

# The Lepchas: From Legends to the Present Day

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## Introduction

The Lepcha community has historical importance in the hill areas of Sikkim and Darjeeling in India. A plethora of books and articles is available on them, written since as early as 1840 to the present day. These writings are mainly by British scholars like Campbell, Hooker, Hunter, Hodgson, Gorer, Mainwaring and Sprigg and by some Indian scholars like K. K. Das, A. K. Das and R. N. Thakur. Chie Nakane, a Japanese, and Halfdan Siiger, a Dane, have also contributed to the stock of literature on the Lepchas.

A survey of literature on the Lepchas reveals, among others, the following main shortcomings :

(i) Some of the earlier scholars have misunderstood the Lepchas especially with reference to their origin ;

(ii) the change in their socio-economic life has not been properly studied in its historical perspective ; and

(iii) the growing differentiation (or stratification)—social as well as economic—has been almost totally ignored. On the other hand, a concern, though highly significant to some, about the land alienation and physical disappearance is amply projected.

The objective of this paper is to clear some of the mist about the Lepchas and present a coherent picture of the Lepchas from the legendary days to the present. The data on the historical aspect are culled from secondary sources and supplemented by my own field observations and interviews in Darjeeling and Sikkim which together formed one political territory till the mid-nineteenth century and the current data have been based on my field work in Tanek village. This village stands by the side of the Reshi Road and is about five kilometres off Kalimpong town westwards towards the Teesta market.

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## Origin of the Lepchas

Among the three main communities of this region—the Lepchas, Bhutias and the Nepalis—the Lepchas are considered to be the ‘original’ inhabitants while the latter two are regarded as later immigrants.<sup>1</sup> Between the latter two communities the Nepalis are said to have settled after the Bhutias.

There are, however, some writings which give a different version of the Lepchas. For example, Mackean<sup>2</sup> writes that the Lepchas came from the east with the Jimdars (or Rais of the Nepalese community) who went on to Nepal and settled there and with the Meches who settled in the foothills. Waddell<sup>3</sup> also believes that the Lepchas, who were of Indo-Chinese origin, came to Sikkim from the east through Assam valley. Siiger<sup>4</sup>, after thirteen years of anthropological fieldwork in Kalimpong, Sikkim and Git, supports the above contentions of Mackean and Waddell. Referring to K. K. Das he writes that before the Lepchas came to Sikkim there were three tribes called *Na-ang* or *Na-ong*, the *Chang*, and the *Mon*, already in possession of the country and of these three, the first is suspected to be extinct.

The Lepcha language has been found to have some relationship with the languages of the Mangars (of the Nepalese community), Arlong (or Mikir) spoken in the present-day Assam, Adis of Arunachal Pradesh and the Khasis of Meghalaya.<sup>5</sup> Sprigg, one of the few scholars on the Lepcha language, also does not deny the relationship with all these languages, but contends that the Tibetan influence on the Lepcha language during the three hundred years of their dominance over the latter is very significant. In any case, it appears that the Lepcha language had or has some relationship with the languages of eastern India through which they are supposed to have come to Sikkim.

To begin with, the chronological order depicted above about the three communities is, by and large, true. The Lepchas were there in Sikkim before the Tibetans began to settle there. Though the Tibetans are supposed to have started settling down there since as early as the seventh century, the migration of the Tibetan population assumed

<sup>1</sup> See Parkhurst, *Sikkim* (London : Macmillan, 1946), p. 13 : V. H. Coelho, *Sikkim and Bhutan* (New Delhi: Indraprastha Press, 1967), p. 18 : G. Gorer, *Himalayan Village : An Account of the Lepchas of Sikkim* (London : Thomas Nelson, 1967) p. 35 : etc., etc.

<sup>2</sup> Mackean, ‘Sikkim’, *Ency. of Religion and Ethics*, Vol. 11, Ed. J. Hastings, 1920, p. 511.

<sup>3</sup> L. A. Waddell, *Among the Himalayas*, (Delhi : Mittal, 1979).

<sup>4</sup> H. Siiger, *The Lepchas : Culture and Religion of a Himalayan People*, Part I (Copenhagen : The National Museum of Denmark, 1967), p. 27.

