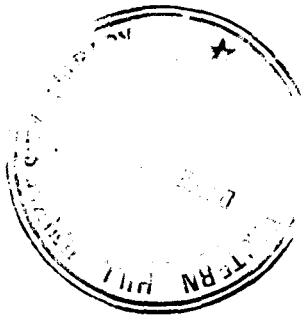
# RELIGION, CULTURE AND IDENTITY:

# A COMPARATIVE STUDY ON THE LEPCHAS OF DZONGU, KALIMPONG AND ILAM

**An Abstract**




**By**

**CHARISMA KARTHAK LEPCHA**

**DEPARTMENT OF ANTHROPOLOGY**
**SCHOOL OF HUMAN AND ENVIORNMENTAL SCIENCES**
**NORTH-EASTERN HILL UNIVERSITY**
**SHILLONG -793022**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## Introduction

This thesis is an ethnography of the Lepchas who live in Sikkim, Darjeeling, and Eastern Nepal. They call themselves *Rong* from the Lepcha words *Rongkup* or *Rumkup* meaning the children of snowy peak/ the children of God. Tradition has it that their creator God, *Itbumu,* created their progenitors *Fudongthing* and *Nazongnyu* from the virgin snows of Mt. Kanchenjunga. They have no migration history and claim to have lived in the land of eternal paradise called *Mayel Lyang* since time perennial. Known to be nature worshipers and initially labelled animists, a deeper examination of the traditional Lepcha religion shows them right in line with Tylor's (1871) evolution of religion from animism to polytheism to the current stage of monotheism.

In anthropology, the study of religion has come a long way since Tylor's definition of religion as 'belief in spiritual beings' (1871: 383) to Geertz's understanding as a 'system of symbols' (1973: 90). Religion has many interpretations and numerous definitions. Scholars even agree that there is no convincing general theory of religion but it still manages to stay in the game with its changing dynamics and varied manifestations. It is methodologically and theoretically diverse which allows scholars to find different ways to understand this phenomenon. For us anthropologists, it is the focus on ethnography in the classical, empirical, and holistic sense that still proves to be an important role in the study of religion.

This research looks into the rhetorical triplets of 'religion, culture and identity' in the case of Lepchas in order to examine the culture change after the introduction of

different religions and the formation of religion-based identities and what it means to the Lepcha identity as a whole. Like language, religion and culture construct identity for their members, 'share common sets of collective symbols and ritual objects such as cross, sacred sites, collective rituals' (Lotha 2011:1) and creates group solidarity. Religion and culture both have that 'common uniting element' (Oommen 2009: 4) which generates 'group cohesion' (van Beek 1985: 265). For the purpose of this thesis, we take Durkheim's definition of religion as 'a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden—beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them' (1995: 44). The emphasis is therefore on religion as a binding force that gives a sense of collective consciousness. But religion cannot be studied in the absence of the culture of the community since religion is the seen to be the core of culture. Therefore, the study of religion and culture goes hand in hand as we look at culture to be 'the totality of tradition-based creations of a cultural community expressed by a group or individuals and recognized as reflecting the expectations of a community in so far as they reflect its cultural and social identity; its standards and values are transmitted orally, by imitation or by other means. Its forms are, among others, language, literature, music, dance, games, mythology, rituals, customs, handicrafts, architecture and other arts' (UNESCO 1989). In the case of Lepchas, these forms of culture have greatly changed after they became Buddhists, Christians, and Hindus, resulting in the formation of different identities and cleavages based on such identities. It may be noted that identity studies initially focused on the formation of 'self' as an individual. But in the last few decades the focus has

shifted from the individual to the collective; as it is the 'we-ness of a group, stressing the similarities or shared attributes around which the group members unite' (Cerulo 1997: 387).

Buddhism was officially introduced to the Lepchas of Sikkim from the seventeenth century onwards. It was a gradual imposition by the Tibetan migrant-rulers from the north who translated many Buddhist texts into Lepcha language to bring the Lepchas under the Buddhist fold. Lepchas accepted Buddhism without much opposition but also continued with their traditional religion 'without any feeling of theoretical discomfort, two mutually contradictory religions' (Gorer 2005: 181). Christianity made its mark when Reverend William Start, former Church of England clergyman turned independent Baptist started a school for Lepchas (Dewan 1991: 104) in 1841. He learned the local vernacular and translated few books of the Bible from English to Lepcha and published Matthew in 1845 followed by Genesis, Exodus, and John in 1849. Interest in the mother tongue nurtured the identity of the tribe and translating Bible into their language was a revolutionary step (Oommen 2007: 12). But an established mission in Kalimpong, one of the subdivisions of Darjeeling district, started only with the arrival of Reverend Macfarlane and the Church of Scotland in 1882. Lepchas easily accepted Christianity but the 'exclusivist attitude' (Longkumer 2010: 85) of Christianity prevented them from continuing many of their old cultural practices for which the Christian Lepchas received a lot of flak and are blamed even today. In Ilam, the easternmost district of Nepal, Lepchas received Hindu influence from early nineteenth century as there were hardly any other religions competing with Hinduism. Lepchas never professed

Hinduism as their religion but the Hindu-tribal contact played an important role in the transmission of cultural elements from the dominant religion. They claim to be 99% Buddhists but their religio-cultural patterns show a fair share of Hinduism, Buddhism and the traditional religion.

**Statement of the problem**

'To change one's religion is to change one's world' (Buckser and Glazier 2003: xi). Among Lepchas, it was not one but three religions that influenced the change in their traditional religion and culture. The acceptance of these alien religions led to an uncalled divide within the already minority community whose cultural changes have also led to the formation of different identities and division based on such identities. Thus, while in Durkheim's definition it is religion that enhances social solidarity and 'group longevity' (Sosis and Alcorta 2003: 266); in the case of Lepchas, it has both united and divided the community at different levels and contexts. The Lepcha community is fragmented, and the factions are specially built around religious differences with one group claiming to be superior to the other, and the other group claiming to be more Lepcha than the other. Indeed, when cultures have more than one religion, they have problems claiming one cultural identity (Pohlong 2004:111). Therefore, the introduction and exposure of three world religions to a single tribal community and its acceptance and influence has proved to be a threat to the ethnic Lepcha identity. But in recent days, Lepchas have come to a realization that division along religious lines will only lead to an annihilation of their

culture. They are making conscious efforts to find common ground and forge a shared identity acceptable to Lepchas from all religious backgrounds. This thesis therefore sets out to explore what they are articulating as shared attributes of Lepchas and whether or not such articulation is uniform across the Buddhist, Christian and Hindu Lepchas.

**Brief Review of Literature**

The earliest historical records on Lepchas are Tibetan texts. In the nineteenth century, colonial administrators started writing about the life and culture of Lepchas. Describing the eating habits, dress code, marriage system, death rites, agricultural practice and housing pattern, Archibald Campbell wrote 'Notes on the Lepchas of Sikkim' (1840) and 'On the Lepchas' (1869) while Colonel George Byres Mainwaring published a Lepcha grammar in 1876. Dr. Joseph Hooker published *Himalayan Journals* in 1855 and C. de. Beauvoir Stocks' (1975) focused on writing about folklores, myths, legends and Lepcha customs. In 1938, Geoffrey Gorer and John Morris published an account of the village life and culture of the Lepchas of Dzongu, North Sikkim. This was followed by Halfdan Siiger's documentation of the socio-cultural, linguistic and religious aspects of Lepchas in the 1940s. Twentieth century saw the dawn of Lepcha researchers with Kharpu Tamsang (1982), Arthur Foning (1987), Rip Roshina Gowloog (1995), Paul Lepcha (1999) and very recently D.T. Tamlong (2008) writing from the native's perspective. Around the same time, other Indian scholars also started showing interest on the Lepcha village, settlement pattern, economic and domestic life, social organization, religious

beliefs and practices, myths, tales, songs, proverbs, dances, and language with Amal Kumar Das (1978), Indira Awasty (1978), Rudranand Thakur (1988), Tapan Chattopadhyay (1990) and Dulal Chandra Roy (2005) at the forefront of Lepcha research. The most recent published materials on Lepchas have been that of Jenny Bentley (2011), Charisma K. Lepcha (2011) and Heleen Plaisier (2011) examining the changes and continuities of Lepcha culture in education, village life and the traditional drink respectively. The above literature reveals that no work had been taken to make a comparative study of the influence of Hinduism, Buddhism and Christianity on the Lepchas as a whole, as this thesis set out to examine the relationship between the three and provide an analysis of the changing face of Lepcha culture through religion.

**Objectives**

i) To reconstruct the pre-Buddhist, pre-Hindu and pre-Christian Lepcha religion on the basis of published literature and ethnographic data collected from the Lepchas who still practise their traditional religion.

ii) To examine the influence of Buddhism, Hinduism and Christianity on Lepcha social institutions like family, marriage, kinship, language, food, and dress.

iii) To understand how the various socio-political and demographic factors like their numerical status, political voice, language recognition, and commissioning of hydel projects in their sacred areas are responsible for the emergence of a common Lepcha identity.

iv) To understand the role of educated Lepcha youths in redefining Lepcha society, culture and identity.

**Methodology**

Three villages namely Tingvong, Bom Busty and Jilbong were chosen in three major geographical locations of Dzongu, Kalimpong and Ilam respectively. The year 2010 was mainly devoted to being in the field although shorter visits took place in 2009 and 2011 as well. The traditional ethnographic method of participant observation, both of daily life and special occasions was conducted along with many formal and informal interviews with villagers and key informants of which two of the elderly people have already died by the time of writing this thesis. The collected data was analysed using the comparative method deemed necessary not just to juxtapose one religion with another but to understand the 'continuities and differences' (Paden 1994: 3) of the three religions. I also used photography, both to document events, and to serve as a conversation starter when travelling between villages/ regions because Lepchas from Kalimpong were interested in knowing how Lepchas from Dzongu or Ilam looked like or how different they were for that matter which eventually resulted to discussing about Lepcha identity as well. Video recordings also resulted similar outcomes when shown to a family or a friend, which again yielded discussions about Lepchas in general. This usage of audio-visual tool actually proved to be an effective methodology in my multi-sited work. Photographs taken during the field have also been used in the thesis to illustrate the text.

## Findings

The main findings of the thesis have been discussed below. But first a brief note on their traditional religion.

*Traditional Lepcha Religion*

Often times, the religion of the Lepchas is seen to be confusing, contradictory, difficult, atheistic, and 'nothing spiritual' (Morris 1938: 287) about it. It is an ardent task to reconstruct the pre-Buddhist, pre-Hindu and pre-Christian Lepcha traditional religion since much of it has been modified, altered and is no more in practice. Stocks (1975) opine that a clear idea of what can be called the original Lepcha religion will probably only be possible with an exhaustive study of all the tales, as this chapter examined the myths and legends while cross checking with the elderly to re-create the basic understanding of Lepcha belief system. The existence of gods and demons in Lepcha cosmology is abundant. There is a country of gods known as *Rumlyang* (Stocks 1975: 19) often referred to as heaven but there is no hell, although there exists a country of ancestors known as *Mayel Kyong*. The *mun*s and *bongthing*s, or priestesses and priests respectively are the ritual specialists who act as mediators between gods, humans and spirits. They are regarded as custodians of Lepcha culture and officiate various rituals from birth to death. Most of their prayers are directed to the mountains, trees, rivers, streams, plants and nature in all its forms, clearly indicating an eco-centric cosmology.

*Naamthars* are the religious books, which also covers different aspects of culture, history and philosophy of the Lepcha ethos. *Longtsoaks* on the other hand are upright stones erected to commemorate a sacred event or occasion. An important change in the traditional religion has been the inclusion of Dzongu as their holy land. The coming of hydroelectric projects in Dzongu has triggered the traditionalists to reconnect most of the mythological stories to the Dzongu landscape. From the creation of their progenitors to the consecration of the first couple and the establishment of customary laws, the place has been promoted as a hallowed ground today. Their love for Dzongu as holy land is also being expressed in stories and songs (Little 2008: 253). Scholars are even comparing Dzongu's holy land status to that of Benares for Hindus, Gaya for Buddhists, Mecca for Muslims and Jerusalem for Christians (Roy 2009: 51). While Dzongu always existed as their homeland, the realization of Dzongu as their holy land has received a constant flow of Lepchas making pilgrimages to Dzongu (Anderson 2006: 54). They are bypassing their religious barriers formed after the acceptance of Buddhism, Christianity and Hinduism as they integrate Dzongu into their belief system. This kind of religious revival with relation to the sacred landscape also 'valorises their identity as forest-dwellers, affirms their indigeneity, and transforms them into primordial environmentalists' (Arora 2006: 57) of the region.

*Influence of Buddhism on the Lepchas of Dzongu, North Sikkim*

The introduction of Buddhism and its incorporation into the Lepcha landscape was the key to an easy acceptance of Tibetan Buddhism in Sikkim. For instance, Mt. Kanchenjunga, the mythical place of Lepcha origin was incorporated into Buddhist belief and transformed into the guardian deity of the religious order of the Sikkimese kingdom. Since then, Lepchas are found to be practising both Buddhism and their traditional religion, creating a 'double-layered religious system' (Torri 2010: 149) where the lamas and the *bongthings* perform side by side and the religious practices are characterized by syncretism. 'The lama and the shaman do not contradict each other but co-exist as religious specialists due to a division of labour in their roles towards the individual, the family, the community and the polity (Arora 2006: 64).' But there is an unspoken tension between the intertwined religions as Ortner emphasizes that 'conflict between Buddhism and *shamanism* is not new to the Tibetan Buddhist tradition' (1995: 357). Lepchas have also realized that they have accommodated Buddhism into their traditional religion, and the various Buddhist festivals and rituals are actually on its way to 'erode Lepcha identity' (Bentley 2007: 99). For instance, the villagers today blame the Buddhist practice of the cremation of the dead for the dwindling number of Lepcha ritual specialists. It is believed that the body of the *mun* or the *bongthing* should be buried according to Lepcha tradition as it enables the spirit to come back and possess someone from the lineage of the deceased *mun* or *bongthing* to continue the line. Lepchas also complain how Lepcha lamas never attain the top most level in monastic hierarchy and feel that they would never be the head lama despite years of dedication in the Buddhist order. Nonetheless,

Buddhism was the common denominator for the Lepchas and Bhutias to form an alliance against the rapid growth of the Nepali migrant population and their dominance in all areas of Sikkim society. With the growing Nepali population, the Bhutias and the Lepchas came together to stand up against the majority although the two have not always been on friendly terms. The Bhutia-Lepcha (B-L) alliance is not natural but a product of 'negative solidarity' (Subba 1988: 169) that has worked for their advantage at certain levels providing reservations in education, politics and other spheres of Sikkim society. For now, the two tribes share a hyphenated identity although Lepchas have recently been granted the 'primitive tribe' status confusing them as to what this new identity holds for the future of the Lepchas in Sikkim.

*Christianity and the Lepchas of Kalimpong, Darjeeling District*

'When a Lepcha becomes a Christian, he becomes a *saab.*' This is an oft-repeated joke in Lepcha circles that has both sarcasm and truth in it. Christianity offered a 'modern identity' (Bal 2000: 155) with the introduction of education and a link to the outside world. The process of conversion among Lepchas was multi-causal which included factors like personal conviction, economic development, social status, and marital relations. But conversion to Christianity required lifestyle changes that divorced Christian Lepchas from the traditional ways of life. Conversion then became a communal issue as it not only implied 'change in one's self-identification but also the ratification and recognition of change by the wider community' (Buckser 2003: 72), which in the case of

Lepchas was met with much disapproval. The non-Christian Lepchas were blaming them for ignoring Lepcha culture, forgetting Lepcha language and 'considering themselves too advanced to interact with their Buddhist counterparts' (Gowloog: Forthcoming). The Lepchas in Kalimpong appeared to be split and the boundaries between who a 'pure Lepcha' was, was being questioned. Christian Lepchas could not always feel secure about their ethnic identity because the Buddhist Lepchas would always question their loyalty and involvement in community affairs. There came a time when a Christian Lepcha had to think what it meant to be a Lepcha and a Christian or both; and whether the religious identity preceded the ethnic identity vis-à-vis the Christian Lepcha vs. the Lepcha Christian. True enough, Christian Lepchas have come to a realization that their religious identity has not been able to suffice for their ethnic identity. In recent times, a resurgence is taking place to compensate for the loss; even the Bom Church has restarted the Sunday service in Lepcha language and church members are seen to be wearing their traditional attires during Christmas, Easter, weddings and other occasions. There is a conscious effort to acknowledge and reaffirm one's ethnic identity and Christian Lepchas of Bom Busty are showing active participation in community affairs both within and outside their religious spheres. It is this union with their Buddhist brethren who are more aware of Lepcha culture and them as the highly educated, government employees that have proven successful in the formation of a group relentlessly pressing and demanding the rights of Lepchas that has yielded positive results.

*Hinduism and Lepchas in Ilam, East Nepal*

The Lepchas of Ilam were most influenced by Hinduism because that was the majority religious tradition. Hinduism was the state promoted religion of the high-caste Hindus who wanted it to be the 'the national culture of Nepal' to create a homogenous nation of 'Nepali speakers who followed Hinduism' (Hangen 2005: 50). Although Lepchas never converted to Hinduism, the country's idea of purity and pollution had a serious impact in the way Lepchas perceived themselves. In Jilbong, one Bhujel man remarked, 'since Lepchas are without caste, they are lower than the lowest caste.' Bhujels were the immediate neighbours of the Lepcha residents there and themselves belonged to a lower caste group. It is only possible that their interacting with low caste people make them feel even smaller than the Bhujels. There was a definite feeling of inferiority but Lepchas were not making any effort to climb the social ladder either. 'They did not rise in revolt even when they were relegated to a lowly position within Hindu society' (Bose 1996: 175). Yet, Hindu religious ideas had penetrated into their culture visibly through the inconspicuous participation and observation of various Hindu festivals and celebrations. The role of a Brahmin priest during the naming of a child is one example of how Jilbong Lepchas have had a 'direct infiltration' (*Ibid:* 177) of Hindu culture in their tribal life resulting from 'a conscious plan of Hindu society to dominate and absorb a tribal group within its economic and social framework' (*Ibid*: 173). They absorbed Hindu traits and ways of living but that did not mean they gave up on their own deities and practices although there was a mixture of Buddhist elements as the Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities (NEFIN) reports show Lepchas to be 99% Buddhists. Indeed, the oldest

monastery in Ilam has a Lepcha head lama, yet he is quick to say, 'Buddhism is a later addition to our culture.' So we question, are the Lepchas of Ilam Buddhists or Hindus? After the fieldwork, the question is not appropriate anymore because we are not able to club them as either Hindus or Buddhists because their religion has already become a syncretic one, combining both of Hindu and Buddhist practices and further mixed with the traditional *mun-bongthing* religion.

*Comparing the Cultural Changes*

Of the three places influenced by three religions, findings on Lepcha social institutions mentioned in the objectives are briefly discussed in the following paragraphs.

Family: Lepcha families are relatively small and organized by clan. Membership to the clan in Ilam is inherited patrilineally for men and matrilineally for women, although it has been out of practice in Dzongu and Kalimpong but Ilam Lepchas still followed this rule. Lepchas believe that each clan is connected to a peak in the Kanchenjunga range so all clans have their own peaks to return to when they die, hence members are expected to know the name of their peaks but again it was only the Ilam Lepchas who seemed to know the names of their clan peaks.

Marriage: Marriage is still tribe endogamous and clan exogamous although intermarriage between regions is also in practice. Intermarriage between Dzongu and Kalimpong Lepchas is more popular than between Dzongu and Ilam, and Ilam and Kalimpong Lepchas. Inter-community marriage has also become popular with the growing

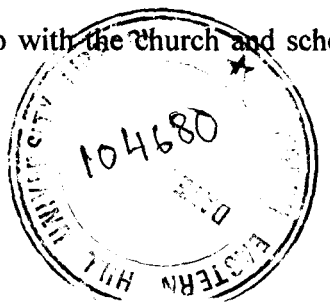
interaction between their neighbours. Dzongu Lepchas were more likely to form marital alliances with Bhutias while Kalimpong and Ilam Lepchas with the Nepalis although the first preference while searching for a bride/ groom is usually from one's own community. Trends of late marriage were quite common in Ilam because of the small Lepcha population and the strict clan system, which limited choices about marriageable partners.

Kinship: Kinship terminologies are slowly being replaced by the usage of Bhutia and Nepali terms instead. Lepcha kinship terminology conforms to the Eskimo kinship pattern, where the emphasis is on the nuclear family directly identifying the father, mother, brother and sister. There is no distinction in the usage of terms between patrilineal and matrilineal relatives as the same terms like uncle, aunt are used for both sides in all the three field sites.

Language: In Dzongu everybody spoke the Lepcha language. Lepchas of Sikkim were at a privileged end to find the school system recognizing the Lepcha language up till graduate level. Kalimpong Lepchas are optimistic with the Government of West Bengal announcing the introduction of Lepcha language in the school system. Most villagers however spoke the Nepali language in both Kalimpong and Ilam. For Jilbong residents, there are no governmental facilities to safeguard the Lepcha language although a local Lepcha teacher conducts night schools in Lepcha.

Education: Between Dzongu, Kalimpong and Ilam, Kalimpong Lepchas were higher educated with graduates, post graduates, engineers, and many government employees scattered all over the country. The reason mainly has to do with the church and school





going hand in hand and exposing the Kalimpong Lepchas to the perks of modern education. Dzongu Lepchas were usually educated till tenth grade but they did not always study further than that and went back to the fields. Ilam Lepchas lagged far behind with high number of school dropouts and many illiterate people in the village.

Food: The staple food of the Lepchas is maize, millet, barley, and rice. They eat different kinds of wild plants and tubers. They are non-vegetarians and indulge in different kinds of meat. They have no reservations on food but some Buddhist Lepchas are found to observe vegetarianism for religious reasons. One of the religious boundary markers when it comes to food has been the consumption of *ci,* the Lepcha alcoholic drink usually made of millet, which plays an essential part in all spheres of Lepcha life. Traditional ritual specialists use it for rites of passage – birth, marriage and death and other occasions too. Because of its alcoholic nature, a line is drawn between those who consume and those who do not, which puts the Christian Lepchas in the latter category automatically divorcing them from a key aspect of Lepcha culture.

Dress: The traditional dress for the Lepcha women is called *gada* or *dumvun,* and it is called *dumpra* for men. In Dzongu, most women wore *bakhu* (Tibetan dress for women) replacing the *dumvun,* which was only worn during weddings and special occasions. The Kalimpong Lepchas have seen a resurgence of traditional dress ever since the Gorkhaland movement demanded everyone to wear the Nepali dress and Lepchas rejected the imposition and vowed to wear their own attires. They are also finding new ways to improvise the dresses to give a modern look. Lepchas from Ilam usually come to

Kalimpong and Sikkim to buy the traditional materials since they have no cottage industries to promote the traditional weaving.

Politics: There was a time when Lepchas were perceived as a demographic group whose vote did not matter, 'No political party can count upon their votes because they are numerically small and politically insignificant' (Thakur 1988: xii). Their numerical status is also a reason why they have been clubbed under 'primitive', 'scheduled tribe' and 'endangered' groups in Dzongu, Kalimpong and Ilam respectively. But times have changed. Lepchas are now demanding their right as the first citizens of the land in all three regions. 2007 saw the initiation of the first ever hunger strike by the Lepcha duo against dams in Dzongu. The movement garnered worldwide attention and also united Lepchas into a single fight. The result was the scrapping of four of the six hydel projects. Likewise Kalimpong Lepchas have been persistent in their demands as the government recently granted the Lepcha Development Council. In Ilam, their voice is weakest since they are only about 3000 Lepchas, but the Maoist movement awakened the people from their complacent selves and they have also been able to elect two individuals as Members of Parliament from the Lepcha community.

## The Lepcha Youth

The opening narrative of this paper gives a peek into the role of Lepcha youth as rising decision makers today. It was a phone conversation between two Lepcha youths—'educated, urban based, and usually Christian' (Shah 2010: 15) trying to interfere in the elders' say. Indeed, these youths are making changes and choices that were unheard of

yesterday. During the time of dam protests, some non-Dzongu Lepcha youths visiting the area were so overwhelmed with the feeling of belongingness to Dzongu that they decided to revoke their Buddhist and Christian beliefs and rechristened themselves with Lepcha names by getting 'baptized' in a nearby waterfall. They called themselves 'born-again' Lepchas, ironically from the Christian tradition, and felt it necessary to take the step so as to regain access to Lepcha culture. Today, Lepcha youths are connecting, through social network sites, across religious and regional boundaries to work together and assert their ethnic distinctiveness. The youth wings of Lepcha organizations in Sikkim, Kalimpong and Ilam have all been working at both village and city levels by visiting homes and social networking on the Internet respectively. Earlier times, Sikkim Lepchas would organize an event and expect Kalimpong and Ilam Lepchas to attend, but they are now organizing events together and the performances are somehow designed to increase the 'visibility' (Barkataki-Ruscheweyh 2011:1) of the tribe. Shneiderman uses the term 'feedback loop' (2009: 116) to describe this process of cross-border communication and exchange of ideologies in operation in the cultural production of a shared identity which seems to work in the case of Lepchas in these three regions too.

**Conclusion**

Religion and culture are both dynamic configurations of the world today. They are continually interacting with changes and reshaping themselves accordingly (Paden 1994: 56). There is no way that the traditional Lepcha religion and culture can be preserved in

some untainted form because change is inevitable. In the case of Lepchas, the influence of Buddhism, Christianity and Hinduism have altered the lifestyle, worldview and the identity of the tribe. The result has been both positive and negative. There have however been many confrontations and compromises in recent days to project a united front. Besides the shared history of the mythological origin in Mt. Kanchenjunga, and the basic identity markers mentioned in the objectives, Lepchas are also hoisting the Lepcha flag, singing the Lepcha national anthem and organizing cultural shows to bind them together. The goal however is not just the preservation, promotion and production of Lepcha culture but who should 'control the pace, the direction and the process of change' (Guneratne 2007: 104). Lepchas have realized that to maintain their distinct identity, the responsibility lies in their own hands. There was a time when Lepchas were thought to be a 'dying race' (Gorer 2005: 69), a 'sinking and shrinking race' (Awasty 1978: 36) and more popularly a 'vanishing tribe' (Foning 1987) – the term popularized by a Lepcha scholar in his *magnum opus,* which had become the basis of Lepcha self-perception about their demographic and political status. Today, none of the Lepchas in any of the three-field areas nurtures such a self-perception. They prefer to use the word 'flourishing' instead of 'vanishing' as they are in the same bandwagon to safeguard the Lepcha culture. They have realized that the 'loss of religion, culture, custom, language, literature can be regained and preserved only by the Lepchas themselves' (Roy 2009: 27). They are making conscious attempts to consolidate their ethnic distinctiveness and produce a pan-Lepcha identity. We can therefore see the emergence of a new-shared Lepcha identity overlooking the religious boundaries consciously fashioned in a way that strengthens the

social and political position of their fight for survival. There has been a conscious effort to keep the differences between these three religions aside and work with each other in the production of a shared culture and identity.

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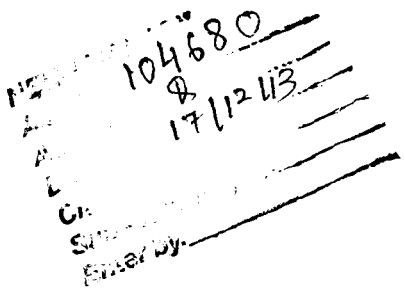

# RELIGION, CULTURE AND IDENTITY:

# A COMPARATIVE STUDY ON THE LEPCHAS OF DZONGU, KALIMPONG AND ILAM

**By**

**CHARISMA K. LEPCHA**
DEPARTMENT OF ANTHROPOLOGY
SCHOOL OF HUMAN AND ENVIRONMENTAL SCIENCES

**A THESIS SUBMITED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY IN ANTHROPOLOGY**

**NORTH-EASTERN HILL UNIVERSITY**
**SHILLONG -793022**
**MARCH 2013**

Examined

**North-Eastern Hill University**

Declaration

I, Charisma K. Lepcha, hereby declare that the subject matter of this thesis entitled "Religion, Culture and Identity: A Comparative Study on the Lepchas of Dzongu, Kalimpong and Ilam" is the record of work done by me, that the contents of this thesis did not form the basis of the basis of the award of any previous degree to me or to the best of my knowledge to anybody else, and that the thesis has not been submitted by me for any research degree in any other university/ institute.

This is being submitted to North-Eastern Hill University for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Anthropology.

28.03.2013

Charisma K. Lepcha

(Candidate)

28/3/13

Prof. T.B. Subba

(Supervisor)

28/3/13

Prof. R. Khongsdier

(Head/Dean of Department)

HEAD
Department of Anthropology
North Eastern Hill University
Shillong 793 022

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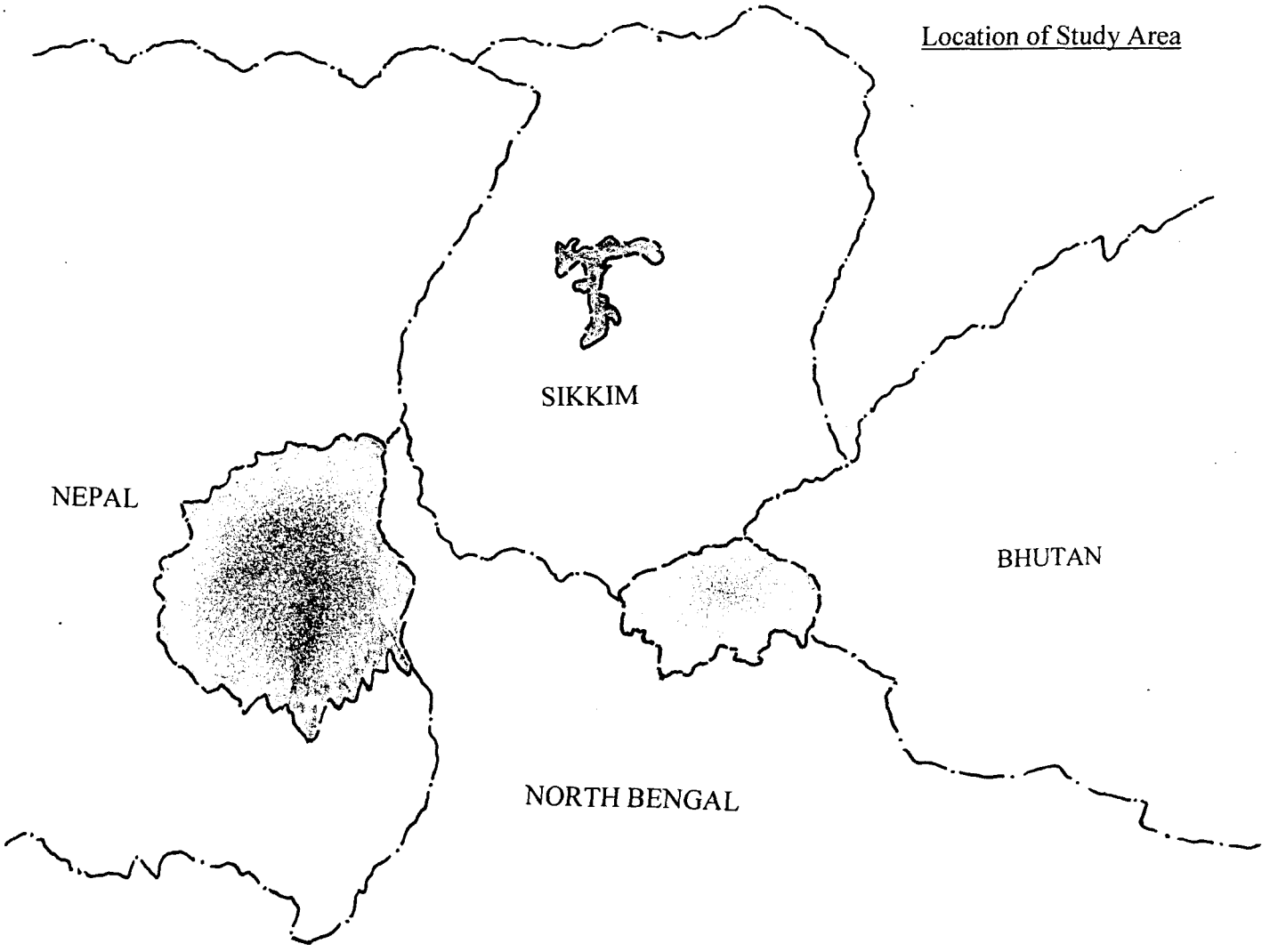
Most importantly, I thank God for His grace, guidance and goodness in my life.

Charisma K. Lepcha


Location of Study Area
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NEPAL
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NORTH BENGAL
North
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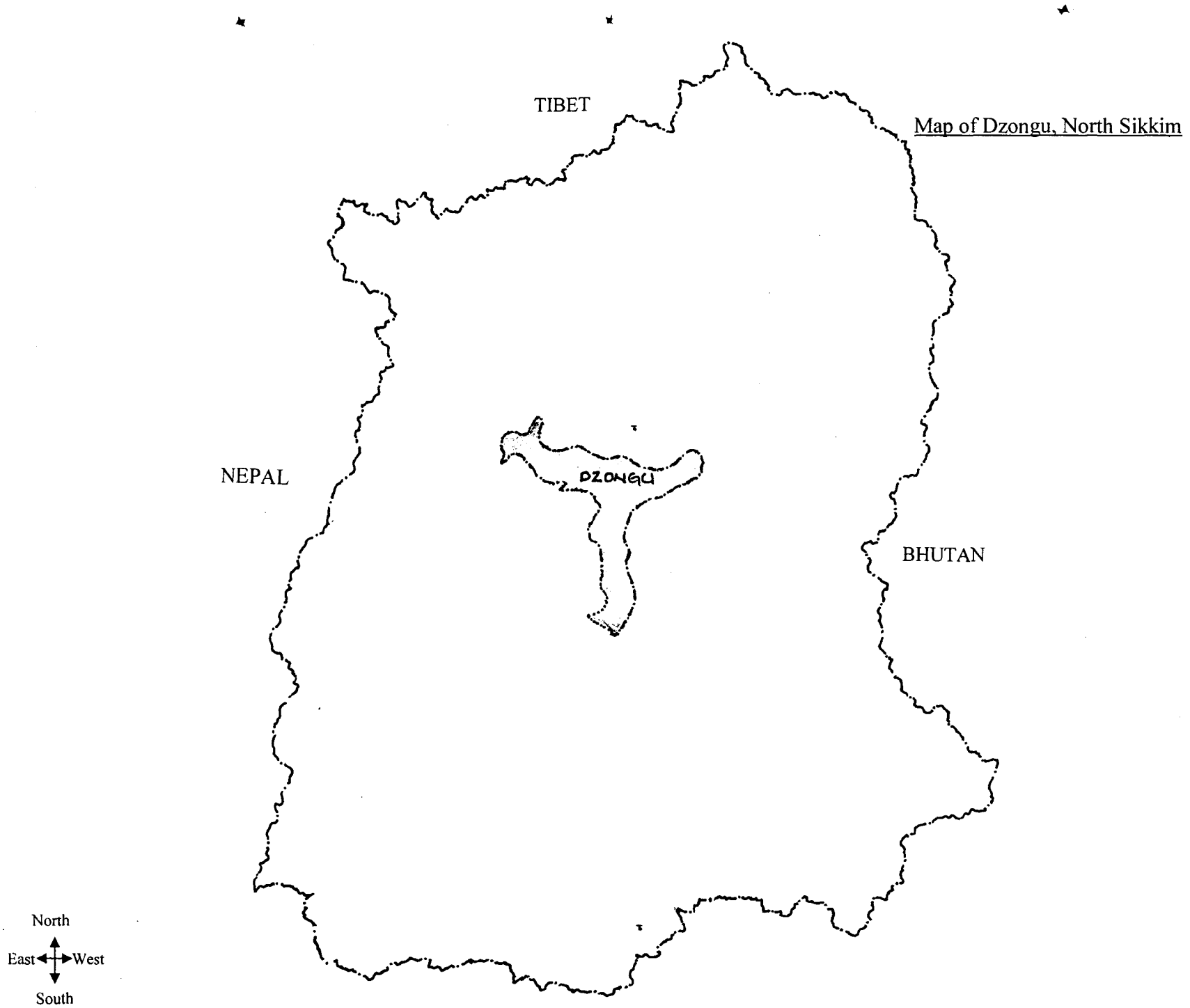
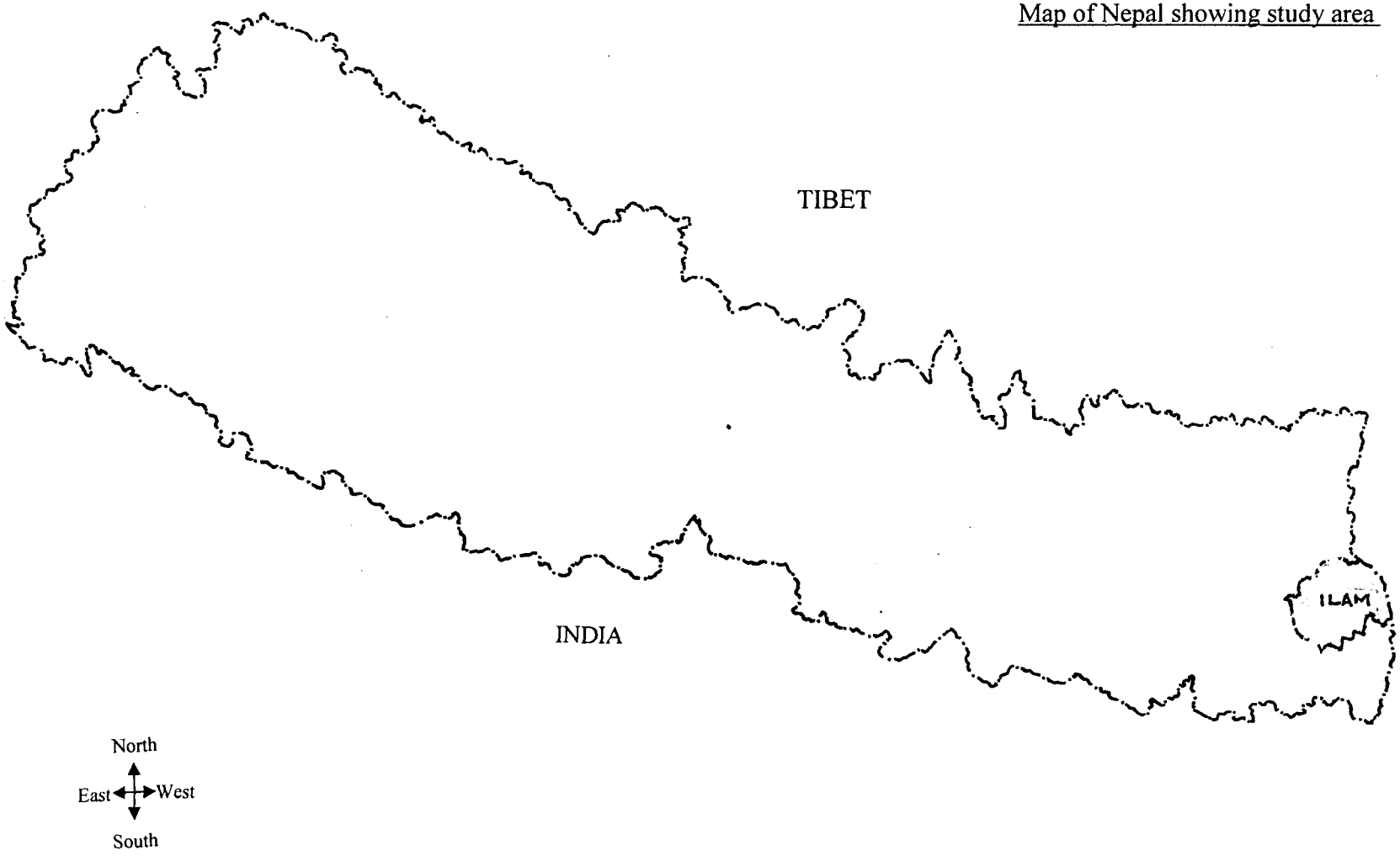

Map of Dzongu, North Sikkim
TIBET
NEPAL
DZONGU
BHUTAN
North
East
West
South

Map of Kalimpong, North Bengal

Map of Nepal showing study area



# CONTENTS

# Chapter 1

## Introduction

One morning I received a phone call, "hey, we heard that a Christian Lepcha meeting is to take place at Bom church today, tell them not to do it."

