

Identity Formation among the Lepchas of West Bengal and Sikkim

Rip Roshina Gowloog

*Anthropological Survey of India, Mawblei, Madanring, Shillong 793 022, Meghalaya, India
Mobile: 9436301958, Email: groshina@yahoo.com*

KEYWORDS Lepcha. Religious Diversity. Animism. Ethnicity

ABSTRACT This article deals with the challenges a small but autochthonous Himalayan community living in the hills of Darjeeling and Sikkim is facing on account of their gradual domination first by the Buddhist Bhutias and subsequently by the Hindu Nepalis, converting them into an insignificant minority in their own traditional habitat. It also demonstrates how allegiance to different religions, especially Buddhism and Christianity, has created a cleavage within them, which they are slowly trying to address and overcome.

INTRODUCTION

Of the three main communities living in Darjeeling-Sikkim Himalayas - Lepcha, Bhutia, and Nepali - the first is accepted by all scholars who have researched on the region to be the earliest inhabitants. Their constitutional status is that of a Scheduled Tribe, and in Sikkim the State Government has given them the status of the "Most Primitive Tribe". Though numerically small, representing less than 7 percent of the total population in the region, they are historically, culturally and linguistically a very important community.

Lepchas are also referred to as 'Rong', 'Meri', and 'Monpa'. But certainly, the name Lepcha is most widely known in the region as well as outside it. 'Lepcha' is supposed to be an anglicized form of the term 'Lapche', whereas according to some scholars like Tshering (1971) and Foning (1987) it is a corrupt form of the Lepcha word *lap-chyo*, which means an elevated place for resting the load of firewood or fodder. There are several instances from Northeast India where the name of a community simply means a hill or man. The name Monpa (or Memba) is apparently given to the Lepchas by the higher-altitude dwelling Bhutias, as this term refers to lowlanders, which the Lepchas were vis-à-vis the Bhutias. Their eastern neighbours - the Drukpas - used the name Meri for them. They came in close contact with the Drukpas after Kalimpong went under the rule of Bhutan in 1706, following a war between the Lepchas of Sikkim and the Drukpas of Bhutan, and remained so till the Anglo-Bhutanese War of 1864. Lepchas refer to themselves as 'Rong', although to outsiders they identify themselves as Lepchas, even as they use clan names like

Karthak, Namchu, Simick, Foning and Gowloog as their surnames.

RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY

It is generally agreed that the original religion of tribal societies of Northeast India - Animism - has not received adequate attention of anthropologists. The opportunity to understand and document this ancient religion is now lost in many places due to their conversion into other religions or their being significantly influenced by the organized religions. Where there is scope for studying indigenous religious beliefs and practices, the native scholars have only recently started making some efforts to understand the same.

Of the very few attempts to explain the intricacies of traditional Lepcha religion, Gorer's study (1938) is perhaps one of the most authoritative of all. He is aware of his limitations but the insight on the traditional religion of this community, which he shares with Morris (1938), is highly valuable. It is quite natural that one often encounters traces of their European bias towards the Lepcha religion but these do not belittle the value of their observations on the subject. To illustrate the point, Gorer writes that "(t)he discussion on the Lepchas' religion is rendered extremely difficult by the fact that they practice simultaneously, and without any feeling of theoretical discomfort, two (or probably three) mutually contradictory religions...." (1938: 181). Actually, there are no contradictions from the Lepchas' own point of view but the same may appear to be contradictory when a Western anthropologist like Gorer tries to look at it. True to the European system of looking at things, he first delineates the fundamental char-

acteristics of various religions and compares one religion with another on the basis of the same. The Lepcha view of religion is, on the other hand, more holistic rather than being compartmental.

This is not to indicate that they follow any religion instinctively, as it may so appear to a scholar studying their traditional religious beliefs and practices. Like all communities they have their share of traditional religious beliefs and practices, which cannot always be explained in rationalist terms. In fact, they often worship many gods and goddesses because they have been doing so for generations or because their happiness is still important for the crops and cattle of the Lepchas or their own health. The fact that they are not able to explain why they do so is not important for them. They of course never needed to explain to any one why they worshipped certain gods or goddesses until research on their religion began. But asking them to explain why they worship what they do can in itself be seen as irrational act, as there can be various explanations of the people themselves at various times and places. It has also been often difficult for them to explain their complex beliefs and practices because of their lack of command in their own languages and those other than their own, which most researchers from outside rarely mastered with the exceptions of a few like General Mainwaring and Keith Sprigg. It is further possible that some of them hesitated to say anything about their gods and goddesses lest they make a mistake and incur the wrath of the concerned deities. Hence, they often gave a highly utilitarian explanation of their traditional religious practices, saying that they do so to please so and so deity, or to avoid the wrath of so and so deity. The world of their traditional beliefs and practices is obviously not that simple.

