

The Socio-Cultural Belief of the Lepchas of Pedong, West Bengal, India

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Abstract: The Indian sub continent as we know is habituated by a multitude of indigenous races ranging from the Himalayas to the coastal plains and each has their own distinct attributes. In this crucible of cultures the Indigenous Lepcha tribe of the Sikkim and Darjeeling hills is an attractive proposition. The dress of any culture defines its refinement down the ages and in this study we shall try to get of a glimpse of this unique culture through its dress. The attire of the Lepchas is as unique as the tribe and a fair reflection into the ingenuity and resilience that this tribe has possessed to tide over the onslaught of time. The present study tried to study the socio-cultural belief of the Lepchas of Pedong, West Bengal. The methodologies included interview method.

Keywords: Lepcha, Indigenous, Tribe, Religion, Pedong.

1. INTRODUCTION

High up among the clouds in the Himalayas, amidst the abode of Gods, legend says that there was a country known as 'Mayel'. And there lived a tribe of simple folk who called themselves 'Mu-Tanchi-Rong Kup', meaning 'the mother's loved ones'. The Rongs popularly known as the Lepchas live there. The Lepcha are also called the Rongkup meaning the children of God and the Rong, The English name 'Lepcha' derives from Nepali *lāpce* or *lāpcā*, which originally had the derogatory connotation of 'inarticulate speech'. Nowadays, the term 'Lepcha' is widely used without this connotation. The word Lepcha, or Lapche means the people of vile speech and was a contemptuous appellation given to this tribe by the dominant Nepalese. From prehistoric time onwards Anthropologist have gathered innumerable evidences regarding the close and intricate relationship between man and environment. Amidst the idyllic backdrop of Mount Kanchenjunga, this tribe has managed to create a perfect harmony with nature which can be a best example to the human ecological study in the high altitude zone. Many Lepchas are also found in western and southwestern Bhutan, Tibet, Darjeeling, the Mechi Zone of eastern Nepal, and in the hills of West Bengal. Among the hill-settlements, in Darjeeling Districts, touched by modernity; Lepchas form a negligible minority. As a community they are virtually unnoticed. They have started living in the outskirts of the towns creating small hamlets in the valleys and gorges, protected by the forests and the mountains faced with a bleak and uncertain future. The members of the community who belong to the urban milieu have almost lost their Lepcha identity. Their society was organized on the basis of sharing and equality - a structure that we call primitive communism. The Lepchas believe that they are the true indigenous people of Sikkim and Darjeeling, a primeval race as old as the Himalayas. The Lepcha regard Kanchenjunga as their guardian deity. They believe their earliest ancestors were created from the snows on the summit of the peak, which towers over their homeland. Although many have converted to Buddhism and Christianity, they still follow some of their traditional rituals. The Lepcha have been praying to Kanchenjunga for hundreds of years, with the ceremony always led by descendants of their original priest. From this contemporary study of culture through we understand their associated socio-cultural beliefs, without enquiring the historical past no fact can explain their background so well. Besides the diachronic and synchronic enquiries, the inter-ethnic interaction in the context of nomadism.

The Lepcha language is spoken in Sikkim, Darjeeling district in West Bengal in India, in Ilām district in Nepal, and in a few villages of Samtse district in south-western Bhutan. The tribal homeland of the Lepcha people is referred to as *ne may LeVĪa ne máyellyáng* 'hidden paradise' or *ne may LemalUVĪa ne máyelmálúklyáng* 'land of eternal purity'. Most of the areas in which Lepcha is spoken today were once Sikkimese territory, as the kingdom of Sikkim used to comprise all of

present-day Sikkim and most of Darjeeling district. Today the Lepcha people constitute a minority of the population of modern Sikkim, which has been flooded by immigrants from Nepal. Although many Lepcha people estimate their number of speakers to be over 50,000, the total number of Lepcha speakers is likely to be much smaller. According to the 1991 Census of India, the most recent statistical profile for which the data have been disaggregated, the total number of mother tongue Lepcha speakers across the nation is 29,854. According to 2001 census report, 35,728 mother tongue Lepcha speakers are present in Sikkim. While their distribution is largely in Sikkim and the northern districts of West Bengal, there are no reliable speaker numbers for the Darjeeling district, where there are many Lepcha villages particularly in the area surrounding the small town of Kalimpong. There are reportedly roughly a hundred Lepcha households in Ilām, mainly in the villages Nāmsāliñ, Phikkal, Kolbuñ, Pañckanyā, Kanyām, ŚrīAntu and Cisopāñi, and approximately a thousand Lepcha speakers in Samtsi District, in Denchukha north of the 'Amochu in Bhutan (van Driem 2001: 819). Although Lepcha is unmistakably a Tibeto-Burman language, its exact position within the Tibeto-Burman language family is still unclear. Besides their adaptation to local environmental situations, there was also a need to explore historically how these people's migration from far off places to develop adaptation to such high altitude regions.

A number of western scholars have researched and written about the tribe, but recently the Lepchas themselves have started exploring their own origin. Among them writers like A. R. Foning and K. P. Tamsong have notable contributions. Mr Miku Foning, the youngest son of late A. R. Foning shares his experiences in the context of changing times. Like most educated and committed members of his community his faith in the rejuvenation of the tribe is rather strong. As a community they were dependent on nature.