This call was from a prominent Lepcha youth leader who is a Christian himself. As dictatorial as he sounded, I could sense his concern about not wanting the meeting to take place because it would look like the Christian Lepchas had separated from the Buddhist Lepchas and were holding their own gatherings. Perhaps the youth leader felt that a separate Christian Lepcha meeting would show the division between the Christian Lepchas and the Buddhist Lepchas and would weaken the united Lepcha front. While the cleavage between Lepchas following these two religions is a known fact, the political developments in Darjeeling hills and the Lepchas demanding their rights as first citizens of the land has brought the two together, affirming what Spencer calls 'ethnic solidarities are the consequences of political competition' (2007: 17). Overlooking the religious differences it is only recently that Lepchas are putting aside their religion-based identities and making a conscious effort to forge a pan-Lepcha identity.

This thesis is an ethnography of the Lepchas who live in Sikkim, Darjeeling, and Eastern Nepal. They call themselves Rong from the Lepcha words *Rongkup* or *Rumkup* meaning the children of snowy peak/ the children of God. Tradition has it that their creator God, Itbumu, created their progenitors Fudongthing and Nazongnyu from the

virgin snows of Mt. Kanchenjunga. They have no migration history and claim to have lived in the land of eternal paradise called Mayel Lyang since time perennial. Known to be nature worshipers and initially labelled animists, a deeper examination of the traditional Lepcha religion shows them right in line with Tylor's (1871) evolution of religion from animism to polytheism to the current stage of monotheism. In due time, they were influenced by the Buddhist, Christian and Hindu religions dividing them into different groups. This thesis looks into the rhetorical triplets of 'religion, culture and identity' in the case of Lepchas in order to examine the culture changes after the introduction of different religions and the formation of religion-based identities and what it means to be a Lepcha.

## Key Concepts

### *Religion*

In anthropology, the study of 'religion' is as old as the emergence of anthropology as an academic discipline (Barnard and Spencer 1996: 726). 'Primitive religion' was the order of the day as Tylor defined religion to be the 'belief in spiritual beings' (1871: 383). But the definition was simple and inadequate as different scholars from various backgrounds made many attempts to come up with an operational definition of religion. Durkheim (1912) distinguished the sacred from the profane, and also said that the sense of sacredness binds a community together, thus creating a collective conscience. It is opined that religion provides core values of a society and tries to make sense of

unanswerable questions about death and the meaning of life, strengthening the norms and creating cultural homogeneity. But Marx said, 'Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, just as it is religion to be the opium of the people' (Marx 2001: 83). Marx's definition points to an underlying assumption that 'religion has a function in society' (Santucci 2005: 42). It guides the social and moral fabric of society and 'orders a universe' (van Beek 1985: 265) facilitating group solidarity. Religion has many interpretations and definitions. Scholars even agree that there is no convincing general theory of religion and in that general stagnation of the anthropological study of religion, Geertz proposes a universal definition of religion as a cultural system. For him, a religion is a system of symbols which acts to 'establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by' (2000: 94) 'formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and' (2000: 98) clothing those conceptions with such an aura of factuality that' (2000: 109) 'the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic' (2000: 119). While he was confident about his definition, Talal Asad (2002) criticizes the claim by saying 'there cannot be a universal definition of religion, not only because its constituent elements and relationships are historically specific, but because that definition is itself the historical product of discursive processes' (Asad 2002: 116). Given the fact that religion is a Western concept, there is truth in Asad's voice. Yet, religion manages to stay in the game with its changing dynamics and varied manifestations. It is methodologically and theoretically diverse which allows scholars to find different ways to understand this phenomenon. For the purpose of this study, we take Emile Durkheim's definition of religion as 'a unified

system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden—beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them' (1976: 47). We look at religion as something that reflects on the collective life while influencing the moral fabric of a society. Often times the variety of religious ideologies creates an unnecessary divide propagating the superiority of one's religion over other religions. For instance, till the very end of nineteenth century all religions outside the biblical tradition were labelled simply as 'idolatory' (Paden 1994: 15). But anthropology has been credited for keeping alive 'an interest in religion as an important part of the life of man' (Yinger 1958: 495). Indeed, for anthropologists, it is the focus on ethnography in the classical, empirical, and holistic sense that still proves to be important in the study of religion.

*Culture*

Culture is the heart of anthropology. It is borrowed from German 'kultur' which means "higher" values of enlightenment of society (Kroeber and Kluckhohn 1952). Tylor was the first anthropologist to establish the word in English language with its anthropological meaning. And for the longest time, anthropologists relied on his definition of culture as 'that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society' (Tylor 1871: 1). Over the years, hundreds of people have tried to define culture. In 1952 A L Kroeber and Clyde Kluckhohn even cited 164 definitions for

religion in their joint publication. Ranging from 'learned behaviour', 'ideas in the mind', 'a logical construct', 'a statistical fiction', 'a psychic defense mechanism', they preferred to use the definition of culture as 'an abstraction from behaviour but is not itself behaviour'. Indeed, culture consists of patterns of behaviours acquired from the society they belong to. It is a way of life of a group of people, which could be taught from one generation to the next. Culture is not inherited but is transmitted. It is seen as the knowledge shared by a particular community. It is constantly changing and evolving. It looks simple but can be very complex. It varies according to the context and there is an endless list of what culture is all about. Out of the many definitions available, the following definition guides this thesis, 'the totality of tradition-based creations of a cultural community expressed by a group or individuals and recognized as reflecting the expectations of a community in so far as they reflect its cultural and social identity; its standards and values are transmitted orally, by imitation or by other means. Its forms are, among others, language, literature, music, dance, games, mythology, rituals, customs, handicrafts, architecture and other arts' (UNESCO 1989). Often times cultures are seen to be at its best when it is uninfluenced by external forces. But change is inevitable, as many traditional cultures have undergone changes to reinvent their cultures today. But what keeps a culture alive? This study will go beyond the clothes they wear and the language they speak. It will look at what gives them a sense of belonging to that particular culture.

*Identity*

Identity can be understood as a process of 'being' or 'becoming' (Jenkins 2007: 17). In answering "who am I?" we find our identity. But it does not end there. Identity is always in the making of what we want it to be. Identity studies initially focused on the formation of "self" as an individual. But it is no longer an individual domain; it multiplies 'across different, often intersecting and antagonistic, discourses, practices and positions' (van Meijl 2008: 10). In the last few decades, the focus has shifted from the individual to the collective; with gender/ sexuality, race/ ethnicity, and class seen as the 'holy trinity' (Cerulo 1997: 386). It is the 'we-ness of a group, stressing the similarities or shared attributes around which the group members unite' (*Ibid*: 387).' It is the historically and culturally rooted self-image of a group of people or community, so those who share the same identity also share the same history. It is also an understanding of who we are and who other people are. It then becomes 'a matter of distinguishing and distancing myself from you and from that person there. The recognition of 'us' hinges mainly upon our not being 'them' (Jenkins 2004: 20). In order to know the difference between them, and us 'they must announce their identities by engaging in social practices that highlight their place in the world' (Hemanowicz and Morgan 1999: 198). Identity is a process of 'inclusion and exclusion' of belongingness and boundaries. 'Identity is essentially a matter of being and it is this consciousness of belonging to this or that collectivity and of being a member of an imagined community that determines one's identity' (Shah 1994: 1133).

Today's world is shaped by religion, culture and identity. If religion is seen to be an integral part of culture, culture gives a sense of identity. The three concepts are universal but each highly contested. Yet they are always intermingling with the other at some level and these three concepts form the basis of this study. It will look at three different religious identities in Lepcha society. A religion can be shaped by a particular culture and a culture can be shaped by a particular religion. What happens then when the religious identity precedes the cultural identity? Can the two identities co-exist? 'Where does religion end and culture begin?' (Bonney 2004: 25). It is in these questions that the concepts have taken shape for this study.

**Statement of the Problem**

'To change one's religion is to change one's world' (Buckser and Glazier 2003: xi). Among Lepchas, it was not one but three religions that influenced the change in their traditional religion and culture. This led to an uncalled for divide within the already minority community whose cultural changes have also led to the formation of different identities and divisions based on such identities. Thus, while in Durkheim's definition it is religion that enhances social solidarity and 'group longevity' (Sosis and Alcorta 2003: 266) in the case of Lepchas, it has both united and divided the community at different levels and contexts. The Lepcha community is fragmented, and the factions are specially built around religious differences with one group claiming to be superior to the other, and the other group claiming to be more Lepcha than the other. Indeed, when cultures

have more than one religion, they have problems claiming one cultural identity. Therefore, the introduction and exposure of three world religions to a single tribal community and its acceptance and influence are seen as a threat to the ethnic Lepcha identity. But in recent days, Lepchas have come to a realization that division along religious lines will only lead to an annihilation of their culture. They are making conscious efforts to find common ground and forge a shared identity acceptable to Lepchas from all religious backgrounds. This thesis therefore sets out to explore what they are articulating as shared attributes of Lepchas and whether or not such articulation is uniform across the Buddhist, Christian and Hindu Lepchas.

**Objectives**

i) To reconstruct the pre-Buddhist, pre-Hindu and pre-Christian Lepcha society and culture on the basis of published literature and ethnographic data collected from the Lepchas who still practise their traditional religion.

ii) To examine the influence of Buddhism, Hinduism and Christianity on Lepcha social institutions like family, marriage, kinship, language, food, and dress.

iii) To understand how the various socio-political and demographic factors like their numerical status, political voice, language recognition, and commissioning of hydel projects in their sacred areas are responsible for the emergence of a common Lepcha identity.

iv) To understand the role of educated Lepcha youths in redefining Lepcha society, culture and identity.

**Review of Literature**

Publications about the Lepchas started with administrative-cum-ethnological accounts, which were later followed by professional anthropological accounts. In the nineteenth century, colonial administrators started writing about the life and culture of Lepchas. It was a very general description portraying the eating habits, dress code, marriage system, death rites, agricultural practice and housing pattern, Archibald Campbell wrote 'Notes on the Lepchas of Sikkim' (1840) and 'On the Lepchas' (1869) which were published in the *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* and *Journal of the Ethnological Society of London* respectively. Besides cultural specifics, he mentioned the printing of four gospels into Lepcha language by a German missionary and mentioned General Mainwaring's work in compiling a Lepcha dictionary. Colonel George Byres Mainwaring took a keen interest in the language, literature and the people as he collected information on Lepcha narratives, which were included in the "Introduction" to the Lepcha grammar published in 1876. He was also working on a Lepcha dictionary, which was edited and posthumously published by Albert Grünwedel in 1898. Other colonial administrators focused on the politics of the region with brief mention of the Lepchas. J. Claude White, the first political officer of Sikkim (1887-1908), described them as 'people of mild, quiet and indolent disposition, loving solitude, and their homes

being found in the most inaccessible places' (White 2000:7). This description of White speaks of an image that has been widely shared by other administrators, botanists, travellers, scholars and linguists from the West. In fact, this image of a timid and docile Lepcha was an accepted version of the Lepcha self-perception for a long time. Lepchas are also nature lovers and thought to be good entomologists and botanists with a name for every insect, plant and animal. During the expedition to Sikkim in 1848-49, Dr. Joseph Hooker, the world-famous botanist, used Lepchas as plant collectors for their knowledge of the plants and trees. He later published *Himalayan Journals* (1855), which embodies their local knowledge. Hooker gives a brief account of the tribe and seems to have relished Lepcha company. It was revealed that he chose a Lepcha to keep his accounts who wrote the details of Hooker's daily expenses from 15 December 1848- 19 January 1849 in 'fine clear hand' (Sprigg 2005: 61).

Accounting the village life and culture of the Lepchas were Geoffrey Gorer and John Morris who spent three months each in 1937 at Lingthem village of the Lepcha reserve in Dzongu, North Sikkim. Gorer was of the opinion that the Lepchas' religion was complicated as 'they practise simultaneously, and without any feeling of theoretical discomfort, two (or possibly three) mutually contradictory religions' (2005: 181). The *mun* (Lepcha priestess) at a death ceremony was an extremely important medium as she was invariably possessed by her guardian spirit and spoke the last wishes of the dead person. Gorer said that the *mun* religion validates Lepcha mythology and theology' (*Ibid*:223), as the origin of everything in the world—visible and invisible, animate and inanimate, and the changes - are told in full details by the *mun*. Lamaistic form of

Buddhism had already made its existence then in Dzongu during as he was able to witness the side by side practice of the two religions. Gorer opines that the Lepchas 'swallowed Lamaism whole, but excreted the irritating portions' (*Ibid*: 193). Morris was actually denied entry to Nepal and he had tagged along with Gorer but his account proved to be a contribution on the Lepchas nonetheless. He noticed the influence of Buddhism early on and went on to say, 'the purity of their belief was, somewhat perverted by the introduction from Tibet of the Buddhist religion' (1938: 37). While there are discrepancies in his account for calling *Itbumu,* the creator God as a man, he noticed the parallel practice of a *bongthing* (Lepcha priest) and a lama (Buddhist priest) as he said, 'I cannot remember attending any ceremony, apart, of course, from purely religious festivals, at which a lama and Mun were not both officiating' (Morris 1938: 122). Another extensive ethnography on Lepchas was carried out by Halfdan Siiger from the Third Danish Expedition to Central Asia in the 1940s. Siiger stayed in Tingvong and documented the socio-cultural, linguistic and religious aspects of Lepchas. He also worked on word-to-word translations and analysis of 39 ritual texts that had only existed as oral traditions before. While his research material is of great significance, most of the recordings were based on second person accounts, as he himself did not take part in any rituals. René von Nebesky-Wojkowitz's wrote about the *mun* and *bongthing* still being buried as per the traditional custom on the 'Ancient funeral ceremonies of the Lepchas' (1952). He also wrote about 'Hunting and Fishing among the Lepchas' (1953). In his account of the three years in the Himalayas, Nebesky –Wojkowitz (1955) points out that Lepchas were hesitant about accepting

Buddhism. He mentions that, 'the priests of the old tribal religion offered particular stubborn resistance' (1955: 121). Examining the 'Religious Beliefs of the Lepchas in Kalimpong' (1960) was Corneille Jest who spent time in Tanyang, Kalimpong in 1953. He was impressed by the stories of a *mun's* trance and conversations with the dead although he reported that there were no *muns* in Tanyang. But the presence of a *bongthing* along with a *lama* (a Buddhist monk) was seen to supplement each other. While the *bongthing* protected the village from evil forces, the *lama* presided over important events of social life. Like Gorer, he says that Lepcha traditions and Tibetan Buddhist beliefs coexist with total disregard for contradictions. Siiger also published articles on 'Fate in the Religion of the Lepchas' (1967), and also examined *Nazongnyu* – the first female creation as the 'himalayan goddess of procreation' (1972) and 'The Gods of the Lepchas of Sikkim' (1975). Siiger's contribution to Lepcha literature is commendable.

After mid-nineteenth century, the accounts of Lepchas became more detailed and specific like the work of C. de. Beauvoir Stocks (1975) who focused on writing about folklores, myths, legends and Lepcha customs. Despite providing a detailed collection of Lepcha folktales, the author talks about the obstacles in undertaking a study of this small and scattered tribe of the "Lap-chas". Stocks' account is noteworthy as it is an attempt to collect even the different versions of a particular myth or a folk tale. In similar lines, Siiger wrote a paper on 'The Abominable Snowman' (1978) throwing light on the hunting god of the Lepchas who became a malicious being because people neglected the hunting rituals and sacrifices and the strained relationship between the hunting god and

humans. In a different light, Klafkowski (1980) wrote about the Athing Joseph Rongong manuscript of Tashe Thing and said that the core of this narrative was 'Lepcha and not Tibetan' (1980: 140). The legend of Guru Rinpoche among the Lepchas was included in *The Himalayan Gateway* (1983) by George Kotturan when he discussed the history, culture and people of Sikkim.

Twentieth century saw the dawn of Lepcha research undertaken by a number of Indian scholars, some of them being members of the Lepcha community. Kharpu Tamsang's *The Unknown and Untold Reality about the Lepchas* (1982) uncovered various aspects of Lepcha culture, history and religion in detail. He calls Bongthingism and Munism to be 'prehistoric but a living genuine religion' (1982:57). The religious divide between Lepcha Buddhists and Lepcha Christians was seen as a sorry development. Arthur Foning worked on an influential book, *Lepcha, My Vanishing Tribe* (1987) that has garnered considerable acclaim. It was an honest account of a native Lepcha in the wake of external influences from the Tibetans, the British and the Nepalis through culture, religion and language simultaneously. Foning credits the Buddhist missionaries for translating Buddhist texts into Lepcha with a 'completely Lepcha aura' (1987: 154). Digressing from the calligraphy method used by the Buddhist missionaries, he is thankful to Christian missionaries for their contribution in producing and printing the gospels by the modern means of printing press. The traditional institutions of *mun* and *bongthing* were described intensively with first hand encounters and examples from his own family and friends. Rip Roshina Gowloog, also a Lepcha, conducted a diachronic study of Gorer's ethnography in *Lingthem Revsited* (1995). She

noted the definite spread of lamaism that was already in existence during Gorer's time which has led to the decline of traditional tribal religion. While there were altogether eight *muns* during Gorer's time, there appeared to be a lone *mun* in the whole village during hers. Yet Lepchas of Lingthem were not particularly bothered about this phenomenon. Paul Lepcha, now a pastor, wrote *A Study of the Scottish Mission Work in Kalimpong Subdivision with Special Reference to the Lepcha Tribe* (1999). When William Macfarlane, a Scottish missionary, came to Kalimpong he thought that Lepchas were the 'most hopeful people' (Lepcha 1999: 24) for them in the hills as the establishment of schools and Christian gospel went hand in hand. The increase in Lepcha Christians from his fieldwork showed over 75 percent Lepcha population in different Kalimpong churches. It is found that Lepcha pastors were instructed to write church reports in Nepali or Hindi language because Lepcha language was too "hard" for the missionaries to learn and understand. He thus questions how far the missionaries helped maintain and preserve Lepcha identity for which he mostly blames Lepcha Christians themselves. *Mayel Lyang and the Lepchas* (2008) by D.T. Tamlong is a recent publication with detailed collection of Lepcha origin, myths, religion, customs, festivals, long forgotten heroes and legends mostly from secondary sources.

Noticing the "unscientific" approaches to studying Lepcha community, Amal Kumar Das, in his *The Lepchas of West Bengal* (1978) introduces Lepchas as 'true sons of soil who have been exploited through generations and centuries' (1978:*v)*. Das has outlined Lepcha village and settlement pattern, economic and domestic life, social organization, religious beliefs and practices, myths, tales, songs, proverbs, dances, and

language. Devoting a chapter to religious beliefs and practices, he talks about the absence of the concept of heaven and hell in Lepcha tradition. The *Mun* and the *Bongthing* are seen as powerful 'magicians' officiating between god and man. In conclusion he makes a point about Lepcha psychology as he says, 'they think themselves to be inefficient in comparison with others, and their lack of competitive zeal indirectly influences their mentality as a losing community in the struggle for existence' (1978: 258). Indira Awasty calls Lepchas to be a 'sinking and shrinking race' (1978: 36) as the introduction of new religions divorced them from traditional culture. The Buddhist Lepchas, she observes, became second class Buddhists as only a few Lepcha *lama*s were initiated as *lama*s. Christianity on the other hand was readily accepted because it gave them a lot of material advantages with regard to medicines, legal help and morale-raising advices. Generally speaking, Christianity was seen as a 'mixed blessing' (*Ibid:* 43) because while it imparted education and awareness it destroyed their traditional culture. The rapid growth of Christianity among Lepchas meant 'an irreparable loss' (Thakur 1988: 85) for the traditional culture. From an anthropological outlook, Tanka Subba's article 'Lepchas: From Legends to the Present Day' (1985) advocates the usage of 'oldest' instead of 'original' or 'authochtonous' (1985: 64) with reference to the Lepchas. His other article 'Dynamics of a Hill Society: Case Study of the Lepchas' (1989) mentions the strained relationship between Lepchas and Bhutias while suggesting that 'Lepchas could perhaps never accept fully the religion of those who plundered their property – cultural as well as material' (Subba 1989: 126). In 1990, Tapan Chattopadhyay published a travelogue titled *Lepchas and Their Heritage* with a

detailed picture of the traditions, myths, religion and music. He mentions that 'it is never considered happy to be a *mun*' (1990: 37). In 1998, Jyotirmoy Chakraborty talked about 'Ethnic Consciousness and Cultural Revivalism among the Lepchas of the Eastern Himalayas'. He mentioned the inclusion of secular trends in the traditional religion with regard to giving the office of the religious heads to 'anyone who can learn and perform such duties' (1998: 185) despite it being a hereditary office. *Dynamics of Social Formation among the Lepchas* (2005) by D.C. Roy examined social formation among Lepchas according to the Marxian ideology of primitive communism. He identifies Lepcha society as an example of social dualism where 'an imported western capitalism has penetrated into the pre-capitalistic agrarian community' (2005: *viii*). In *Khanchendzonga: Sacred Summit* (2007), there is a chapter where Wangchuk and Zulca discuss the significance of Mt. Kanchenjunga as the eldest brother to the Lepcha people. Dawa Lepcha, a Lepcha filmmaker, has shot three films in collaboration with Anna Balikci –Denzonpa on the Lepcha community of Dzongu—*Tingvong –A Lepcha Village* (2005), *Cham in the Lepcha Village of Lingthem* (2007) and *Ritual Journeys* (2011).

The recent publications on Lepchas talk about the emerging trends of cultural revival among the Lepchas. Bentley (2007) writes about change and cultural revival among Lepchas in general and talks about the different Lepcha associations in Sikkim that has facilitated this trend. One of the man reasons for this revival has to do with the 'Lepchas and their hydel protest' (Wangchuk 2007) which documents the entire saga in a detailed manner. Highlighting the Gandhian methods to protest hydro projects in Dzongu, Arora (2008) wrote about 'Gandhigiri in Sikkim'. Little (2008) also published

on 'Lepcha narratives and their threatened scared landcapes' about the protests against dams in Dzongu. She has been examining the protest movement in great detail and providing different angles to the story. 'Deep Ecology, Dams and Dzonguland' (2009) and 'From the village to the cities—the battlegrounds for Lepcha protests' (2010) have all contributed to the voice from Dzongu. Following the fight for the safeguarding of their sacred environment, the survival of Lepchas have a lot to do with the unification of religious differences which was mentioned by Davide Torri (2010) when he says 'Lepchas from all backgrounds (Buddhist, Christian and "shamanic") try to look at each other mostly without animosity today' (2010: 161). 'Ambivalence of Change: Education, Eroding Culture, and Revival among the Lepcha of Sikkim' was published by Jenny Bentley in 2011 with regard to education as an agent that could either erode or promote Lepcha culture. Her study is based in Sikkim where formal education includes the Lepcha language in school syllabus. 'Tales of Lepcha *ci*, the traditional medicine for lightheartedness' by Heleen Plaisier (2011) is a fresh take on the age old 'curse' of *ci* that Lepchas seem to have suffered. At a time when revivalism is taking place, and *ci* is considered a vice, this article talks about the origin of *ci,* its integral usage and it being a unifying factor for most Lepchas. 'Identity Formation among the Lepchas of West Bengal and Sikkim' is another article that has explored the renewed relationship between Buddhist and Christian Lepchas, as Gowloog writes, '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 identity in the region for very long, seems to have been greatly bridged in the past decades or so' (Gowloog Forthcoming).

Besides these works, the Lepcha associations in Kalimpong and Sikkim have collected and published Lepcha scriptures, mythologies and folk stories. News articles on Lepchas are also found in scattered dates in various national and state newspapers. There is a growing number of Lepcha journalists and writers writing about Lepchas in general in various magazines, newspapers and bulletins.

While the Lepchas of Sikkim and Darjeeling have been studied extensively, the 4000 odd Lepchas residing in Ilam, East Nepal have remained almost untouched. There is just one small booklet called *The Lapcha of Nepal* (2000) by a Nepali professor with two anthropologist researchers from the University of Amsterdam, the Netherlands. Interestingly, the history of Lepchas in Ilam has baffled both historians and laymen alike. The authors of the book account for the 1826 Kotopa Insurrection when the Lepchas rose against Bhutias in Sikkim. It was then the Lepcha Prime Minister Bholod was murdered and about 800 Lepcha subjects of Sikkim fled to Ontoo in Ilam district of Nepal and settled there. In *The Road to Destiny: Darjeeling Letters 1839* (1986), Fred Pinn also mentions the Ontoo boundary dispute that went in favour of Nepal as the Rajah of Sikkim did not object to it. However, the names of rivers, trees and villages in Ilam owing their origin in the Lepcha language makes one suspect that there might have been Lepchas in Ilam prior to 1826. Collecting these names of places that have Lepcha origin and outlining the general character of the Lepchas of Ilam, Bima Lepcha (2003) published a short booklet in Nepali. A year later, a report on 'A real picture of Lapcha Community in Ilam District' (Roy 2004) was submitted to the National Foundation for Development of Indigenous Nationalities where Lepchas have been classified under the

endangered group. Besides that, Rai (2007) did his MA thesis on the Lepchas of Ilam district from Tribhuwan University where he shows the main reason for the backwardness of the Lepchas to be education. There have also been occasional news articles and feature pieces in the Nepali newspapers.

The above review of literature on Lepchas show a gradual progression of Lepcha studies from administrative to ethnographic to more specified accounts today. There have been a lot of earlier publications related to their basic political and demographic history, which forms the basis for any study today. The works of earlier ethnographers that contributed to Survival Anthropology on their language, rituals and mythological stories have almost garnered an authority position due to the discontinuation of certain traditions and practices. Most ethnographic monographs in earlier days were based on a single village of Kalimpong or Sikkim. The recent publications show a great deal of what is happening in the Lepcha revival movement but is studied in isolated regions and not as a community together. It is clear from the above summary that no study has been taken up till date to make a comparative study of the influence of Hinduism, Buddhism and Christianity on the Lepchas as a whole, as is proposed in the present study. It also hopes to contribute to the ongoing trend of examining the revival tendencies, particularly among the youths, in light of the political developments in the eastern Himalayas.

## Methodology

Three villages namely Tingvong, Bom Busty and Jilbong were chosen in three major geographical locations of Dzongu in North Sikkim, Kalimpong in Darjeeling district, and Ilam in East Nepal. The year 2010 was mainly devoted to conducting fieldwork although shorter visits took place in 2009 and 2011 as well. The traditional ethnographic method of participant observation, both of daily life and special occasions, was conducted along with many formal and informal interviews with villagers and key informants of which two of the elderly people have already died by the time of writing this thesis. The collected data was analysed using the comparative method, deemed necessary not just to juxtapose one religion with another but to understand the 'continuities and differences' (Paden 1994: 3) of the three religions. The same set of schedules was used for all three locations with specific questions for them. I also used photography, both to document events, and to serve as a conversation starter when travelling between villages/ regions because Lepchas from Kalimpong were interested in knowing how Lepchas from Dzongu or Ilam looked like or how different they were for that matter which eventually resulted to discussing about Lepcha identity as well. Video recordings also resulted similar outcomes when shown to a family or a friend, which again yielded discussions about Lepchas in general. This usage of audio-visual tool actually proved to be an effective methodology in my multi-sited work. Photographs taken during the field have also been used in the thesis to illustrate the text.

**Representing the 'Other'**

Anthropology has always been the study of 'Other Cultures' (Beattie 1999) but the study of one's own culture is a popular trend in Northeast India. Likewise, mine was a study of my own culture making me a 'native' anthropologist, expected to give a more authentic view of the people than the ones provided by non-Lepcha anthropologists.

But how native is a 'native' anthropologist? (Narayan 1993) Can someone like me who was raised away from the ancestral village all her life be considered native to that village? With my educational background, and upbringing in residential schools and exposure to the world beyond the village makes it difficult to fit into the "native" glove. In many ways, it becomes what Srinivas said, 'my study... would enable me better to understand my personal cultural and social roots' (Srinivas 1976: 5). Likewise, fieldwork among my own community was not only an opportunity to find answers to questions that set the research tone but also to find answers to questions that had been lingering in the back of my head. But in the field, belonging to the same community was not enough to convince the villagers to open up. They needed to know who I was. So it was important to become 'actively involved in the life of the people, communicate with them, and spend a considerable period of time among them' (Jones. 1970: 252). In Dzongu, the household census was conducted the same time when the official census was taking place. So I went around the village with a teacher. Later too, I mostly hung out with the women teachers at the village school automatically qualifying me as the new teacher in the eyes of the villagers. Whenever they saw me, they would say,

"*Khamree Luponmoo*" (Hello Miss). In Bom Busty, my rapport went back four generations because it was my ancestral village. Elderly people were happy to know of my interest and told stories from many moons back because no one talked about it anymore. In Ilam, the situation was different. Lepchas have always lived in fear of strangers there. At one house, the owner took more than half an hour just to tell me his name. He wanted to know if I was from the government, some NGO, or was preaching the gospel, and if none of it then why I was there? In all three places it was easy to approach without the notebook because people got conscious when they realized that something that they had just said was being noted down. So a mental note would be made and the daily activities would be written in the field diary at the end of the day. It was better to join them in what they would be doing and get into questions after the ice was broken. But the camera was a definite icebreaker and villagers enjoyed seeing their pictures and their friends' pictures. Some would even go for a change of clothes to get their pictures to be taken.

Writing about the "Other" in my case meant writing about my own people. Lepchas have had their fair share of researchers asking questions about their social life. I meet my informants in town sometimes or at gatherings and people start asking, "where is the book?" They want to know what has been written and how it has been written. There is pressure from the community to give an accurate representation of the Lepcha world.

**Organization of thesis**

Chapter 1 introduces the statement of the problem and looks into the key concepts used in the thesis. It outlines four objectives and gives a review of literature on various works done on the Lepchas. This chapter also discusses the methodology and ends with an outline of the thesis.

Chapter 2 attempts to give an overall picture of the Lepchas. It discusses the nomenclature of the Lepchas and the confusion about using terms like 'Lapche', 'Lapcha' and 'Lepcha'. It looks at the mythological origin of the Lepchas and outlines the various social institutions like clan, marriage, kinship, language, food, and dress. It then introduces the Lepchas of Dzongu, Kalimpong and Ilam with specific references to the villages of Tingvong, Bom Busty and Jilbong.

Chapter 3 gives a thorough account of the traditional Lepcha religion by referring to secondary sources and cross checking with elderly Lepchas to verify the same. It examines the Lepcha concept of gods and demons, heaven and hell, and the country of ancestors. It also looks at the different worship patterns and the markers of Lepcha religion. The next part looks into the traditional ritual specialists known as the *mun* and the *bongthing*, and the changes taking place in the same. Finally it looks at the veracity of Dzongu as "holy land" in the traditional belief system.

Chapter 4 focuses on the influence of Buddhism among the Lepchas of Dzongu. It argues that Dzongu Lepchas were introduced to Buddhism when *Guru Rinpoche* passed through Dzongu on his way to Tibet. It also examines the low-key village Buddhism that prevails in Tingvong and affirms the simultaneous use of both a *bongthing* and a lama even today. The final portion looks at the Bhutia-Lepcha alliance following the increase of Nepali majority for which it was Buddhism that acted as a common denominator to give the Lepchas a hyphenated identity. Finally it touches on the "primitive" identity of Lepchas in Sikkim.

Chapter 5 traces the arrival of missionaries in Kalimpong and the response of Lepchas to the Christian gospel. It looks at the coming of Christianity and the establishment of the oldest church in Kalimpong. Thereafter, it looks at the factors of conversion and the cultural changes that took place in the Lepcha social institutions like family, marriage, kinship, language, food and dress. The third part examines the Christian Lepcha identity and what it means to be a Lepcha and a Christian or both; and whether the religious identity precedes the ethnic identity.

Chapter 6 considers the spread of Hinduism and the possible acceptance of Hindu religion among the Lepchas of Ilam. It looks at the indirect participation of Lepchas in various Hindu festivals as a way of absorbing Hindu culture. Like the previous two chapters, it also examines the cultural changes in various social institutions. The third part of the chapter questions the religious identity of the Lepcha as to whether they are Hindus or Buddhists.

Chapter 7 discusses the direction Lepcha identity is taking in the wake of various socio-political developments in the region. Known to be a community with no political influence, three separate cases of political uprising in Dzongu, Kalimpong and Ilam have been discussed as cross border connections between the Lepchas of these three regions. It also looks at new forms of identity markers that have erased the religious boundary uniting the Lepchas to a common ethnic identity. The final part looks at the role of educated Lepcha youths and the usage of social media to further bridge the territorial and religious boundaries.

Chapter 8 concludes by giving a summary of the main arguments and insights. It looks at the social institutions across Dzongu, Kalimpong and Ilam and looks at the direction Lepcha identity is taking in the region.

## Chapter 2

## People and Study Area: An Overview

### Who are the Lepchas?

Lepchas are a Mongoloid community living in Sikkim, Darjeeling, Southwest Bhutan and Eastern Nepal. They call themselves *Rong* from the Lepcha words *Rongkup* or *Rumkup* meaning the children of snowy peak/ the children of God. Tradition has it that their creator God, Itbumu, created their progenitors Fudongthing and Nazongnyu from the pure virgin snows of Mt. Kanchenjunga. The couple was instructed to live like siblings but they violated the rules and gave birth to several children. Itbumu is believed to have summoned the two and said, 'You have committed a sin. I cannot allow you two to live in this sacred mountain any longer. As a punishment, both of you now must live at the foothills of Mt Kanchenjunga as humans and fend for yourselves' (Aachulay magazine). In the meantime, the abandoned babies grew up to be evil spirits and started troubling the people. After getting rid of seven children, the couple decided to keep their child who is now considered to be the first Lepcha. With their legends pointing Kanchenjunga as the place of origin, it is only understandable to find Lepchas living in the foothills of this mountain for a long time. They have no migration history although some scholars speculate their coming from the east. J.C. White, the first Political Officer of Sikkim, for instance writes,

> Their origin is doubtful, as they did not enter Sikkim across the Himalayas or from Tibet, but are supposed to have come from the east along the foothills from the direction of Assam and upper Burmah' (White 1909: 7).

*Nomenclature*

The name 'Lepcha' is an exonym given by outsiders; in this case it is commonly believed to have derived from the Nepali words *lap* and *che,* which is supposed to mean 'vile speakers', used condescendingly for the Lepchas because they spoke their own mother tongue and could not speak the Nepali language. Subba discards this translation and opines that there are no words in Nepali that translates *lap-che* to mean vile speakers. Schwerzel *et. al* reiterates, 'no Nepali we know corroborates this story and they are even much perplexed by it' (Schwerzel *et. al* 2000:1). The authenticity of the word and its meaning is questionable as there is no uniformity between scholars who sometimes define the meanings in reverse order. Thapa (2002) says *lap* means 'vile' and *che* means 'speaker' while Bentley (2007) writes, *lap* is 'speech' and *cha* is 'unintelligible'. Despite its controversy, it is generally agreed *Lapche* is derogatory since most Nepali words/ names ending with *ey*-sound has negative connotations. Subba suggests that it might actually have been the Limbu neighbours who gave them the name, which roughly translates to mean 'wing-eaters'. There is a story about how a Lepcha wanted to marry a Limbu girl and took chicken for his future in-laws. The girl's family found this gift to be funny and called them 'wing-eaters' and the name has stuck

ever since (Schwerzel *et. al* 2000: 1). Though the Lepchas reject this story, this translation is quite close. Thakur (1988) also refers to another Limbu version of the term to mean those who use animals with feathers as ceremonial gifts or the name of a fish with meek characteristics representing the Lepchas. Digressing from the idea of the name being given by someone from the outside, Lepcha writers like Foning and Tamsang say that Lepcha is a distorted version of *lap-chyo,* which means an elevated or resting place. And it is this very *lap-che* that has been anglicized by the British to form the Lepcha that is in use today.

While there is no consensus regarding the origin of the word, the usage *of Lapche-Lapcha-Lepcha* for and by the people is also not in unison. As mentioned before, the natives dislike being called *Lapche* for the very reason that it carries an unflattering undertone ending with *ey* in Nepali. They prefer to be called Lepcha, finding this word more appropriate while referring to their community. *Lapcha* on the other hand is how the Lepchas of Ilam have always been identified. From official documents to common day usage, *Lapcha* is widely accepted and used among Ilam Lepchas. In *The Lapcha of Nepal* (2000), the authors use *Lapcha* throughout the book because that was what the people preferred and the writers had only 'respected their wish' (Schwerzel *et. al* 2000: 1). Today, there is a growing movement in Ilam to rename their titles from *Lapcha* to *Lepcha.* During my fieldwork, people in the village still used *Lapcha* but those in urban areas used *Lepcha.* The Lepcha organizations of Ilam have been campaigning to change the same because Lepcha was more popular internationally and they could also align themselves with Lepchas elsewhere in the world. This move

runs parallel with the growing awareness among Lepchas elsewhere to affirm their identity as they have begun using 'Lepcha' as their last names. Before, people used their clan names like Karthak, Simick, Lucksom for their surnames, but today they use Lepcha. The uniformity in their surnames is an exercise being practised across the Lepcha world to show solidarity within the tribe. One of the main reasons is to show strength of the Lepcha population because recent census figures usually totals the Lepchas to be less than one lakh. In the Census 2001, the population of Lepchas in Sikkim was 40,000; West Bengal was 33,000 and Ilam counted to 3000. In all these places except Ilam, Lepchas do not agree with the numbers and believe that some discrepancy had taken place. It is hoped that having a 'Lepcha' surname instead of the different clan names, as surnames would club all Lepchas together and bring uniformity. This effort is a conscious move taken by the Lepcha community.