Gorer has discussed the Lepcha religion under Lamaism, Mun-Bongthing-ism (Lepcha priestess and priest) and as the worship of the "people of Mayel". Lamaism, which is a kind of mixture between pre-Buddhist (Bon) and Buddhist religious practices, is a later addition to their cosmology. Although, almost every Lepcha family in Sikkim once sent its youngest son to the nearby monastery for training as monks they apparently could never identify themselves fully with Lamaism for a number of reasons. One such reason was that all religious

scriptures were written in Tibetan script whereas the Lepchas had their own script, while the other reason was that Lamaism was identified with the Tibetans coming from the north, who had fought with the Lepchas and subjugated them. Although it is possible that the sense of insiders and outsiders was not strong then Buddhism was certainly not considered as a Lepcha religion to begin with. Until the consecration of the first Tibetan king in Sikkim in 1641 its influence, if any, was minimal. They were 'Animists' in the sense that they worshipped a plethora of gods and goddesses the most important of which were their ancestors from the land of "Mayel" or their mythical place of origin which is believed to be located somewhere at the foot of Mount Kanchanjangha. Their ritual specialists were called Mun (female) and Bongthing (male), who mediated between the common Lepcha people and their world of supernatural beings.

Lepchas believe that their ancestors were seven brothers, each being the guardian deity of one crop. They lived in seven separate huts in heaven, which has a close resemblance with the Khasi cosmology besides sharing huge similarities in female dress and vocabulary. Lepchas further believed that their ancestors were immortal; they were babies in the morning, youths during the day and old in the evening. They had each a huge goiter – which was once common in the Darjeeling-Sikkim Himalayas due to lack of iodine in their water. They wore traditional Lepcha clothes made of nettle fibre and hats made of bamboo strips. They believe that on the way to Mayel, there were three brothers who acted as their guardian spirits. Their names were Yookrum (or Pongrum to the hunters), Mitik and Tomtik. The younger two brothers were known as cruel deities and the eldest a benevolent one.

The very fact that Muns and Bongthings still exist and serve the religious needs of their society shows that Buddhism never displaced their traditional religion completely. Thus, 'Mun-Bongthingism' and Buddhism co-existed in the Lepcha society of Darjeeling and Sikkim.

Which year Christianity - another important religion of the Lepchas today - began to spread among them is not known, although it began with the extension of the British administration to these areas. The theocratic regime of the Namgyals in Sikkim did not permit the Christian missionaries to operate there till as late as

1975 nor was there any effort on the part of the British to disturb the religious fabric of this tiny Himalayan country. The main interest of the British in Sikkim was as a trade route to Tibet and China. This is perhaps why the spread of Christianity is rather recent in Sikkim and there are not many Christians there even today.

LEPCHA ETHNICITY

The reason why the researcher has discussed Lepcha religion in detail in the previous section is the fact that it has a very significant bearing on their ethnicity. Vibha Arora explains “how rituals performed by the Lepchas regenerate the human body, the land, the ancestral connections of the Lepchas, and their indigenous identity” (2006: 55). Although they were original inhabitants of Sikkim, they were a silent witness to the changes taking place in Darjeeling and Sikkim where the Bhutias and Nepalis were gradually taking control of the land and politics. Ghosal (1990) has looked at the changes among the Lepchas from the mode of production point of view whereas Roy (2005) has analysed these changes with the conceptual frameworks of social formation and social embeddedness. However, Bhasin (1989), writing on the Lepchas and Bhutias of Sikkim, has paid attention to the local dynamics of relationships between them and the numerically dominant Nepalis.

