identity thanks to the ILTA's efforts. This organization traces its roots back to 1925. It encourages Lepchas to protect, advance, and maintain their culture and language. It also supports them in reclaiming lands tied to their heritage and identity. The Lepcha Culture Centre came into being in 1967. These days, people refer to Lepcha communities as "shezums," which exist in every village. Lepchas must join the Shezum, which operates under the Lepcha Association's authority. This Society serves as the foundation for Lepchas in their struggle for their people. It has set some key goals that include: (i) bringing the Lepcha language into schools and other places of learning for Lepcha kids in the Darjeeling District, (ii) seeing the long-standing tribal group of Lepchas as part of the PTG group, and (iii) fixing Census numbers as well as sharing true and trustworthy figures on how many Lepchas there are.

Although education in the Nepali language was not provided initially in the Darjeeling Hills, the people had already developed social and political consciousness. This was more so because of the impact of the Nepali language, which had already developed into the "Jatiya Bhasa." This age saw the emergence of a large number of Nepali writers. Their aim was to improve the language, build up an adequate literature, and raise its standard to a level equal to that of other literary languages of India. It was, therefore, fully understandable that they should demand Nepali as the medium of instruction in schools and colleges situated in the hills. While Nepali or Khas Kura was already taught up to the degree of Bachelor of Arts as a vernacular subject by 1924, recognition by the Calcutta University was provided. Consequently, in 1957, the popular demand for making Nepali the medium of instruction upto Matriculation was acceded to. At present Nepali is taught as an Honours subject and at Post Graduate and Ph.D. levels in North Bengal University and Benaras Hindu University amongst others. Further, the West Bengal Official Language Act, 1961, dated December 25, 1961, accorded official recognition to both Nepali and Bengali as official languages in the three subdivisions of Darjeeling, Kalimpong, and Kurseong. Recognition for the Nepali language would also bring in economic and educational benefits for the Nepali-speaking people.

Later, Nepali was included in the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution on August 31, 1992. However, the linguistic movement that the Nepalis initiated was not able to maintain a united front for a longer period of time. The socio-economic and cultural existence of the Lepchas as the indigenous community in the Darjeeling region has undergone several changes. The demography entirely changed when a large group of Nepali people arrived in particular after Dr. Campbell was appointed as the Superintendent of Darjeeling in 1839, so that the ratio amongst Lepchas, Bhutias, and Nepalis became increasingly against the former two. In this respect, the Nepali language is considered to be related to Bhuti and Lepcha languages for Darjeeling Hills.

III. CONCLUSION

Unfortunately, the Lepcha language has not gained the attention of general society. However, in several villages and minor settlements in which the Lepcha community lives in compact groups—for example, Mani Gumba, Bong Basti, Tashing, Tanek, Ngassey—they are much better known to their language compared to their town peers. However, they often use the Nepali language to communicate with the other communities. Now, with greater awareness of linguistic identity gripping them, an increasing urge is felt among them to preserve their language and culture. The Lepcha have an elaborated and developed script. According to legend, this was invented by the mythical Thekong Mensalong, who is said to have lived in the early 17th century. Others say that it was gifted by Mother Creator, Itbu Moo, along with nature's mountains, rivers, and lakes. Another story says that it was invented by Chador Namgyal, the third consecrated king of Sikkim. The Tibetans, who were the first attackers of the Lepchas in the 17th Century, translated the remaining books of the Lepchas into Tibetan. The Tashay Namthar, or Namthur Tsung, comprising the biography of Padmasambhava—the man who is credited to have brought Buddhism to Tibet—"operated as a single literary text that kept the written language of the Lepchas, the language suppressed for centuries" (Foning, 1987: 154). Subsequent to the Bhutanese invasion into Mayel Lyang during the 1700s, the Lepchas were also at risk from the Gorkhas under the leadership of Prithivi Narayan Shah. Incidentally, the grant document of Darjeeling when given to the British East India Company, was prepared in English, Hindustani, as well as Lepcha. The British initially promoted the development of the Lepchas for the same purpose as that of the Tibetans, too, even going so far as to attempt the conversion of the Lepchas into Christianity.

In the 1920s, the Lepchas demanded the inclusion of their language in several educational institutions just like Nepali. Unfortunately, the demand was turned down by the British Government. Apart from that, the Nepali Text Book Committee had also forwarded the following arguments in 1929: (i) In the absence of textbooks in Lepcha, it is no use teaching a boy the Lepcha language, (ii) Unless the language stands on the brink of extinction, most Lepcha boys will learn it at home, (iii) The Lepcha language in its written form has no practical utility in later stages of life, (iv) The Lepcha boy is already obliged to learn both Nepali and Hindi at different stages; it is not a fair thing to impose on him an additional burden of a third language, for which literature hardly exists. (Report of the Nepali Text Book Committee, 1926, pp. 14) However, success of the British withdrawal from India was not followed by due accord of recognition to the Lepchas from the West Bengal government. Hindi, Tibetan, Urdu, Nepali, Bengali, and Dzongka have secured official spaces within the educational institutions in Darjeeling District, while the Lepcha language has been left behind within its own country.

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