*Rong* is an endonym used by Lepchas among themselves. It is commonly understood as 'ravine folk' but *Rong* in Lepcha also means horn, and to wait. *Rong* is often just the shorter version of what they call themselves to be from the *Mutanchi Rongkup/ Rumkup*, which means children of the snowy peak/ the children of God. The tribe has rightly named themselves as this version matches with their belief of being created from the fresh snows of Mt. Kanchenjunga. Gowloog (2013) writes that Lepchas refer to themselves as *Rongs* but no one is ever found to have used this as the title. These days however *Rong* is gaining popularity as a title and there are those who write *Rong* in place of *Lepcha* for their surnames too. *Rong* is also used with a suffix depending on the gender of the person. A male would be a *Rongkup* (*kup* is from the

Lepcha word *akup* meaning son) and a female would be a *Rongmit* (*Mit* is often used as a suffix in Lepcha female names). In Dzongu, villagers would often ask, *Rong do*? which can be translated as "Are you a Lepcha?" In Ilam they used *Mutanchi* often asking, "Are you a *Mutanchi*?" The latter usage is interesting because the word *mutanchi* is not so in vogue except in formal occasions and popularly used in slogans exclaiming *mutanchi rongcup –aachuley*[1]!

*Origin*

Lepchas consider Mt. Kanchenjunga to be their place of origin and their mythological country to be *Mayel Lyang,* the land of eternal paradise. It is generally accepted that the land was spread over a vast area that stretches across Sikkim, Darjeeling, Bhutan and Eastern Nepal today. It was before the formation of nation states and political boundaries that the Lepcha land is believed to have 'extended for over 120 miles along the southern face of the Himalayas from the river Kosee in Nepal on the West to about 50 miles due east of river Tista' (Dozey 1989: 41).

> Their land extended from the Himalayas down to Titalya in the vast plains of India, now in Bangladesh after partition and to the east, it was extended up to Gimpochi mountain (14,523'), the trijunction of Sikkim, Bhutan and Tibet, now Chinese Tibet, and to west, it was extended as far as the Aaroon river, now in Nepal. (Tamsang 1983: 1)

[1] *Aachuley* in Lepcha literally means 'Hail Himalayas.'

Although historical evidence supporting this territory is scarce, and Subba calls this 'not dependable academically' (1985: 64); Foning recounts the nostalgic talk of elderly folk when he was young about the mythical homeland expressed in a chant.

*'Chuk-lat, Po-nok take,*

*Chuk-kyer, Ru-chan Rang-a Dake,*

*Chuk-gyom Tal, Chyu-bee Bong,*

*Chuk-veem, Zo-la-see Brong'* (Foning 1987: 138).

Foning (1987) interprets these lines and provides a convincing dimension to the traditional territories as *Chuk-lat* in the first line means East and *Po-nok* is thought to be *Punakha* which used to be the capital of Bhutan. In the second stanza, *Chuk-kyer* is West and *Ru-chan Rang-a Dake* are believed to be the Arun and Tamur rivers. *Chuk-gyom* then means North and *Chyu-bee Bong* means right to the base of the sun while the last line has *Chuk-veem* meaning South and *Zo-la-see Brong* means enormous heaps of rice. So when you translate the poem, the boundaries of *Mayel Lyang* are mapped out the places mentioned above. The map will however tell us that they have always lived in the shadows of Kanchenjunga, which can further be affirmed when one notices that most names of places in the area owe their origin to the Lepcha language. The most probable explanation could be how the community made a conscious effort to always keep Kanchenjunga in sight. 'It is rare to find a Lepcha village from where Khangchendzonga cannot be sighted' (Wangchuk and Zulca 2007: 32). Historical events have however changed the landscape and Lepchas now owe allegiance to three different

countries namely India, Bhutan and Nepal. They have transitioned from being just the children of Kanchenjunga to bonafide citizens of three nation states. The 'political shuffling of the old Lepcha kingdom' (Roy 2009:16) into three separate nation states meant different provisions and benefits in the social, political, and economic spheres. In the light of these developments, Lepchas have begun to identify themselves according to their respective regions. Lepchas from *Renzyong* (Sikkim) are called *Renzyongmoo,* those from *Damsang* (Darjeeling) are called *Damsangmoo,* Ilam Lepchas are called *Ilamoo* and Lepchas from *Pro* (Bhutan) are called *Promoos.* The categorization of Lepchas in different countries using the suffix *moo* is an interesting development since *moo* means clan, and a very elaborative clan system already exists in the Lepcha social organization.

*Clans*

Lepcha community is organized in different clans, which they call *moo, ptso, agit* or *kugit* depending on where they are from. Clans are hereditary in nature and follow an intrinsic blood relation either by birth or marriage. The male *moo* is supposed to differ from the female *moo,* as the girls traditionally belonged to the mother's *moo* while the sons inherited the father's *moo* although Lepchas of Dzongu during my fieldwork were not aware of this tradition in practice. The pattern of parallel descent is where 'a man traces descent through his father to a line of males and his sister through her mother to a line of females' (Maybury-Lewis 1960: 191). Membership to the clan is inherited

patrilineally for men and matrilineally for women, although this tradition is on the decline mostly due to inter-community marriages and the inability for a mother of another community to provide a clan name for the daughter as she takes on the father's name. The origin of the Lepcha *moo* is connected with Mt. Kanchenjunga as each *moo* is named after one of the peaks (*chyu)* in this mountain range. There are supposedly 108 peaks. (Tamsang 1983: 41, Tamlong 2008: 111) resulting in a total of 108 Lepcha clans. Although another version speaks about the original ten clans known as *Rong Kati,* today, there are more than 200 *moo*s recorded. It is believed that each *moo* is linked to the peak (*chyu*) and a lake (*da*) where the soul is to return after death. The peaks and lakes 'function as entry points of the spirits into the realm of the dead' (Bentley 2007: 90). It is thus important for a Lepcha to know the name of the peak and the lake connected to one's *moo* because that becomes his/ her address to return to when he/ she dies. The ritual specialists' task is to guide the soul back to the peak of origin and when the address is wrong there is confusion and the souls do not find their way back home. Today most Lepchas do not know the names of their *chyu-da* but the belief that Kanchenjunga and its neighbouring peaks are home to their dead ancestors remain uncontested. Many youngsters are even found to be saying that their *chyu* is none but the mighty Kanchenjunga.

The purpose of the *moo* is 'the regulation of marriage and prevention of incest' (Gorer 1996: 148). People of the same *moo* are not allowed to marry unless they are separated by nine generations on father's *moo* and four generations into a mother's *moo.*

It is referred extensively before and during the time of marriage since Lepcha marriage is *moo* exogamous.

> 'A boy cannot marry a girl belonging to his mother's or father's moo while a girl cannot marry a boy of her father's or mother's moo. Marriage within the blood relations is strictly forbidden and any violation may cause the birth of deformed child' (Roy 2009: 22).

Lepchas make a conscious effort not to marry or even fall in love with those belonging to the same clan. The *moo* relation often means that one could be related either through the father's clan or the mother's clan, which could lead to incest. 'Nearly everybody is related, either by blood or marriage, to everyone else' (Morris 1938: 112). They often joke how tracing the *Rong* genealogy would mean that even the pig could be related to you. True enough, the clan system is extensive but is the one important feature that unites the community. There is a sense of belongingness when meeting someone from the same clan in a different setting. During my fieldwork in Ilam, the elderly man from the village was initially sceptical about my arrival and my questions, but when he figured out that we both belonged to the *Sandyang* clan, he wanted me to spend the night at his place. Marital alliances between the four regions are not uncommon, but it is easier to look for partners closer home. It is however becoming difficult to find partners who do not belong to either father or mother's clan. There has been a scarcity of marriageable partners because of the strict adherence to their *moos.* Sometimes they are believed to have added a suffix or a prefix to the clan name so they can make

adjustments to marry the groom/ bride of their choice. This means that there has been an increase in the number of clans in Lepcha society.

In a list (see appendice) prepared by a Lepcha government officer during his time as a Land Revenue Officer, he met Lepchas with almost 250 different clan names. While these clan names were collected from different villages around Kalimpong, there are many overlapping clan names with those in Sikkim and Nepal as well. From studying the list, it can be concluded that the above hypothesis of adding a prefix or a suffix to create a new clan name is verified. Eg: *Molom-moo* (#18) is one clan name, which is even listed in the original ten clans. Then we have *Molom-Yukpho-moo* (#78), *Git-Molom-moo* (#128) and *Molom-moo-yen-moo* (#199). Secondly, the clan names are also a result of the names of places where they might have come from. Eg: *Kabi-moo* (#205) is probably a derivation from the place called Kabi. Likewise, there are several names which sound like the names of either the peak or the river. Owing to the fact that lot of Lepchas in and around Kalimpong do not know the names of their peaks and rivers, it could be a possibility that they were using the names of peaks or river names as a traditional practice.

Another version of the clan origin speaks of only ten clans known as *Rong Kati* which would literally translate as ten Lepchas. Interestingly there are two versions explaining the existence of these ten clans. Tamsang traces the descent of the ten *moos* to the ten children of *Fudongthing* and *Nazongnyu* (Tamsang 1983: 40, Tamlong 2000:108), which is contested because it is widely believed that the first couple threw

the first seven babies because of their incestuous relationship. The second version of the *Rong Kati* came to existence after the slaying of *Lasso Mung* – the evil spirit who tormented the Lepcha people. It is believed that there were ten Lepchas involved in the killing of Lasso Mung using different methods, which gave way to ten different clan names. For example, *Sadamoo* chopped the head; *Simickmoo* had something to do with the eyes etc. Before being killed, however, Lasso Mung is believed to have transformed his body twelve times to confuse his killers. These twelve appearances gave the twelve-year cycle of the Lepcha calendar. Most elders refer to the Lepcha calendar to tell the year they were born or recall certain events. The younger generation stick to the Lunar calendar although they all know their *naam* or the year of the birth having been told by their grandparents.

| ***Kolok*** **Rat** | ***Long*** **Ox** | ***Suthong*** **Tiger** | ***Punthyong*** **Eagle** | ***Sader*** **Thunder** | ***Bu*** **Snake** | ***Oon*** **Horse** | ***Luk*** **Sheep** | ***Sahu*** **Monkey** | ***Heek*** **Rooster** | ***Kuzyu*** **Dog** | ***Mi*** **Pi** |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1900 | 1901 | 1902 | 1903 | 1904 | 1905 | 1906 | 1907 | 1908 | 1909 | 1910 | 19 |
| 1912 | 1913 | 1914 | 1915 | 1916 | 1917 | 1918 | 1919 | 1920 | 1921 | 1922 | 19 |
| 1924 | 1925 | 1926 | 1927 | 1928 | 1929 | 1930 | 1931 | 1932 | 1933 | 1934 | 19 |
| 1936 | 1937 | 1938 | 1939 | 1940 | 1941 | 1942 | 1943 | 1944 | 1945 | 1946 | 19 |
| 1948 | 1949 | 1950 | 1951 | 1952 | 1953 | 1954 | 1955 | 1956 | 1957 | 1958 | 19 |
| 1960 | 1961 | 1962 | 1963 | 1964 | 1965 | 1966 | 1967 | 1968 | 1969 | 1970 | 19 |
| 1972 | 1973 | 1974 | 1975 | 1976 | 1977 | 1978 | 1979 | 1980 | 1981 | 1982 | 19 |
| 1984 | 1985 | 1986 | 1987 | 1988 | 1989 | 1990 | 1991 | 1992 | 1993 | 1994 | 19 |
| 1996 | 1997 | 1998 | 1999 | 2000 | 2001 | 2002 | 2003 | 2004 | 2005 | 2006 | 20 |
| 2008 | 2009 | 2010 | 2011 | 2012 | 2013 | | | | | | |

Table 1. Lepcha Calendar

*Marriage*

Lepcha marriage is tribe endogamous and clan exogamous. Marriage within the clan is prohibited but marriage within the tribe is widely accepted, especially since marriage outside the tribe is being practised today. One cannot marry a member of either the father or the mother's clan and has to practise a nine and a four generation gap respectively in case of identical *moo*. Polyandry is not recognized by Lepcha custom and tradition but might have taken place in some cases due to 'contact with Tibetans' (Morris 1938: 225) as Hooker argues how 'the Lepcha is in morals far superior to his Tibet and Bhotan neighbours, polyandry being unknown, and polygamy rare' (Hooker 2005: 121). Polygyny on the other hand is allowed in rare occasions to produce descendants and to save a clan from extinction. There might also be instances of a man marrying additional wives which Morris opines to be an 'importation, probably through contact with Nepalis, for the language does not contain any specific word to denote a second wife, the Nepali word *kanchi* being used for this purpose' (Morris 1938: 263). In case of the death of a spouse, a wife may be obliged to marry her husband's brother. This practice of levirate marriage often has to do with inter-family/ clan commitment and responsibilities, while sororate marriage is unheard of. Divorce is rare and is not permissible, but can happen either in case of 'barrenness and immortality'. However it is the person seeking divorce who usually pays the penalty.

> 'A Lepcha woman can divorce her husband on grounds of cruelty, injustice and misconduct. A divorced wife will not be entitled to maintenance of the former

husband's property. When husband seeks divorce, he has to pay a very huge penalty. Similarly, if the wife seeks divorce, she has to return all the presents given to her at the time of *Asek*[2] or *Nongcheyong*.

*Kinship*

Kinship terminology refers to words that describe familial relationships. Different societies classify social relations differently. The Lepcha kinship terminology conforms to the Eskimo kinship pattern, where the emphasis is on the nuclear family directly identifying the father, mother, brother and sister. There is no distinction in the usage of terms between patrilineal and matrilineal relatives as the same terms like uncle, aunt are used for both sides, which is another indication of them practising parallel descent traditionally. It consists of both classificatory and descriptive terms. Example of classificatory is when a kinship term like *anum* could mean elder brother, wife's elder brother, wife's elder sister's husband, and husband's elder sister's husband. Example for descriptive could be *avo* for husband, which represents only one type of relationship between two people. Listed below are some kinship terminologies.

| **Lepcha terms** | **English translation** |
|---|---|
| *Abo/ Apa* | Father |
| *Amu/ Ama* | Mother |

[2] *Asek* means engagement and the *Asek* presents include whole bodies of mature pigs, silk garment for the mother, a big copper pot filled with brewed millet and the bridal price. *Nongcheyong* is when the date for *Asek* is fixed and the groom's side has to offer presents to the parents of the bride then too.

| | |
|---|---|
| *Anum* | Elder Brother |
| *Anom* | Elder Sister |
| *Ing* | Younger brother/ sister |
| *Thikung/ Thikungpa* | Grandfather |
| *Nikung/ Nikungma* | Grandmother |
| *Kupzong* | Grandson/ daughter |
| *Aku* | Father's younger brother, Father's younger sister's husband, Mother's younger sister's husband. |
| *Anue* | Mother's younger sister, Father's younger sister,<br>Mother's younger brother's wife, Father's younger brother's wife |
| *Azjyong* | Mother's elder brother, mother's younger brother |
| *Battim* | Father's elder brother, Father's elder sister's husband, Mother's elder brother. |
| *Mattim* | Father's elder sister, Mother's elder sister, father's elder brother's wife. |
| *Myok* | Son-in-law |
| *Nyom* | Daughter-in-law |
| *Azong* | Elder brother's wife, Elder sister's husband. |

*Language*

Lepchas call their language *Rongring*, which belongs to the Tibeto-Burman family. It is a monosyllabic language and is governed by postpositions following the structure 'subject-object-verb' (Klafkowski 1980:09). The Lepchas also have their own script written from left to right with spaces between words. Linguists and scholars generally hold the belief that the invention of Lepcha alphabet was motivated by religious

activities of Buddhist missionaries. Sprigg even argues that the 'Lepchas did not have a writing system before the arrival of the Tibetans in Sikkim because they had no use for one' (Sprigg 1982: 29). Indeed, Chagdor Namgyal, the third King of the Namgyal dynasty is credited for discovering the Lepcha script although Lepchas recognize their own scholar *Thikung Mensalong* for inventing the script who is believed to have possessed supernatural powers. It is also possible that the two worked on devising the script together as the *History of Sikkim* (1908) accounts of meeting of the King and Mensalong at *Chukar Pang-shong* for the first time. The Lepcha script consists of 35 consonants and 9 vowels.

Consonants

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| ᰀ | ᰁ | ᰂ | ᰃ | |
| ka | kha | ga | nga | |
| ᰄ | ᰅ | ᰆ | ᰇ | |
| ca | cha | ja | nya | |
| ᰈ | ᰉ | ᰊ | ᰋ | |
| ta | tha | da | na | |
| ᰌ | ᰍ | ᰎ | ᰏ | ᰐ |
| pa | pha | fa | ba | ma |
| ᰑ | ᰒ | ᰓ | ᰔ | |
| ca | tsha | Za | ya | |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| ra | la | ha | va |
| shya | sa | hwa | |

Vowels

| | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| a | aa | ee | i | o | oh | uh | oo | eh |

There is a specific method of learning the Lepcha script with a text called the *lazong*. The alphabets are taught in a singsong manner as the teacher usually recites a set melody enabling the students to read and chant along, 'memorising the values of the letters and syllables in the process' (Plaisier 2003: 32). It is very systematic and is believed to give 'fluency, force and rhythm' (Tamsang 2009: 10) to the Lepcha speech. This existing tune is passed on from generation to generation, as they believe that to master their language, *lazong* is a must. Plaisier, a noted linguist, writes: '*Lazong* represents an old, powerful and important Lepcha tradition, that is still practiced today' (Plaisier 2003: 32).

> 'From the letter 'K' alone, the Lepchas produce 540 different sounds and words which can be perfectly used in sentences to express ones thoughts. If we carry on with other

> consonants, conjunct consonants, vowels, diatric marks, signs, and symbols, it will give us 6,660 words, which can be used in the Lepcha language. The *lazong* is very systematic, scientific and exhaustive' (Tamsang 2009: 10).

The Lepcha orthography is still in practice although not every Lepcha has access to the *lazong* training. So the Lepcha script is transcribed using the Roman alphabet or the Devanagri script. The richness of Lepcha language was highly recognized by General Mainwaring, the first person to write a grammar of Lepcha, which was published in 1876. In his introduction to *A Grammar of the Lepcha Langauge,* he wrote: 'The language is abounding in synonyms and possessing words to express every slightest change, every varying shade of meaning, it admits to a flow and power of speech which is wonderful, and which renders it capable of giving expression to the highest degree of eloquence' (Mainwaring [1876] 1971: xix). The systematic organization of the Lepcha language cannot be ignored even in every day words and names. There is a specific order in the way the Lepchas name different things. For example, the naming of different human body parts usually start with 'A.' An eye is called '*amik*', face is '*aaku*' mouth is '*abung*', *and* ears are '*anyor*'. Likewise, the names of different wild animals starts with 'S' and the names of rivers in the region start with 'R'. Another interesting element in the Lepcha language and literature is the *lungten sung*. It represents the orally transmitted stories of Lepcha myths, legends, fables and fairy tales. These narratives contain views and issues on the origin and destiny of the human world or with matters of life and death. Some even try to explain the Lepcha ethics, moral philosophy, places of pilgrimage and traditional customs like the laws, hunting techniques etc. While

Mainwaring worked for the betterment of Lepcha language and found beauty in its anterior characteristics, he was much wise to note the possible demise of this language when he wrote,

> "I may, without fear of misrepresentation, state it to be, the oldest language extant. It is a most comprehensive and beautiful one; and regarded alone, as a prolifc source of the derivations and etyma of words, it is invaluable to the philological world. But, like everything really good in this world, it has been despised and rejected. To allow the Lepcha race, and language to die out would indeed be most barbarous, and inexpressibly sad" (*Ibid: xx).*

The fear of loss of Lepcha language is a concern long shared by both scholars and members of the community themselves. And it has come true to a certain extent but the current generation is also doing its share of keeping it alive.

*Food*

The staple food of the Lepchas is maize, millet, barley, and rice. Before the introduction of wet rice cultivation, dry paddy was cultivated and consumed. They eat different kinds of fruits, wild plants and tubers. They are non-vegetarians and indulge in different kinds of meat. Their favourite drink is the local *ci,* the Lepcha alcoholic drink usually made of millet, which plays an essential part in all spheres of Lepcha life. Traditional ritual specialists use it for rites of passage, and is especially important during a Lepcha marriage ceremony. It is believed that the bride and groom finally become *nambaom*

meaning a couple only after drinking and sharing *ci* from the same cup during the *Sung Kyo Faat* –the exchange of marriage vows. Likewise, the immediate relatives of both the bride and groom and elders present at the ceremony also drink and share the same *ci* from the same cup and bless the newly married couple. (Tamsang 2001).

*Dress*

The traditional dress for the Lepcha women is called the *gada, dumdyem* or *dumvun* depending on where one is from. It is a soft long fabric of about 5 metres, which is wrapped and folded around the body by pinning on both the shoulders and held together by a belt around the waist. The remaining fabric is then brought to the front and folded in pleats, which falls forward known as the *dumpin*.[3] The *gada* is ankle-length and is worn with a blouse underneath. It is usually worn in different colours and prints but there is a particular kind made of rough silk known as *tamaan dum*. Traditionally, the women used to braid their hair in double plaits and used a headscarf called *taro*. Today, the usage of scarves to cover the head is rare (except in the church) and hairstyles are varied. As for the men, their traditional attire is called the *dumpra*. It is also a shawl like cloth pinned together but only in one shoulder and held together by a belt around the waist. It is hand-woven and heavy but machine made materials, which are not so expensive and heavy, are easily available in the market today. Underneath, they wear

[3] The length of the *dumpin* depends on where you are from. I was told during my fieldwork in Dzongu that it was the Kalimpong Lepchas who introduced *dumpin* to Dzongu Lepchas. Prior to that, the women from Dzongu did not use *dumpin* in their attire.

trousers known as the *tomooo* which falls below the knee and above the ankle. They also wear a shirt inside called the *tago* which is loose fitting and is designed with high collars covering the neck. The men folk usually carry their *banphok* (knife) and a woven bag to go along with the attire. The Lepcha men used to keep their hair long and plaited in a single braid adorned with a hat. The kind of hats can be divided into two categories with those made of the cloth and the cane. The former is round in shape usually bordered with velvet topped with a red knot in the middle, although the woven *dumpra* material is seen to be placing the velvet cloth these days. The cane kind was mostly popular during the time of the Chogyal worn by the Lepcha home guards but is also seen to be worn by elders of the community today.

*Conclusion*

Who then is a Lepcha? Elderly folks are often heard yelling at the younger generation, "You are not a Lepcha, if you do not speak Lepcha". While the younger ones understand the elders' concern and the youngsters' negligence in speaking one's mother tongue, it does not make the young Lepcha less of a Lepcha because he does not speak the language. He cannot be denied of his Lepcha identity just because he does not know Lepcha. Likewise, the traditionalists have also been heard categorizing Lepchas as 'full Lepchas', 'half Lepchas' and 'quarter Lepchas' based on when both the parents were Lepchas, when the father was Lepcha and the mother a non-Lepcha, and when in two generation –the father or the grandfather was a Lepcha respectively. Again there are

those who say a Lepcha is one who is born to a Lepcha family and married to a Lepcha, thus retaining Lepcha women who marry non-Lepchas and certifying non-Lepcha wives into the Lepcha family. Regardless, discussions about pure and mixed Lepchas are bound to continue, and the battle over who is more authentic becomes superficial in many levels. In this context, the Lepchas of Dzongu are often seen to be purer and knowledgeable about Lepcha culture as Dzongu is the only place in the world where Lepchas live in isolation from other communities and are supposedly untouched by external influences. Can this be true? In this study, we set out to examine whether the exclusive conditions of living in isolation makes a Lepcha purer than those living in a multi-cultural environment?

**Lepchas of Dzongu**

Located in North Sikkim at an altitude of 4000 to 7000 feet above sea level, Dzongu lies in the foothills of Mount Kanchenjunga, the guardian deity of Lepchas. Sparsely populated with about 6000 Lepchas, Dzongu used to be the private property of the queen who wanted only Lepchas to reside in the area. The King fulfilled her wishes with a royal proclamation (*Sikkim Code* Vol III: 38) that banned the entry of non-Dzongu residents into the reserve area as early as 1954 when it stated,

> 'General Public is hereby informed through this notification that His Highness the Maharaja of Sikkim has strictly banned entry of any trader/ agent from outside the Dzongu area, into the Dzongu area' (*Sikkim Code* Vol. III: 38).

Four years later in 1958, it was further established that outsiders could visit Dzongu with a special permit issued by the Government of Sikkim. This rule is still enforced today as outsiders (including non-Dzongu Lepchas like myself) need a permit from the district authority to enter the terrain. It has been set aside with a 'pro Lepcha orientation' (Roy 2007: 50) and has since become the signature of Lepchas all over. It has been 'earmarked' (Wangchuk and Zulca 2007: 37) as a Lepcha reserve because it was in this valley that the oldest permanent settlement[4] of Lepchas is recorded. This special protection for the Lepcha tribe in Dzongu has been seen as a blessing for the preservation of Lepcha culture and tradition. Often times, its exclusive characteristics are believed to have defended the culture, language and traditions from actually "vanishing" (will be discussed later) as is often labelled by both scholars and laymen to describe the status of the Lepcha tribe.

*Village of Tingvong*

> *Many years ago, a hunter named Kolokthing came travelling from South and reached the Lingzya falls. He was thirsty from his wanderings and decided to refresh himself. He decided to take bath and as he was drinking the water, he found a long strand of hair. Seeing that, he thought there might be people living*

[4] Tingvong, a village in Dzongu, is regarded as a very old settlement, also mentioned by Siiger who refers to the Chronicle when Nat-Wang-Ton-Grub of Kham travelled to Sikkim around 1264 and settled in Talung where his son, Tset-Wang-rNam-rGyal moved to Tingvong and married a Lepcha wife.

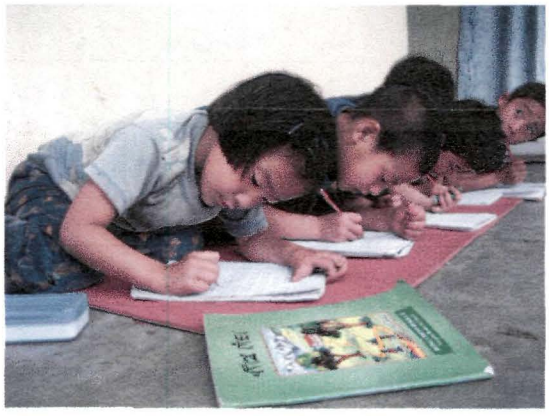
*in the area so he decided to trace the source of the waterfall. Upon reaching the origin, which is the Rongshyot ung-kyong, he saw a very beautiful girl-taking her bath. He was taken aback by her beauty and grabbed her from behind. He vowed to marry her. But there was one condition –he had to meet her parents who were both snakes. Lot of other men had also come to ask for her hand in marriage but was unable to face her parents. Kolokthing was not afraid of this meeting and was ready to face her parents. When he finally met them, the snakes wrapped themselves around the groom's body. Kolokthing was a strong man and perhaps had some supernatural powers, as he withstood their grip. He had thus passed the test and was able to marry the most beautiful girl he had ever seen. For the occasion he was asked to bring a pig, ci, cock and other rites, which are still inscribed in the rocks of Kapligen,*[5] *located behind the Tingvong Secondary School today. Their offspring is believed to be the clan of Araampuzet Ptso. Interestingly, they do not take the male lineage because nobody knew where Kolok-thing had come or originated from, hence the lineage is from the female line. This is the origin of the Araam puzet clan, the first settlers in the village of Tingvong, Dzongu* (Fieldwork 2010).

Tingvong is located in Upper Dzongu and is about 22 kilometres from the state capital of Gangtok. It is made of cluster of villages, which are also identified as wards for administrative purposes. They have five clusters/ wards that comprise a total of 100

[5] While there were some inscriptions in the rocks, the researcher was unable to make out what it said. And only a year ago, members from Aram Pazet clan had gone to the area and cleaned the premises because the bongthing had told them to do so.

households. The five official wards are Tingvong, Lingko, Kusoong, Namprik, and Nung. The increase in population has led to the creation of a new cluster called Mongkong –southeast of Nung. Mongkong is a young cluster and is only 30-years-old. There is a paved road that passes through these villages and connects Tingvong to Mangan and Gangtok. There are two jeeps named "Rongkup" and "Mr. Lepcha" that run a daily service from Tingvong to Mangan and back. The drivers get a break when monsoon comes and the rains wash away the roads. The last stop for the motorable road in Upper Dzongu ends at gate of the village school.

The two schools in the village are Tingvong Secondary School with a total of 98 students and Nampick Government Junior School with a total of 78 students. The Integrated Child Development Services also has its centres in all five wards. The literacy rate was found to be 90% with third grade pass as the main criteria. Unless there was some village activity, my host who was also a teacher at Tingvong school and her cousin would give tuitions to the children of the village free of charge.



Students at work during tuition evenings

Younger students at work

The number of households in the village came to 100 families. Table 3. shows the 12 clans with Aram Pazet constituting the majority of households also proving the origin story of their clan in the village.

Table 3. Clan Distribution in Tingvong

| | **Clans** | **No. of Households** |
|---|---|---|
| 1. | Aram Pazet | 33 |
| 2. | Paki | 18 |
| 3. | Zumchyong | 14 |
| 4. | Khamyangmu | 13 |
| 5. | Zumyangmoo | 9 |
| 6. | Taaryom | 4 |
| 7. | Taarzyok | 2 |
| 8. | Teem | 2 |
| 9. | Demik | 2 |
| 10. | Garkungchum | 2 |
| 11. | Lucksom | 1 |
| 12. | Simick | 1 |

It is noticed that the clans often stick to their own cluster. For instance, Lingko had only the Paki *ptso* residing in that ward while Payel had majority Taaryom families. The lone clans like the Simick and Lucksom were a result of marital alliance between

Lepchas of Kalimpong. In this case, the sons-in-law had started living with the wife's families. They lived in sturdy houses and the traditional way of constructing the house standing on huge stones without the use of any nail was still found to be in practice.

Typical house in Tingvong

Carved poles for traditional house under construction

**Lepchas of Kalimpong**

Kalimpong is a subdivision of the district of Darjeeling in the state of West Bengal, India. The name is derived from the Lepcha word, *Kalempung*, an amalgamation of *Ka* meaning 'we/us', *lem* means to play and *pung* for ridge; therefore it means 'the ridges where we play' (Foning 1987: 13). Its anglicized name is Kalimpong and *Kalebung* is used by the Nepalis which is gaining popularity today. Christianity made its way among Kalimpong Lepchas when they came in contact with the British following the Anglo-

Bhutanese war of 1864-65. It was added to district of Darjeeling in 1866 and the opening of educational instututions was a major boon for this small town. In the beginning of 20th century, Kalimpong was a major trade route for wool exported from Lhasa to Calcutta. By then the plethora of ethnic groups interacting with each other had increased along with the population somewhat dominating the Lepchas who had become a minority in their land of origin.

*Village of Bom Busty*

Located only two and a half kilometres away from Kalimpong town, Bom Busty is a typical village found in dictionary definitions—a group of houses, shops, etc. usually with a church and situated in a country district (Cowie 1992). But many years ago the land it occupies was mostly forest, which extended from Durpin Hill to Relli River owing their toponyms to the Lepcha language. Bom Busty itself takes root in the Lepcha words *chyo vom* understood as 'book' and 'salt' respectively a term regarded as meaning a 'religious book'. This meaning was further understood as referring to the bud of a religious book, a bud that would bloom to be a beautiful flower and spread its scent just as a salt adds taste to food. In time the exclusive Lepcha population of the village welcomed newcomers and it became a showcase for a plethora of multi-ethnic communities residing there today. Hence, it has been divided into three sub-villages - Tadi Gaon, Gairi Gaon and Salim Bom. Salim Bom is further divided into Upper and Lower Salim Bom because of the growing population. For the purpose of this study, the

village of Upper Salim Bom[6] has been taken into consideration but will still be referred as Bom Busty here. People also proncounce and spell as *Bong Busty* but *bong* is a negative word which means mute so the Lepchas prefer Bom Busty.

There are two schools in Bom Busty namely the old Bom School, which is now a government school and the Mt. Aben school which functions under the Bom Church board. Mt. Aben school is only up till fifth grade and is more closer for the population of Bom Busty so most young children are seen to be attending the same. There is also a church and a dispensary in the church premises. The government health centre is also located in the village.

There are a total of 52 Lepcha households in the village. The village is ethnically heterogeneous. The Lepcha population is not the dominant anymore. Often times it is usually a small brook or a field that drew the boundary between village and municipality making it difficult to decipher whether that house is in the village or not. The Lepcha households were distributed into 11 clans with the Simicks and the Karthaks in majority, as they were also the first settlers in the village.

Table 4. Clan Distribution in Bom Busty

| | **Clans** | **No. Of Households** |
|---|---|---|
| 1. | Simick | 12 |
| 2. | Karthak | 11 |

[6] Upper Salim Bom is chosen because it is home to the oldest church in Kalimpong which fits with the objective of looking at Christianity among the Lepchas of Kalimpong.

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 3. | Sandyang | 7 |
| 4. | Taso | 7 |
| 5. | Kabo | 5 |
| 6. | Targain | 3 |
| 7. | Lucksom | 2 |
| 8. | Namchu | 2 |
| 9. | Sungoot | 1 |
| 10. | Aden | 1 |

There are only a few old stone houses. Otherwise most houses are built with cement and bricks. Most houses are two storied and have corrugated iron roofs. Some also have a balcony or a terrace. The kitchen is usually separate.

Old Stone house in Bom Busty

View overlooking the Relli river.

**Lepchas of Ilam**

Located in the eastern part of Nepal, Ilam borders Darjeeling in the East, Dhankuta district to the West, Jhapa in the South and Panchthar district in the North. It is the only district in Nepal where Lepchas have been residing for a long time. According to the Lepcha *shezum* (organization) census, the population of Lepchas in Ilam is 2589 with a total of 1373 men and 1216 women scattered across 14 Village Development Committees (VDC). The Lepcha population is found in Erautar, Fikkal, Godak, Jirmale, Jogmai, Kanyam, Kolbong, Laxmipur, Namsaling, Panchakanya, Pashupatinagar, Samalbong, Santipur, Shree Antu. They are often mistaken for migrants from Sikkim, which is only partially true. History speaks of the 1826 Kotopa Insurrection when the Lepchas rose against Bhutias in Sikkim and the Lepcha Prime Minister Bholod was murdered which made 800 Lepcha subjects of Sikkim flee to Antu and settle there. But villagers in Ilam claim their forefathers had actually gone to receive the Sikkim contingent at Phatak, which is today the border area between Ilam and Darjeeling proving that Lepchas were already living in Ilam before 1826 while some migrated at that time. It is also argued that *Mayel Lyang* might have been extended up to Ilam and it could well have been because Mt. Kanchenjunga is very much visible from Ilam too. The etymology of Ilam is believed to come from two Lepcha words *It* and *Lyang*. *It* means to 'bring to being' and *lyang* means 'place' combined to suggest place of origin. Likewise, the names of rivers, trees and villages in Ilam owing their origin to the Lepcha language make one believe that Lepchas have been living in Ilam for a long while.

*Village of Jilbong*

There was a time when Lepcha explorers were looking for a place to settle when they chanced upon a dense jungle. It was vast and it took them seven days and seven nights to decide where to settle until they found the section of the *rani malat* plant. So they decided to cut and clear that portion of the forest and prepared a ground for them to settle. This place was called *Jilbong Lyang* until it was later changed to Chindepani. But for the purpose of this thesis, I shall be referring to the village as Jilbong because the Lepcha population there preferred this name.

Jilbong is a cluster of villages located in Kolbung -1 Village Development Committee (VDC)[7], 12 kilometres from Fikkal bazaar. It passes through the famous tea garden of Kanyam, Ilam. On top of the Kanyam tea garden is the *Singram Pano Longtsaok* which often goes unnoticed but has a historical significance to the existence of Lepchas in the area. These rocks were the hiding place or the resting place for the *Pano* (king) who had fought many battles and shed much blood. At one point, he felt guilty and slaughtered an ox in between the two huge rocks and was believed to have said, "From now onwards, let the Lepchas not have to go to war or kill people." So they believed that this is why Lepchas avoid war and conflict.

[7] VDCs are made up of an average of nine wards, depending on the population of the district. There are several VDCs in each district. It is known as *Gaon Bikas Samiti* in Nepali.

*Longtsaoks* on top of Kanyem teagarden


Historic Place: *Singram Panu Longtsaok*

The last public vehicle stop is the Harkatey Bazar. From there on it is about half an hour downhill and one has to walk past the Bahun Gaon (Brahmin village) to reach Jilbong. There is a Sharda Primary in the village but the children have to go to a different village to attend a higher secondary school. The level of school drop out is very high in Jilbong and has been lamented by Nepali researchers in the area. The nearest monastery is in Fikkal town where the head lama is a Lepcha.

Table 5. Clan Distribution in Jilbong

| | **Clans** | **No. of Households** |
|---|---|---|
| 1. | Molommoo | 13 |
| 2. | Lucksommoo | 8 |
| 3. | Pugongmoo | 6 |
| 4. | Lingdamoo | 1 |

5. Rongongmoo 1

6. Sandyangmoo 1

7. Sungumoo 1

The 31 families in Jilbong included households of six patrilinial and one matrilineal clan. Sungumoo is the only house where the mother and the daughter live with the same clan name. The typical Lepcha house in Ilam is different from the traditional Lepcha house known as *dakey mo lee*. From the construction of the house to the raw materials used, Ilam houses are thatch-roofed (or tin) and made of mud walls (or tin). The house is usually whitewashed and decorated with red earth on its borders and window frames. It actually looks like a typical house found in rural Nepal. From the outside, one cannot differentiate between a Lepcha and a non-Lepcha house although once you go inside, the fact that the rooms would not be well furnished would indicate a Lepcha home. The kitchen is usually separate. After marriage, most sons find a piece of land in their father's property and build their own house to start the family.

Typical house in Ilam

A woman daubing the walls with red earth

*Conclusion*

The brief introduction of the three villages of Tingvong, Bom Busty and Jilbong indicates the existence of Lepchas in the respective places for a long time. While Tingvong is a homogenous area, Bom Busty and Jilbong are rather heterogeneous. Tingvong still held on to the village story of origin and the villagers are able to trace their clan origin too. Bom Busty and Jilbong Lepchas do not really know the origin of the village except the meaning of the names and have to compete with other communities about the changing village names. Secondly, Tingvong and Jilbong are organized in clusters whereas Bom Busty households are scattered although those belonging to the same clan are seen to be close in proximity. Thirdly, the houses in all three villages retain some traditional characteristics despite external influences to its appearance.

## Chapter 3

## Traditional Lepcha Religion

Often times, the religion of Lepchas is seen to be confusing, contradictory, double-layered (Torri 2010:153), difficult, atheistic (Risley), and 'nothing spiritual' (Morris 1938:287) about it. Scholars and administrators usually described the early religion of Lepchas as animists and nature worshippers, but by the time they studied the Lepchas, influences of Buddhism and its practices had already pervaded their everyday life. The search for an unadulterated traditional form of Lepcha religion is therefore an ardent task as the introduction of new ideas and practices made way for the acceptance of a modified or a syncretised version of their original religion. Traditional religion is defined as a religion, which has not spread as the world religions, but has remained in original socio-cultural environment (Bonney 2004), as we have made an attempt to view the Lepcha traditional religion as not just the way things used to be, but as a localized version of it today. This chapter will mostly deal with secondary sources of scholars and anthropologists who collected and recorded many of the mythical stories before changes took place in Lepcha society. Likewise, elderly Lepchas who are able to remember the stories have also been referred to cross check and verify with what has been written by anthropologists. In this light, it should be remembered that the sources are scattered and collected over a span of many years from people with varied backgrounds and might be both biased and limited.