The Lepchas, once original inhabitants of Sikkim, have not only slowly turned into an insignificant minority in their own land but also gradually lost their language, land, costumes, food habits, and even rites and rituals. Any attempt to bring their people together under a common platform for protection of their culture and traditions was affected by a strong sense of divide within them between the so-called Buddhist Lepchas, who began to see themselves as the true bearers of Lepcha culture and tradition, and the Christian Lepchas, who considered themselves superior to their Buddhist counterparts. Matrimonial relationships were defined more by their religious affiliation than the rules of tribal or village endogamy. The cleavage between these two groups of Lepchas continues to hamper the interest of the tribe to some extent even today.

In Sikkim, the situation was slightly different till 1975 or so because there was hardly any

Christian Lepcha population there and the first converts to Christianity in the urban areas of Gangtok all came from Buddhist background. In the rural areas of Sikkim their conversion into Christianity led to severe hardships for them due to their social ostracism by the Buddhist relatives who took such conversions as an insult or even a threat to them. There are many similarities between the stories of the first Lepcha converts into Christianity and their counterparts in Nagaland or Mizoram.

One other reason why the Buddhist-Christian divide could not sharpen in Sikkim, as it did in Darjeeling, was the existence of a large Lepcha ‘reserve’ called Dzongu in North Sikkim. This reserve has thirteen blocks where no outsider, not even the Lepchas from outside these blocks, has the right to settle permanently or even get permission to visit the area easily. This helped the Lepchas of Dzongu to remain Buddhists and not be influenced by either Christianity or Hinduism until recently. Today some of them have been converted into Christianity, but Dzongu continues to be the bastion of the Lepcha language, culture and tradition. Sikkim as a whole being isolated from the outside world could forestall the influence of westernization more successfully than Darjeeling, which brought some benefit to the Lepchas as well.

It is such a situation that made them unable to develop a strong Lepcha ethnicity either in Darjeeling or in Sikkim. This may be illustrated with some examples here. Until 1934, the Lepchas of Darjeeling were part of the Hillmen’s Association, which was led by a Bhutia but had significant members from the Nepali community as well. From 1934 onwards they became a part of the Hill people’s Social Union (HPSU) of which Dr. Yen Singh Sitling, a Lepcha ophthalmologist, was a joint vice-president. In the same year a Lepcha association was formed for the first time but it must have been overcast by the HPSU, which was very much an association of the Nepalis, Bhutias and the Lepchas.

In 1937, one Christian Lepcha called G.T. Sitling contested the election against Dambar Singh Gurung, a legendary Nepali leader. Sitling campaigned for the welfare of the Lepchas and promotion of their language and script but he lost not only because the Nepalis were in absolute majority but also because he could not secure some of the Buddhist votes of his own community. He later arranged to get some school

books published in the Lepcha language by the Baptist Mission Press in Calcutta. One S. Tasho also did the same. He translated the Psalms and hymns of the Bible, the gospels of Saints Mathew, Luke and John into the Lepcha language. The Lepcha Association also published a Lepcha self-taught and a monthly journal called *Mutanchi* with the help of Arthur R. Foning, the author of *Lepcha: My Vanishing Tribe* (1987).

The Lepcha Association or *Rong Mutanchi Shezum* was re-established in 1972 with the following objectives:

- 1) to make their people conscious about their language, script and traditions;
- 2) to get their language recognized as official language of Darjeeling; and
- 3) to persuade the All India Radio, Kurseong, to broadcast in the Lepcha language also.

As far as the first objective is concerned the members of this community are reported to have gone around the villages during 1971 census requesting their people to declare their mother tongue as 'Lepcha' and not 'Nepali'. Apart from that there was no significant attempt of this Association to achieve this objective or the other two objectives.

In Sikkim they were part of 'Lhomensongsum', an association of the Bhutias, Lepchas and Limbus based on a 'blood treaty' executed at a place called Kabi Lungchok in North Sikkim during the middle of the 17th century. The treaty was basically to neutralize the opposition to the Bhutia rule from the Lepchas and Limbus by invoking the relationship of the Lhopa or Bhutia as father, Monpa or Lepcha as mother and Tsong or Limbu as son. After Sikkim became a part of Indian Union there was rapid development in Lepcha language. It is now taught up to college level and broadcast from All India Radio, Gangtok, a feat the Lepchas of Darjeeling District in West Bengal could not achieve even after six decades of India's independence. The Lepchas of Sikkim have also been able to retain seat reservation in Sikkim Legislative Assembly and the Lepcha language is recognized as one of the four state languages of Sikkim.