<sup>5</sup> R. K. Sprigg, ‘The Lepcha language and three hundred years of Tibetan influence’, *Journ. of the Asiatic Society*, Vol. 24, Nos. 1-4, 1982, pp. 16-31.

significant proportions possibly after the establishment of the first *Dharmaraja* (king of righteousness) in 1642. The Nepalese immigration started in 1780 when Nepal invaded Sikkim and ruled it for thirty-seven years, up to the West of Teesta River, until 1817 when under the Treaty of Titaliya the land occupied by Nepal was restored to Sikkim by the British.

It should be noted here that the Nepalese immigrants here do not include the Limbus or *Chongs* and the Mangars of the Nepalese community. There are profuse historical references including the *History of Sikkim*,<sup>6</sup> which show that the Limbus and Mangars were in Sikkim for ages.

Therefore, if the word 'Nepalese' is taken in the present-day sense, the chronological order mentioned above does not stand true because the Nepalese community today includes these two castes also.

Now, about Siiger's quotation of K.K. Das<sup>7</sup> that *Na-ang* or *Na-ong*, *Chang* and *Mon* were already in possession of Sikkim before the Lepchas came to this country, it may be mentioned that Siiger has misrepresented K. K. Das's writing. K. K. Das, in the page and paper referred to by Siiger, talks of the Tibetans and not the Lepchas.

According to General Mainwaring's *Dictionary of the Lepcha Language*<sup>8</sup> the word *Na-ong* or *Na-on* means a foolish class of the Lepchas. The superior Lepchas perhaps called their inferior brethren *Na-on*. It should also be borne in mind that the word *Lepcha* is given by their Nepali neighbours and they called and knew themselves as *Rong*. Again the word *Chang* most probably meant *Chong* or *Tsong* meaning the Limbus only. The Limbus are still known as *Chongs* or *Tsongs* in Sikkim. Mitra<sup>9</sup> has also noted them as *Chang* or *Tsang*.

Finally, the word *Mon* also probably referred to the Lepchas only. *Mon* is a general term used for the inhabitants of the lower Himalayas.<sup>10</sup> The Tibetans who are basically 'highlanders', must have used the word *Mon* for the Lepchas who are, in general, lowlanders. They are hardly found above five thousand feet above sea level in the whole region. Moreover, they have been often referred to as *Mon*.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>6</sup> T. Namgyal and Maharani Drolma, *History of Sikkim*, 1908 (typescript) p. 19.

<sup>7</sup> K. K. Das, 'The Lepcha people and their notions of Heaven and Hell', *Journal of Buddh. Text Society of India*, Vol. 4, 1986 p. 5.

<sup>8</sup> G. B. Mainwaring, *Dictionary of the Lepcha Language* (Berlin : Unger Brothers, (1898), p. 189.

<sup>9</sup> A. Mitra, *Census 1951, West Bengal : The Tribes and Castes of West Bengal* (Alipore : Govt. Printing, 1953), p. 65.

<sup>10</sup> L. A. Waddell, *op. cit.*, pp. 92-3.

<sup>11</sup> T. Namgyal and Maharani Drolma, *op. cit.*, Append : 1.

If the above suggestions are accepted, Siiger's contention<sup>12</sup> that the *Na-ang* or *Na-ong* are perhaps extinct is completely wrong. It may be said that the Lepchas, Limbus and the Mangars are the oldest inhabitants of Sikkim, the Tibetans or Bhutias are later immigrants and most of the Nepalis still later settlers.

I am personally against the use of the word 'original' or 'autochthonous' for any caste, tribe or community in any place in the Himalayan range from the east to the west. This stands for the Lepchas also. This is precisely because of the fact that the dominant mode of agriculture in the Himalayas till the nineteenth century was what is known as 'shifting cultivation' and the cycle of such a cultivation was more than thirty years at the beginning. This meant that those people might have moved around to quite far off distances also, which inhibited the society to stick to a permanent place. This apart, the people migrated to far-off places, despite the lack of communication facilities, for salt or for hunting and gathering food which was a part of their socio-economic life.

With reference to the Lepchas also, my preference for the word 'oldest' to 'original' or 'autochthonous' as used by many scholars, seems more meaningful. The linguistic link of the Lepchas with the Mangars, Nagas, Khasis, etc., also shows that they might have come in contact with each other in some period of their history. The above explanation of mine thus also finds support from the linguistic composition of the Lepchas.