Some anthropologists opine that to understand religion it is the rites rather than beliefs that needs to be focused, but this chapter reiterates Siiger's idea that the totality of the Lepcha religious beliefs can be extracted from their cults, cult-prayers, myths, legends etc. Stocks (1975) also opines that a clear idea of what can be called the original Lepcha religion will probably only be possible with an exhaustive study of all the tales. Therefore an attempt has been made to examine the myths and legends, which hopefully sheds light on re-creating the traditional Lepcha religion in a modest manner. Interview inputs have also been included along with observations regarding the recent developments in 'original' Lepcha religion. Stocks opines 'a clear idea of what can be called the original Lap-cha religion will probably be only possible with an exhaustive study of all the tales' (Stocks 1975: 9). While the tales are on the verge of extinction as the landscape and demography changed with newer narratives replacing the old folklores, this chapter has tried to put together a basic understanding of the belief systems of the Lepchas.

The Lepcha myths are distinct but share many commonalities with the mythological narratives of indigenous people from around the world. 'Oh, we also have an Adam and Eve story, we also have the story of Noah, we also have the story of Babel' (Longkumer 2010: 88). Likewise, Lepchas also have a creation story, a flood story, and the tower story. Interestingly, the local version of all these stories also plays a big role in the Lepcha cosmology. While the differing accounts of the same story in different places create a colourful diversity adding more dimensions to a single story, it often becomes problematic to do a proper comparative study and to have a standard

version of the same story in the formation of a pan-Lepcha identity. One example can be taken of the flood story where Mt. Tendong is believed to be the saviour hill for Lepchas. After the Teesta-Rangeet rendezvous and the waters rose to flood the land, Lepchas are believed to have climbed Mt. Tendong and Manoam Hill to save them from being drowned. Those who climbed *Tendong* saw in distance that *Manoam* hill was disappearing under water so they prayed to stay alive and were thus saved, making the hilltop the ultimate place of refuge. Interestingly, Tingvong residents refer to two different peaks found in their vicinity when it comes to the flood story. Langham chyu and Lingee chyu, the highest of the peaks in that area, are believed to have competed to stand taller and not drown when the water level increased. Langham is believed to have folded his legs and sat in an upright position whereas Lingee decided to stretch his body taller so he would not drown. And, when the water rose, Langham drowned but Lingee remained afloat. It is these differing accounts of the same flood story that could be puzzling while dealing with Lepcha myths, as everybody would know about the flood, but not everyone would have similar mountain peaks that drowned or did not drown during the deluge. But the Tendong story is an accepted version with the government of Sikkim declaring 8$^{th}$ August as Tendong Hlo Rum Faat (which will be discussed later) to mark this occasion. In this, we see two competing narratives of the same story in the same community. The localized versions are more authentic to the people from the local area since the stories have been directly passed from their forefathers, but it could pose a challenge to unite the community through local myths as community myths. We can then see a two-tier cosmology of the flood myth, which is impossible to separate

because the local myth is 'bound within a certain locality' (Longkumer 2010: 83) and the general myth is accessible 'to the wider world' (*Ibid*).

Another problem while trying to understand the Lepcha cosmology is the usage of same name for different deities or the usage of many names for the same deity. Therefore the characters get confusing and difficult to build up a chronology of the series of events involving that deity. For instance, Guru Rinpoche also known as Padmasambhava, the founder of Buddhism in Tibet, is believed to have battled a Lepcha 'protagonist' (Bentley Forthcoming) on his way to Tibet. The possible Lepcha warriors include Thikung Adik, Thikung Munsalong and Zor Bongthing himself. It gets confusing at some point because there is a high possibility of mixing the characters which is noticed by Siiger in 1972 when he remarked that the same names are often referred for the same deity.

But as we attempt to define the religion of the Lepchas, it should be noted that Lepchas do not even have a word for 'religion' *per se*. Today, the word *sang-gyo* is often used to mean 'religion' although *sang-gyo* is actually the shortened version for Buddhism and is today used to refer to other religions as well. In other words, Lepchas never had a religion as we understand today. They believed in spiritual beings (Tylor 1871) that existed in their environment separating the good and the bad spirits, revering and appeasing as necessary. It was not until the coming of other religions and the acceptance and rejection of these systems into their beliefs that makes us question the traditional religion of the Lepchas. While animism could be the simple answer to the

traditional religion of the Lepchas, a deeper look will reveal that they believed in a wide array of gods making them polytheists. In a way, they fall in line with the evolution of religion propounded by Tylor, passing through the three stages of animism, polytheism, and finally monotheism. This chapter will look into the first two stages while the belief in one god shall be discussed in the following chapters.

**Concept of God**

> 'To the Lepchas the supernatural world is divided into two groups, the *rum*, or the mainly benevolent supernatural beings, and the *mung*, or the malignant supernatural beings. Any evil occurrence is in the first instance ascribed to the malignant activities of the *mung*, but it may, under certain conditions, also be due to temporary ill-will on the part of some or other *rum*' (Siiger 1967: 152).

Lepchas believed in the existence of gods and demons simultaneously. The gods are called rum and the demons (or evil spirits) are called the mung. The rum is supposed to cause happiness while the mung are the demons that cause sorrow (Stocks 1975: 59). There are numerous gods and an even wider array of spirits that cause illness and misfortune if unhappy and bring health and fortune if properly propitiated. The focus is mostly on pleasing and pampering the mungs (Tamlong 2008: 40), as the fear of the devil was seen to be greater than the fear of god. But as much as the evil spirits needed to be pacified, the rum could also suffer from 'ill-will' if the sacrifices were neglected (Plaisier 2007: 27). Hence, it was important to please both the gods and the demons

although it can be argued that the religion was dominated by the fear of the evil mung (Siiger 1955: 188).

*Who are the gods?*

> In the beginning there was nothing but God—God *Rum*, so says the Lepcha folklore and he created the world out of earth and rock. He decorated the empty sky with countless stars and the world he filled with plants, animals, and birds. He then created the Himalayas, the elder brother of all mountains, and many rivers and their tributaries. (Kotturan 1983: 122)

Lepchas believe in rum, the good spirit to whom they offer their prayers and thanksgiving. But there is no single rum –that one supreme being they look up to, as the attention is directed more towards the many gods to be called upon for different occasions. Rums are believed to answer prayers as local myths narrate different characters praying to different gods for different things. But it is the creator God, It-bu-moo who receives an important place in Lepcha cosmology for creating the heavens and the earth. This supernatural is a female god and is invoked on most occasions as she is credited to have created the whole world and decorated the skies with the stars. 'Still the sky did not show all its beauty, and the Creator ornamented it with clouds so that the mountains were sometimes shaded, and he saw it was good' (Stocks 1975: 23). The creation story is very similar to the Biblical version except that the Lepcha creator is credited to have created other gods too. According to Stocks (1975) the five original

gods include It-bu-moo, the creator God and her husband Pa-sandi; their children Nazong-ngyu and Takbo-thing[8], and Tashey-thing the son of the former. Fudongthing and Nazongnyu were believed to be the first couple equivalent to biblical Adam and Eve hence the progenitors of the Lepcha race. Between the two, Nazongnyu occupies a prominent position among the gods and is also known as the 'goddess of procreation' (Siiger 1972: 238) since she is the mother of mankind associated with childbirth and responsible for both the conception of the child and for its sex. While the goddess and her husband is responsible for giving the soul to a child, the sex of the child depends on the kind of sacrifices and invocations made by the parents to the goddess. The fifth god is listed as Tashe-thing, who is not really the son of the first couple but is actually a Buddhist figure, incorporated into the Lepcha cosmology. (The first few children of Fudongthing and Nazongnyu were actually deemed illegitimate because of their parent's incestuous union) Tashi-thing is actually Guru Rinpoche who introduced Buddhism to Tibet and is believed to have passed through the Lepcha country on his way to Tibet. *En route*, he is believed to have challenged a Lepcha *bongthing* as the two competed with supernatural powers to settle their dispute. The *bongthing* is believed to have won (although the win depends on whether the person telling the story is a Buddhist practitioner or not because a Buddhist Lepcha could also tell of Guru Rinpoche's win) and as Guru Rinpoche left, he had predicted a lama would return to this wild and untamed area, 'subdue the demons and convert the Lepcha people to Buddhism'

[8] Here we see the problem in Lepcha mythology pointed by Siiger regarding the usage of different names for the same deity or vice-versa. For instance, *Takbo-thing* has been used instead of *Fudongthing* while *Takbo-thing* is ofen used for *Tashe-thing*.

(Kotturan 1983: 17). While it is just legends and local lores that tell of Guru Rinpoche and his antics on the way to Tibet, he has become a part of the folklores and local religious beliefs, revered in Lepcha homes today. It is no wonder Stocks labeled Tashe-thing aka Guru Rinpoche as one of the main gods. However, he is a later addition to the Lepcha religion.

Besides the listed five, an important 'god' in the cosmology of the Lepchas is the hunting god known in Lepcha as the *Pong-Rum* (Siiger 1978:426)/ *Pum-Rum* (Das 1978: 68)/ *Dju Thing*/ *Rum-Zong-Pano* (Das 1978:192)/ *Chyu Mung* (Little 2007: 88)/ *Zamfee Mung*/ *Hlo Mung*/ *Hlo Rum* etc. While the figure is very similar to the mysterious yeti whose footprints have been found in the Himalayan range especially on the way to Mt. Everest, the *Pong Rum* has appeared to hunters on different occasions and left lasting impacts on Lepchas whose stories fill their homes, especially in Dzongu (See Little 2007). Hunting is a male activity and there are certain beliefs and rituals very closely attached to this event that the hunters are required to observe. For instance, a hunter is to refrain from eating the flesh of the first hundred animals he kills, unless he shoots them with a gun (Morris 1938: 193). It is also required for the hunters to leave a portion of meat usually where the game has been killed so to give back what was taken from the forest. Another belief is such that in case the dead animal needs to be left behind for various reasons (may be the hunter was alone and could not carry it back), he should cut one foreleg and one hind leg on opposite sides of the animal's body so the animal is no longer whole, because they believe that the yeti will come and take it back to the forest (Little 2007: 88). Interestingly, *Pong Rum* is also believed to have given the

Lepchas bows, arrows and knives, and taught them how to shoot fish (Das 1978: 192). He is regarded as the king of the jungle –master of all animals, therefore occupying an important place in the hunting complex of Lepcha society. While it is only logical for a hunter-gatherer society to look up to the hunting god, it can be noticed that the character is also referred to as *Chyu Mung/ Hlo Mung/ Zamfee Mung.* The presence of *mung* in these names gets confusing whether the hunting god is actually a god or a devil or both. Siiger well explains the transition of the god to a devil with his argument that 'the powerful hunting *rum* has turned into a primarily malicious being because the hunters have neglected proper ceremonial sacrifices' (Siiger 1978: 428). It is believed that the *Pong Rum* would cause trouble if the hunter stopped offering the sacrifices that is due to the hunting god. One of the most popular antics is the way he pursues with a whistling sound that people automatically account it to their negligence of appeasing the hunting god. It is this disregard to the king of the jungle that has transformed the *rum* to a *mung* and has become a feared figure to avoid contact and lock their doors at night to keep the yeti spirit out (Wangchuk and Zulca 2007). People have many stories about the troubles caused by the creature as the following paragraph accounts the way Tingvong residents got rid of the *Hlo Mung* who had continuously pestered their village surroundings.

> *There was a time when a group of yetis from Langham chyu would look down toward Kusoong village and re-enact everything the villagers did during the day at night. But the people in the village were frustrated because their fields were damaged and people started disappearing too. They were fed up. So the villagers devised a plan to kill the yetis. One day they prepared cauldrons of ci and acted*

*like they were feasting while pretending to kill each other with wooden bamfok's they had prepared during the day. As expected, the yetis were watching the incident and repeated the same when they came out at night. Unfortunately, the villagers had replaced the wooden bamfoks with the real bamfoks as they drank ci and slayed each other. It is believed that everyone killed each other and there was only one yeti left who ran away wailing and screaming where nobody could find him. And this is how the Hlo Mung have disappeared from the region* (Fieldwork 2010).

*Who is the devil*?

Mungs are believed to be the abandoned children of Fudongthing and Nazongnyu, the first Lepcha couple who threw away the children because of their illicit relationship. After neglecting the first seven children, the goddess of procreation is believed to have fed milk to the next child and raised it as the first human. Seeing this biasness, the deserted children got jealous and turned to evil spirits. The countless number of evil spirits is feared from a very young age, and the children are threatened with devils whenever they are naughty.

> 'The childish ghost-devil num-een *moong* is feared by all children, and a great number claim to have heard it moaning; other favourite bogies are Tong-ryong *moong*, who looks like a tiger and runs after and kills people, Mi-toor, the unkillable dog, and other theriomorphic devils' (Gorer 2005: 312).

Indeed, the image of the demon is described as someone who ate flesh, drank blood, and caused droughts. They sound uncontrollable and people are always fearful of them. Humans try different ways to appease them. For instance, in every cardamom field, there is a place for the *Mung Li* (devil's house) for a devil called Thyok Dum who is known to destroy cardamom plants. The farmers usually build a *Mung Li* for this devil in the corner of the field hoping that he will not damage the field (Morris 1938:186). But it was not just the humans they tortured, even birds had their wings torn off while rats lost their paws and nothing was ever left undestroyed (Stocks 1975: 104).

Among the many *mungs,* the most dreaded and dangerous is Lasso Mung Pano. In Lepcha, *lasso* means 'to change', *mung* means 'devil' and *pano* meant 'king' so he is the king of the devils. He was believed to be the first born of Fudongthing and Nazongnyu, and was considered the 'archenemy of mankind' (Foning 1987: 124). He is hard to please and keeps troubling the humans because he was jealous of his younger siblings who were loved by his parents. So he united the forsaken siblings and started harassing and eating human beings. The Lepchas were fed up of his antics and wanted to kill the troublemaker. But it took a long while for them to kill Lasso Mung as he was believed to have confused his killers by changing his appearance twelve different times. When he was being chased, he took the form of twelve different animals namely; *kolok* (rat), *long* (ox), *suthong* (tiger), *punthyong* (eagle), *sader* (thinder), *bu* (snake), *oon* (horse), *luk* (sheep), *sahu* (monkey), *heek* (rooster), *kuzyu* (dog), and *mun* (pig) thus marking the twelve-year cycle of the Lepcha calendar. When he was finally killed, the Lepchas celebrated a new beginning—a new start without the troubles of the past year,

which marks the New Year for the Lepchas known as *Nambun/ Namsoong*. Despite the transformationsinto animals it is believed that *mung* in human disguise/ form is believed to be the worst (Siiger 1967:152). The existence of so many *mung*s in the Lepcha cosmology is hard to fathom; even Siiger was in awe of so many *mung*s (Plaisier 2007: 15);

> 'As soon as one leaves the village area, the influence of *mung* increases, and nobody is ever safe from their uncanny persecution. The virgin forest, never cleared and cultivated and therefore uncontrolled, is the actual domicile of the *mung*, where they go on forays by day and night. Obviously the Lepchas feel insecure when moving about in the jungle, defenceless against the unexpected assaults of the *mung*' (Siiger 1967: 177).

**Concepts of Heaven and Hell**

The idea of heaven and hell is vague among the Lepchas. There is no sure answer although folk tales do tell of a country of gods known as *Rumlyang* and a country of ancestors known as *Mayel Kyong*. If the place above the sky is *rumlyang*, the place beneath the earth is supposed to be 'water, fire and wind (causing earthquakes)' (Awasty 1978: 31). Hence, the concept of hell is relatively absent although there is one mention of 'the country of *A-nok*' (Stocks 1975: 73) in a story about the building of a palace by twins. This mention is too minor and not convincing enough to come to a conclusion that hell exists in Lepcha cosmology because *A-nok* in Lepcha means black and while hell could be associated with black as the darkness that surrounds the devils and the

demons, it is a weak argument. Also, hell is regarded as the place of suffering where the wicked are punished after death. For the Lepchas, they believe in returning to their peaks of origin after they die. So there cannot possibly be a hell for them to go to. To sum it up, Lepchas do not believe in hell but they believe in their ancestral place called *Mayel Kyong*. There is a strong sense of veneration and worship towards the immortal souls of this country of *Mayel* that holds a significant place in their traditional belief system.

*Heaven is the Country of Gods*

Lepchas believe in the country of gods known as *Rumlyang, which* is above the sky where everything is at plenty, and people live with fairies there.

> 'The *Rum* country is flower-like, the people inhabit the calyx during life, while it is on the petals that heaven lies. Time is so long on earth, that a hundred months of our time equals one day. Everyone is good there on the petals, drink is equal to '*chi a-rok*,' the Spirit of '*chi*' (Stocks 1975: 19).

The *rum* country is a mysterious yet an assuring place to go if they needed refuge. On one occasion, Ati-azyak is believed to have flown up to the *Rum* country, and watched the demon brothers search for him (Stocks 1975: 92). It is also believed that men and animals could fly up to the *Rum* country from the earth without dying (*Ibid*: 11). While the stories sound outlandish, flying people in Lepcha mythology are very common. Interestingly, Lepchas have not only flown to the *rum* country, but have tried

creating a stairway to heaven as well. Skilled in pottery (Tamsang 1982: 73), they started building a tower of earthen pots to reach *Rum lyang*. They piled the pots and had reached quite high—only a pole away from the heaven when one of them asked for a hook;

> The man at the top shouted *"kok vim yang tale" (Hand up the pole with the hook)*, while the men at the bottom heard the words *"chek tala" (cut it down)*. These wondering greatly shouted up to ask the man at the top whether he really meant it. This time they heard the words *"ak ak" (yes yes)*. And at once they cut the tower down... (Stocks 1975: 36)

It was an enterprising and a very eager effort from the Lepchas to build the tower of earthen pots and reach heaven. Though this incident poked fun and ridiculed the Lepchas, the presence of potsherds in Daramdin, West Sikkim stands proof of the Lepcha quest to reach the country of gods. Heaven is probably the same nice place we all imagine it to be and the Lepchas' attempt to visit the same should not be ignored. But this wonderful country of *Rumlyang* should not be confused with the other enthralling place of *Mayel Kyong*, the country of Lepcha ancestors.

*The Country of Ancestors*

Located somewhere near Mt. Kanchenjunga lies the country of Mayel known to be the home of their ancestors where food is at plenty and lives are immortal. Foning equates the place with the biblical 'garden of eden' (Foning 1987: 51) although it is much closer

to heaven or the 'paradise myth' (Eliade 1959:255) found across different societies, where the idea of immortality plays an important factor. It is believed that there are seven Lepcha families in *Mayel* living a traditional Lepcha life. They have all the food they want and the crops in *Mayel* grow a hundred times bigger. There is no disease or any famine and the people there are immortal. They are infants in the morning, adults during day and old people by evening.

> 'The people of Mayel live in seven huts; they are immortal; each morning they are infants, at midday they are grown men and in the evening they are old... They wear the traditional Lepcha costume of clothes made of nettle cloth and small basket-work hats. They are somewhere between the gods and ordinary human beings; they are not gods because they live on earth but they are not human because they do not die' (Gorer 2005).

These mysterious mythological creatures embody both god-like and human-like characteristics making them 'semi-divine beings who have access to the domain of the gods' (Foning 1987: 52). When the creator *It-bu-mu* made rice, millet and maize; she put the people of *Mayel* in charge of these crops, and they are believed to have given humans their first seeds of the crops. Lepchas believe that they will never go hungry because the *Mayel* beings will always provide them with enough to eat. They believe that the people of *Mayel* will intercede on their behalf with the gods for sufficient rain and fertility of the soil for their crops (Foning 1987: 53). Lepchas also do not believe that they will ever vanish because the people of *Mayel* are looking out for them and will come to their rescue if tragedy struck. There was a time when the way to *Mayel Kyong*

was easily accessible and people from *Mayel* would also come to the earth. They say that the people of *Mayel* even helped build the palace of *Fyung Di* near Pemionchi and interacted with ordinary people, but disappeared in a clap of thunder (Gorer 2005: 237). It is believed that only a 'pure Lepcha' (Little 2007: 83), one who has Lepcha ancestry, speaks Lepcha language and follows Lepcha tradition is given access to this country. Interestingly, when humans tried to find *Mayel Kyong*, only a few have found way through the narrow and heavily guarded paths. One incident tells of a hunter from Sakyong who entered their terrain but ran away after some misgivings and he was 'pelted with snow and hail' (Gorer 2005: 238) blocking the road ever since. In recent days, one young Lepcha man from Kalimpong recounts his travels in search of *Mayel Kyong*. The roads were treacherous and hard but he had finally reached the pass where he could place his palm on the rock and could enter. But an overwhelming rush of emotions stopped him from doing that and he decided not to continue further because there would be no coming back. So he never entered the country of *Mayel* but came back more knowledgeable about Lepcha culture and tradition. He says that he had never read any of the old texts and did not know the mythical stories but after this trip he is well versed in Lepcha folk tales and can even officiate certain rituals as a *bongthing*. There is thus a belief of an unfathomable power in the *Mayel* country. Offerings are made in honour of the people of *Mayel* every year after the harvest is over. They are believed to look after the Lepchas and save them from famine, drought and any other natural calamities. It is therefore only natural to revere their 'living ancestors'

(Gowloog 1995: 106) as gods who watched over them and provided for their well being with the production of crops and the maintenance of the same.

**Worship Patterns**

> 'Worship is rendered almost exclusively to the bad spirits and not to the good. For, say the Lepchas, the good spirits never do us any harm; it is only the malignant spirits which we have to fear' (Waddell 1978: 7-8).

Lepchas do not have a permanent place of worship. So they worship anywhere their *mun* or *bongthing* considers appropriate. 'There is no mention of temples or other places of worship, or of idols, etc' (Stocks 1975: 14). Sacrifices and offerings known as *Rum Faat* are made of flowers, fruits, fish, birds, rice and *ci*. It is the responsibility of the *mun* or the *bongthing* to conduct rituals from birth till death. It can be observed that most of their prayers and offerings are directed to the mountains, trees, rivers, streams, plants and nature in all its forms. We can see the priority given to nature in Lepcha cosmology as God is sought through nature, creating an 'eco-centric approach' (Lepcha 2009:26). Lepchas call themselves *Mutanchi Rongkup*, which is understood as the children of the snowy peak. Here too, we can see them identifying themselves as the children of nature in a very candid way. There was a time when the various invocations to nature used to be a highly anticipated community affair. 'Everybody in our village, including old men, women and children, used to be present; they are now attended by only a skeleton of the population left behind in the village, and at home' (Foning 1987:

47). In a couple of decades since, the participation is still scanty and the influence of other organized religions could be blamed for it, but Lepcha elders and *shezums* are trying their part to continue the different rituals and *rum faats* that are still being practised and will be discussed below.

*Chyu Rum Faat*

In simple understanding *chyu* means mountain, so *Chyu Rum Faat* is a time of prayers and offerings to the mountains—especially Mt. Kanchenjunga. It is called *Chirim* in Sikkim and is celebrated twice a year there while the Kalimpong Lepchas observe it only in late autumn (Bentley 2007: x). The worship of Kanchenjunga extended beyond the Lepcha realm when Kanchenjunga became the guardian deity of Sikkim and Buddhist beliefs were incorporated into the ritual to commemorate it as *Pang Lhabsol.*

> 'They took up our 'Chyu Rum Fat' worship of our mountain gods, and gave the glorified name of 'Pang Labsol', and incorporated it into the Buddhist mystery plays, and other dances. They made it brilliantly colourful and ceremoniously ritualistic' (Foning 1987: 286).

Indeed, the celebrations are elaborate with a state holiday marking the occasion. In recent news, the Kanchenjunga *bongthing*[9], known to have offered prayers to the mountains since the King's rule, passed away in 2011 leaving a void in the continuation

[9] Samdup Taso, 83 was a resident of Nung, Tingvong village and had been performing the Kanchenjunga rituals for a long time. Known to be a descendant of the first *bongthing*, he however failed to pass on his knowledge and oral tradition to his son and grandson as the tribe mourned the loss of the last mountain priest.

of the rituals. Interestingly, the Kalimpong Lepchas do not celebrate *Pang Lhabsol* because of its exclusivity as a Sikkimese festival.

*Lyang Rum Faat*

In Lepcha, *Lyang* means earth and *Rum* is God. So this ritual is a worship of the land, marked by prayers to the earth. It is celebrated during Spring season and is officiated by the *mun* or the *bongthing*. This ritual is annually observed in Kalimpong while Lepchas in Sikkim are not really aware of it. Because of the nature of this ritual *Lyang Rum Faat* is also called an environmental festival today (Bentley 2007: x)

*Lee Rum Faat*

In Lepcha, *lee* (also *li*) means house, so *Lee Rum Faat* is the prayer to the god of the house. It is usually members of certain household/ clan that come together and invoke the blessings of their respective guardian peaks.

*Muk zyuk Ding Rum Faat*

In simpler understanding, *muk-zyuk-ding rum faat* is the worship of the sprouting of grass. In Lepcha, *muk* means grass, *zyuk* is to sprout and *ding* is to stand forth. This is the first ceremony of the Lepcha calendar and is seen as the celebration of nature. It is a

way of giving respect to their environment and the surroundings. The ceremony is conducted by a *mun* or a *bongthing* along with members of the community. The opening texts begin by thanking the creator god *(It bu moo)* for creating perfume and oil giving plants. While the worshipper acknowledges the creator, he/ she says that the responsibility of 'moulding and shaping nature' is in the hands of the prime-baby-grass *(mukkup)*. The observance of *muk-zyuk-ding rum faat* in Kalimpong is an annual event while Sikkim stopped celebrating it till 2002, when under the initiative of the Lepcha associations of Sikkim they made a comeback in Kabi Longstok, the historic place where the blood brotherhood treaty between the Bhutias and Lepchas was commemorated.

*Sakyoo Rum Faat*

Lepchas observe *Sakyoo Rum Faat* each year after harvest around October-November. It is a thanksgiving ceremony and prayer to the year's produce and no one is allowed to eat from the new harvest until the rituals are over. It is also an offering to the seven immortal Lepcha couples of *Mayel Kyong* who is believed to have given them their first seeds of the crops. They offer their respect and thanks to them for providing not just the seeds, but looking after their crops and protecting them from any disease or natural calamities. Their belief in these immortal couples is such that in case of any natural disasters, it is predicted that these couples will protect and rescue the Lepcha tribe.

*Satap Rum Faat*

*Satap Rum Faat* is the offering to *satap rum*, the god of hail storms. It is performed during winter, around January. During the prayers, *satam rum* is asked not to send storms, natural disasters, hail or flood but accept the offerings instead.

*Teesta Rum Faat*

Following the September 18, 2011 earthquake in Sikkim, the *Teesta Rum Faat* was observed with a ceremony of prayers and offering held at the confluence of Rongyoo and Rangeet on January 30, 2012. It was a sacrifice to avoid natural disasters such as earthquakes and landslides.

*Tendong Hlo Rum Faat*

During the time of the deluge, Lepchas are believed to have climbed Mt. Tendong and fervently prayed to It-bu-rum to save them from drowning. In answer to their prayers, the waters subsided and the tribe was saved. Located at an altitude of 8,675 feet, Mt. Tendong is the saviour hill for the Lepchas, as *Tendong Hlo Rum Faat* is celebrated across the region in commemoration to the flood story. Here, Tendong is the name of the hill; *Hlo* means the Himalayas and *Rum Faat* is the worship to it. It has also been said that the name of the hill is actually Tungrong meaning 'the uplifted horn or ladder'

(Tamsang 2004:27) but had been anglicized by the British to Tendong. Since the hill is located in South Sikkim, Lepchas from other places visit Sikkim and climb the Tendong hill as a pilgrimage during this occasion. In Sikkim, *Tendong Hlo Rum Faat* is observed as a state holiday on August 8th since 1997.

*Nambum/ Namsoong*

The victory over *lasso mung's* death marks the celebration of a new beginning, the New Year for the Lepchas known as *namsoong/ nambun*. It usually falls after Christmas and is actually a weeklong celebration. The festivities begin only after offering thanks to the gods for the past year and bribing the devils to leave the people alone in the coming year. The negative energy from the past year is to be left behind. So on the eve of the new moon, when the moon is in its darkest phase, offerings are made to the evil spirits who are responsible for causing trouble in the past year. This discarding of the unwanted is called *lut-dyan* and requires items like cereals, twigs and leaves, figurines, fruits, miniature bows and arrows, pieces of cloth etc (Foning 1987: 247). There is also a practice of *lasso* playing when young people in the evening visit different Lepcha homes with songs and skits.

*Longtsaok*s

*Longtsaok*s are the stones erected to commemorate a special occasion or an event. It is derived from two Lepcha words, *long* meaning 'stone' and *tsaok* (Tamsang 1980: 672) meaning hard. These are upright stones found in different parts of Lepcha inhabited areas with a sacred sentiment attached to it. An example can be taken from the widely known Kabi Longtsaok, where the Lepcha chief Thikung Tek and the Tibetan Khye Bhumsa are believed to have signed a blood brotherhood in the 17th century. It is a historic landmark where the stones stood witness to a sacred covenant built between two communities. These stones have withstood time and still stand tall at Kabi, 17 kilometres North of Gangtok thus deriving the name Kabi Longtsaok.

*Longtsaok*s in Upper Dzongu, Sikkim.

*Longtsaok in Ilam.*

The use of stones in traditional Lepcha burial has also been accounted in detail by Foning (1987) as he mentions the lining of stones when somebody dies in the family.

'Over the grave, flat stones are used as cover. With the earth around, a low spherical mound is raised, on top of which, normally, four longish flat stones are balanced; this is considered the normal outside arrangements of a grave' (Foning 1987: 40).

Likewise, Lepchas also use huge stones during the construction of their house. While the focus is usually on the ingenuity of carving the wood and constructing the house without using a single nail, the wooden pillars usually stand on the big rocks at the bottom. It is therefore very important to select the perfect stones that could hold a Lepcha house together. The *long*s are thus an invaluable item during house building too. Besides the big stones, the smaller celtic stones known as *sadaer long* also hold a strong belief about its possession. Taken from the Lepcha word *sadaer* meaning thunder and *long* as stone, these thunderstones are small in size but when rubbed together with few drops of water, the paste is used as medicine for all kinds of illness. It is supposedly used for pneumonia, mumps, gangrene, gout and any disease under the sun (Foning 1987: 31).

*Naamthar*s

*Naamthar*s are commonly understood as the religious books of the Lepchas –the original manuscripts that hold the stories, histories and philosophies of the Lepcha ethos. It covers the different aspects of Lepcha culture and is believed to coexist as a key guide for their life, right from birth to the death. *Naamthar* is a word borrowed from Tibetan *namtar*, which means biography –a text containing a sacred legend, some chapter of

native lore or a hagiography about the life of a saint or miracle worker. True enough, there are some *naamthars* with translated works of Tibetan Buddhist texts to Lepcha, but there also exists original manuscripts that contain original stories purely based on Lepcha subjects, topics and issues (Tamsang, 2009: 9). The manuscripts are divided into two categories depending on Lepcha and Tibetan origin. It is to be noted that Lepchas are using *Naamtho Naamthar* instead of just *Naamthar* as the word *Naamtho* is broken to *naam* meaning year and *thar* meaning the record of incidents and events thus implying the documentation of the Lepcha story. In the Ngassey village of Kalimpong, the *Naamtho Naamthar* day is observed every year for reading the ancient Lepcha manuscripts. From the story of creation of Fodongthing and Nazongnyu, the first male and female in Lepcha tradition to the importance of bamboo to a Lepcha; various other folk tales, traditional knowledge about various items and predictions of the future are included in these texts. The seven books read on *Naamtho Naamthar* day were:

1) *Pomic-Potong Njyumjyo*

2) *Fodong-Nazoang Nyumjyo*

3) *Lakok-Lanyen Byumjyo*

4) *Koying-Duren Nyumjyo*

5) *Lafo-Ladong Nyumjyo*

6) *Nyulik-Mundong Nyumjyo*

7) *Shimvonmu Ungtuksot*

Readers are encouraged to use the rhythmic tones that accompanied the narration. Imitating the sound of swinging bamboos to the cicada chirping, there is both an emotional lamentation and an attractive sound commanding attention from the listeners. The emphasis on nature, even when it comes to reading ancient texts, is evident here.

*Naamthars* being read in Ngassey, Kalimpong.

### *Mun* and *Bongthing*

The traditional Lepcha religion is officiated by *mun*s and *bongthing*s, or priestesses and priests respectively who act as mediators between God, men and spirits. It is their very titles that derive the name *munism* and *bongthingism* for the traditional Lepcha religion. The *mun* and the *bongthing* are required to officiate various rituals from birth to death. They are seen as powerful magicians and can expel demons and appease gods through sacrifice. But they cannot practice any black magic since their job is to help people ward

off all evil (Das 1978: 193). The *mun* can be both female and male, while the *bongthings* are all male and it is impossible for a woman to be a *bongthing*. The road to being a *mun* or a *bongthing* is not by choice, but because of some 'irresistible compulsion' (Morris 1938: 116), when the spirit possesses his/ her entire body and guides that person through a *shamanistic* initiation led by a senior *bongthing* during the first few times. There are only a certain number of these specialists in every clan, and when one dies, the office should be passed on. While it is possible for a mother and son to both be a *mun*, it is not hereditary (Morris 1937: 116). If one's grandfather is a *bongthing* but the father is not, there are chances of the grandfather's spirit taking over the person to make him the next in line to be one. During the rituals, *mun* and *bongthing* do not say their prayers and sermons by reading out from any written scriptures or notes but get possessed by an unseen force and chant their prayers flowing freely 'from within their hearts of heart' (Tamsang 1987: 51). The sacrificial offerings include *ci*, fruits, egg, fish, flowers, fowl, goat, pig etc. It is believed that the spirits of the *mun* and the *bongthing* do not always live in their mediums, but stay in a place called Tiamtan (Das 1978: 195) and only come when they are summoned to take possession of their mediums for the sacrifices.

*Who is a Mun?*

A *mun* is usually the priestess or the female *shaman* mediating between humans and the spirits. She is defined as a 'vagrant singing priest' or 'an exorciser or any experienced person' (Morris 1937: 115). The function of the *mun* is to ward off illness and disaster

through sacrifices and communication with the supernatural. But hermain task is to guide the soul of the dead to his peak of origin. It has been suggested that the *mun* is of *shamanistic* origin due to features such as her ecstatic performances, using headgear during performance, exorcism, and 'spiritual fights' (Das 1978: 196). For ordinary divinations the *mun* uses either a necklace or an egg. The egg is placed against the forehead and the eyes are closed and this helps to concentrate. By means of the egg if one sees a long straight road, it means illness in near future, if a circular road, it means serious illness; circular road arranged in the form of knot indicates that several people will die of dysentery shortly thereafter (Das: 194-195). Interestingly, there are different kinds of *muns* with differing powers among which the *Nyulik Nyusong Mun* is deemed the most powerful. Her name means 'who can bring out to the outer world, even the inner most secrets of the nether world' (Tamsang 1982: 48) She was sent to the earth to save the living creatures from the demons and is refereed in most invocations.

*Who is a Bongthing?*

A *bongthing* is a male ritual specialist or the high priest who is regarded as 'a *shaman*, a medicine man or an exorciser' (Stocks 1975:12). The word is a derivation of two Lepcha words, *abong* and *athing*. *Abong* means 'trunk, main, original' while *athing* means 'honourable, respected one' so the amalgamation results in 'the original highly honoured and respected one' (Foning 1987: 61). Indeed, a *bongthing* is a high priest, a healer and a knowledgeable figure indispensable to Lepcha society. According to

legends, he was sent to relieve the humans from the tortures of the demons, and to be an intermediary between the gods and the humans. The demons however were too many and widespread, but they agreed to negotiate with the *bongthing*;

> 'On one condition we will do everything you command, when we worry the human beings with disease and illness, we will go away and leave them in peace if, in return, you will give us something; fowls, eggs, pigs, or any other animal' (Stocks 1975: 24).

The *mungs* swore to leave the humans at peace if they would be propitiated with offerings. Hence various articles are required during Lepcha rituals. More than a *mun*, people rely on the *bongthings* and request his presence for every tiny occasion at their homes. Despite the accessibility of roads and access to health care centres, most villagers first turn to a *bongthing* for any kind of illness, as a *bongthing* from Tingvong tells of a busy day in the village because he has to go from one house to another and conduct rituals (*Ritual Journeys* 2011).

Between the *mun* and the *bongthing*, the *mun* is deemed more powerful than the *bongthing*. There are different kinds of *muns* who are divided according to their powers while there is only one kind of *bongthing*. The one distinct task associated with the *mun* is guiding the soul of the dead, which the *bongthing* does not do. The rest of the tasks might sound similar but they both have their own guardian deities and hold sacrifices annually. There is thus a difference in the way of conducting rituals, using different items as offerings and calling upon different deities. For instance, the *mun* starts her incantations since the beginning of existence while the *bongthing* usually starts at the

origin of the clan (Bentley 2007: xvi). The problem of names comes up here when we trace the first *mun* and the first *bongthing* because we have two contesting pairs are not verified. For some, Nyoolik Nysong and Azaor Bongthing were the first ritual specialists (Tamsang 1982: 47), while others trace Thikung Tek and Nikung Ngal as the first *bongthing* and *mun* respectively (Das 1978: 18, Stocks 1975: 3). It is confusing but we can leave the names aside and focus on the indispensible existence of the *mun* and the *bongthing* as key players of traditional Lepcha religion and culture as a whole. It is these specialists that hold the history and stories of the Lepcha people and the landscape as they invoke on the spirits of the land and the ancestors. Then they become more than *shaman*s and healers but 'keepers of this (Lepcha) tradition' (Torri 2010: 154).

*Bongthings at Tendong Hlo Rum Faat 2010*

Despite the need for traditional ritual specialists, the declining scenario of both the *mun* and the *bongthing* is a blow to the traditional Lepcha religion. They have since come a long way and are still under threat from various influences not just about religion but about their roles too. During the *Tendong Hlo Rum Faat* 2010, *bongthing*s from all over Sikkim had gathered in Mangan (headquarters of North Sikkim), but one could hardly recognize the kinds of performances put up by these ritual specialists. Though it can be argued that the context was different as this event was held in a community hall, it was somewhat surprising to see the *bongthing*s. The following two pictures are shown to examine the outward changes taking place in a Lepcha *bongthing*.