The reasons why the Lepchas of Sikkim could achieve a lot but their counterparts in Darjeeling could not are many but the most vivid reason is lack of state patronage for their language in West Bengal. West Bengal has done precious little in the last six decades to develop the languages of

the minority communities. The state did nothing even for the Nepali language till the Nepalis engaged in prolonged agitation for recognition of the Nepali language as an official language in the hill areas of Darjeeling. The Lepchas of Darjeeling must also partly share the blame for their failure to achieve anything in this regard, as they did little to propagate their language or demand its recognition even as a medium of instruction at primary education level.

CONCLUSION

It is heartening to note at the end that the divide between the Buddhist and Christian Lepchas, which hindered the emergence of a pan-Lepcha ethnicity in the region for very long, seems to have been greatly bridged in the past two decades or so. Today not only is the attitude of the Buddhist Lepchas towards Christianity greatly softened even the Christian Lepchas are re-inventing their Lepcha-hood by wearing Lepcha dress, participating in Lepcha festivals, games and associations alongside their Buddhist brethren. Both the sections of the community seem to welcome this new development. This indeed heralds a new era in the history of the Lepchas of Darjeeling and Sikkim.

The other positive development perhaps is the growing solidarity between the Lepchas of Darjeeling and Sikkim, which was first noticed very clearly when the Lepchas of North Sikkim sat on indefinite hunger strike against the state's decision to allow Dzongu, their "sacred reserve", to be desecrated by a number of medium scale hydel projects. The Lepchas of Kalimpong marched to Sikkim in hundreds to show their solidarity with their brethren in Sikkim, but were stopped at Rangpo, the border town of Sikkim, and not allowed to enter Sikkim. Some of them continued their support through various social media.

One of the reasons that seems to have contributed to this development is the imposition of 'Gorkha' identity on the Lepchas since the launching of the Gorkhaland movement in 1980. In September 2008 the Lepchas were even asked to wear the Nepali dress by the resurgent group called Gorkha Janamukti Morcha led by Bimal Gurung. The diktat on the Lepchas was withdrawn after a Lepcha delegation met Gurung and apprised him of the fact that they had their own dress, which was different from the Nepali

dress which they were asked to wear for at least one month.

Whatever is the catalyst for this new development it has brought a new hope in the Lepcha community. But in order to give stability to this new unity and togetherness they need to have a dialogue on their future and how best they can secure it, more so in the state of West Bengal than in Sikkim. Such a dialogue is yet to begin but there is every hope that they will continue to bury their religious and geographical differences for a common future amidst challenges they will find difficult to face if they are divided.

REFERENCES

- Arora Vibha 2006. The forest of symbols embodied in the Tholung sacred landscape of North Sikkim, India. *Conservation and Society*, 4(1): 55-83.
- Bhasin Veena 1989. *Ecology, Culture and Change: Tribals of Sikkim Himalayas*. New Delhi: Inter-India Publications.
- Das AK 1987. The Lepchas of Darjeeling. In: MK Raha (Ed.): *The Himalayan Heritage*. Delhi: Gian Publishing House.
- Das AR 1982. The language and script movement in Darjeeling Himalayan area. In: KS Singh (Ed.): *Tribal Movements in India*. Volume 1. New Delhi: Manohar.
- Foning AR 1987. *Lepcha: My Vanishing Tribe*. New Delhi: Sterling.
- Ghosal S 1990. *Lepchas of Darjeeling and Sikkim: A Study in Cultural Ecology and Social Change*. PhD Thesis, Unpublished. North Bengal University, Darjeeling.
- Gorer Geoffrey 1938/84. *The Lepchas of Sikkim*. Delhi: Cultural Publishing house.
- Gowloog Rip Roshina 1995. *Lingthem Revisited*. New Delhi: Har-Anand Publications.
- Morris Col. John 1938. *Living with the Lepchas: A Book about the Sikkim Himalayas*. London: William Heinemann Ltd.
- Roy DC 2005. *Dynamics of Social Formation among the Lepchas*. New Delhi: Akansha Publishing House.
- Subba TB 1985. The Lepchas: From legends to the present day. *Religion and Society*, 32(2): 61-70.
- Tshering G 1971. *Lepcha Jatiko Sanchipta Parichay* (in Nepali). Darjeeling: Shyam Brothers.