The legendary history of the Lepchas, though not totally dependable academically, shows that their origin has been somewhere near Mount Kanchenjunga which is situated in west Sikkim. This original homeland is called 'Myel-Lyang' which is placed somewhere in the middle of the four districts of the present Sikkim by a Lepcha scholar, Sonam Tshering, from Bhagalpur University. This is not improbable but the linguistic affiliation with various Indian tribes suggests at the same time that they might have moved around the entire eastern Himalayas. The Lepchas who were basically forest-dwellers and not traders like the Tibetans, should not have moved around very much. The shifting cultivation which continuously displaces society might not have taken them as far as the present Meghalaya. Nor is there any record of the Khasis or the Nagas having ever settled in Sikkim.

Under the circumstances, it is really difficult to place the Lepchas in their proper place. My hunch, though very difficult to explore and

<sup>12</sup> H. Siiger, *op. cit.*, same page.

establish, is that the Lepchas had insulated themselves into the forest and had gradually adapted to the forest environment, making them solely dependent on the forest. Such a situation might have arisen as a consequence of their being conquered by other tribal groups in the region. Even the timid and humble nature of theirs, often mentioned in the literature on them, might have been a result of this. The pre-British history of this region gives us ample indications to show that the inter-tribal conflicts, feuds or fights were a concurrent feature of tribal India earlier.

### **The Change : Within and Without**

A significant change has come about among the Lepchas themselves and in their relationship with other communities, meaning mainly the Bhutias and the Nepalis. There are various reasons behind this change such as deforestation (after 1866 in Darjeeling and 1888 in Sikkim), population growth and the change in the mode of agriculture, from shifting cultivation to the settled or terraced cultivation. One can no more give a romantic picture of the Lepchas—meek and humble, depending on hunting and fishing or some forest resources, dancing and singing, worshipping plants, trees or rivers, etc. These changes may be discussed here from three angles—economic, socio-religious and psychological.

The Lepchas practised shifting cultivation which continued even after they came in contact with the Tibetans from the north. These Tibetans being primarily traders and herdsmen interfered little with the traditional mode of agriculture of the Lepchas. The Lepchas themselves had limited wants and unlimited forest to give them what they needed.

It has been reported that the Lepchas were not so noted for their weaving practices but they wove clothes for their own use. Moreover, they are well known to be experts on bamboo work. Paddy was not known to them but the sowing of maize, millet or barley used to be done. The implements they used were also simple—hoe, sickle and *bamphok* (an iron piece with which they cut everything).

It is said that the terraced or settled cultivation was taught to them by the Nepalis. The use of plough, fork, spade, etc., was also taught simultaneously. Gradually, the Lepchas followed terraced cultivation which was the most modern mode of agriculture in Sikkim then. In a way, they were forced to give up shifting cultivation when the Maharaja of Sikkim put curbs on forest utilisation after J.C. White was appointed as the Political Officer to Sikkim in 1888.

Consequently, the Lepchas suffered economically in two ways. First, they lost access to free exploitation of the forest resources, which

was a part of their socio-economic life. Second, they could not compete with the Nepalis in the practice of this new mode of cultivation which the latter had mastered before they came to this region. However, they still had extensive plots of land, parts of which they lost to the Nepalis and the Bhutias. Land alienation, a major disease till independence, has remained a problem because the Bhutias can still buy lands from them.

A parallel change took place in the sphere of their socio-religious life also. Take, for example, their house types. The old Lepcha houses consisted of two floors. The upper floor was used for themselves while the lower floor was for animals was for pig, goat and other animals. The pillars of the houses which used to be of solid tree trunks of about at least eight feet circumference rested on a stone slab of even bigger size. They did not use nails for joining the various parts of their houses. The thatching used to be of wild grass and the floor was of bamboo splits, or wooden planks.

Quite the same type of houses is still found among the Bhutias in rural Sikkim. This indicates that the Tibetans did not have a more advanced technology of house building. The Nepalese houses are comparatively more hygienic though the old Lepcha and Bhutia houses are more durable and strong. The modern Lepcha houses are, however, no different from the houses of the Bhutias or Nepalis.

As largely true of the Bhutias and Nepalis, the Lepchas today do not wear their traditional dresses. Their ancient dress was called *Dompa* or *Domdam* and looked quite like the Bhutia dress to a foreigner. But to a local person there were significant differences.