*Bongthings* with long white robes, feathers, beads and bells at Tendong Hlo Rum Faat 2010

In the village, *bongthings* are never seen in long white robes like the one seen in the pictures above. The closest influence on their attires could have come from the *phedangmas* of the Limbus as they are known to wear long white robes during their *pujas*. Likewise, the feathers on his head, the cowries, the bell on the beads and the noises made from hitting on the copper plate is a very new look for a minimalist Lepcha *bongthing*. The Lepchas from were also taken aback by the kind of performance that they put up as they agreed that they had never seen *bongthings* in long dresses, or the ones who use drums. Hermanns (1954) mentions that the Lepchas do not use drums and here we could see the *bongthings* banging on the copper plate. Likewise, the second picture shows the *bongthings* from behind giving us an equally baffling picture of the long robed *shamans* with belted bells and fruit-beads usually seen on a Hindu *sadhu*, as the woven coat with Lepcha patterns was the only indicator of them being Lepcha

specialists. The *bongthing*s usually wear everyday clothes even while conducting rituals except for a special headgear for certain rituals. The dancing was not altogether strange because, when possessed, the *bongthing*s also dance all around the place and the kitchen hearth. But there is fear of the 'authenticity' of *bongthingism* being taken away with these staged performances. The traditionalists have well noted the threat to the traditional religious specialists from all angles and are trying to hold on to what remains and what can be revived. In case of the *bongthing*s, there is some debate about the word origin and usage as *abong* of the *bongthing* is today being defined as *abong*, which also means 'mouth'. From this, the meaning of *bongthing* is being adjusted to make it possible to learn to be a *bongthing* because it is through the mouth that one calls upon the spirits. So, the meaning becomes something that can be learned, and the Indigenous Lepcha Tribal Association (ILTA) is on a bid to revive the *bongthing*s by organizing trainings to be a *bongthing*. Sensing a need to fill the lack of *bongthing*s in Lepcha society, they are willing to favour 'anyone who can learn and perform such duties' (Chakraborty 1998: 185). They have somewhat broken the age-old myth that *bongthingism* is destiny-driven as they try to 'increase the number of *bongthings* through training so as to disseminate and preserve the traditional culture among the Lepchas' (Roy 2010). Some still argue that a *bongthing* cannot be made but has to be destined.

*Dzongu: From Homeland to Holyland*

For long, Dzongu has been the homeland of Lepchas anywhere in the world. They identify Dzongu as that one place where Lepcha culture is at its 'purest' form; since no other community besides the Lepchas can reside in this area leaving the place untouched and unchanged from its traditional self. It was their mini *Mayel Lyang*, since most of their original boundaries were now a part of one nation state or the other. In recent days, the Lepcha homeland has taken a new *avatar* as the holy land. The coming of hydroelectric projects (which will be discussed in Chapter 7) in Dzongu meant that the Lepcha homeland was under attack. Hydel projects were creeping into their sacred place and people feared of losing their ancestral land –their mythological land where they believe to have originated from. Traditionalists argue that Dzongu is the place of Lepcha origin. They say that the original Lepcha name for Dzongu is *Faokraam Takraam* which is an amalgamation of four Lepcha words, *faok* meaning 'through or channel', *raam* meaning source, *tak* means to nestle and '*raam*' again means the source. In short, it could be understood as the source of Lepcha origin and life. Legends boast of how their creator God Itbumu created the first Lepcha man Fudongthing and the first Lepcha woman Nazongnyu from the pure, virgin snow of Mt. Kanchenjunga and were sent to live in Dzongu. The *mun* and the *bongthing* use *foakraam takraam*, indicating Dzongu in their prayers and incantations. Even the origin of the Lepcha clan *(moo)* is found in the different peaks of Kanchenjunga mountain range. Each clan has its peak (*chyu)*, lake (*da)* and cave *(lep)* that is recognized and identified accordingly. It is claimed that the number of clans among the Lepchas is in proportion to the number of peaks, lakes and

caves in the Kanchenjunga range (Roy 2008:36). After death, the soul is believed to return to the original peak for rest. The *mun* and the *bongthing* guide the souls back to their respective *chyu-da-lep*. So, the Lepchas believe that their souls go to Dzongu when they die. Also the consecration of the first *mun* and *bongthing* took place in Dzongu as did the marriage ceremony of Taarbong and Naarip, the first Lepcha couple. It was during this wedding that the system of bridal price took origin where Komsithing, elder brother of Taarbong approached the hand of Naarip from her mother with gifts comprising of items that are still in practice today. Therefore the customary laws for a Lepcha marriage was first made and practised in Dzongu. Likewise the antics of the evil *lasso mung* and the way he killed Lepchas at various places provides an interesting insight into how the villages in Dzongu got their names.

The mythological stories all come alive in the Dzongu landscape as the place becomes sacred and inescapable to a Lepcha mind. Even the ritual specialists in Dzongu are seen to be 'more powerful and the Lepcha more knowledgeable about their own culture in terms of oral traditions and ritual practices' (Bentley 2007: 106). There is an unquestionable attachment of deep cultural and traditional heritage to the Lepcha land of Dzongu which has been recognized today as the most spiritual and holy place for Lepchas like Benaras for Hindus, Gaya for Buddhists, Mecca for Muslims and Jerusalem for Christians (Roy 2007:51). While Dzongu always existed as their homeland, the realization and integration of Dzongu as their 'holy land' is an imagination that has united Lepchas bypassing the religious barriers formed after the acceptance of Buddhism, Christianity and Hinduism. Lepchas from all religious

backgrounds are accepting Dzongu as their holy land because it has become essential to own and integrate Dzongu with the Lepcha cosmology for the establishment of a united Lepcha belief system. .

## Chapter 4

### Influence of Buddhism on the Lepchas of Dzongu, North Sikkim

Following the September 18, 2011 earthquake in Sikkim, a badly damaged old Buddhist monastery in Hee Gyathang, a village in the Lepcha reserve of Dzongu in north Sikkim was being considered for demolition. The 6.9 Richter scale earthquake damaged the monastery in such a way that some villagers thought it best to destroy the structure and rebuild a new one. But there were others who did not support the idea as this was a very old monastery and the cost borne entirely by the villagers themselves and they preferred to keep it as it was, so to perhaps promote it as a heritage site in the near future. There was an attempt to save the site because of the community's involvement despite being a Buddhist place of worship. The third voice came from those who did not want to promote the age-old monastery because it was a Buddhist place of worship and traditionally Lepchas were not Buddhists. The third voice is a recent but an important voice that is being heard among Lepchas today. In the end, the monastery was to be renovated and it is being promoted as a 'community building' (Little 2011: 66) today. It is not just a Buddhist monastery but a Lepcha monastery because it represented the combined effort of Lepcha villagers.

In this chapter, we shall explore the arrival of Buddhism among the Lepcha population of Dzongu and its different dimensions that added to an open acceptance of

an alien religion. It will also look at the various arenas where Buddhism intermingled with the traditional religion and created a syncretised version of the Lepcha religion.

**Advent of Buddhism**

Buddhism was officially introduced in Sikkim from seventeenth century onwards. It was a gradual imposition by the Tibetan migrant-rulers from the north who translated many Buddhist texts into Lepcha language to bring Lepchas under the Buddhist fold. It was the beginning of 'Tibetization' (Bhasin 2002: 4) of the Lepchas. Initially Lepchas were hesitant about the new faith in the beginning as there was 'stubborn resistance' (Nebesky- Wojkowitz 1955 :121) where 14 Lepcha *bongthing*s even plotted to kill the king with black magic. Nonetheless, Lhatsun Chenpo, the patron saint of Sikkim traveled across Tibet studying in different monasteries when he realized the many hidden messages left by Guru Rinpoche. He felt he was called to open the Northern gate of the hidden country and 'develop that country religiously' (Kotturan 1983: 27). So he made way southwards and changed the history of Sikkim.

> 'He opened the hidden land, created a sacred environment according to Buddhist ideals of the universe, partly by redefining Lepcha sacred sites as Buddhist, established a political entity and converted the indigenous population' (Balikci 2008: 84).

Lhatsun Chenpo consecrated the first King of Sikkim in Yuksam in an elaborate ceremony that lasted for 21 days. He belonged to the Nyingmapa sect and discovered

many sacred texts and established Buddhist monasteries, including the Tholung monastery inside the Dzongu reserve. He promoted Mt. Kanchenjunga, the Lepcha source of origin as a Buddhist God and incorporated Buddhist ideas into their traditional religion. Lepchas began practicing both Buddhism and traditional religion keeping those they found fit and throwing away that was not necessary. They had syncretised the two to produce a religion that worked to their advantage. While this trend of mixture between 'Buddhism and *shamanism* is not new to the Tibetan Buddhist tradition' (Ortner 1995: 357), Lepchas had comfortably created a 'double-layered religious system' (Torri 2010: 149), which had been well noted by anthropologists over time.

> 'The discussion of the Lepchas' religion is rendered extremely complicated by the fact that they practise simultaneously, and without feeling of theoretical discomfort, two (or possibly three) mutually contradictory religions...' (Gorer 2005: 181)

True enough, the parallel practice of Buddhism and traditional religion was very much present in Tingvong. Almost everyone in Dzongu professed Buddhism as his or her religion as it has permeated to all walks of village life. Often times, there was no separation between Buddhist culture and Lepcha culture as the two intertwined to create a common culture.

*Guru Rinpoche in Dzongu*

> 'Guru Rinpoche is said to have tamed all the supernatural beings of the land, including the mountain god Kanchendzonga, during his eighth century visit to Sikkim and to have

bound them through solemn oaths into being protectors of the faith and to refrain from causing harm to sentient beings. By this act, and having hidden spiritual treasures to be discovered in later times, Guru Rinpoche is seen as having brought Buddhism and a civilized way of life' (Balicki 2008: 83).

Legends of Guru Rinpoche speak about the seeds of Buddhism sown in eighth century when he passed through Sikkim on his way to Tibet. However it was not so easy for him to win over the Lepchas as he had to battle a Lepcha priest to prove his worth. Bentley uses the term 'magical contest' (Bentley forthcoming) while referring to the verbal and physical disputes between the Lepcha *bongthing* and the Buddhist saint. The Lepcha counterpart is believed to be someone with supernatural powers, and different people have various versions regarding who actually contested with Guru Rinpoche. So as to not confuse the story, I shall refer to the most popular version of Thikung Mensalong, the Lepcha *bongthing*-cum-scholar, who fought with Guru Rinpoche. The two met when Guru Rinpoche was passing through Dzongu, confronting the spirits of the Lepcha land. Mensalong charged him and the conversation between the two heated up when Guru told Mensalong to 'follow the lessons of the Lord Buddha' (Kotturan 1983: 17). The two argued for a while and decided to compete with their supernatural powers to settle the dispute. Mensalong won and Guru accepted his defeat but he did not leave before saying the people were 'primitive and wild... and just not profitable to preach them the doctrine of the Buddha' (*Ibid*). Grothmann (2012: 130) writes about Tibetans using words like "barbarian" "savage" or "wild" to characterize the non-Buddhist population of the Southeastern Himalayas and it rings true in the case of

Lepchas too. Guru is believed to have said, this area is not ready to be tamed, but later a *lama* will return, subdue the demons and convert the Lepcha people to Buddhism. Soon enough, Lhatsun Chenpo entered Sikkim and so did Buddhism fulfilling the words of Guru Rinpoche who has become a revered figure localized in Lepcha homes today. Most Lepcha households hang photographs of Guru Rinpoche in their worship altars or the living room but outside, the Dzongu landscape is full of stones and mounds telling his stories. On the way to Tholung monastery, there is a collection of stacked rocks, popularly known as *Thigong*, which have withstood time and are known to be the library where he hid the sacred texts. Another rock has a footprint fossil, believed to have been of the holy one as nobody dare put his or her feet on top to measure the foot size.

Footprint on the rock

Sacred rocks adorned with *khadas*

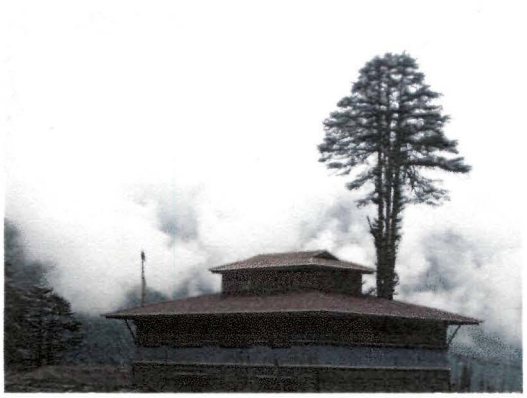
Nearby in a small opening to a cave where Guru Rinpoche's little finger had gotten stuck. Indeed, the Sikkim Buddhist tradition mentions that he had left 'writings on the noble teachings' (Kotturan 1983: 17) in the many caves and many other secret places, which he hoped later on, some dedicated monk would pick up and give to the

people. Further up is a resting area where he is believed to have had lunch on his way to Tibet. The "sacred" sites in the Tholung landscape can be easily recognized by any newcomer in the area because there is always a white silk scarf or wax remnants of candles lit by locals who pass through. Further up in Kishung lake, there is a thin white passing through the middle of the lake, believed to have been Guru's path on the way to Tibet. Nearby are rice grains believed to have been remnants from his lunch as they have been growing ever year while nobody actually plants them. There is a saying that if the grains in Kishung are healthy, the rest of Dzongu would have a good harvest too.

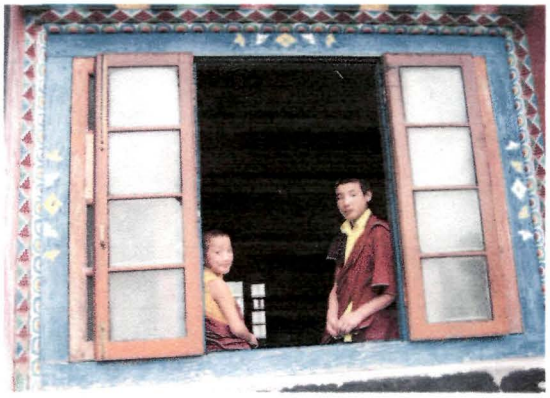
As convincing at it is to the local believers, it is not easy to verify the stories of his visit to Dzongu as there are no historical records. However, the belief of his presence and the myths and legends that have been passed down are far too many to be left unaccounted and 'dismissed as sheer fabrication' (Kotturan 1983: 25).

*Tholung Monastery and Pang Lhabsol*

> 'Talung Monastery is one of the most sacred monasteries in Sikhim, and is full of very beautiful and interesting objects of veneration, nearly all real works of art. During the Nepalese invasion of 1816, many of these objects were removed from other monasteries and brought here for safety, and have remained here ever since' (White 2000:66).



Tholung monastery



Monks at Tholung monastery

Located at an altitude of 8500, one has to walk almost half a day to reach the revered Tholung monastery. Built during the time of Lhatsun Chenpo –the patron saint of Sikkim, this monastery is historically significant for safeguarding the national treasures during the time of Gorkha invasion. It is believed that the treasures inside the monastery are not disturbed because 'Lhatsun Chenpo left it in charge of certain devils who would immediately take revenge if anyone tried to touch it' (Morris 1938: 54). It also holds the remains of Chagdor Namgyal, the third King of Sikkim. Upon the King's death, Lepchas brought the corpse from Gangtok to Tholung to give him a proper Lepcha burial because they believed him to be their *Rong Pano* –Lepcha king. It is remembered that Chagdor Namgyal was a keen advocate of the Lepcha people and the people were equally fond of him. So they followed tradition, buried the dead king and also slaughtered a pig offered by the *kazi* from Linkgo. The lamas opposed any forms of animal slaughter, especially within the monastery premises, as one of the key moral obligations for a lay Buddhist is to not destroy life (Fraser 1982: 80). But the Lepchas went ahead with the animal slaughter and buried the dead King inside the monastery.

About three years after the burial, people spoke of different kinds of animals emerging out of the dead body and attacking the people. They feared that they had wronged the funeral rites and decided to cremate the already buried dead body. When they pulled out the corpse, they noticed that the blood in the body felt alive and if it were delayed by even a few days, perhaps the corpse would have raised itself from the dead. So, they finally cremated their King and the ashes have been placed inside the *gombu* ever since. Traditionally Lepchas buried their dead but the Buddhist tradition is to cremate the dead, and this event in history symbolizes the victory of the Buddhist tradition over Lepcha ways of life. There was a near clash when the gods were not properly appropriated. But time and experience has taught the Lepchas to make both religions work in their favour.

Because of its distance, not everyone in the village can visit the Tholung monastery any time they want nor participate in the occasional religious visits of different Buddhist leaders. But during *Pang Lhabsol,* villagers from Dzongu make a point to participate in the activities that has long been a mixture of Buddhist and Lepcha traditions. *Pang Lhabsol* is the state recognized festival in Sikkim commemorating the blood brotherhood between the Lepchas and the Bhutias. It is known as the festival of unity across Sikkim. Devotees invoke Mt. Kanchenjunga, the guardian deity of the state to protect the land and look after the people. And the villagers from Dzongu are no different in contributing their share of offerings by collecting from each household and taking it to the Tholung monastery every year. Different villages take turns every year to bring the *khokpa* –a whole pig, along with *ci*, grains, beaten rice, maize, vegetables and fresh fruits from the village. Gyathang was the chosen village in August 2010 as they

carried the offerings and made way to the monastery in huge numbers. About 50 villagers from Gyathang alone made their way to Tholung and this was a large contingency compared to ten or less participants from other villages. While the monastery premises do not have enough room to accommodate large groups of people, there are small log houses for each village to host their pilgrims lest they have to take shelter for the night. But tradition has it that villagers from the "chosen" village were not to be denied a place of rest nor sent back hungry when they reached the Tholung monastery. Suppose a pilgrim from Gyathang were to reach late at night and the cabins were already full, arrangements were to be made to house the tired travelers who had walked many miles to reach the place of worship. The next morning, people assembled at 10:00am inside the monastery as the head lama popularly known as Kongsho Thikung presided over the ceremony. Though attired in his maroon *lama* robes, Kongsho Thikung automatically took on the role of a *bongthing* as he started with selected prayers and incantations in the Lepcha language and performed a *faat ci*. He was no different from any *bongthing* in the command over his inexplicable chants as he went on to tell the names of the Kings, the places, and the story attached to this occasion. Thereafter he repeated the same in Bhutia language. Since he was calling on the names of the dead Kings, he feared that they would not understand Lepcha and had to invoke their spirits in the language they understood as well. He was compelled to speak in two languages because there were no other *bongthings* who would know of the names of the different kings that would be required for the ceremony. Likewise, the invocation of gods in front of a slaughtered animal could be seen unacceptable to his role as a

Buddhist lama, but the *bongthing*- cum-lama had managed the mixture of two traditions by appeasing both the local gods and the dead kings.

*Buddhism in Tingvong*

> 'I had my camp in the western part of the village of Tingbung, House No. 1 is situated almost in the middle of Tingbung village and belongs to *rig zing*, the *gya pan* or the local headman, I made this house my starting point for a survey tour of the whole district, using some of the local men as guides' (Siiger 1967: 46).

Following Siiger's footsteps, I arrived in Tingvong and found lodging at the same place where Siiger had camped. While he had pitched a tent, I was fortunate to find a clean and luxurious place to live during my fieldwork in Dzongu. The office of the headman ceased to exist since the introduction of the *panchayat* system and the headman's house had turned into a homestay promoting ecotourism and allowing tourists to rent a room, and spend a night or more with the headman's family, eating their food and doing the things they do. With the introduction of *panchayat* system, where the *panchayat* is an elected head of the village, the headman's legacy was still carried on as the current *panchayat* of Tingvong was the first born of the headman. Interestingly, the headman *Rig zing*, mentioned by Siiger had two wives and the *panchayat* was the first son of his first wife. The homestay was at the second wife's house. But like the headman, the *panchayat* still held most of the say in the village. As for the homestay, it was an ideal gateway for travellers and tourists who came to Tingvong and found themselves

transported to a different world. Tingvong held that sense of serenity as the fluttering of faded prayer flags on the road and the wind powered prayer wheels rotated on its own. The village monastery was a short walk from the last vehicle stop and although it remained closed most of the time, people still visited the same.

Prayer flags in Tingvong

Locked Tingvong monastery

There was a time when Tingvong did not have its own monastery. During those times everyone would refer or visit the Tholung monastery. The heads of the Tholung monastery were of the '*Nang-pa* clan of Tibetan origin with permits to reside in Dzongu reserve' (Arora 2009: 66). It is only obvious that a Bhutia clan would be the owners of a monastery but for them to rule inside Dzongu was almost appalling. Their dominance was present in the unfair way they treated Lepcha monks. The Lepcha lamas were always denied of their rightful place in the monastic order. Of all the lamas from Tingvong, Chodar Lama had traveled to Tibet to study Tibetan Buddhism and reached the level of a head lama, returned to occupy the coveted seat but disagreements with the

Bhutia and Lepcha lamas created a division and Chodar brought back some of the idols and texts from the Tholung monastery and built the Tingvong monastery. Prior to his arrival, the *gombu* in Tingvong was made of bamboo and the first lama was Sambukmu Thikung who apparently had no family or relatives, and nobody knew where he came from. The second lama was Norden lama who was succeeded by Chodar lama, the third lama of Tingvong monastery. With his extensive knowledge of the new religion, Chodar turned out to be a reformist bringing many changes with set rules of dos and don'ts for the Lepcha villagers. He stopped the killing of animals in monastery premises. He advocated *ahimsa* and discouraged the consumption of meat and alcohol. Meat meant game and Lepchas used to live off the land. So the new order was a restriction to the hunting and fishing culture of the Lepchas. It meant that the fathers were unable to teach their sons how to hunt and fish in the way their fathers and grandfathers traditionally did. Likewise, giving up on alcohol meant giving up on the customary *ci* and its significance in many spheres of life. Buddhist Lepchas however do not strictly necessarily abstain from *ci*. Chodar Lama also introduced the monastic *seda* school in Tingvong and encouraged Lepcha children to join the school. Today the *seda* school is a government recognized institution called Govt. Rikzing Tarling Monastic Primary School where novice lamas are taught other subjects like Mathematics, English, Environmental Science besides the religious studies. But during Chodar's time, the children would only learn the religious texts of Tibetan Buddhism. In promoting lamaistic form of education, Chodar also made it mandatory for each family to send their second son to the monastery to be a monk like in Bhutia families. While there are

families who still send their second sons to be a monk, the practice was not enforced on those who did not want to because to be a lama was not to hold a separate job or earn big money. Most lamas would be engaged in the normal everyday life of a villager unless they had periodic ceremonies at the monastery or were called to different homes for special occasions. While the money at the monastery would not be so rewarding, the private parties could pay a good amount. However, the lamas were required to know certain prayers and chants for different occasions in Tibetan language and this might have been difficult for the young monks to learn by heart as repeated cases of runaway monks were found. Likewise, young boys did not always prefer to be a monk and had other aspirations, so it was only natural to hear them run away from the institution and come back home. At one time, a villager and I were waiting for the jeep to take us to Tingvong when he told me about how the driver had gone to be a lama but ran away from the monastery and was driving the jeep today. However, lamas who stuck around and got educated at the *seda* school in Tingvong had gone to different monasteries in Gangtok and Mysore today. But the senior lamas carried grievances regarding the inferior treatment they received in their monastic order. The usual complaint was how a Lepcha never becomes a *Rinpoche* despite having served in the monastery all his life. Today, most lamas in Sikkim are either Lepchas or Bhutanese. In that context, the Lepcha lamas can be seen as agents holding on to the Tibetan Buddhist culture in Sikkim.

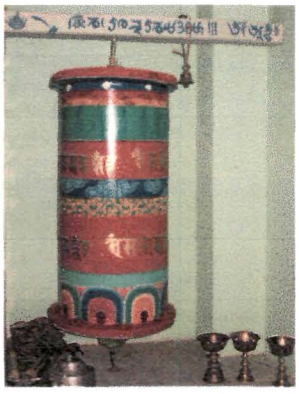
Indeed, the prayer flags that flutter around Tingvong giving the village a Buddhist identity was a carrier of Tibetan culture because when one looked closely at

the inscriptions on the flags, it is written in a script unrecognizable to the Lepchas. The prayers are written in Tibetan and a normal Lepcha villager would not necessarily be able to read through the prayers. In the village of Lingko, there were prayer flags right outside the *bongthing*'s house. This could be seen as a blend of religions, because here was a traditional ritual specialist who adorned his house with Buddhist prayer flags. But these instances were an accepted norm and nobody questioned the *bongthing*'s loyalty to the traditional religion. Likewise, the people of the village never missed the dates when new flags needed to be replaced every year following an auspicious occasion or the death anniversary of a certain family member. In that, the death rites had changed. If the ancestors used to be buried, the descendants were being cremated today. The dead is cremated in the Buddhist tradition but a *bongthing* is initially required to separate the path of the dead and those of living. A *mun* usually guided the soul back to where the person originated, but in Tingvong there was no *mun* and the lamas took over the funeral ceremony. At one funeral, the lamas were in the room where the corpse was kept reading their prayers and clanging cymbals. In the next room, the *bongthing* sat with us drinking tea as any other villager who came to visit the house. Later too, the rites were conducted in a Buddhist fashion cremating the corpse. The burning of the dead was also seen as a prime reason why there has been a decrease in the number of traditional ritual specialists. It is believed that the spirit of a *bongthing* is destined, although if the father or the grandfather was a *bongthing*, then the son or grandson had higher chances of becoming one after the death of his father/ grandfather. But when the funeral is conducted in the Buddhist tradition, their belief in reincarnation makes it difficult for the

soul to be reborn as a *bongthing* himself. It is a possibility but it might take a longer time for the dead soul to reincarnate itself. Hence the practices of Buddhist death rituals have contributed to the dwindling number of traditional ritual specialists in Lepcha community.

**Cultural Changes due to Buddhism**

Lepchas have always known that Buddhism was not their original religion. They also know that Buddhism was the religion of the rulers and they often strived to be like them. In Dzongu, however, there is no yardstick for Buddhism because they have all been on the receiving end. They practise what has been taught and do not question the authority. But in recent days, Lepchas are owning Buddhism to fit to their culture. Buddhist chants are being written in Lepcha language today. They have not just been transformed from traditional religion to Buddhism, but are also making efforts to transform Buddhism to fit to Lepcha religion.



*Om mane peme* in Lepcha

Prayer flags in Tibetan

The following paragraphs will examine the various Lepcha social institutions that might or have not been changed due to the influence of Buddhism in the Lepcha reserve of Dzongu.

*Family*

The family size in Tingvong is slightly larger than the regular Lepcha family elsewhere. The average number of children is 5 and there are cases of infant mortality too. There is a trend of male out-migration leaving only the women in the village. Most houses have the mother, daughter and daughter-in-law working in the fields and taking care of the children. Despite the mother and daughter-in-law squabbles we usually hear in other societies, the Lepcha women hardly raise their voice. They seem to avoid confrontation as much as they avoid conflict. During the entire time in Tingvong, the present researcher did not hear any arguments in the village. Most children go to the village school unless the parents desired to send them to Mangan or Gangtok. When the children return home during winter vacations, they are found to take part in household chores like grazing the sheep and looking after the cows. Practice of polygamy is present in a few cases when the man keeps two wives but have different houses for each wife. The husband spends equal time with both wives and also gives equal attention to children from both the wives.

*Marriage*

During marriage, we can see the co-existence of traditional religion and Buddhism as both the *bongthing* and the lama are present to officiate the wedding. The *bongthing* starts off by invoking the spirit of the clans that were being united and offer *ci* and rice to Mt. Kanchenjuna and the rivers *Rongyoo –Rangeet.* Then the couple is called upon to drink *ci* from the same bowl. Thereafter the lamas chant their share of prayers, which is not necessarily understood by the newly weds nor themselves because the chants would be in Tibetan often memorized as they have different set of prayers for different occasions. Marriages usually take place between Lepchas within Dzongu itself. If not from the same village, they could also find possible partners in Mangan and Gangtok. There have been cases of marital union between Lepchas of Dzongu and Kalimpong. Marriages are seen as a union between two families, clans, villages and geographies. There are a few cases of Lepcha men bringing non-Lepcha wives to the village. There are two cases of men from Kalimpong who stayed on in Dzongu and became the *kamok myok* or sons-in-law. In case of polygamy, the husband is believed to have gotten the consent of his first wife and even if she is not willing, there is nothing she can do when the husband decided to bring another wife.

*Kinship*

Tingvong is organized in clusters of houses of close kins. Those belonging to the same clan are seen living nearby. For instance, all households in Kusoong belong to the

Khamyangmoo and those in Lingko belong to the Paki clan. Dzongu Lepchas do not practise or know about parallel descent. They have been taking their father's clan name since ages. But the origin story of Tingvong and the taking of the girl's clan name for the *Aramptso*'s speak of a possible practice that existed and has since been forgotten. They also do not use the term *moo* while referring to the clan. They use the term *ptso* instead. It is also claimed that *moo* referred to female clan and *ptso* represented the male clan. So, the absence of taking mother's clan name meant the *moo* disappeared after marriage. They were of the idea that only Kalimpong Lepchas practise and promote parallel descent. The kinship terminology has remained the same although there is a tendency to use Bhutia terminology when the Lepcha was a little better off. At one point, the girl who stayed with my host started calling me *aai* meaning elder sister in Bhutia and my host yelled at her for trying to emulate the Bhutia ways.

*Language*

Everyone in Tingvong spoke the Lepcha language. The children learned to read and write their mother tongue in the village school as Lepcha language is incorporated into the education system in Sikkim. Textbooks often included Lepcha stories and poetry exposing students to learn Lepcha history in school itself. There was a trend of sending students to Mangan or Gangtok for further education and those students were found to be speaking in Nepali even when they came home during breaks. Most villagers who frequented Mangan or Gangtok were bilingual. In the monastic sphere, the

lamas knew their prayers in Tibetan by heart, but did not necessarily know the Tibetan language. Even in 1938, Morris recalls that the lamas were 'merely repeating the scriptures as they happened to know' (Morris 1938: 289). Indeed, 'texts are chanted and the lamas learn a paralanguage associated with texts: proper pronunciation, cadence, gestures, secret passages, and ritual acts closely related to particular moments in the recitation of a text' (Holmberg 1984:702).

*Food*

On the first day in the field, my hosts told me not to drink even water from a certain house when I went for household census. "Let nothing happen after drinking tea," she cautioned. There had been cases of food poisoning in that house and my host wanted me to be on the safe side. As scary as it sounded, I was curious too. Surprisingly, a few houses with daughters-in-laws from outside were known to be practising food poisoning. 'Poisoners were usually rich, successful and independent women who inspire jealousy in others rather than being poor and thought to be envious of others' possessions' (Balikci 2008: 179). Otherwise, there were no food restrictions and most residents of the village were non-vegetarians. In case of death in the family, they would stop eating meat for a few days, which was in contrast to the traditional ways of slaughtering an ox and feeding the village during funerals. Tibetan cookies known as *khapsey* and beaten rice was used as snacks with tea in a very Tibetan presentation.

*Khapsey* served with tea

*Ci Puthyut* (local millet beer in bamboo)

However, *ci* was freely available at any time of the day and season. In Morris' words, 'all the Lepchas, men, women, and children, drink far too much; and in Jongu it was unusual to find any adult completely sober in the evening' (Morris 1938: 287). *Ci* was readily available at people's homes at any time of the day. One could find villagers consuming *ci* from early morning and for most of the time, they walked around with smiley faces going about with everyday work. When intoxicated, they seemed a little bolder to confront those who had wronged. One villager corrected me for spelling his name wrong during the household census after three weeks of noting his name. We were at a funeral wake and he came up to me and said, "*Luponmoo*, you have spelt my name wrong. It is l-e-d-a and not l-e-y-d-a."

*Dress*

In Tingvong, most women wore the Tibetan *bakkhu* at home and around the village. Only a few elderly women were seen to be wearing the traditional *dumvun* of thicker material without the pleats in front known as *dumpin*. They said that the pleats only came to vogue in Dzongu after they attended a wedding in Kalimpong and copied from them. Despite *bakkhu* 's popularity, special occasions and events in the village like the Independence Day brought out the women in traditional *dumvun*.

*Dumvun* without *dumpin*

Lepcha women in *bakkhu*

Girls in at Tendong Hlo Rum Faat

Women in Tingvong wore pearl necklaces. From a young girl to an elderly grandmother, the beads would be from scanty to ornamented with precious stones.

Pearl necklace with stones and silver accents

## Emergence of Lhomen Identity

The gradual incorporation of Buddhism into the Lepcha lifestyle permeated beyond the religious sphere of Lepcha culture. They were receiving more than they bargained for as the dominant Buddhist Bhutia culture and religion became a part of their everyday life. The Bhutias came from Tibet and were 'the carriers of Tibetan culture, Tibetan language, the Lamaist Buddhism and a combination of Pastoralism and semi-settled agricultural practices' (Thapa 2002: 28). The new arrivals were not seen as a threat but were accepted in the Lepcha land.

### *Blood Brotherhood Treaty*

> 'Being childless, Khye-Bumsa consulted his Lamas and was told to propitiate the heads of the Lepcha people. Accordingly, with a following of seventeen persons only, he crossed the Yak-la and Penlong and reached Sata-la near Rankpo: here he enquired who were the heads of the Lepchas, and was informed that they were Thekong Tek and his wife, Nyekong-Nal, but where they dwelt he failed to ascertain. Proceeding towards Gangtok, they came across a very old man quite black from tilling his recently burnt field, but could get nothing out of him. Suspecting he knew more than he chose to tell, the Tibetan party hid themselves, and when the old man left off work, followed him secretly to a house which he entered. Obtaining at last an entrance, they found their old man clad in a robe adorned with animals' heads and seated in state on a dais,

worshipped by the other inmates, and thus discovered that he was the veritable Thekong Tek they were in search of' (Risley 2001:9).

History speaks of a time when the Tibetan noble, Khye Bumsa travelled to Sikkim in search of Thikung Tek, a Lepcha 'divine priest' (Tamsang 1983: 9) to seek blessings for his barren wife. The Tibetan couple longed for a child and Thikung Tek was believed to have magical powers to grant such wish. So they visited him and he blessed them not one but three sons. Khye Bumsa and his wife were thankful for the sons and returned to express their gratitude. They brought their sons along and when Thikung Tek lifted one of the sons up with fondness the child's feet touched his forehead. This worried the old man as knew that this child's descendents would rule Sikkim in the coming future. If that was to happen, he was concerned for the future of the Lepchas and made a blood brotherhood treaty between the two communities.

'...he (Thekong Tek) called on Khye Bumsa to swear blood brotherhood with him as a symbolic acceptance of Bhutias and Lepchas as equals. The blood brotherhood ceremony was consecrated at Kabi Longstok with the two sitting on animal hides and surrounded by blood of sacrificed animals' (Wangchuk and Zulca 2007: 54).

Statue of Unity in Gangtok

They invoked Mt. Kanchenjunga to witness the solemnization as *longtsaoks* were erected to mark the 'eternal friendship and fraternity' (Foning 1987: 37) of the event. It has also been said that Khye Bumsa took a Lepcha wife to 'reinforce the equal status of the two communities in Sikkim' (*Ibid:* 54). The historical pact between the Lepcha and Bhutia ancestors had bound them together as an inseparable entity. Until the Bhutias betrayed the brotherhood treaty and a descendent of Khye Bumsa became the first *chogyal* (king) of Sikkim. Thereafter the kings kept taking Lepcha wives to continue the marital ties but the equality was short lived as the Lepchas became subjects and the Bhutias became rulers of the land. Intermarriage between the two tribes took a toll and a Lepcha Bhutia marital alliance was unheard of even outside Dzongu. Young Lepcha girls were told they could marry anyone but if they married a Bhutia then it was as if they were selling their soul. Both communities generally seemed to not trust each other. 'The aggressive Bhutias were never accepted whole-heartedly by the Lepchas' (Subba 1989: 126). And this bitterness between the two communities was engrained from an early childhood. Lepcha mothers could be heard saying, "if you don't go to sleep, the Bhutias will come and take you away." Children out of fear would quietly go to bed. Young people were discouraged from wearing a Bhutia dress and Lepchas had plenty of reason to stay away from them. Bhutias referred to Lepchas as *Membo-Nah*, meaning "foolish Lepchas" while making derogatory remarks like *Membo-Dudum* meaning "tailless monkey" (Thapa 2002: 174). It was not just the betrayal of the blood brotherhood treaty but the Bhutia dominance over Lepchas on the religious, political and social fabric of Lepcha society had betrayed their trust. There were rumours about the

demand for Lepcha women from Dzongu for the Sikkim palace that added sour taste for those left behind. Lepchas would rather marry the Limboos or Nepalis instead.

But there came a time when the rapid growth of the Nepali migrant population and their dominance in all areas of Sikkim society was seen as a threat to the Lepcha Bhutia population of Sikkim. They felt insecure in their land of origin because they were easily outnumbered. This fear of cultural extinction and nostalgia over lost political dominance brought the warring tribes close to each other. Consequently, 'several organisations were formed with a view to campaign actively for tribal unity' (Thapa 2002: 88). Putting aside the animosity that had brewed for a while, the Bhutias and Lepchas came together to stand up against the majority Nepalis. They started searching for similarities between themselves as intermarriages between the two tribes were being entertained once again. It was necessary and paved way for a renewed cultural and social assimilation between the two communities. In this case 'the common and uniting element' (Oommen 2009: 4) for the Lepchas and Bhutias was religion. Buddhism proved to be the main factor in the rekindled friendship between the two. They were called to stand firm and not be shaken like 'the meditating Buddha under a *Bodhi Tree*' (Bhandari 2006: Foreword) as loss of these communities also resulted in a loss of 'Buddhist heritage and peacefulness, which is rarely found' (Chakraborty 2006: Forword). In these developments, the Lepchas put aside their reservations and differences to team with the Bhutias for a united fight. This coalition gave birth to a hyphenated identity for the Bhutia-Lepchas (B-L) beyond the Lho-Men-Tsong (Bhutia-Lepcha- Limboo) brotherhood that was formalized when the first King of Sikkim was

consecrated. The B-L alliance was key to the political representation of these communites as the verdict of the Supreme Court on February 10, 1993 upheld reservation of 12 reserved seats of Bhutia-Lepcha in the Sikkim Legislative Assembly. But the B-L alliance cannot be seen as a natural union. History speaks of the time when this brotherhood pact was broken creating mistrust between these two communities. They were enemies but today it has become necessary to join forces in the creation of 'negative solidarity' (Subba 1988: 169) regarding the interethnic relationship between tribes in Northeast India. Only time will tell when this alliance will be broken and new alliances be made.

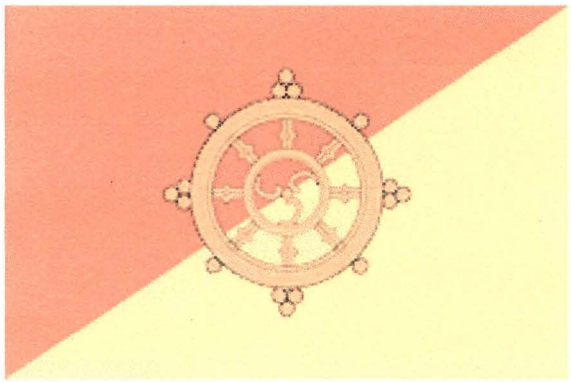
*Sikkim Bhutia Lepcha Apex Committee*

Fostering tribal unity between the Lepchas and the Bhutias is the Sikkim Bhutia Lepcha Apex Committee (SIBLAC) that was formed on 5 September 1999 to protect the right of the Bhutias and the Lepchas. It is a consortium of different Bhutia and Lepcha associations with a 'battle cry for their struggle to retain their identity and dignity' (Chakraborty 2006: Q). Their main concern is the dilution of Article 371F in the subsection (k) which guarantees special provision for Sikkim within the Indian state. They feel that the weakening of constitutional rights threatened the survival of the oldest settlers of the land.