The only possession they seemed to have been their faith in Mount Kenchenjungha as their mother. They were not keen about forming villages. But with the increase in population and various invasions they were compelled to start living in small hamlets in the valleys and forests. Many writers, anthropologists and historians had written about the origin of these people. From their appearance it seems that they are from the mongoloid stock. Histories and myths, traditions and superstitions all blend together in an age-old way of life. The inexorable forces of time will inevitably change the face of reality. But the "Mayel Lyang" will still exist, in the mindscape of the people who are the true children of the mountains. Myths often become history; and if these myths are not exploded, they go on to be the basis of our understanding of the world, our dreams and aspirations. They set the foundations of our future and they become part of our culture. No community is exempt from this mechanism. These hills of North Bengal, the Mayel, the land of the Lepchas, is no exception to this dynamism. These incantations and fluttering flags are part of the myth that refers to the unknown, the mysterious and creates admiration and fear in people.

2. BELIEF IN LIFE AFTER DEATH

The belief in life after death has its hand in almost every walks of life of a Lepcha. To know the life after death we must deal with the ghosts. The knowledge regarding the the concept of ghosts of the Lepchas is quite necessary to become familiar with certain terms that deals with this particular concept. It clearly implies a dichotomy of ideas, that which is natural and that which is more than natural or, indeed, superior to the natural. Animism implies the belief in spirit beings. They are known in many forms, plant and animal spirits, souls, ghosts, elves, goblins, demons, devils, angels and gods. Their essential quality is their ethereal embodiment, they are beings without real flesh and blood – nonmaterial, but real enough for those who believe in them. As spirits, they are uninhibited by the limitations of the physical matters, by the weaknesses of human or animal flesh. They transcend matter, time and space and believe it is a universal concept. This too provides them religious merit and confidence in life. We all believe the soul is, in itself, quite intangible and the word "soul" is synonymous with "shadow" or "shade". Though it is enough intangible, it often times perceptible in the image of the body it normally inhabits. In most primitive beliefs not only man but all living beings possess a souls. Souls after death become ghost or free spirits wholly disembodied.

If the date of the death anyhow coincides with the date of the birth then the dead body is cremated in a cave present in the forest. As per the Lepchas 'once death occurred to a lady and she became alive after 5 days of her death. This might be due to some spiritual power'. Nobody was able to unfold the mystery behind this incident. It is quite necessary to lit up 108 candles before the burial of a dead body or else it may turn into an evil spirit and thus the evil spirit will known as the *murda haddi*.

As per their statement different types of spirits reported to them. They are named as *khola mung*(ghost of the river), *masang*(ghost of the bank of the river), *mashaal bhoot* (ghost of the fire) and the *sungur bhoot* (ghost of pig). Among them *mashaal bhoot* is considered as good spirit. The Lepchas pay respect to it and however this is in the light of religious

and social consideration. So in every ceremonial occasion they prepare fire. They believe that the spirit will protect them from any kind of harmful events. *Masang, sungur bhoot and khola mung* are evil spirits, they generally cause harm to the people. When a pig is slaughtered it turns into *sungur bhoot*.

Regarding any sort of disease like Gastric Ulcer, they believe that the person suffering from it is being captured by a ghost. At this condition, they take some rice and the patient is made blow in it, after that the *bongthing* chants some mantras. This plate full of rice is offered to the soul and is kept in a place from where the soul grants it. Soon, the face of the ghost appears as an image on the rice plate revealing the fact that it has left the body of the victim. Then a glass of water is taken and some mantras are recited again. This makes the patient feel relieved.

The flash of lightening makes them feel afraid. Once a flash of light stroke a tree while a child was standing underneath. This killed the boy. Thus, whenever a lightening is followed by a thunder they believe it to be the roaring of a dragon. According to them dragon is a monster which always causes harm to the people. Driven out by this fear they started worshipping in order to appease it.

Due to some sort of disorder in the solar system once showering of various meteors and meteorites took place. The people believed it to be the gift of GOD. The stones are of various shapes. The triangle shape symbolizes male and the round shaped ones are regarded as the symbol of fertility or it symbolizes female. They started worshipping it as *sidrilon* or thunderstone since it was showered on the earth with the roaring sound of thunder hence, it is named as thunderstone.

3. CONCLUSION

As regarded to nature, It is considered as the sum total of all living and nonliving things is very special to human beings in general and to the tribes in particular. Nature is considered to be the sole provider of life support system of the tribes, having a close an intimate relation between tribes and nature. They have close Association with nature, they can read, judge, assess and interpret nature more correctly and accurately having an intrinsic Bond between nature and tribe. Such anthropological attempts made to know the traditional wisdom concerning with cosmology and belief system of the community. It also discusses the traditional practices that confer to set a unique example of cultural and biological co-existence of the Lepchas with their life cycle and environment.

Present paper tried to understand the concept of life after death as practiced by the Lepchas of Pedong. *“They believed in spiritual beings that existed in their environment separating the good and bad spirits revering and appeasing as necessary”* (Tylor 1871). The simultaneous belief in the existence of Gods and Demons explores their well balanced trends in world view which also incorporates the changing trends of this community.

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