Today, many Bhutias and Nepalis are still seen in their traditional dresses but hardly any Lepcha is seen with the traditional costume on. The use of shirts, trousers, shorts, etc., is extensive all over the region and one cannot differentiate among the Lepchas, Bhutias and the Nepalis just by looking at their dresses.

Many changes are also observed in the forms of family—from joint to nuclear, marriage—from intra-community to inter-community, and their food habits—from hunting and jungle food to modern and more balanced food.

As for their religion, they once worshipped nature and animals : they were what many today bluntly call animist. They gradually became Buddhist under Tibetan rule and this religion has been deeply embedded in them. Today, a large number of them are also Christians. Christianity spread among them after they were exposed to the British

administration during which a large number of the Lepchas and the Nepalis belonging mainly to the lower castes and classes, chose to be Christians. Surprisingly, Christianity could not spread among the Tibetans and today very few of them are officially Christian. This might be due to a relatively better economic position of this community *vis-a-vis* that of the Lepchas and Nepalis and a well-knit kinship relationship.

Psychologically, the Lepchas can be clearly divided into two groups based on their religious differences—Buddhism and Christianity. The Buddhist Lepchas are more proud of their traditional culture and have a tacit dislike for their Christian brethren who, they feel, have abandoned 'Lepchahood'. They are also more orthodox, less outgoing and more backward in education on the whole. The Christian Lepchas, on the other hand, are more open and have a greater interaction with the members of other communities. They are also less conscious of their traditional culture as they are more educated and urbanised than the Buddhist Lepchas.

The relative closedness and openness between the Buddhist and Christian Lepchas respectively is apparently based on their religious differences. But it is probably the education which is the actual factor behind this difference in their personalities. The Christian Lepchas have become more educated with the help of the missionaries. Many of them got married to Anglo-Indians during the pre-Independence period and to members of other communities, later. Their reference group also being different—the Christian priests—from that of the Buddhist Lepchas, a clear difference can be observed in the psychological build of these two groups of Lepchas.

### The New Inequality

It is recorded in the history of Sikkim that there was a Lepcha king before the establishment of the Tibetan regime there. The Tibetans had little hold over the power structure of Sikkim till 1642. Therefore, the Lepchas had their own king, ministers and the subjects. The last category—subjects—consisted of the Limbus, Mangars and the Bhutias also.

Even after Phuntsoog Namgyal started ruling the country there were twelve Lepcha heads of *jongs* or castles.<sup>13</sup> The Tibetan rule wiped out the political apex of the Lepcha community and left them with only two classes—ministers and *kazis* at the top and the *rayats* at the bottom. The Lepcha *rayats*, like their Nepalese and Bhutia counterparts, had little difference within themselves, whether political or economic.

<sup>13</sup> T. Namgyal and Maharani Drolma, *op. cit.*, Append : 1.

This paper seeks to draw the attention of the readers to the growing inequality among the Lepchas at large, excluding a few of the urban elite among them. A few tables may be produced here to show the socio-economic inequality in respect of education, landholding and income among the Lepchas and their position *vis-a-vis* that of the non-Lepchas referring to the Nepalis, Biharis, Muslims and Bhutias.

TABLE 1  
*Education and Inequality*

Educational Categories	Lepchas		Non-Lepchas	
	No. of Inds.	Per-centage	No. of Inds.	Per-centage
Illiterates ..	57	21.8	371	33.5
Infants (—5) ..	51	19.5	154	13.9
Pry. Educated ..	75	28.6	320	28.9
Second Educated ..	74	28.2	252	22.7
College and above ..	5	1.9	11	1.0
Total	262	19.1	1,108	80.9

This table shows that only 28.6% of the Lepchas are educated upto primary level, 28.2% upto the secondary level and only 1.9% upto the college level and above. Though the data based on individuals cannot properly project the class inequality within the Lepcha society, for that matter in any society, it can be fairly assumed that very few households of the Lepchas have been educated at the university level. The mass of them are educationally at a low strata.

The educational status among the Lepchas is almost the same as in the case of the non-Lepchas but slightly better in the category of the college level and above. The following table (Table 2), for example, gives a wide variety in the size of land holdings among the Lepchas. Only 7.3% of the Lepcha households have land above 6 acres while 22.0% have between 2.1 and 3.0 acres, 29.3% below one acre and 2 or 4.9% are landless.