> 'With growing awakening among the indigenous Bhutia-Lepcha community who have been reduced to minority in their own native land, if their precious rights and interest are

not restored and safeguarded as provided in the Constitution of India, the very concept of integration, assimilation or pride in being an Indian, pride in being involved in nation-building will be undercut' (SIBLAC 2003: Introduction)

The SIBLAC is represented by members from both Bhutia and Lepcha communities. They are often branded as being communal although their activities have been relatively peaceful. They have their own flag, which is diagonally separated to saffron and golden colours with a *dharma chakra* in the centre.



SIBLAC flag

The flag for SIBLAC is a religious representation at some level with Buddhism at its base. The *dharma chakra* is one of the oldest Buddhist symbols meaning the wheel of life. It has also represented Buddha's teaching of the eight-fold path to enlightenment. It represents the Bhutia population in its truest sense but for the Lepchas, it has been a place of compromise. There is no element of Lepcha-ness in the SIBLA flag and this rings true the further we decipher SIBLAC's agendas. One of their main agendas has been to do away with the integration of six other ethnic groups namely Sherpas, Kagatays, Yolmos, Dukpas, Dopthapas, Chumbipas who have also been clubbed under

the "Bhutia" tag. The SIBLAC claims that these groups are not really Bhutias and has asked for an amendment of the Scheduled Tribe Order 1978. Here too, Lepchas have just been tagged along for a cause that does not really speak for them. While the SIBLAC alliance could be advantageous at a political level, villagers were honest to say that they do not need actually need the Bhutias to go forward. Some of them even feel that 'the Bhutias needed Lepchas because without them they would not be the indigenous people of Sikkim' (Bentley 2007:81). There are also those who say that SIBLAC has never taken up a Lepcha cause. Even during the time of protests over dams in Dzongu, SIBLAC's voice was only a faint whisper. They failed to show solidarity to the Lepcha brothers and if they were functioning to champion the cause of both the Lepchas and Bhutias, their actions should have spoken more than a press release condemning the construction of dams in Dzongu. While the two tribes share a hyphenated identity, which has worked for their advantage at some levels, it is safe to say that the agendas and political aspirations of SIBLAC do not often match with the demands and struggles of the Lepcha people. And if they are to work together, they need more than religion to unite them and fight for their rights in the long run.

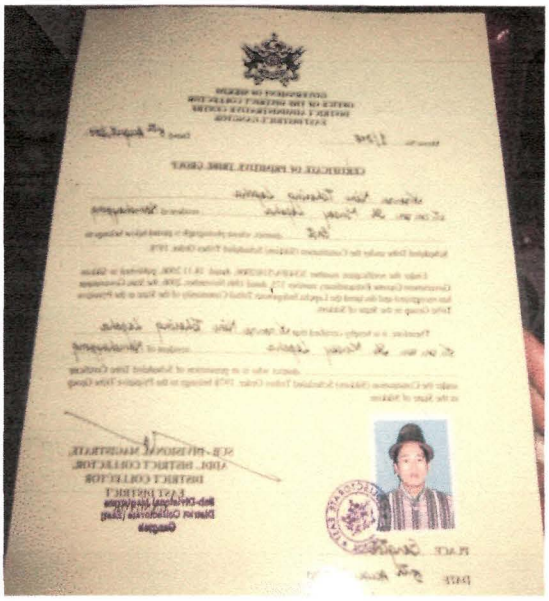
*"Primitive" means first citizens*

On August 8, 2010 the state government of Sikkim distributed 'certificate of primitive tribe group' to the Lepchas of Sikkim at the annual *Tendong Hlo Rum Faat Celebrations* in Mangan, North Sikkim. It read,

'Under the notification number 3(54) PA/518/2006, dated 18.11.2006, published in Sikkim Government Gazette Extraordinary number 375, dated 18th November 2006, the State Government has recognized and declared the Indigenous Tribal Community of the State as the Primitive Tribe Group in the State of Sikkim'.

The announcement was made five years ago in 2005 while the notification came in 2006 after being passed in the Sikkim Assembly but the certificates were distributed only in August 2010. While it has been received with mixed response, the state notification says that it has been passed to 'protect and safeguard the vanishing tribe and to uplift their socio-economic, educational and political status'. A year later at the same event, Pawan Chamling, the Chief Minister of Sikkim said that the new identity had 'provided them with a clearer, more unique identity as the officially recognised "first citizens" of Sikkim, the people indigenous to this land since antiquity' (northeasttoday.in). There is indeed recognition for the first settlers of the land, but in a reverse manner. While most anthropologists and even the Government of India refuse to acknowledge the term "primitive", this development has raised more questions than answered them. It has indeed separated them from the hyphenated B-L identity they held for a long time reinforcing their distinct identity and allowing them to exist on their own. But the provisions for the "primitive" group have not been outlined in a clear-cut manner. The only thing they have heard since the distribution of certificates has been the exclusive quota for the Lepchas of Sikkim in higher education to be implemented from the academic session of 2012 onwards. The elders are positive about this development while the youngsters are not too keen on being called "primitive". There could be a

common ground if the state government replaced "primitive" with the "particularly vulnerable group" tag that is an acceptable feature with the Indian government and with people the in general. Then perhaps the educated Lepchas would also take advantage of their newfound identity and work for the betterment of the community.



Primitive Tribe Group Certificate

*Conclusion*

The introduction of Buddhism and its incorporation into the Lepcha landscape was the key to an easy acceptance of Tibetan Buddhism in Sikkim. For instance, Mt. Kanchenjunga, the mythical place of Lepcha origin was incorporated into Buddhist belief and transformed into the guardian deity of the religious order of the Sikkimese kingdom. Since then, Lepchas are found to be practising both Buddhism and their

traditional religion where the lamas and the *bongthings* perform side by side and the religious practices are characterized by syncretism. 'The lama and the shaman do not contradict each other but co-exist as religious specialists due to a division of labour in their roles towards the individual, the family, the community and the polity (Arora 2006: 64).' But there is an unspoken tension between the intertwined religions as Lepchas have also realized that they have accommodated Buddhism into their traditional religion, and the various Buddhist festivals and rituals are actually on its way to 'erode Lepcha identity' (Bentley 2007: 99). Nonetheless, Buddhism was the common denominator for the Lepchas and Bhutias to form an alliance against the rapid growth of the Nepali migrant population and their dominance in all areas of Sikkim society. For a long time, the two tribes showcased a united front but the recent provision of the 'primitive' tribe status for the Lepchas have given them their recognition that was due long ago. In that context, the educational reservation is a start to recognize the first citizens of Sikkim but it is still to be explored whether the 'primitive' tribe is just for namesake or for the true betterment of the Lepcha tribe.

## Chapter 5

### Christianity and Lepchas of Kalimpong, North Bengal

"When a Lepcha becomes a Christian, he becomes a *saab.*" This is an oft-repeated joke in Lepcha circles that has both sarcasm and truth in it. Christianity offered a 'modern identity' (Bal 2000: 155) equipped with education and a link to the Western world. Lepchas were introduced to a new religion and worldview, which also exposed them to educational and professional opportunities. The nature-loving and spirit-fearing Lepchas were now questioning the authority of many traditional beliefs as Christianity initiated a change in attitude and lifestyle as well. Their newfound religion paved way for new ideas that were easily accepted and often imitated without fully understanding the consequences of what was to come. Reiterating the starting sentence of this chapter, Foning (1987), a Lepcha Christian himself, writes,

> 'Forgetting our own age-old customs and ways of life, the beginnings of which are lost in antiquity, now among our Christian kinsmen there is a definite trend to display with pride, like the proverbial peacock, the plumes of Western culture in almost everything that is displayable. Moving outside more often than not, suit, hat and tie proclaim that the person is a Christian convert' (Foning 1987: 294).

While the wave of imitation hit the Christian converts, it cannot be denied that along with Christianity came education which proved to be the most powerful agent in the all round development of the tribe. Education empowered their way of thinking,

triggered 'mobility' (Thakur 1988: 103) and gave them hope for a better lifestyle. The adoption of Christianity and embracing education from early on 'gave them status and position' (Thakur 1988: 98) in society. Lepcha students grew up to become teachers, church leaders and government jobholders occupying a respectable position in society. Armed with the perks of modern education, it is only likely that they considered themselves superior and looked lowly upon their non-Christian neighbours. It is this 'exclusivist' (Longkumer 2010:85) tendency among Christians to profess Christianity as the one true religion, which separated them from the larger community. Interestingly, the openness of Lepcha society is also held responsible for the easy acceptance of the newfound religion as they gradually imitated, adapted and adopted the Christian culture.

For most Lepchas of Kalimpong today, Christian culture is all they have known. We can find fourth and fifth generation Christian Lepchas whose forefathers gave up the traditional practices and ways of life, leaving the current generation devoid of the knowledge and wisdom of their culture. Their upbringing in the church environment and being educated in Christian institutions have exposed them to stories from the Bible but have often ignored the richness of their traditional past. Often times, these educated young people migrate to urban centres for better job opportunities further distancing them from their traditional ways of life. Unless, their grandparents or parents tell the present generation Lepcha Christians about the Lepcha stories, they have little to claim to know about their own culture. True enough, Lepcha Christians themselves have realized this predicament as Peter Karthak, a fifth generation Christian Lepcha author writes,

'Christian Lepchas did not care for their own Lepcha ethos because they were happy within their Christian ghettos. They would have to pay dearly for their unworldly dowdiness once the British left Darjeeling' (Karthak 2009: 9).

## Advent of Christianity

In this chapter, we shall look into the advent of Christianity and the role of missionaries in the establishment of the church and school in Bom Busty. It will also examine the process of conversion and the culture changes that took place among the Lepchas of Kalimpong. Finally it shall analyze the Christian Lepcha identity, what it meant to be a Lepcha and a Christian or both, and whether the religious identity preceded the ethnic identity vis-à-vis the Christian Lepcha vs. the Lepcha Christian.

### *The Missionaries*

'Over there is a place for planting another branch of the mission to operate chiefly among the Lepchas, I reach a spot at the place called Kalimpong, about four miles from the Teesta, that will do admirably for a mission station. There are many Lepcha villages in the neighbourhood, and we could from there visit all the countries round about, as well as cross the Teesta river to visit the Lepcha country on the other side'-William Macfarlane (Manuel, D.G 1914 ).

Having visited the Lepchas of Kalimpong in 1870, Reverend William Macfarlane of the Church of Scotland 'desired' to move to Kalimpong even though he initially started his missionary work in Darjeeling in June 1870. Compared to the Bhutias and the Nepalis, he found Lepchas to be the most responsive to the gospel as he wrote in the year-end report to his mission, 'The Lepchas seem to be the most hopeful people for us in the hills' (Perry 1997: 42). Though Macfarlane was the first missionary to enter Kalimpong, Christianity had already made its mark among the Lepchas when Reverend William Start, former Church of England clergyman turned independent Baptist, went to Darjeeling (in 1841) and decided to establish a self-supporting mission. Although his mission work was not very successful, he showed interest in the local vernacular and started a school for Lepchas in Tukvar (Dewan 1991: 81). He also learned the local language with a limited collection of Lepcha words and went on to translate a few books of the Bible from English to Lepcha and published at his own expense (Wylie 1854). Interest in the mother tongue nurtured the identity of the tribe and translating the Bible into their language was a revolutionary step (Oommen 2007: 12). The earliest gospel translation was of St. Matthew's in 1845, followed by the Genesis and part of Exodus in Lepcha' (Sprigg 2005: 53) published in 1849. That same year in 1849 - the St. John's Gospel[10] was also printed along with a revised version of St. Matthew's Gospel. These publications were printed at the Baptist Mission Press, Calcutta. These were the first books to be printed and published in Lepcha language

[10] A copy of St. John's Gospel reprinted in 1872 is available at the Carey Library and Research Centre, Serampore.

with the help of modern technology, i.e., the movable printing press. Sprigg sees these publications as a historical feat,

> 'Lepchas everywhere will be able to take pride in the distinction of having had their language in print for (more than) 150 years; and Christian Lepchas, in particular, will have the added satisfaction of knowing that it was some Books of The Bible that were the first to be printed in Lepcha' (Sprigg 2005: 53).

It was these contributions in the translation of the books of the Bible that laid foundation for other missions with the spread of Christianity in Darjeeling hills. In 1841, Revered J.C. Page, a British educated Anglo-Indian, was appointed missionary in India with the Baptist Missionary Society (BMS). He was very keen on evangelizing the local people and a Lepcha convert is reported to have assisted him with his missionary work. But he soon retired and there was no one to carry on the work as BMS closed their Darjeeling mission work. Thereafter it was the arrival of Macfarlane and the Scottish Mission in Darjeeling, which also paved way for the first missionary work in neighbouring Kalimpong. Macfarlane was known to be a 'zealous' (Perry 1997: 32) preacher who set goals and hoped that a mission in Darjeeling would mean 'a mission to the great independent states of Nepaul, Sikkim, and Bhootan (*Ibid*: 33)'. Darjeeling was the prime location at that time as these countries were closed to foreigners and the British missionaries would not be allowed to enter the same. So it was only fitting to convert the local people and under the influence of these missionaries several young people were motivated 'to go beyond Darjeeling-Kalimpong' (Perry 1997: 60). Among them a few Lepcha names to carry the gospel to Nepal include Robert Karthak, Rajendra

Rongong, Jermit Rongong and their daughter Sharon Rongong in 1956. They went to Nepal as teachers, as we can see the missionaries' emphasis on education with Macfarlene advocating school to be the most necessary to start missionary work.

> 'If they cannot read, of what use will it be to send Bibles and tracts among them? We therefore think that it is the duty of the missionaries, in subordination to the great work of preaching, to do their utmost to establish such schools wherever they can be setup' (Perry 1997: 40).

Soon enough, Macfarlane started a teachers' training school along with the Bible as part of their coursework to train the Lepcha and Nepali teachers. With the growing importance of the Nepali language with an increasing Nepali population in the hills, even the Lepchas and Bhutias were beginning to learn and speak the same. By 1873, there were 25 primary schools with 650 boys and girls in all over Darjeeling (Perry 1997: 40) as the gospel and the school went hand in hand. The establishment of schools alongside the churches was seen as a 'mixed blessing' as education exposed the natives to a new world of knowledge and ideas while church meant the acceptance of a new religion and belief that often contradicted with the traditional ways of life.

> 'The church and the school have gone together in the hill region of Darjeeling district ever since the advent of the missionaries, who had chosen the pen rather than the sword in proselytizing and in disseminating education' (Dewan 1991: 40).

Indeed, the school and the church started simultaneously in Bom Busty too. The church-school has been the foundation for almost all educated professionals emerging

out of Bom Busty. It started as a night school and soon became a regular six-day schooling centre as the seventh day brought everybody to church. At that time, the church hall had a thatch roof and Bom Church is actually the oldest church of Kalimpong. It is seven years older than the landmark Macfarlane Church of Kalimpong.

Bom Church 1897

The person responsible for introducing Christianity to Bom Busty Lepchas was Sukhman Limbu, a Hindu convert from Darjeeling who was one of the first three 'catechists' (Perry 1997: 43) of Macfarlane. The other two catechists of Macfarlene were both Lepcha converts namely Namthak Rongong and Dyongshi Sada. But it was a Limbu convert who helped start the Bom Church in 1882. The training of local people as missionaries was one of the main reasons for an easy acceptance of Christianity by the Lepcha population of Kalimpong. Under the leadership of Sukhman Limbu four of the first five converts in Bom Busty were Lepchas. They were Aakhon Simick, Dazyo

Simick, Langkham Sandyang, and Tachon Karthak (Bom Church 125 anniversary souvenir). Unfortunately, Sukhman Limbu died of the widespread dysentery that had gripped the hills then and his brother Mekbar Singh Limbu took charge of the church affairs for the next 39 years (1884-1923). Mekbar Singh married the daughter of a Lepcha *bongthing* who was on her way to become a *mun.* While this move might have been opposed by higher religious orders, we notice that the rules of Christianity were not rigid among the Christians of Bom Busty. The direct involvement of the British missionary activity was absent in Bom Busty. So people did not completely severe ties with old customs and practices.

*Bom Self-Supporting Church*

For many years since its inception, majority of the church leaders were non-Lepcha individuals. It is possible that the teachings and preachings of the Bible were conducted in Nepali language which was not necessarily understood by the congregation at all times. One pastor is remembered to have preached in both English and Nepali but otherwise Nepali - the becoming *lingua franca* of the region had taken over church matters too. Church leaders were required to submit their mission reports in Nepali and the service was usually conducted in Nepali language. In this context, it can be questioned whether people had fully understood and accepted Christianity as majority of the villagers did not really understand Nepali language since Lepcha was the spoken language at home and around the village. But going to church on Sundays had become a

routine task as they obediently followed the leaders and attended the same. Soon they were singing hymns and learning bible verses in Nepali. Nepali had become the church language and despite the majority Lepcha population at church, they adopted the Nepali tongue on Sundays. At that time, the church readily accommodated to the simple lifestyle of the people. During the sowing season, the congregation would spend their entire Sunday mornings in the field and only attend church in the evenings. They had their own time and way of doing things. Bom Church is also famous for the one incident about an abrupt end to the church service because of a hovering airplane in the sky. It is recalled that the church was in session and the noise of the aircraft outside prompted the preacher to stop his sermon as he urged everyone, 'let us all go out and watch the plane now,' and he ended the service. Christmas usually meant archery, cockfights, mini-marathons, plenty to eat and a hefty intake of the local *ci*. Elders recall a time when the Christmas carollers sang in front of a pigsty because they were so heavily intoxicated with *ci*. Likewise, funerals meant the slaughter of an ox or a goat and feeding the villagers before finally taking care of the corpse. This was perhaps a continuation of the traditional way of honouring the dead as Lepchas traditionally killed animals on this occasion. Luckily, Christianity and education walked in parallel paths as the church encouraged the youth for higher education. There are individuals today who remember their pastor writing notes of reference to a Lepcha *kaiiya* (Marwari shopkeepers who were fluent in Lepcha language) to borrow money for college education. The amount would be returned after they received their tribal stipend in due time. This allowed many of their generation to complete graduate and post graduate studies and apply for

government jobs. In many ways, the church-school became the first school attended by almost all professionals from Bom Busty. In a 2010 report submitted by a church elder to the governing body, Bom church recorded 41 graduates and 26 post-graduate Lepchas, out of which 51 were government employees and others in private and self employed sectors. Church had educated the people of Bom Busty. It became an important avenue of 'social mobility' as they had achieved positions of influence and respect in their own community too (Caplan 1980: 667).

Education provided better opportunities but it also paved way for a new generation of "committed" Christians to take over the church leadership. Gone were the days when drinking *ci* for Christmas was an accepted feature. Today's Bom Christians claim to be convicted Christians. They have studied the Bible and "know" what it means to be a Christian. They seem more assured of their faith and have their own set of do's and don'ts as a Christian. There is an 'internal conversion' (Geertz 1973: 170) that has taken place almost similar to how Gellner talks about the acceptance of modern interpretation of Buddhism among Newars –a compulsive, radical change of perspective after which one's former life is viewed as morally wrong. Interestingly, Bom Church is not an exclusive Lepcha domain but it is also the only church in the area to hold services in the Lepcha language too. On January 3, 2010 few Lepcha members of Bom Church started gathering for the Lepcha service at 10:00 am before the Sunday service at 11:00 am. They sang Lepcha choruses, prayed and listened to the sermon in Lepcha itself. While the service is open to anyone who might be interested, it has been confined to members of Bom Church only. This recent development in the history of Lepcha

Christians resonates very much with the contribution of Christianity through education and the awareness it created about their cultural identity.

Bom Self Supporting Church 2011

*Conversion*

The Lepcha process of conversion was "multi-causal" including both internal and external factors. One of the main reasons for conversion was the idea of *Rum* who could deliver them from the evil *mungs.* In a society where household *mungs* were rampant and could be used against each other to cause sickness and death, deliverance from malevolent spirits and a promise of eternal life was good news to them. While we do not hear of conversion motivated by direct material gains, there could have been indirect 'economic motivation' (Yoko 2004: 262) for those who found Christianity to be less

expensive than their traditional religion or Buddhism. Also Christianity provided the possibility of an altered lifestyle through education, moral values and a 'protestant ethic' (Weber 1958) that was attractive and fulfilling in the long run. Interestingly, the Christian convert stories were unlike those we hear in India. They were neither out-cast nor persecuted and Lepchas did not necessarily severe ties with their neighbours, kinsmen and other members of the community. They remained very much a part of the wider community although their Sundays would be occupied with Church activities.

> 'Conversion to a religion is an irreducibly social act; one does not merely join a faith, but one enters into a set of new relationships with members of a religious community. Conversion, therefore, changes not only the individual, but also the groups that must assimilate or give up the convert' (Buckser 2003: 69).

In the case of Bom Busty Lepchas, conversion was more of a community affair as families converted around the same time and there was not much resistance or opposition. In cases of individual conversion, there were instances of the remaining family being converted in due time. Conversions also occurred during or after marriage if the spouse was a non-Christian. Conversion in Bom Busty occurred many decades ago and there are not that many new Lepcha converts, as it was their grandfathers or great-grandfathers who first converted to Christianity. Today, most Lepchas here are fourth – fifth generation Christians who are not aware of the real reasons why they became Christians. However Bom Busty boasts of one interesting but important incident that triggered many converts. It was the death of Sethang Chemjong, son of Mekbar Singh Limbu and his Lepcha wife that had an unbelievable story of the deceased who came

back to life. As unlikely as it sounds, the story has a folklorish appeal to the Bom population as one of the oldest ladies in the village narrated this story with much flavour as if it was she herself who had died and returned from heaven. She was told this story by her grandfather who was awake when the deceased returned to life.

*The Man who Died and Came Back to Life*

> *Sethang Chemjong died around 2:00 in the afternoon and came back to life at 8:00 in the morning. Known to be a tall fellow who almost hung down, everybody called him Hungrayo. As he reached the door of death, it was dark and he found it very difficult to enter. The only thing he could hear himself say was, "I am a Christian" as the door opened and he went inside. There seemed to be a lot of commotion and he boarded a train that had stopped nearby. Interestingly, the train was going nowhere but revolving in the same tracks making stops every now and then for passengers to get off. So he got off too, but since there was no where to go, he got back on the train and it went round and round for 18 years (which according to him was equivalent to one night on earth) As he looked around, he saw a lama spinning his prayer wheels and he said, "O lama, do you know the way?" to which the lama replied, "I myself have not been able to find the way and have been roaming around for the last 18 years." Then Sethang stepped outside the train and reached a dangerous slope from where the ground was far too deep and only the eerie wind could be felt.*

*Then he again said, "I am a Christian." But a man came and pushed him from behind and he thought, "Oho! I am dead now," but instead he landed on a very dusty road. As he looked up, he saw sadhus, jhakris and lamas running around and they all seemed to despise him because he was a Christian. He then went a little further and found a desert-like area, but as he waited, the group that mocked him was swept up not by water or the fire but they disappeared in front of his eyes. He however managed to cross the sandy desert and was walking uphill when he met many people like Dr. Grahams, his own grandfather and father. He then recalled that his father was a little on the selfish side; and they were all going downhill, but he was climbing up. It was a small path and as he ascended, he found Ram seated on a deerskin and asked, "They treat you as God in the world, but why are you sitting here?" Ram replied, "The world didn't know and mistook me for God while I was only teaching them the good things so now I have to sit here till his second-coming." Sethang then said, "Where is Laxman then?" and Ram pointed him towards Laxman who was also sitting in a deerskin nearby. He looked around and found all the gods of the earth wandering around. Suddenly he got really hungry and started looking for something to eat and found a cottage. Unaware, he was punished for some misdeed on earth and was turned to a cat, which was distressing because how was he able to get to heaven now? But as he looked at the cottage from the window, he saw some curd and ate it all. The next day too, he went to eat the curd but the owner of the cottage found him and beat him to death. He was*

*thrown out and interestingly, he died as a cat but reincarnated as a man. But his punishment had not ended, as he now became the hard root of a bamboo. Since the dried parts are good for firewood, the travellers used the root as fire and it was scattered to embers but it soon assembled and he became a man again. However saying "Christian" was like a medicine when trials came. He walked further up and met a naked giant roasting and eating humans from a huge pot. The giant held a bow and arrow and was carrying a baby on its back. It then aimed the arrow at Sethang who said, "I am a Christian" and the giant with his huge arms showed a fist to Sethang and said, "You shall return again." Sethang proceeded further only to come in contact with a huge black figure in a horse wanting to slice him with a sword. But Sethang used his remedy, "I am a Christian" and he was spared. He then found himself following a straight road with heavenly scents and reached a garden where fruits from all 12 seasons were ripe. From there he saw a city and went towards it but he ran into an angel in the platform, who asked him, "Where are you going?" Sethang replied, "I want to go to heaven." "Have you had communion?" asked the angel. "No, I have not," replied Sethang to which the angel said, "then you cannot enter heaven." Sethang was surprised so the two of them wrestled for a while and Sethang was feeling a little low when they heard a voice say, "Maanoheeem" to which the angel let him loose, got on his knees and said, "Yes Lord". "What are you doing there?," God asked. "This man has not had communion but wants to come to heaven," replied the angel. Then God said, "If he didn't deserve to*

*come to heaven, would he have reached this far? It is entirely your fault. You are now transferred!" Upon hearing that, the angel stood up, flapped its wings, which were as huge as could cover the whole earth and flew away. Sethang went towards the east and climbed the stairs where he found a library with the book of life and the book of karma. But the book of life was not there. Then he climbed further up and searched more but with little success. So he was depressed and stepped down. He was wondering what next when he found God standing over a pulpit. As soon as he saw God, he bowed down and God said, "your time is not over yet, you have to return to earth and do some more work." Then Sethang told God that he wanted to see the nail wounds on his palm from when he died on the cross. God showed the scars and as Sethang tried to touch, it was like an illusion because he couldn't touch it. Then God said, "you have to return to earth, be my witness and save souls for heaven. You go back." So he agreed and as he stepped down the stairs, he found himself sneezing out loud, which woke him from under the white sheets that had covered him since his death. At that time, there were two women beside his body who ran outside the room as the men who had gone to the bathroom returned and one of the men said, "Ow, you have risen from the dead?" and he said, "Yes, bring a copy and a pencil and close the door." Then he relayed his story that has now been told and retold in Bom and its surroundings about the man who died and came back to life* (Fieldwork: 2010).

This narrative is quite popular in the village, as everyone has heard one version of the story or the other. It is also a narrative that tells us about the kind of Christianity that was pervading in the village. Sparing the details, which were fervently told by one of the oldest living persons in the village, it is commonly understood that Sethang did not get to enter heaven because he had not had communion yet. Since then taking communion to get to heaven had become an important doctrine in Bom church. Until recently, church leaders would even visit dying members in the hospital and give the ailing person communion before they breathed their last, hoping that was the dying person's ticket to heaven regardless of the life he had led while on earth. It showed the simplicity of people's belief in a religion that promised eternal life. It can be argued that Sethang's story made more impact because his uncle was the missionary who brought Christianity to Bom Busty, and his father was also a pastor who had married a Lepcha wife whose father was a *bongthing*. So the congregation took heed of his word as almost equal to the word of God. It is recalled that members of his family themselves were humbled in many ways and churchgoers became sincere and God fearing. Interestingly, if we look deeply into this narrative there are certain things that emphasize the superiority of Christianity. To begin with, "I am a Christian" speaks for the Christian identity that was emphasized which even proved to be a "medicine" when he was in trouble with the giant and the dark man in a horse. It thus became important to identify oneself as a Christian. Secondly, the meeting of a lost *lama* and the sudden disappearance of god men from other religions like the *sadhus* and *jhakris* somewhat show the negligible role of other religious heads in the Christian cosmology. Likewise

the conversation with Ram as he waited for the second coming of Jesus and him being misunderstood as God undermines the God status held by Ram on earth. Another interesting aspect pointed in this narrative is the concept of reincarnation as Sethang takes different forms of life for some misdeed on earth before he becomes a man once again. The belief of rebirth upon one's death is very much a Buddhist tradition as is the idea of *karma* when he starts looking for the book of *karma.* In fact, Christinity does not even talk about *karma.* The details of this narrative can seem like just another story but the fact that everybody in Bom Busty knows the story and has relayed it even to their friends and relatives outside the village means it had certain significance at that time that is still held on to today. At one point, it is almost funny that the lady narrating the story tells that the angel had to be transferred. One can also see the language of bureaucracy used as we notice that this narrative intrigued the villagers in a profound way.

**Cultural Changes due to Christianity**

Conversion is also seen as a 'cultural passage' (Austin-Broos 2003: 2) changing the direction from old practices and aligning oneself to a new institution with new rules and social expectations. It requires the reorientation of priorities and 'negotiates a place in the world' (*Ibid*) as the following paragraphs will look into various social institutions that were both in conflict and in continuity. It will look at the changes and how those changes were recognized in the community.

*Family*

The families are relatively small and nuclear in nature. An average family consists of father, mother, and two children. Most fathers have government jobs either in Kalimpong town or nearby villages while the mothers stay at home and look after the house. Mothers are also known to be active in gardening and growing flowers for economic purposes. After completing their twelfth grade, most children went out of Kalimpong for further studies or employment. In case of extended families, there are surviving grandparents (mostly grandmothers) and the families of siblings living together. In order to avoid conflict between brothers especially after they are married, the eldest son usually moves out of the parents' home and builds another house in a nearby ancestral land while the youngest son stays with the parents. In case of misunderstanding, they do not like to argue and ignore each other to avoid confrontations. They live in modern houses and there is no traditional Lepcha house in the village.

*Marriage*

Church is an important place for young people to meet and get married. However, church is not an exclusive Lepcha domain. So intermarriage between Lepcha and non-Lepcha neighbours is a common practice in Bom Busty. Christian Lepchas have no reservations when it comes to finding spouses given that their other half is Christian. Often times when a Lepcha brings home a non-Lepcha wife, there are high

chances of the new bride introducing her culture and lifestyle to the new family, thus diluting the ethnic boundary of a Lepcha family. This phenomenon of intermarriage has been well noted for the decline of Lepcha culture but there is no stopping to the trend as love marriages are a popular trend today. "Of course we wish for Lepcha-Lepcha marriages but we don't hold any restrictions today," said an elderly gentleman. But Christian Lepchas are cautious about avoiding marriage to members of the same clan. In some cases arranged marriages take place and the traditional practice of a middleman – *peebu* - is still used as the main interlocutor between the bride and the groom's family. In a Christian Lepcha marriage, extensive traditional rules are discarded although those that are not in conflict with Christianity is selectively chosen and practised. Instead of the wedding gown and the suit, the bride can also be seen wearing the traditional *gada* in white and the groom is seen to mix the modern suit with the *dumpra.* Those at the wedding are also seen to wear the traditional attires and they use *pagu rip* (white flower) instead of the *khada* (white silk scarf) as garlands for the couple. Marriage often becomes the only time when families from far and near, both Christian and non-Christian come together and get to know each other.

Engagement Day

Wedding day with the garland of *pagu rip*

*Kinship*

Lepchas still follow the clan system but the practice of parallel descent ceased to exist following the acceptance of Christianity. It was difficult to follow the traditional practice since the wife took the husband's last name after marriage and the daughter was unable to take the mother's last name because her mother had already changed her last name to her father's clan name. Although there are cases where both the son and the daughter took their mother's clan name in the absence of the father. During 1960s some Chinese men married Lepcha women but left their wives behind with the children. The children of those unions took their mother's clan name and stuck to the clan rules. Till today, these families are strict about marriage within the clan although technically they never belonged to that particular clan. Indeed, clan endogamy is still taboo and they strictly adhere to the rules. In that, kinship ties have remained unchanged although the terminologies are slowly being replaced by the usage of Nepali kinship terms instead. Examples like *daju* for elder brother is used in place of *anum* or *mama* for uncle in place of *azyong.*

*Language*

There was a time when Lepcha was the official language of the region, which is evident from the fact that even the Deed of Grant of Darjeeling was written in Lepcha. But in due time Lepcha language became 'unfashionable' (Foning 1987: 160) and the Nepali language took over as the *lingua franca* of the region. Lepchas were mocked at not

being able to pronounce the Nepali words properly. "There was a feeling of shame that we weren't speaking the right way," said a Bom resident who remembers his classmates and teachers making fun of him speaking in Nepali. It was tough in the beginning for Lepcha students to speak a different language at home and at school but they made a conscious effort to master the Nepali language as almost all Lepchas in Bom Busty speak Nepali today. They are fluent and can read and write in Nepali rather than in Lepcha, owing also to the education system where Nepali is the medium of instruction (unless they go to English schools). Most parents have realized that Lepcha language has ceased to be spoken even at homes while their children took Nepali as their spoken and written language in school around the village. The usage of Lepcha language thus became limited to a few words in dinner table or when there would be a visitor. But different Lepcha organizations are working to promote the practice of Lepcha language as Bom Busty hosted the decadal celebrations for the Lepcha Conversation Course (LCC) in January 2012. LCC is a mobile language programme started by like-minded Lepcha individuals held annually in different Lepcha villages. Bom Busty also hosted the fifth LCC, which gave birth to regular Lepcha classes in Bom School for Lepcha students. Following the decadal celebrations, the Lepcha class has also been extended to villagers and other language enthusiasts. Since the class was a later addition to school syllabus, the teachers' salary was being borne by the contribution of a few Lepcha families from the village.

Students at LCC learning Lepcha alphabets

Lepcha language classes being held outside

*Food*

The Lepchas of Bom Busty remember when food used to be gathered from the bountiful forests. There was a time when the village residents would reap dry paddy a little away from their houses. Men and women would go to particular spots where the women would start gathering fruits and plants while the men would weave cane mats which were used to carry the gathered food stuff. Maize and millet were other popular crops amongst Lepchas. In case of excess food, they would dig holes and store the food in layers with the grains placed at the bottom. This would be their granary, a storehouse that could be used when they needed more food. While the different kinds of yams and sweet potatoes were readily available in the forest, fishing in the Relli River usually resulted a good catch. The fish would then be prepared inside a bamboo and shared with everyone present. Today, young people visit the Relli River for riverside picnic activities and although there are some young men from the village who still fish,

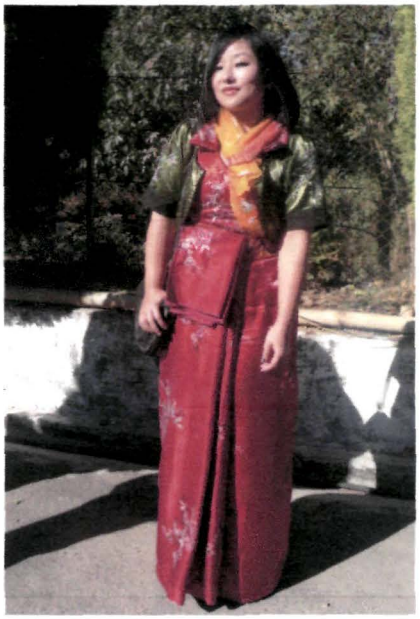
majority of meat and fish products are readily available in the market. One of the important changes in the dietary habits has to be the intake of *ci*, the Lepcha alcoholic drink usually made of millet, which plays an essential part in all spheres of Lepcha life. Because of its alcoholic nature, a line is drawn between those who consume and those who do not, putting the Christian Lepchas in the latter category automatically divorcing them from a key aspect of Lepcha culture. Although Christian Lepchas of Bom Busty have fond memories of *ci* intake on various occasions, it has become a religious boundary marker today. One of the interesting food influences has been the making of *sel roti,* a Nepali circular shaped rice doughnut prepared during Hindu festivals, which the Christian Lepchas have picked up and prepare during Christmas. It has also been seen served during weddings.

*Dress*

Until about fifty years ago, *dumpra* and *gada* were worn by Lepcha men and women in the village respectively. There was a time when thorns from orange trees were used as safety pins to hold the female attire together. Today, the traditional attires are only worn during special occasions. The recent trend among men has been to coordinate a tailored suit and a *dumpra*, transforming the traditional attire to a modern contemporary look. Women are also seen to wear their *gadas* to church on Sundays especially during the winter season. In September 2008, the leader of the Gorkhaland movement demanded everyone in Darjeeling hills to wear the Nepali dress that triggered a new wave of

consciousness among Lepchas. Lepchas rejected the imposition, and vowed to wear their own attires instead. This was a wake up call for the Lepchas since their cultural identity through what they wear was being threatened. It became more of a reason to wear the traditional dress and today's youth are also promoting the traditional attires with the first ever Himalayan Ethnic Lepcha Fashion Event (HELFE) held in 2012.

*Dumpra* worn with pants and jacket



Ready made *gada* worn during Christmas

**Christian Lepcha Identity**

> 'Becoming Christian is not a simple process of replacing an old set of local practices with a new set of universal practices, nor is the local Christianity to be understood as some kind of quasi-Christianity as a result of the transformations and compromises that have occurred in the adoption process' (Yoko 2004: 291).

A Christian Lepcha identity is a combination of two distinctive identities. A Christian Identity and a Lepcha identity constituting its own separate cultures. But what makes one a Christian? What are the boundaries that separate a Christian Lepcha from a non-Christian Lepcha? In order to examine the Christian identity, it is important to understand what it means to be a Christian first. For the purpose of this study we look at 'being Christian as a social rather than intellectual or spiritual phenomena' (Bal 2000: 132). The Christian church has its universal ideals and rituals but there is no exclusive "Christian identity" because it is also contextualized through time and space. A Christian identity does not mean that all Christians share a common set of beliefs and values' (Tanner 1997: 124). Despite its universal appeals, not all Christians everywhere believe in the same things. Historically, to be a Christian meant to be a follower of Christ but things are not so easy and simple. There are many layers of practices and beliefs that make up a Christian identity today. There are no 'sharp cultural boundaries that give Christians (as a whole) group specifity' (Stamps 2009: 1) and this could ring true for Lepchas of Bom Busty as well. There are Bom Lepchas who come from Catholic and Protestant denominations following different doctrines but are known to others as Christians. It is interesting that the Middle Bom Busty Lepchas have garnered the Christian tag in the area. True enough, if you are a Lepcha from Middle Bom Busty, there are high chances you might be a Christian. With only two Buddhist households in the village and the Lower Bom Busty comprising most of the Buddhist population, Lepchas of Middle Bom Busty are Christians by default. But what separates the

Christian Lepchas from their Buddhist counterparts across the field or from Christian Lepchas from the Christian non-Lepchas?