Therefore, the inequality in relation to landholding size among the Lepchas is quite clear. Their position *vis-a-vis* that of the non-Lepchas is, however, much better : while only 4.9% of the Lepchas are landless, 38.9% are landless among the non-Lepchas. If we exclude the Limbus and Newars from the group of the non-Lepchas, the position of this group with respect to landholding becomes still deplorable.

TABLE 2  
*Landholding and Inequality*

Size of landholding	Lepchas		Non-Lepchas	
	No. of households	Per-centage	No. of households	Per-centage
Landless ..	2	4.9	75	38.9
Upto 1.0 acre ..	12	29.3	60	31.1
1.1 to 2.0 ..	6	14.6	27	14.0
2.1 to 3.0 ..	9	22.0	19	9.8
3.1 to 4.0 ..	..	..	7	3.6
4.1 to 5.0 ..	1	2.4	2	1.0
5.1 to 6.0 ..	2	4.9	..	..
6.1 to 7.0 ..	3	7.3	2	1.0
7.1 to 8.0 ..	..	..	..	..
8.1 to 10.0 ..	3	7.3	..	..
10.0 and above ..	3	7.3	1	0.5
<b>Total ..</b>	<b>41</b>	<b>17.5</b>	<b>193</b>	<b>82.5</b>

The following table (Table 3) also gives a wide variety of income among the Lepchas. It shows that 7.3% households have income below Rs. 1000 per year, 31.7% have between Rs. 1001 to 3000, 24.4% have between Rs. 3001 and 5000, Rs. 5001 and 10,000 and 12.2% have above Rs. 10,000 per year. The class position of the households belonging to the lowest and the highest income groups is staggering and conspicuous even otherwise.

TABLE 3  
*Income (per year) and Inequality*

Income class	Lepchas		Non-Lepchas	
	No. of Households	Per-centage	No. of Households	Per-centage
Below Rs. 1000 ..	3	7.3	18	9.3
Rs. 1001—3000 ..	13	31.7	84	43.5
Rs. 3001—5000 ..	10	24.4	43	22.3
Rs. 5001—10,000 ..	10	24.4	39	20.2
Rs. 10,000— ..	5	12.2	9	4.7
<b>Total ..</b>	<b>41</b>	<b>17.5</b>	<b>193</b>	<b>82.5</b>

As in education and more importantly the landholdings, the position of the non-Lepchas in respect of income is lower than that of the Lepchas. While in the income group below Rs. 1000 to 3000 the non-Lepchas have a higher percentage, the same above Rs. 3001 is consistently lower among them than among the Lepchas.

The above data falsifies the conception among many recent writers on the Lepchas that the Lepchas have been completely dominated by the Nepalis and Bhutias and their personality has been subdued. The position of the Lepchas at a particular period of history and place might have been dominating and it is not so today. But their socio-economic position seems better than that of other communities at least in the rural areas. However, from the numerical point of view, they have turned into a minority though they never had a very large population.

Whatever be their position *vis-a-vis* that of the non-Lepchas, a growing inequality among them is clearly seen. This deserves attention of the social scientists because we know from the study of other communities that an increased inequality within makes it difficult for bringing about an internal solidarity. Even among the Lepchas it is seen that their elite have a very close relationship with the non-Lepcha elite while the poorer among them are fully assimilated with the mass of other communities.

### Conclusion : Whither Lepchas ?

A growing sense of separate identity seems to have taken root among the Lepchas of the whole region—a sense created by the special constitutional facilities accrued to them after Independence. This took them away from the Gorkha League (a regional political party). Otherwise they were as devoted to this party as any Nepali before Independence. Without the constitutional facilities which have put many among them in satisfactory jobs, the feeling of separate identity would have probably gained more momentum for the unemployed Lepchas would have nothing to do save instigate their fellow people and exploit their sentiments. Even otherwise, this feeling becomes evident from the panchayat elections in the rural areas, where the Lepchas are found to be supporting their own candidates. This is, however, in no way, a special feature of this community.

Below Rs. 1000	13	31.7	44	85.2
Rs. 1001—3000	10	24.4	43	82.3
Rs. 3001—5000	10	24.4	39	50.3
Rs. 5001—10,000	2	5.1	9	47.7
Rs. 10,000—	41	102.3	193	85.2
Total				