*Identity Markers*

From a Biblical perspective, Christian Lepchas reject the polytheistic array of many Gods and devils in Lepcha cosmology by following the one true God who created them and promised them eternal life. They believe in the Bible as the word of God and are affiliated with the local Bom Church (or other) for Sunday services and other church activities throughout the year. Association with a church officially recognizes the individual as a Christian and can be cited as a place of identification when asked about religion in government census or places of employment. Members are expected to participate in church activities and church is expected to look after the members in baptising and dedicating the baby, during marriage and death. Traditionally, a Lepcha *bongthing* would be required for these rites of passage but when almost all the Lepcha population of the village has embraced Christianity, the traditional Lepcha practices are emitted from the scene and the church identifies their task in the same. True enough, a Christian Lepcha does not believe in *mun*s and *bongthing*s and stays away from the various *rum faat*s that take place in neighbouring Lepcha houses. Instead, Lepcha homes host the various cottage meetings and prayers in Christian tradition. Members are expected to get married at church and monogamy is the order of the day. In case of marriages, Lepcha members are making an extra effort to amalgamate both Lepcha and

Christian tradition in their attires and rituals. While the church wedding remains as per Christian tradition, certain Lepcha rituals like the bridal price and the usage of *peebu* has been seen in practice. Certain gifts like *ci* is replaced by milk clearly indicating that this is a Christian Lepcha marriage. Alcohol is strictly prohibited in church although there are instances of its usage in negligible homes during the after-party. When a child is born, it is the parents, grandparents or friends of the baby who would name the child and there is no special day for this occasion. The growing children are sent to Sunday Schools to learn about the stories of the Bible and most of them also start their educational careers in Bom School itself, their 'natal denomination' (Caplan 1980: 656) before transferring to other mission institutions or government schools. One of the impressive Christian Lepcha identity markers in Bom Busty has been education. From the very onset of Christianity in the village, education went hand in hand to create an environment that encouraged people to study and the trend continues today. Because of easy access to education through church, Christian Lepchas were well educated and exposed to the world, but they ignored and missed out on the knowledge about Lepcha culture. In that, Christianity failed to contextualize its cultural package in the case of the Lepchas. For the longest time, it failed to "find Jesus in Lepcha culture" (Limboo 2009: 89) as the two identities walked towards the same direction of progress but on the different sides of the road. There was no amalgamation of Lepcha culture and Christianity as Christianity overtook the traditional culture creating a significant boundary between those inside and outside the faith (Farhadian 2003).

*Comparing Narratives*

"Rongs are much closer to the biblical tradition". This is an oft-repeated phrase in recent days when a pastor/ preacher is preaching to the Lepcha crowd. Today, Lepcha Christians are drawing parallel between Lepcha myths and biblical stories starting from before the creation when the Bible talks about 'the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters' (Genesis 1:2). Lepchas also believe that in the beginning, 'the world was all water, and there were no living creatures' (Stocks 1975: 32). The presence of water since the existence of this planet is a recurring phenomenon across tribal tales and scientific speculations, but this is only the start of similarities of Lepcha narratives sounding like they are from the Bible or vice versa.

The Creation Story: In Lepcha mythology, the creator God Itbumu is believed to have created the heavens and the earth before he picked the fresh snow of Mt. Kanchenjunga and created Fudongthing the first man on earth. But the creator was not satisfied and decided to give him a companion by taking a bit of '*a-yong,* literally translated marrow' (Doma 2010: 2) from Fudong's bones and created Nazongnyu, his sister. They were blessed with supernatural powers and instructed to live separately. Fudongthing was to live on top a mountain named *Nareng Nangsheng Chyu* and Nazongnyu was to live in a lake below the mountain called *Naho-Nahar Daa.* But they could not stay away from each other and started meeting in between the mountain and the lake. Soon enough they gave birth to their first child but threw it away. This continued till their seventh child when they were ultimately found out. Itbumu was

disappointed at Fudongthing and Nazongnyu for disobeying her orders. She cursed them and banished them from her presence. 'You will leave immediately and live in the foothills of Kongchen Kongchlo as ordinary humans and suffer for your sins' (Doma 2010: 4). This narrative is very similar to the creation story in the Bible where God created Adam from the dust of the ground and took one of his ribs to create Eve, a helper for him. Unlike Fudongthing and Nazongnyu's living arrangements, Adam and Eve lived in the Garden of Eden but were instructed not to eat from the tree of life. Unfortunately, they relented and they were also banished from the garden as he cursed them both for disobeying his orders.

The Flood Story: The flood story is the story of Rongyoo and Rangeet, two rivers of Sikkim. They were lovers who were to meet at Pesok and travel towards the plains. They each had a bird and a snake to guide them. But it was the girl—Rongyoo guided by the snake that arrived before the boy and that upset his male ego. When he reached, she asked him *Thee-satha?* meaning "where have you been?" (the name of the river has been anglicized to Teesta and remained so ever since). In that, Rangeet was ashamed of his delayed arrival and instead of travelling forward he decided to return to his place of origin. The opposite flow caused turbulence as the waters rose and flooded the land. During the time of the flood, Lepchas were believed to have sought refuge in Mt. Tendong and was saved from being drowned. Likewise, the biblical flood occurred when the earth was full of evil and God wanted to destroy it. But, he found a righteous man in Noah and wanted to save him and his family along with other living creatures of this earth. So, he told him to build a wooden ark and when it flooded, those inside the

boat were saved. In both cases, we see a select group of people saved from drowning when the earth was flooded with water.

The tower of Babel: The Bible talks about a time when everyone spoke the same language and said, 'Come let us build ourselves a city and a tower that reaches heaven' (Genesis 11:4). But God was not pleased with the developments as he confused their language and they could not work on building the tower together. In case of the Lepchas, they too wanted to build a stairway to heaven (see Chapter 3) and they used earthen pots for that purpose. Soon they were piling pots after pots to get to heaven. But a miscommunication between those at the top and those at the bottom caused the earthen pot tower to be smashed down. Here too, we see similar aspirations of the Lepcha people and the people of the Bible to reach heaven, which remained unfulfilled because of language problems.

In all three narratives, the stories and its themes are so alike that we wonder if one was inspired from the other. However, the similarities of Lepcha mythology to Biblical stories have an added advantage to the developing interest in Christian Lepchas affirming their Christian faith and Lepcha culture today. Limboo compares the 'peace loving, generous, sincere, faithful, hospitable, self giving and self sacrificing nature' of the Lepchas to the Christian concept of agape (Limboo 2009: 118) . And with biblical stories running parallel Lepcha myths, Christian Lepchas can now embrace the history of traditional culture they once ignored. But can 'an ethnic *cum* religious identification' (Yoko 2004: 285) exist in the context of Lepchas? The above narratives are examples of

how Christian identity and Lepcha identity can possibly co-exist and produce a shared identity.

*Christian Lepcha vs. Lepcha Christian*

> 'I personally feel that it is best for us simple people to adopt Christianity...' (Foning 1987: 295)

In this shared identity, however, it is very likely that one becomes dominant and the other dormant in different contexts. The question of whether the religious identity precedes the ethnic identity *vis-à-vis* the Christian Lepcha vs. the Lepcha Christian will always be there because there was a time when the 'exclusivist attitude' (Longkumer 2010: 85) of Christianity prevented them from continuing many of their old cultural practices. Christian Lepchas were blamed for ignoring Lepcha culture, forgetting Lepcha language and 'considering themselves too advanced to interact with their Buddhist counterparts' (Gowloog Forthcoming). On the other hand, Buddhist Lepchas managed to integrate Lepcha culture with Buddhism and kept up with the traditional practices. In that, Christian Lepchas have not always felt secure about their ethnic identity because Buddhist Lepchas would always question their loyalty and involvement in community affairs. Today, Christian Lepchas have come to a realization that their religious identity has not been able to suffice for their ethnic identity. They are making conscious effort to acknowledge and reaffirm their ethnic identity and Christian Lepchas of Bom Busty are showing active participation in community affairs both within and

outside their religious spheres. There has also been an emergence of the educated Christian elite who are outspoken and prominent in projecting their Lepcha Christian identity referring to Bible verses like, 'Blessed is the nation whose God is the Lord, the people whom he has chosen as his heritage' (Psalms 33: 12). Lepcha Christians are pronouncing worlds of the Bible on behalf of their community, surer of both their religious and cultural identity. There is an acceptance of Christianity's ignorant role to the traditional culture and are willing to accommodate different ideas. Involved with church affairs, there was a time when Christian identity overshadowed the Lepcha identity but Christian Lepchas are today positive about their role in the preservation and promotion of both their identities. When asked around the village if they were Lepcha Christians or Christian Lepchas, the wordplay was only distraction as everyone agreed, "We are Lepchas first".

## Chapter 6

## Hinduism and Lepchas in Ilam

"Dashain is not our festival," said Bir Bahadur Lepcha, President of the *Rong Shezum Thee* (Lepchas Association of Ilam). It is the biggest festival for the Hindus, but we have never claimed Dashain to be our festival, he added. The radio FMs announced Dashain to be the "national festival" and the festivities could be seen and heard all over Ilam. Shopkeepers were busy selling more sweets than regular days and travellers were finding harder to find seats even on local buses. It was that time of the year when school children enjoyed almost a month long vacation while everybody looked forward to new clothes, good food and visiting relatives from both far and near.

Dashain is known to be the longest religious festival of Nepal. It is an important celebration that usually lasts for 15 days. For a country officially known to be the *ekmatra Hindu rajya,* the only Hindu kingdom in the world until 2008[11], Dashain was the uncontested national festival. It was the Ranas who turned Dashain to be a national festival par excellence (Gellner 2005: 768). Hinduism was the dominant religion and the King was regarded as an incarnation of the Hindu God Vishnu. Citizens even lined at the gate of the royal palace in Kathmandu to receive *tika* from the king. It was also seen as a 'ritual of state power' (Schneiderman 2009: 562). Post monarchy, however, the Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities (NEFIN) comprising 59 people groups

[11] On May 28, 2008 Nepal became "a secular, federal, democratic, republic nation' as they abolished the monarchy that had ruled the country for the last 239 years.

decided that Dashain was not their festival, and that it was the 'encroachment of the dominant Hindu people and their culture have posed great threats to both culture and nature of indigenous peoples'. So the minority groups of Nepal united against Dashain celebrations. The idea of boycotting Dashain is described by Susan Hangen (2005: 50) as a "strategy" used at the national level by ethno-political organizations representing different minority groups in recent years.

In this chapter, we shall look into the spread of Hinduism among the Lepcha population of Ilam. We have taken the village of Jilbong for its "traditional" tag. It is believed to be the most Lepcha village one will find in Ilam and the people here are known for their 'community feeling' (Schwerzel *et.al* 2000: 41) in trying to keep the culture alive. We shall look into the various spheres of society where direct and indirect permeation of Hindu culture has taken place. It will discuss the various culture changes resulting contact with Hinduism and an attempt will be made to discuss whether they are Hindus or Buddhists because almost all Lepchas of Ilam profess Buddhism as their religion.

## Spread of Hinduism

*Dashain vs. Nikung Pundee Rum Faat*

In the Lepcha settlement of Jilbong, houses were being cleaned and freshly daubed with red mud. It was Dashain time which also meant it was time for the annual "autumn

cleaning" along with the eating, drinking and merry making attached to this festival. Villagers were seen to be going to Harkatey or Fikkal bazaar to buy new clothes especially for their children and to replenish their food stocks that was unavailable in the village. Daughters who had married elsewhere would be coming home and it would only be proper to serve them the best food. Every Lepcha house you visited would offer the local *ci* and fried pork intestines. While mutton was the preferred meat for Dashain, pork was usually served in Lepcha homes. The ninth day of Dashain festival was known as *maarko din* (the day of kill) when hundreds of goats were slaughtered to appease the goddess Durga. Even the poor saved money throughout the year to be able to buy a goat/ duck/ chicken for slaughter on this day. On this occasion, Lepcha households were seen to slaughter pigs instead. They had their own rituals and practices attached to the day of the kill, which was very different from a typical Hindu home in Nepal. At a certain Buddha Lepcha's place, the slaughter had been taking place every year for the last few decades. The house had been cleaned and freshly painted with red earth, but it was not the Dashain ritual that awaited us there; the Lepcha family would be celebrating the *Nikung Pundee Rum,* an annual ritual conducted to appease the ancestors. "We have to give our forefathers the *Dashain bhaag,*" (Dashain share) often an act of sharing food items to neighbours and friends, making it seem like it was a part of Dashain celebrations.

At the corner of the house, an arch like shrine was built using the local *titeypati* (mugwort). The top part was covered with banana leaves, which were also used to carpet the area of worship. A copper plate with some rice was placed in the middle of the

shrine with a copper vase that held some mugwort plant wrapped in banana leaves. This arrangement was supposed to depict the *pundee rum* (queen god). Also on the plate was an oil lamp and an egg, which was supposed to represent the "hunter". Bamboo sticks were placed in four corners surrounding the plate within the shrine, which were supposed to have walked alongside the hunter. There was also a spear nearby which would later be used to kill the pig.

The shrine for Nikung Pundee Rum

Close-up

Before the *bongthing* presided over the ceremony, the eldest person in the house came over and lit the oil-lamp in the shrine and listed the names of the family members of the house. Then the *bongthing* took over as he faced the shrine and placed a bowl of water and added pine on an ember lit lamp. The burned pine produced sweet incense that was a part of the worship. He then held a wrapped banana leaf and used it like a wand by dipping its tip in the bowl of water every now and then as he initiated his recitations. Seated next to him was his assistant holding a young rooster that would also

be used during the ceremony. The rooster was required because the pig to be slaughtered was a female and the presence of a cock balanced the need of a male-female pair for the ritual. The incantations were short and very simple. The *bongthing* would sprinkle both rice and water on the shrine and the rooster in between his chants. It was important that the rooster shrugged off the water and that was also expected of the pig as the *bongthing* went out to the sty in the middle of the ceremony and sprinkled grains of rice and water on the pig as well. The shrug by the pig and the rooster was an indication that they could now go ahead with the slaughter. Upon his return to the shrine, he offered bits of the newly harvested rice grains, millet, *marcha* and cracked the "hunter" egg with a wooden baton. Thereafter the cock was hit with the same baton and its blood offered to *nikung pundee.* The *bongthing* then heated the blade of the spear on his incense lamp and handed the spear to be used to kill the pig. Once outside, it took just one strike with the spear and the pig was left squealing as it slowly bled to death. The Lepchas do not have strict rules about pure and impure food items. And killing a pig during Dashain had now become a tradition in Lepcha households. While the meat was consumed for feasting and merry making, he added that it had an economic advantage in selling the meat to villagers at 140 rupees per kilo.

So for the daughters who visited once a year, they can look forward to eating pork at home. Interestingly, the daughters do not receive the same kind of reception as in other Hindu homes. Lepcha families do not practise one of the main customs of Dashain, which is the receiving and giving of *tika,* which is prepared by mixing rice, yogurt and vermilion applied on the forehead. Lepchas do not adorn their foreheads with

the red *tika* popular and significant to Dashain customs as red is to symbolize blood relations. Often times, the visiting daughters were those who had eloped with a non-Lepcha and these visits can be seen as an occasion for renewing ties between daughters and sisters who married out from their natal kinsmen, as well as between these women and their affines (Caplan 1970: 184-185). But since Dashain is not their festival, the visits could be superficial and no different than when visiting their parents' home on a non-Dashain occasion. Their non-Hindu orientation prevents them from knowing stories and myths related to the festival and falls short of 'these visits as a context for rehearsing customs, relating myths and legends and in other ways demonstrating shared cultural background' (Caplan 1970: 185). The homecoming could be nostalgic including stories and memories of childhood but it did not necessarily facilitate the meaning and significance of Dashain.

However, Dashain for Lepchas could be seen as local interpretations of the national festival serving as an opportunity to 'negotiate their relationship with the state and each other' (Pfaff-Czarnecka 1996), as *Nikung Pundee Rum* is the local ritual running parallel with the state's Dashain celebrations. Although the Lepcha observance of the local ritual does not have much in common with the Dashain tradition, the Lepchas have an excuse to "celebrate" the national festival and are known to feast the hardest. "It is somebody else's festival but we celebrate it longer than they do," said a Lepcha villager as we found his friend drunk even after the holidays were over. His statement itself was an indicator that for Lepchas Dashain does not mean anything and unlike the prolonged celebrations, *Nikung pundee Rum* is only observed at the main

houses and lasts for a mere one hour or so. Still it was an occasion for the Lepchas to celebrate Dashain because they have to for owing citizenship to the nation. But they are also not celebrating Dashain because they have substituted the Hindu festival with their own annual ritual as they look forward to celebrating Dashain every year.

*Naga Panchami*

*Naga Panchami* (festival of snakes) is another Hindu festival where they worship snakes or images of snakes. In Nepal, they post pictures of snakes above the doors of their homes to ward off evil spirits, offer prayers to Nagas, and offer sweets, milk and honey for the snakes. Lepcha homes were no different from Hindu homes as posters of snakes were placed above the door. Complying with the general belief that snake posters above and at the door would ward off evil spirits and lessen snakebites, Lepcha homes followed suit. Besides the general knowledge of *naga panchami*, they were not fully aware of the mythological reasons behind the snake posters nor the festival yet, they were keen to welcome the Brahmin priest who visited different houses and distributed the snake posters for this occasion. "We give him a few rupees and he does the *puja* for us," said a resident of Aaitabarey where Lepchas were found to be living alongside other communities. But the occurence of the snake posters was less evident in Jilbong although not totally absent.


Posters of *naga panchami* on the door

*Naming Ceremony*

In Lepcha tradition, the typical naming ceremony known as the *tungbaong faat* of a newborn baby takes place after three nights of its birth. It is believed that a 'newly-born child is not in full possession of its soul until three days after its birth (Morris 1938: 207). So, the *bongthing* is called on the fourth day to perform the *ci faat* to bless the child and offer prayers to their respective clan peaks by calling upon the deities of birth. In Ilam, however, the *bongthing* was often replaced by a Brahmin priest challenging his role and changing the Lepcha names to Hinduized names. There have been occasions when the *bongthing* would have given a particular name like "Birmit" but the Brahmin priest would take a look at a *patro* (religious calendar) and rename the child to "Harimaya". We can here see the 'direct infiltration' (Bose 1996: 177) of Hindu culture through a Brahmin priest in Lepcha society. Despite having a Lepcha name, it seemed

like the societal pressure to have a name acknowledged by a Hindu priest gave more validation and acceptance, as it would be easier to pronounce amongst neighbours. One lady mentioned that she had both the *bongthing* and *brahmin* names, but she preferred to use the latter.

In other instances, the baby would have a Lepcha name but when they would go to the VDC to register the baby, most of the workers would not be able to write or pronounce the Lepcha names. So they would give the baby a new and an "easy" name to pronounce and that would be registered as the official name of the child. Even visits to health posts to treat the child resulted in a change of name as the worker would name the baby at his/her linguistic convenience. Prem Tshering Lepcha and Buddha Maya Lepcha were the kinds of names in practice today as they combined both religious and ethnic connotations. These days, there was also a trend of mixing a Nepali/ Hindu name with a Lepcha suffix. Such as Buddhamit with *mit* being the suffix that is usually added to female Lepcha names.

In Jilbong, majority of the villagers gave their Hindu-inspired names during the household census. There were only five individuals in the village that used their Lepcha names. Though they have an "official" and a Lepcha name, they often tend to use their non-Lepcha name. Sometimes there is a deliberate attempt to hide the "Lepcha-ness" that is attached to a given name. One Meera Lepcha mentioned how ashamed she was of being a Lapcha and that she would try to hide her surname and mention that she was either a Rai or a Limbu when she was in school. Though her case might not ring true for

the entire population, there has always been an inferior kind of self-perception among the Lepchas in Ilam.

*Caste among Lepchas*

The Lepchas do not practise the caste system but their citizenship to a Hindu country has compelled them to be a part of the caste hierarchy. The caste system incorporated non-caste societies and attempted to integrate them. Even Buddhists were incorporated to the caste system although they did not strictly comply to it. It was how the state promoted the language and religion of the high-caste Hindus as 'the national culture of Nepal to create a homogenous nation of Nepali speakers who followed Hinduism' (Hangen 2005:). Unlike the Indian *varna* system of Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishyas and the Shudras, Nepal followed the *Muluki Ain* (1854), which was the country's first legal system for many decades. It was rooted in Hindu philosophy and categorized the population in terms of purity and pollution. 'It laid down a complex system of rights, obligations and permissible forms of behaviour which varied according to different ethnic communities belonged in its categories' (Guneratne 1999: 163). It divided the citizens into two castes but a third category was added in between to accommodate the tribals who were known as *Matwalis.* While the Limbus, Rais, Gurungs and Tamangs were included in this category, Lepchas were not listed in the *Muluki Ain* that imposed the caste system. It could be the reason why Lepchas of Ilam feel free to say, "we have no caste". Their exclusion from *Muluki Ain* gave them the liberty to speak from outside

the rigid caste system. But the society is not ready to accept that anyone in Nepal would have no caste because it is a 'state mandated caste hierarchy' (Guneratne 1999: 163) and if you are not included in the books, it could only mean you must be in the bottom rank; as a Bhujel neighbour listening to our conversation was quick to remark, "Since Lepchas are without caste, they are lower than the lowest caste". Bhujels themselves belong to the low caste and in that hierarchy, the fact that Lepchas have no caste could mean that they are of the lowest caste. It is only possible that their interacting with low caste people made them feel smaller than Bhujels. There was a definite feeling of inferiority as the Lepchas were poor and economically dominated by the other groups. Yet Lepchas were not making any effort to climb the social ladder either. 'They did not rise in revolt even when they were relegated to a lowly position within Hindu society' (Bose 1996: 175). They seemed unmoved about the position they were given in the caste system because they had managed to maintain a distinct identity outside the caste system. Acceptance of caste has also been seen as the 'first step of Sanskritization' (Jones 1976: 68), and the Lepchas, indifference to the caste system somehow kept them away from this phenomenon. While tribal groups are known to be absorbed by the Hindu social structure as the 'caste system is not exactly immutable it is generally assumed to be' (Bose 1996: 172), Lepchas stayed on the outside and absorbed only those that fit with their liking and refrained from a full-fledged membership of the Hindu society.

*Lepcha Absorption of Hinduism*

There is no denying that Hindu ideas had been socially absorbed and noticeable in their everyday life. One of the main characteristics of Hindu method of tribal absorption was 'worshipping a Hindu goddess' (Bose 1996: 169) and Lepchas are far from this invocation. While *ganesh puja, saraswati puja,* and *laxmi puja* are observed as state holidays, Lepchas do not go to temples and invoke these gods. But an indirect appeasement of Hindu gods and goddesses could be seen through posters in bedroom walls. While this could be seen as mere decoration in the otherwise plain wall, it could also be an acknowledgment of the good fortune associated with gods and goddess like Ganesha and Laxmi as seen in the picture below.

Poster of Laxmi and Ganesha in the bedroom

Regardless, Hindu traits found their way in Lepcha homes in a very unassuming fashion. As part of their daily make-up, young girls were seen putting a *tika* dot on their foreheads with a kohl pencil. *Tika*s are Hindu identifiers as it could also mean the third eye of Lord Shiva, it has also become a fashion statement. Likewise older women were seen to be wearing the *potey*, the glass beads which were worn by married women in

Hindu culture. These were negligible yet absorbing features besides the inconspicuous participation and observation of various Hindu festivals and celebrations. Indeed, Hindu religious ideas had penetrated into their culture dominating and absorbing Lepchas within its 'economic and social framework' (Bose1996: 173).

## Cultural Change in Ilam Lepchas

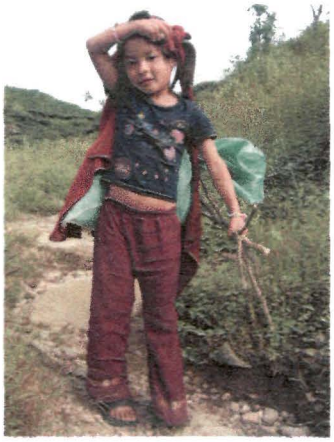
Lepchas were most influenced by Hinduism because it was the majority religious tradition. Hinduism was also the official state religion for a long time in Nepal, the exposure to which was inevitable. Hinduism believes to be a non-proselytizing religion. So Lepchas were never converted to this religion. However the assimilation and absorption of their cultural and religious ideas of Hinduism dominated the tribal worldviews. The following paragraphs will look into the cultural changes Lepchas have faced or retained since cultural contact with Hindu society.

### *Family*

The Lepcha families of Ilam are small and close-knit. Daughters are found to help in the household chores from a very young age. Most families worked in their own fields and farm their own products. The constant help in the fields from the children has led to a high percentage of school dropouts among Lepcha children. It is important to know of one's family origin or clan because different clans had different death rituals in

Jilbong. While most clans buried their dead, Pugongmoos of Jilbong have been cremating their dead since they can remember. On a side note, other communities residing in Ilam pay the Lepchas when they need to bury their dead. For instance, the Rais dig the grave, and before putting the corpse in the ground, throw in a few coins to pay to the original owners of the land to bury their dead.

Lepcha family in Ilam



Young girl carrying grains and twigs

*Marriage*

In Ilam, the limited number of clans make it difficult to find partners when Lepchas reach a marriageable age. Everybody is somehow related and the observance of nine generations on father's *moo* and four generations into a mother's *moo* make it difficult to find spouses. There is a wide occurrence of late marriage among the Lepchas of Ilam. They prefer to live in their ancestral homes and help around the house and the fields rather than finding a spouse of a different community and having to adjust to their

lifestyle. "We like it here. Why go to somebody's place and suffer?" said a woman in her late 30s. But there are also cases of a Lepcha girl marrying someone of a different community; she will automatically belong to her husband's community while the practice of son bringing a non-Lepcha daughter means the wife will take his family line. Some Lepchas also have cross-border marital alliances. Christian Lepchas from Ilam and Kalimpong are also seen to partake in cross-border nuptials. But otherwise, Lepchas of Ilam do not necessarily speak of relatives in India.

*Kinship*

Kinship terminology has mostly been replaced from Lepcha to Nepali. The term of reference for maternal uncle and aunt has changed from *azyong-anue* to *mama-maiju.* Marriage within the clan is not permitted hence clan exogamy is the rule of the society. They practise parallel descent in Ilam. So the son took his father's clan name, while the daughter took her mother's name. But they held on to the clan names and were knowledgeable about clan origin, an important feature to Lepcha society. Despite negligible population, Lepchas of Ilam seem to be the only ones in the field who know their clan addresses (see Ch. 2). Each clan member is able to tell the name of their peak and the lake where their soul was to return upon death.

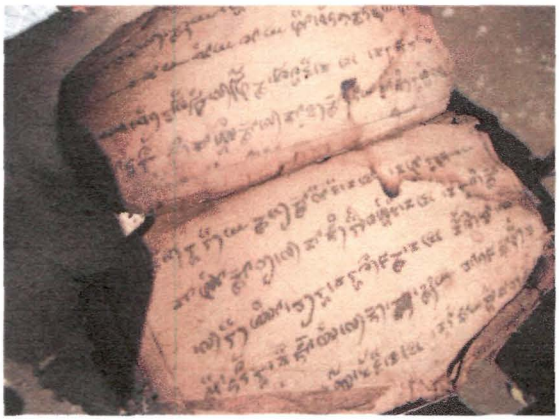
| **Clan (*Kugit*)** | **Peak *(Chyu)*** | **Lake *(Da)*** |
|---|---|---|
| *Pugong moo* | *Namla Namhor Chyu* | *Namla Namjeet Da* |
| *Lucksom moo* | *Kongla Kongchen Chyu** | *Tanuk Tashe Da* |
| *Rongong moo* | *Norbu Norsang Chyu* | *Tanuk Tashe Da* |
| *Molom moo* | *Yalbo Norsong Chyu*<br>*Molmu Ngolsong Chyu*<br>*Kongla Kongchen Chyu** | *Ingmu Longmu Da*<br>*Ingmu Longmu Da*<br>*Yolmu Longmu Da* |
| *Sandyang moo* | *Kongchen Kongla Chyu** | *Lingmu Longu Da* |
| *Lingda moo* | *Namzit Namsang Chyu* | *Barfong Da* |

The *Molommoos* are inconsistent with their *chyu* (peak) as three different names are given as shown in the list above. Likewise, *Konchen Kongla Chyu** was repeated by the *Lucksomoos*, *Molomoos* and the *Sandyangmoos*. While it can be confusing, *Kongchen Kongla* is actually the name of Mt. Kanchenjunga in Lepcha language and people have started using Kanchenjunga as their peak of origin. Despite the knowledge, however, the influence of patrilineal descent and the practice of using father's clan name is not uncommon because when one applies for the Nepali citizenship, father's name is very important. So it was also necessary for the children regardless of their sex to take on the father's clan name unless they have used "Lepcha" as the last name. Therefore the practice of parallel descent practiced by Lepchas is seen to be suffering a set back with the daughters taking their father's clan name.

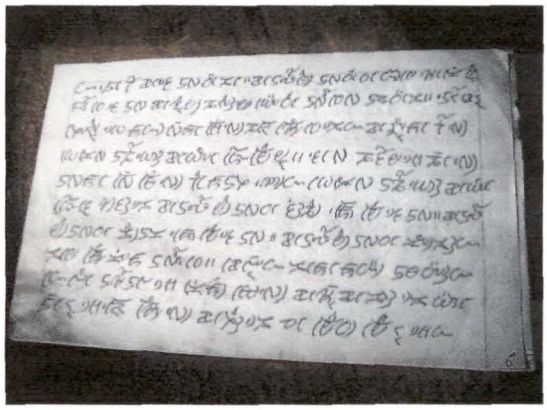
*Language*

Nepali is the national language of the country but 'the *lingua franca* at Jilbong was Lepcha' (Schwerzel *et. al* 2000: 41). Lepchas residing in that village speak both Lepcha and Nepali with the elders encouraging the younger generation to speak their mother tongue. "If we do not speak *Rongring* than the others will not be able to recognize us," said Mrs. Man Maya Lapcha who thinks it is important to maintain the linguistic boundary of the community. They make a conscious effort to speak in Lepcha as the neighbours are also full of praises regarding their ability to speak in their own language and have themselves learned some Lepcha words and phrases. But there was a time when the Lepcha language was ridiculed, as villagers were quick to say, *"manche khaney bhasa boldai chha."* (They speak the man-eater's language). During the panchayat rule, when freedom of speech was non-existent, there were others who thought Lepchas were speaking the language of the government. So in order to avoid accusations and prevent attention, they refused to speak in Lepcha and spoke Nepali like any other villager. But in the last decade or so, Jilbong Lepchas have been organizing Lepcha language classes for both adults and children. They learned to speak, read and write in Lepcha. Being together in a classroom learning the ancient script also gave them a sense of togetherness and belongingness to their ancient culture. It was deemed important to organize the language school because of fear of the younger generation losing their linguistic traits and becoming Nepali. 'Nepali is the language of the Hindu conqueror, (Jones 1976: 68) and it has become a must because that is the language used in government offices, to secure jobs, and to travel outside the village. But Lepcha

language is still spoken in Lepcha households. The villagers also take pride in the existence of many old Lepcha books for a long time. In an unfortunate event, an arson in the house of the last *mun* of Jilbong burnt most of the books, but there are still a few old books and *naamthars*. Among them, *dotho naamthar* is believed to have records for the last ten generations in Jilbong. At the moment, the language teacher is copying some old *naamthars* in his own handwriting.



An old *naamthar* in Jilbong



*Naamthar* in progress

*Food*

The fields were ripe with millet when I reached *Jilbong*. It is one of the main crops that makes their diet. They also farm maize and rice. Most people are involved in agriculture. They grow their own vegetables and are seen to be farming ginger, which they sell in Fikkal bazaar. They are non-vegetarians. They are fond of pork and also rear them for economic reasons. Beef is not easily available but if served they are free to

consume it. Hoefer mentions Lepchas eating elephant meat (Hoefer 2007: 117) but nobody could confirm this information, and it must have been an isolated case of consuming elephant meat at that time. Lepchas have the knowledge of different fruits and roots available in the forest. They enjoy the roots and know how to separate the good from the bad. History speaks of a time in Ilam when Lepchas had to go to war but they did not want to go. So they fried poisonous roots and left it for the enemy to eat. Eventually, the enemies found those roots and ate them killing 1500 men. There are remnants of cardamom farming which is no more in practice today.

*Dress*

The Lepchas do not wear anything out of the ordinary from fellow villagers. The men wear regular pants, shirts and a jacket or a sweater, while the women wear lungis and blouses, salwar kameez and *sarees* when they go to town. It was also common to find a Lepcha man wearing the *dhaka topi* (Nepali hat) and the Lepcha women to be wearing a *dhaka choli* (blouse usually worn by Nepali women) around the village. Most men seemed comfortable with the *dhaka topi* on a regular basis. In the picture below of the second couple, the man is wearing a traditional Lepcha hat. While his wife is wearing the *dhaka* blouse and a *potey* (necklace) adorned mostly by married Hindu women. In the second picture, the husband and the wife depict an amalgamation that is happening in Ilam as they try to assimilate but retain their cultural identity through dress.

Man in Nepali *Dhaka topi*

Woman in *Potey* and man in Lepcha hat

Unlike Sikkim and Kalimpong, the traditional Lepcha dress was not easily available in Ilam. The women's *gada* was easier to find than the woven *dumpra* for men. Often times they brought the traditional dress from Kalimpong or Sikkim and the Ilam Lepcha Association was known to have bought and bought traditional attires from Kalimpong to make it available for Ilam Lepchas.

**Buddhist or Hindu?**

Despite the influence of Hinduism in different walks of life and the subtle acceptance of some of its practices, Lepchas do not accept Hinduism as their religion. They refuse to be identified as Hindus especially for census purposes. They choose to call themselves Buddhists instead. According to a report submitted to the NEFIN, Lepchas in Ilam are 99% Buddhists and 1% Christians. Buddhism is their accepted religion although the

practices show a syncretised version of Hinduism, Buddhism and traditional religion. Exposed to three religions, they have managed to pick and choose what fit best for their advantage and survival. While Buddhism is labelled the 'second religion of the Lapcha of Ilam' (Schwerzel *et.al* 2000: 36), it is difficult to come to this conclusion because Lepchas of Jilbong are very inconspicuous about the presence of Buddhism in their homes. They have no monastery in the village and do not hoist the prayer flags outside their homes. They do not have a resident lama and villagers do not observe the Buddhist calendar. Their shrines at homes are very simple and include only a picture of Buddha and some plants and flowers. There is one set of *chorten* (stupa) with a few prayer flags, which seem to suffice for their identity as Buddhists.

One of these *chortens* is believed to be 200 years old and the other one older than that. It was built when some old people from the village went for a pilgrimage westward to visit the various Buddhist sites. It took them six months to reach those places and upon their return they decided to build the *chorten* because they feared that the younger generation would not be able to travel so far. So they built this sacred monument in the village itself. These *chortens* are believed to be less "pure" than before because some miscreants had vandalized them.

Shrine with Buddha's picture

*Chortens* in Jilbong

*Shree Fensong Gombu*

Only a few minutes walk from Fikkal Bazar stands the Shree Fensong Gombu behind the *Rong Shezum Thee* office. Located right behind the Lepcha Association office, some people think of it as an exclusive Lepcha place of worship but Buddhist devotees from other communities are known to attend the same too. The lamas from Fensong Gombu are known to visit both Lepcha and non-Lepcha homes for different Buddhist rituals and readings. Located in a prime site, the *gombu* hardly receives any recognition for its many years of existence. There is no written record as to when it was established but they trace it to the year of the rooster, which could mean about 165 years ago. Karsing Lucksom is believed to have donated the land to construct the monastery and also helped in its construction. Since the Lucksom clan in Ilam is believed to have come from Sikkim, it is speculated that there is a Sikkimese connection in the existence of this

monastery. The monastery follows the *Nyigmapa* sect. There are many different *chyos* in the *gombu* out of which *setho chyo* (book for the dead) is written in Lepcha. The *tashe naamthar* is written in Nepali although most *chyos* are written in Tibetan. The monastery has been entrusted to safeguard a powerful *chyo*, which still remains in the premises today. There are altogether 32 *chyos* and 6 *ku*'s which also includes the *Guru Rinpoche ku*. There was a time when people from Sikkim had come to take back some of the things from the monastery too.

*Shree Fensong Gombu*

*Head lama of the monastery*

The head lama at *Fensong Gombu* is Chandra Bahadur Lapcha whose Buddhist/ Lepcha name is Nim Tshering Lapcha. Originally from Malim, he took his first meditation at the Kazini Gombu. When the senior lamas were getting old, he applied for this "job" and became the head lama in 1996 and has since become the caretaker of this *gombu* for the last fifteen years. He lives with his wife and a son in the *gombu* quarters

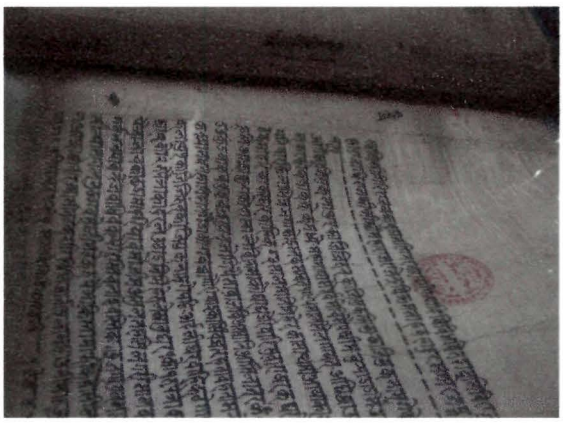
and teaches 15 pupils (all Lepcha) from different parts of Ilam. "Buddhism is a later addition to our culture," he said fully aware of the presence of *mun/ bongthing* that is required to officiate religious Lepcha rituals. There is a simultaneous presence of the *bongthing* and the lama. In case the *bongthing* called for slaughter of an animal, the head lama gladly complied with it. He mentioned that the two work together and the lamas usually chanted the prayers mostly in Tibetan while the *bongthing* would be directly involved in the *faat ci.* He felt that the young people today did not see gods and demons and lacked proper guidance when it came to religion. An advocate of promoting the *gombu* as a religious tourist destination, the head lama had a few plans for the future of the monastery and Buddhism. But it has been said that the arrival of Yuklathup and his followers in 1826 was what aided to the firm establishment of Buddhism among the Lepchas of Ilam.

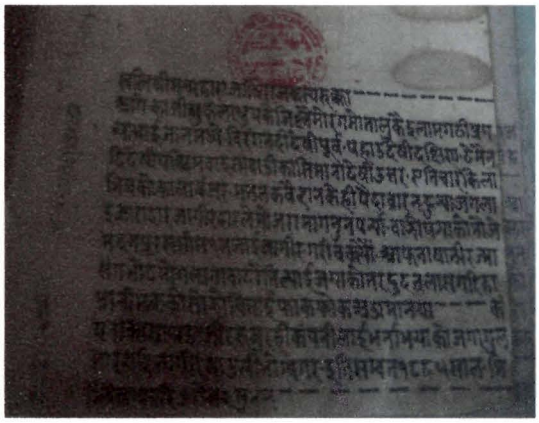
*Yuklathup and his descendants.*

> 'The Sikkimese leader along with his 800 Lepcha followers then entered Nepal and *Subba* Jayanta Khatri welcomed and provided asylum to all these fugitives. Nepal not only provided shelter but also granted landed property both in Ilam and Jhapa for their livelihood' (Mishra 2011: 98).

Still residing in Ilam was the eighth descendent of Yuklathup Kazi, named Padam Chandra Kazi who prides over the glorious yesteryears while worrying about the present state of Lepchas in Ilam. Prior to the arrival of the Sikkim contingent, he mentioned that

Lepchas were already living in Ilam, but it was only after the arrival of his forefathers that Lepchas lived as "rulers" of the land. He [Kazi Yuklathup] was allowed to retain the kazi title while employed as a Subba, an already existing institution to collect tax and rule over certain territories as instruments of administrative control in the settlements (Caplan: 190). He was also granted the *mana-chamaal*, a personal gift by the King of Nepal, and was exempted from certain taxes, which the other Subbas had to pay. This was officially declared in the *laal mohar*s (red seal) given to the kazis which was also signed by Bhimsen Thapa, the first prime minister of Nepal.





*Laal mohar* with Bhimsen Thapa's signature  *mana-chamal laal mohar*

The kazis enjoyed their authoritative privileges and were known to consider themselves superior to Lepchas who were already in Ilam. They were considered "*thulo* Lepchas" (bigger Lepchas) and were known to isolate themselves from the latter. The common people do not have a positive picture of the Kazis as they charged more than the official rates and oppressed the people. It was remembered that some Lepchas even fled to Bhutan to escape the ruthless Kazi dominance. They had a negative perception of

the Kazis and detest them even today. But the Kazis at that time were in constant touch with the Sikkim palace and practise many of the customs brought from Sikkim. "Whatever the king of Sikkim did, we did here as well," said Padam Chandra who showed pictures of him in a Sikkimese garb along with weapons his forefathers had brought from Sikkim. The guns that were given to them by the King of Nepal however had to be returned when the subba system was abolished.

Padam Chandra Kazi

Silver sword and shield brought from Sikkim

One of the important imports from Sikkim was Buddhism and the construction of different monasteries in the area. Kazini Gombu was the first monastery and was believed to be a 'truly traditional Lepcha monastery' (Schwerzel *et.al* 2000: 39) as the architecture was very different from the usual Tibetan style. It was three storied but was

not maintained properly and some paintings and statues were stolen about 35 years ago. It is ten years older than Fensong Gombu. In between, there was a monastery called Mat li Gombu in Panchakanya VDC, which was thought to be lost. But its mound exists near the Aaitabarey tea factory today. With the establishment of monasteries, different Buddhist rituals were observed and practised, introducing Lepchas to Buddhist worldviews and a different set of ideologies. Lamas of Ilam were not considered 'highly skilled' (Schwerzel *et. al* 2000: 37) and lamas from Sikkim still came for special occasions. In this case too, Lepchas had managed to select the rites that worked for them and discarded those that they did not think were necessary. The simultaneous practice of both Buddhism and traditional religion was evident in Ilam as well. Till today, the lama and the *bongthing* work together although Ilam is running short of *bongthings* with less than ten *bongthings* for the whole of Ilam. The demise of the *Tungling mun* from Jilbong was a huge blow to the traditional religion because there has been no one as powerful as he was. His son had taken up the cause but villagers believe that it was a forced affair so he died early on. Now, his great-grandson is seen to be practising *bongthingism.*

*Conclusion*

Having lived in contiguity with Hindu communities in a Hindu country with constant contact and exchanges, Lepchas of Ilam have gradually absorbed Hindu traits and ways of life. In Nepal, Hinduism was a state promoted feature. There was a time when the state tried to propagate minimal Hinduism as 'respect for the cow' (Michaels 1997) and

'participation in Dashain' (Gellner 2005: 770). Lepchas failed to meet both the standards with their non-observance of beef and a replacement of their own festival during Dashain. They did not meet the minimum requirements but lived outside the Hindu structure and absorbed some traits. Even if they denied their association with Hinduism, Hindu religious ideas had penetrated into their culture visibly through the inconspicuous participation and observation of various Hindu festivals and celebrations. They refused to be identified as Hindus and embraced Buddhism as their religion. But condemning Hinduism was also seen as a 'core part of the Buddhist revivalists' (Gellner 2005: 772) when Nepal promoted itself as the only Hindu kingdom in the world. But the kind of Buddhism embraced by the Lepchas of Ilam was connected with Sikkim and its Tibetan influence rather than Nepal's own Siddhartha Gautama and incorporating Hindu gods into the Buddhim. For instance, Buddhism in Nepal encouraged to look at 'Vishnu as *bodhisattva*' (Gellner 2005: 765) and since the King of Nepal was known to be the reincarnate of Vishnu, there was an interchange of ideas to ease the boundary between the two religious traditions. But Lepchas of Ilam refrained from the Hindu gods and despite their absorbing Hindu practices, they identified themselves as Buddhists who were willing to combine their traditional *bongthingism* in religious practices. While we set out to explore if Lepchas of Ilam were Buddhists or Hindus, we do not end up with a clear cut answer because the boundaries between Hinduism, Buddhism and traditional religion has blurred to create a syncretised religious identity.

## Chapter 7

## Trajectory of Lepcha Identity

> 'They are wonderfully honest, theft being scarcely known among them; they rarely quarrel among themselves, and I have never even seen them strike one another. "Do you ever fight?" was asked of an intelligent Lepcha; "No, never, (was the reply) why should we, all Lepchas are brothers, to fight would be unnatural' (Campbell 1840: 386).

The above is an extract from 'Notes on the Lepchas of Sikkim' (1840), one of the first articles written on the Lepchas. Affirming what was said earlier, Hooker found them to be 'timid, peaceful, and no brawler' (Hooker 1855: 118). They were 'people of a mild, quiet and indolent disposition, loving solitude' (White 2000: 7) who were always portrayed in 'highly positive and some even bordering on paternalistic words' (Subba and Wouters Forthcoming). Mainwaring even went on to say, 'their peaceful and gentle character is evinced by their numerous terms of tenderness and compassion, and by the fact that not one word of abuse exists in their language' (Mainwaring 1876: xix). Lepchas were always in the good books of the Western eyes, 'I believe that Europeans in our district trust the Lepchas generally' (White 2000: 7). Their 'amiable, obliging, frank, humorous, and polite' (Morris 1938: 35) attitude had won the hearts of not just the British administrators and anthropologists, but also made similar impact with the 'home-grown orientalists' (Po'dar and Subba 1991: 78) who used comparable language to describe the Lepchas. But with the changing demographics in the hills and sensing a

disadvantageous position for their favourite people, the scholars were worried about the future of the Lepchas. They thought that the Lepchas were 'disappearing', 'sinking and shrinking' (Awasty 1978: 36), and appeared to be 'a dying race' (Gorer 2005: 37). They began to be known as the 'vanishing tribe' (Foning 1987) – a term further popularized by a Lepcha scholar in his *magnum opus,* which had become the basis of Lepcha self-perception and identity until recently. Feeding to whatever has been written and re-written about their character, culture and civilization, Lepchas' self-perfection and self-presentation also considered themselves to be the simple, shy and submissive kind.

In this chapter, we shall examine the reconstruction and direction of Lepcha identity in terms of the various socio-political developments responsible for the emergence of a common ethnic identity. They have realized that the various boundaries between different Lepcha groups are only imagined realities as they have begun interacting with each other to overcome the religious and geographical divide. Overlooking the differences of the past and determined to change the course of history, they are refusing to accept the language of yesterday. They are embracing their assertiveness and are refusing to be the almost extinct community in the hills. Today, none of the Lepchas in any of the three-field areas agree that they are a "vanishing tribe". They prefer to use the word "flourishing" instead of "vanishing" as they are all in the same bandwagon to safeguard Lepcha culture. They have realized that the 'loss of religion, culture, custom, language, literature can be regained and preserved only by the Lepchas themselves' (Roy 2009: 27). They are making conscious attempts in the production of a pan-Lepcha identity as we see the emergence of a shared identity

overlooking the religious boundaries consciously fashioned in a way that strengthens the social and political position of their fight for survival. There are intentional efforts to keep the differences between these three religions aside and work with each other in the production of a shared culture and identity.

**Political Identity**

There was a time when Lepchas were perceived as a demographic group whose vote did not matter, 'No political party can count upon their votes because they are numerically small and politically insignificant' (Thakur 1988: xii). According to the Census of 2001, the Lepchas of Sikkim totaled 35,728, while Lepchas of Darjeeling totalled 34,000 and the Lepchas of Ilam totalled about 3000. The total population of Lepchas in the world came to less than one lakh. Besides, Ilam Lepcha leaders claim there is discrepancy in the way census is conducted, as the strength of Lepcha population is never accurately represented. In 2011, the Lepchas of Darjeeling boycotted the Assembly polls for the 'step-motherly treatment' (zeenews 2011) by both the state and central government after it showed only 43,000 Lepchas in West Bengal in Census 2011. True enough, their numerical status has been a matter of concern and one of the reasons for being given the "primitive", "scheduled tribe" and "endangered" titles in Dzongu, Kalimpong and Ilam respectively. These 'externally generated' (Grothmann 2011: 1) categorizations are for the upliftment of the "backward" people telling us of a community that is on the receiving end. While it does not speak for what the tribe thinks of themselves, Lepchas

do identify themselves with the official tribal identities that have been given to them by their respective governments. In all three regions, Lepchas can be seen as the marginalized group that is getting the government push through these categorizations with regard to seat reservations and stipends in education, employment and development of the tribe. Politically, there has never been any party or a single politician to speak on behalf of the Lepchas. There have been Lepcha candidates who fought elections and won because of the Lepcha vote. But they have often been criticized for sticking to party lines and not doing anything for the community including their own kith and kin. "Lepchas are not good in politics" they have been told and for long Lepchas believed in those words and stayed away from it. But recent developments in the three regions of Dzongu, Kalimpong and Ilam has seen the emergence of a new generation of educated 'tribal elite' (Shah 2010: 15), who are changing the political scenario and the identity of the Lepchas. The following paragraphs will visit the political movements in the three regions and examine the voices that are resounding in these hills.

*Protests for Dzongu*

On June 20, 2007, Dawa and Tenzing Lepcha started an indefinite hunger strike to oppose dams in Dzongu. Supported by the Affected Citizens of Teesta (ACT), Concerned Lepchas of Sikkim (CLOS) and the Sangha of Dzongu (SOD), this protest went on to become a record-breaking resistance movement in the history of Sikkim. Of the 26 dams to be constructed in Sikkim, six were to be built in Dzongu, the Lepcha

'homeland' (Lepcha 2007: 121). Hydel projects were creeping into their sacred spaces, as people feared of losing their ancestral land. While they were being pressured to call off the strike, the duo remained unmoved. Encouraged by their persistence, many youths from Dzongu took turns to be a part of the relay hunger strike at the Bhutia-Lepcha (B-L) house in Tibet road, Gangtok.


Protest banners outside B-L House.

Tenzing Lepcha being fed by tube.

They received fellow Lepcha visitors from neighbouring Darjeeling hills, Ilam and Bhutan along with well-wishers from other communities too. Of the various people who came to see them was Medhha Patkar, the outspoken activist popular for her role in Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA), which brought the much-needed media attention to the anti-dam movement. In their most unassuming way, the Dzongu protests had garnered international support especially through their web-log of weepingsikkim.blogspot.com. The blog became very popular, received several hits and documented extensive feedbacks even from indigenous communities facing similar

situations from across the world. But the Lepchas from inside Sikkim were in a fix. Their Chief Minister labeled the agitation "anti-Sikkimese" and those employed by the government were too scared to openly show support to their fasting brethren. In the home front, Dzongu Lepchas were only a handful and it would have been difficult to sustain the movement had it not been for the much needed support and solidarity shown by the Lepchas of Kalimpong. A month into the protests on July 11, 2007, the Rong Ong Prongzum (Lepcha Youth Association) of Kalimpong blocked national highway 31A that connects Sikkim with West Bengal for two hours in protest of hydel projects in Dzongu. "Dzongu is sacred to us and any attempts to destroy it will have to be stopped," the Prongzum president said. The Kalimpong Lepchas were pronouncing Dzongu as their "holy land" which was later taken up and 'used aggressively in Sikkim' (Wangchuk 2007: 49) as well. Elders began pronouncing Dzongu as the very source of Lepcha origin and life (see Chapter 3) on mythical grounds, and Lepchas of Dzongu relied on the Lepchas of Kalimpong for the 'cultural content' (Shneiderman 2009: 135) on which the claims were made. While this claim was criticised and contested by State government and the pro-hydel lobby, Lepchas went ahead and even formed the 'Dzongu Holy Land Protection Joint Action Committee.' Alongside the sacred as a political narrative (Little 2008: 230), the Kalimpong youths also started their indefinite hunger strike on August 23, 2007. In less than two weeks, the Lepcha youth of Darjeeling also commenced their relay hunger strike in support of Dawa and Tenzing. Though these protests did not last as long as the one in Gangtok, it had created a fight for the one cause to save Dzongu. Lepchas between two regions were communicating and

exchanging ideas of the production of a shared identity, which is called the 'feedback loop' (Shneiderman 2009: 116). Indeed the idea of Dzongu as "holy land" was intriguing and enlightening to educated Lepcha youths from outside Dzongu. On the 200th day of this historic *satyagraha,* the Rong Ong Prongzum from Kalimpong decided to pay homage to the "holy land". After meeting with those fasting in the Bhutia-Lepcha house, the group of forty Lepchas youth from the neighbouring hills made way to Dzongu. On the third day, they reached the Lingza falls at about 50 feet high and overwhelmed with the feeling of belongingness to Dzongu, they decided to revoke their Christian and Buddhist beliefs and rechristened themselves with *Rong abryangs* (Lepcha names). "We were born-again Lepchas," they said, ironically from the Christian tradition, and felt it necessary to take the step so as to regain access to Lepcha culture. This process of altering ideas and creating new ones to fit into the bigger scheme of Lepcha identity can be seen as a part of the role of Lepcha youths in redefining Lepcha society. But the joy was short-lived. They received news that their permits had been cancelled by the District Commissioner and were told to depart immediately. The pro-hydel lobby (which included Lepchas) was quick to make them feel unwelcomed as they hurried out from Dzongu. In a short report submitted by a youth from that pilgrimage, he wrote;

> We felt very bad at not being able to complete the pilgrimage. Though we returned with heavy hearts, we did manage to bring smiles on our sunken faces for having at least stepped on the soil of our Holy Land, *Foakraam Takraam,* the place of our origin (Rongkup 2008: 21).

In the exchange of ideas and production of shared goals between Lepchas of two regions, ACT announced that Lepchas under the banner of ILTA was to undertake a "pilgrimage" to Dzongu to perform the traditional rites and ceremonies on the 250th day of the hunger strike. Before commencing the march, ILTA President told the crowd that the 'pilgrimage to Dzongu was not motivated with political ideals and ambition' (Tamsang 2008: 46). The pilgrimage was supposed to be 'an ancient religio-cultural, enlightening and humanising experience' (*Ibid*). In their own way, Lepchas seem to want to stay away from "politics" while undertaking actions that can be deemed political in the remaining world. Eventually politics found its way, when the pilgrims reached the Dzongu border the next day and were barred from entering the reserve. Members of the ruling party brought pro-hydel Lepchas from outside Dzongu who claimed that the visitors were 'corrupting a developmental debate into an ethnic issue' (*Ibid*). Avoiding confrontation, the pilgrims offered prayers from the far bank of the Teesta river and returned to their respective places. But we can see politics at play not only in dividing the community but also in giving the community a platform through these protest politics. The Dzongu issue lifted the voice of the Lepchas in Sikkim as the youth of Dzongu played a key role in defining the fate of the Lepchas and Dzongu. Dawa and Tenzing became 'youth leaders demanding the rooting of morality, consensual politics, people-centred development, and a strong democratic ethos within Sikkim' (Arora 2008: 28). Their role in drawing awareness about hydel projects in Dzongu and its environmental impact will forever be remembered as the combined effort of Lepchas from both inside and outside Sikkim to safeguard the Dzongu homeland has proven the

Lepchas to be a 'determined minority' (*Ibid*). A month after the incomplete pilgrimage, ACT president received a letter from the Secretary, Power and Energy Department stating that four of the five hydel projects proposed for Dzongu had been scrapped. The ACT responded by withdrawing Dawa and Tenzing from the 93rd day of their indefinite hunger strike. But, the remaining two projects were yet to be scrapped, as the relay hunger strike continued to days, weeks, months, years, and the uncertainty of its end seemed like a bottomless pit. So on September 27, 2009, ACT decided to end their historic protest after a 915 days run. Following an official letter from the Chief Secretary with offers on table for solving the issue, the decision was made to formally withdraw their relay hunger strike ending the longest protest in the history of Sikkim and Lepchas.

*Lepcha Development Council Detey Hobey*

While the Lepcha movement was gaining momentum in Dzongu, the Prashant Tamang phenomenon had gripped the Darjeeling hills with a renewed demand for Gorkhaland in Darjeeling hills. Fighting for a separate state called Gorkhaland, elderly Lepchas were heard saying "This land is already ours. We don't need a Gorkhaland." But who would speak on behalf of the Lepchas? Lepchas had already received the first warning when Bimal Gurung, leader of the Gorkha Janmukti Morcha (GJM) demanded everyone including the Lepchas to wear *daura sural* in Darjeeling hills because it was the traditional dress of the Gorkhas. It was seen as an ethnocentric move by the dominant

majority to dilute Lepcha culture with Gorkha culture through a dress code diktat and that did not settle well with the Lepcha community. But the dress code imposition was a wake up call for the otherwise politically silent Lepchas of North Bengal who knew that their slumber days were over and if they did not act now, they might regret in the days to come. While Lepchas have been patronized for not being organized and lacking good leadership, this time around they were seen making extra efforts to give a strong voice to the community.

For long, the *shezum* or the 'council system', popularly understood as the Lepcha organization has been the only voice of the Lepcha community. It has been around since 1925 in a system of three-tier governance. At the base is the *kyong shezum*, which is a village council of elders, in the middle is the *thoom shezum*, which is a council of elders of cluster villages, and the top most level is the *poom shezum* who usually represents or speaks on behalf of the Lepcha community. With its meagre resources, the *shezum* has been involved in networking between villages and working for the development and promotion of Lepcha culture, language and tradition while settling disputes and creating liaisons with government officials. They have mainly worked at the grassroots village level where most of the Lepcha population resides, so the *shezums* have played an important role in establishing the collective strength of the community. In this context, Lepchas living in town areas have often been out of the Lepcha loop as they are not usually connected to the *shezums* and is not aware of the happenings of the community. But the last few years saw a resurgence of Lepchas making conscious attempts to be a part of the larger Lepcha community. With the *shezums* refusing to take political sides

because they considered themselves to be a social organization, the Lepchas felt a need to form a body to tackle political issues as numerous meetings were held between elders of the *shezum,* town-dwelling Lepchas employed by the government and many others who wanted to give a voice for the community. As impossible as it seemed because of the already existing religious divide, the combined effort gave birth to the Indigenous Lepchas Tribal Forum. They seemed eager to work for the community as they started drafting memorandums to be sent to various state and central government offices. The memorandums demanded constitutional guarantee for the social, political and economic status of the indigenous Lepchas. On December 2008, Lepchas even refused to join other minority communities to show support to the Gorkhaland movement. 'The Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council (DGHC) experience has taught us that our interest is never taken care of. We did not even have a reserved seat in the council. We want constitutional guarantee to protect our interest in future dispensations' (Telegraph 2013), the president of the forum was quoted in the Telegraph. The forum was consistent with their memorandum submissions but that was not enough. The Lepchas were tired of waiting to hear back from the respective governments and under the banner of Lepcha Rights Movement (LRM), and with active participation from both Christian and Buddhist youths, they began their protests of recognition that could also be seen as politics of identity. They were cautious in avoiding linkages with established political parties and were seen to be 'agitating silently and peacefully making repeated representations to the centre highlighting their minority status and plight' (Ghosh 2011). From walking barefoot in Siliguri with traditional gear to an indefinite *dharna* in

Kolkata, they were demanding justice for being ignored and forgotten by the state government as they chanted, 'Lepcha Development Council *Detey Hobey*,' roughly translated, as 'We want Lepcha Development Council'. As the state government promised the Gorkhaland Territorial Administration (GTA) to the Nepali population, the Lepchas demanding their separate development council, submitted a 3-point Charter of Demands, which read;

a) A separate Lepcha Development Council/ Board for the protection of Language, Culture and Economic Development of Lepcha Community.

b) Recognition of Lepcha Language and its introduction in Formal Education System.

c) Reservation for People's Representation in State Assembly and Parliament.

On 2 September 2011, the Chief Minister of West Bengal announced the setting up of Lepcha Development Council (LDC) for the development of the community. But it was only after a year and half on February 5, 2013 that the state cabinet cleared a proposal to set up a Lepcha development board under the backward classes welfare department of West Bengal. The news was received with much excitement among the Lepchas while the ruling GTA vehemently opposed the same. The GTA wanted the Lepcha board to function under them and not outside their purview. They even called for a 12-hour *bandh* in the hills to protest the government's decision to set up a separate Lepcha Development Board on the same day the Lepchas planned their celebratory rally. In a counter move, Lepchas started a fast unto death, saying they would rather die than live in the hostile environment that has been created by the ruling party. 'We are a

peace-loving people. We can't comprehend why there is so much opposition to us. Since it appears we will not be able to live in peace, we have decided to sacrifice our lives,' (Telegraph) president of the LRM was quoted in the paper. The fast lasted for 6 days with a total of 320 Lepchas who fasted unto death and about 3663 Lepchas on the relay hunger strike. On the sixth day the West Bengal minister of development visited the Lepchas, to end the hunger strike and gave the government's assurance to the community's demands. On the same day, the government passed a notification establishing a development board for the hill Lepcha community, as the Lepchas broke their fast. There was a rousing welcome to the 'Mayel Lyang Lepcha Development Board', headquartered in Kalimpong to work for the protection and promotion of the Lepcha language and historical and cultural landmarks of the community. In their very "Lepcha" characteristic, by emphasizing on peace and subtle agitations, the Lepchas managed to establish their own *Mayel Lyang* in Darjeeling hills. Non-Lepchas had reservations about the name since it would mean 'the land of the Lepchas', but the Lepcha leaders were quick to respond, '*Mayel Lyang* means the land of eternal paradise'. One can notice the language and the manner of this political journey for the Lepchas of Darjeeling hills to get where they are today. They had managed to create an a-political civil society by putting forth their political demands that was caught unaware by the political *pundits* of the hills.

President of the Rong Ong Prongzum addressing the crowd.

Check-up of the fasting Lepchas

*Rong Uparajya*

In Ilam, the people's war had enlisted many young Lepcha boys into the Maoist army. Although the war ended and a multi-party system was established in Nepal, one young Lepcha ex-Maoist told me that he was glad of his Maoist experience as it had made him conscious of his Rong identity. Since then, the Communist Part of Nepal (Maoist) placed first in the Constituent Assembly election that was held in 2008, and two candidates from the Lepcha community of Ilam were also elected to become members of the parliament. Shakuntala Lepcha and Tikaram Subba -Lepcha had made a mark for the first time in the history of Nepal. Prior to this, Lepchas had not even been represented in district level politics. Most people saw the inclusion of Lepcha candidates as vote banks but the win had put Lepchas in the map of Nepal. Between the two, Tikaram was criticized for holding a dual ethnic identity of a Subba and a Lepcha. There

was a time when Subba was the title of the tax collectors (often from the same community) who would maximize the taxes and abuse those who were unable to pay them. 'Subbas for Lepchas are still synonymous with corruption and wickedness' (Schwerzel *et. al* 2000: 13). They refused to be identified as Lepchas and basked in the glory of the Subba title, acting superior and higher than other Lepchas. But the election win confronted the Subba (Lepcha) with his dual identity as people started questioning whether he was a Lepcha or a Subba, which could also mean he belonged to the Limbu community. In Eastern Nepal, Limbus are demanding their separate state of Limbuwan meaning 'land of the Limbus'. Living within the Limbu dominated areas are the Lepchas who are voicing their own demand for a *Rong Uparajya* which means the Lepcha sub-state. The demands have been put forth by the *Rong Shezum Thee* (Lepcha Association) of Ilam who have taken up the task for the development and upliftment of the community. In similar lines with the *shezum* of Kalimpong, Ilam Lepchas established the same in 1990 to preserve and maintain Lepcha culture. It has also become the voice of 3000 plus Lepchas of Ilam with social agendas in the long run. The *shezum* is also affiliated with the Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities (NEFIN) and the National Foundation for Development of Indigenous Nationalities (NFDIN) which defines 'indigenous nationalities' as a tribe or community mentioned in the schedule having its own mother language and traditional rites and customs, distinct cultural identity, distinct social structure and written or unwritten history' (NFDIN Act 2058, BS 2002 Clause A Section 2). The NFDIN classified all Nepalese Indigenous Nationalities into five major categories in March 31, 2004. The five categories included

endangered, highly marginalized, marginalized, disadvantaged and advanced groups. Lepchas have been classified into the endangered group with the government's provision of a monthly stipend for the over all development of the tribe. Known as *Samajik Surakcha Vatta* (social security stipend) the amount has been increased from Rs. 500 during my fieldwork to Rs. 1000 per individual in the family. There have been positive reports about the usage of the allowance with Lepcha farmers engaged in commercial vegetable farming and yielding profits for their betterment (Chapagain 2012). Though their population is miniscule, the Lepchas of Ilam are on their way to political recognition in Nepal. They do not have a large organization nor the means to network in the way fellow Lepchas have been able to do so but the political consciousness about their identity is slowly taking shape. Despite their scattered living conditions in 13 VDCs of Ilam, the kind of language used by Lepchas about their self-perception is no different than the Lepchas outside Ilam. 'Simple, kind, loving, peaceful' (Lepcha 2003: 5) were some adjectives used by an author of a small booklet about the Lepchas of Ilam. Comparatively, they are behind other communities in many spheres especially when it comes to education and employment but in their own pace and style, they have been able to garner support and solidarity for their survival. In 2010, one Sachin Lepcha from Ilam made it to the Top 16 of Nepal Television's *Khoji Pratibhako,* a reality show which could be translated as 'Talent Search'. Unfortunately, he did not win despite his talent, say the villagers, because the competition was based on sms voting system. And Lepchas were either too poor to own a mobile phone or have no

resources to send text messages to vote for their favourite singer, even though he was a Lepcha.


Posters of Sachin Lepcha in Fikkal Bazar

MP Sakuntala Lepcha addressing the crowd in Kalimpong

**Religious to Ethnic Identity**

> 'In the contemporary period, the severe contradictions between the teachings and practices of Christianity on one hand and Shamanism and Buddhism on the other are responsible for dividing the Lepcha community' (Arora 2006: 65).

The religious divide between Buddhist and Christian Lepchas is an overtly discussed topic. But what is not known is the fact that this was initially a Kalimpong phenomenon, which became a generalized conception and later built upon it to act the same. Sikkim saw the arrival of Buddhist missionaries before the Christian missionaries so Lepchas had already converted to Buddhism. Likewise, majority of the Lepchas of Sikkim lived in isolation in the Dzongu reserve where "outsiders" could not visit without permits so

they remained 'as Buddhists and was not influenced by either Christianity or Hinduism' (Gowloog Forthcoming). In Kalimpong, Lepchas were the willing converts to Christianity with the perks of modern education that exposed them to a whole different lifestyle. Equipped with education and knowledge of their culture, a handful of Christian Lepchas like Joseph Rongong, Sankyol Taso and G.T. Sitling worked for the preservation and promotion of Lepcha culture. But majority of them flaunted their newfound identity by imitating the British and ignoring the traditional culture. In the process, Christianity also lost Lepcha stalwarts like Sonam Tshering Tamsang, a Padmashree awardee, who says that he was initially baptized at the local Bom church. In due time, the gap started widening as Christian Lepchas got caught up with church activities and their Christian lifestyle. They stopped participating in the Lepcha activities leading to a clear separation from the Buddhist Lepchas. But these religious boundaries were socially constructed. It existed to 'set limits that mark social groups off from each other and provided a template that separates distinct categories in the mind' (Longkumer 2010: 121). But in recent days it is because of the 'boundary-crossing behaviour' (Bal 2000: 110) between the Christian Lepchas and Buddhist Lepchas that have omitted religion as an obstacle for their common purpose. The recent hunger strike protests is a good example of the change of language among the Lepcha leaders too. During the final speeches before the hunger strikers dispersed, president of the LRM said that the development council was a tiny achievement in the bigger sphere of things, as the biggest accomplishment for the Lepcha community was to have come together and be united for the Lepcha cause. Indeed, the solidarity of the community was an

overwhelming phenomenon, as the religious divide seemed non-existent. Both Buddhist and Christian Lepchas had shed their religious cloaks in this movement as there were speeches urging Lepchas to pray to their own gods for the development council. On one hand, the religious identities were being blurred while on the other they acknowledged the different religions followed by the Lepchas trying to balance the needs of the community. There is therefore an endless process of construction and reconstruction of the Lepcha identity as its religious identity seems to be taking the shape of a secular identity.

*What's In a Name?*

> "When Lepcha parents bring their child for dedication and I hear a non-Lepcha name being pronounced, I give that child a Lepcha name instead." – a Lepcha pastor

We laughed when the pastor relayed this incident. He said he even had a page with Lepcha names stuck to his Bible so that when crisis arises he can be the Christian *bongthing* and give the child a Lepcha name. But why was it so important to have a Lepcha name? There was a time when Lepchas especially Christian Lepchas were fond of naming their children with English names. Except for the eldest son, one family in Bom Busty boasts of Roland, Nancy, Dennis and Peggy as names of their children. If it were not for their last name, their name would be no indicator of their Lepcha identity. In that, a name is an important identity marker too. It is a word by which a person is known. A person's name could be associated with the language, religion and location of

that individual as 'religious, mythology, customs, beliefs, culture, folk-tales, etc. get reflected in the name of a community' (Roy 2010: 14). In Lepcha society, the naming ceremony known as *tungbaong faat* is an almost forgotten tradition especially in Christian homes. These days, the name choices for a newborn baby is plentiful and it does not necessarily require a *mun* or a *bongthing.* There was a time when belief in the power of names was highly prevalent and a person believed to possess supernatural powers was called *Aagen.* But Lepchas also went through the phase when they got insecure about baby names and started using negative words like *kuzyumit* and *kolok,* literally translated as a dog or a mouse respectively. However, they also have a gender specific naming pattern, which makes it easier to name the child. Suffixes like *mit* and *kit* are often understood to mean 'attraction' and used accordingly. Likewise, the twelve months in the Lepcha calendar is considered female. So the two could be added to form a female name. e.g: *mar* is December and when *mit* is suffixed it becomes *Marmit,* a very popular female name among Lepchas. There are also some names that are used for both the sexes depending on the suffix used. e.g: *Lee* means house and it is used as *Leeyaom* for a girl and *Leeong* for a boy. *Yaom* in Lepcha means something soft and delicate while *ong* means son appropriately used for the two sexes. The examples above were mostly of the first name, which is an important part of one's name. While the last name could speak for the Lepcha identity, the first names in the case of Lepchas have proven otherwise. In Dzongu, most Lepchas have Buddhist names whereas Kalimpong boasts of not just Biblical but English and Nepali names while Ilam Lepchas carry both Hindu and Buddhist names. So, the three regions influenced by different religions and

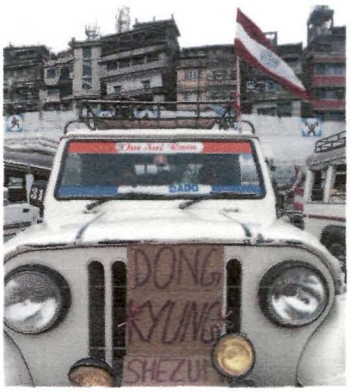
cultures have given birth to non-Lepcha names posing a question to their identity today. However, the realization of one's identity in a name has finally struck the right chords with the educated Lepchas who are giving the new generation their rightful Lepcha names. We can take example of the pastor's dialogue earlier that chose to interfere in the renaming of the child to a Lepcha name. We therefore see name as an identity marker that is undergoing some changes to reaffirm the Lepcha identity.

*Lepcha Flag*

The Lepcha flag was born at a time when Buddhist Lepchas and the Christian Lepchas were not in friendly terms. A certain Sankyol Taso from Bom Busty is believed to have put the symbol of a dove that was to reflect unity amongst fellow brothers under one banner. The flag is known as *taarsyaok* in Lepcha language and has indeed been a uniting factor of not just the two religions but between Lepchas across different regions. The Lepcha flag was widely used during the Dzongu protests and the Development Council protests. As of late, Lepchas have been hoisting the flag on different occasions and singing the national anthem too. It has become a symbol of Lepcha identity and Lepchas have started identifying with it in various other occasions too. During the Gorkhaland movement, when the GJM demanded all houses to hoist the party flag, certain Lepcha villages/ houses put up the Lepcha flag in their homes instead. It was a way of displaying their loyalties to their ethnic backgrounds and refusing to compromise

with the Gorkha movement. Hoisting of flags in a way can be as a 'secular ritual' (Barkataki-Ruscheweyh 2011:8) in the production of Lepcha identity.

Lepcha Flag

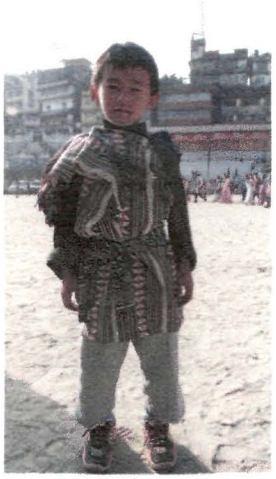



Local jeep with the Lepcha flag

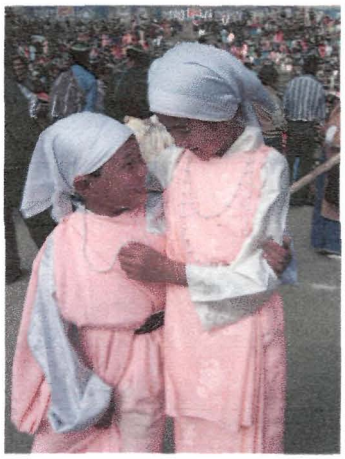
*Pano Gaeboo Achyuk*

"If the Lepchas demand for Lepchaland, maybe they will get it." A local taxi driver in Kalimpong could be heard making this remark when he saw the number of Lepchas walking around Kalimpong town in their traditional attires towards the *mela* ground. December 20th every year marks the birth anniversary of *Pano Gaeboo Achyuk*, popularly recognized as the last Lepcha King of Kalimpong. Known to be a brave warrior, he had defended his bastion and revolted against the invaders and oppressors of the 17th century. He was believed to be an excellent general who fought and sacrificed his life for the 'Lepcha civilization' as he saved the culture, language and religion from being wiped out by alien rulers. He is fondly remembered and this day is set aside to commemorate his contribution to Lepcha society. The day usually commences in the

morning with the *bongthing* offering prayers at Damsang Fort, 17 kilometres from Kalimpong town, which is attended by only a handful of people. The fort was built by *Gaeboo Achyok* himself who had also built several forts at strategic places around Kalimpong to defend the country from the opportunistic enemies targeting from north-west and south-east. In safeguarding this area from enemy attack, he can even be dubbed as the King of the Kalimpong region and not just of the Lepchas. This annual celebration is a mark of respect to the brave warrior as the significance of *Gaeboo Achyok* is however beyond the last Lepcha king legends. In many ways, he was a hero—a personality that the Lepchas find solace and strength in. For a community seen to be passive and lagging behind, here was a person who defied those stereotypes and stood against his aggressors to give hope to his people. His historical feats not only speak of courage and bravery but have also become a symbol of hope and unity for the Lepchas today. It is the only occasion where Lepchas from all walks of life irrespective of their age, sex, religion and geography flock to the Kalimpong *mela* ground proudly attired in their traditional wear. Thereafter, a colourful rally takes place around Kalimpong town and ends in the *mela* ground where the festivities begin. The stage is usually decorated with a life size poster of *Gaeboo Achyuk* as different speeches, dances and songs are presented with much pomp and pageantry.



A little boy in *dumpra*



Two girls in *gada*

A young man in traditional gear

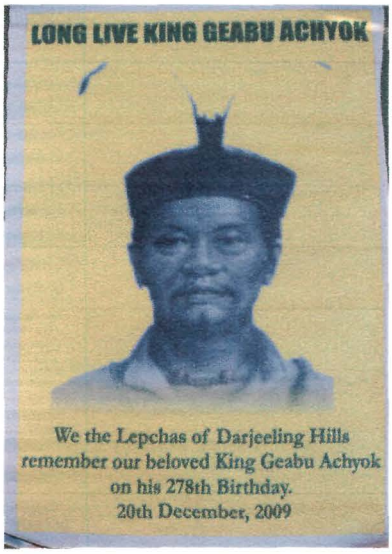

President of ILTA making his speech


Children in line before the dance

Tug-of-war between the opposite sexes

Young archers in mela ground

Somewhere in the ground traditional sports like tug-of war, archery, and shot-put is played. At one corner, tea is served and Lepcha calendars, new books and magazines are sold too. A little further towards the gate, the youths serve food to whoever joins the feast. Often times villagers from far away places come walking or by jeeps and they can not be sent back without food. So youths from different villages take turns every year to take up this responsibility. *Ci* is also sold to those who want to drink. It is like a tiny *mela* in itself as they sit and eat together with people from various Lepcha villages. It has been a deliberate attempt to bring together Lepchas from all walks of life under the name of *Gaeboo Achyok* and this day can be seen as the annual Lepcha festival, which is constantly changing its features in the production of Lepcha identity. Every year, the celebrations open after the *bongthing* invokes the gods and the mountains. In 2012, a catholic priest was also asked to pray to represent the Christian community. This inclusion shows the effort being made to include the Christian community who often feels that most Lepcha events are dominated by the *bongthing*'s prayers and often refrain from participating in it. But as mentioned earlier, the programmes are evolving as talks are on the process to perhaps do away with the awkward prayers to make it more inclusive for people of different faiths. Likewise, the promotion posters of 2012 saw the addition of a mythical place made real. *Gaeboo Achyok* was made the last king of *Mayel Lyang* and not just of Kalimpong.




Poster from 2009


Poster from 2012

Some Lepchas in Sikkim did not even know who *Gaeboo Achyok* was, and geographically, it could be out of their concern. But when a familiar place to Lepchas like *Mayel Lyang* is included it becomes a community affair blurring the geographical boundaries as villagers from my fieldwork in Dzongu also came to Kalimpong every year for *Gaeboo Achyok* celebrations. With the recent recognition of the *Mayel Lyang* Development Board, *Gaeboo Achyok* has indeed become the last king of *Mayel Lyang* as this inclusion can be seen as a brilliant integration into that imagined state.

**Cleavage to Convergence**

> 'The Lepcha community acting together can achieve a desired aim which they will not be able to achieve if individual Lepcha acts alone. All the Lepchas, irrespective of their different backgrounds, must unite and agree with each other and work extremely hard

> on the conservation, maintenance and development of their rich and ancient Lepcha language, literature, traditions and culture. This will enable their survival as the one and only true original indigenous Lepcha tribes of eastern Himalayas with dignity' (Tamsang 2012: 3).

Known to get the crowd on its feet during his speeches with the passion for his community, Lyangsong Tamsang's voice on the first issue of the Lepcha bulletin *Kaatlut* is no different. Encouraging young Lepcha journalists who have taken the initiative to start this bi-lingual bulletin, the president's message was an articulation of what is being heard across Lepcha circles today. Intense efforts are being made on the part of both Buddhist and Christian Lepchas to come jointly for the creation of a pan-Lepcha identity. In that, education, blogs and facebook will be further examined as they have become agents of convergence in the production of Lepcha identity.

*Education*

> 'The relative closedness and openness between the Buddhist and Christian Lepchas is apparently based on their religious differences. But it is probably the education which is the actual factor behind this difference in their personalities' (Subba 1985: 67).

A little more than two decades has passed since the above sentences were written and the situation has changed. Education has actually paved way for dialogue and action between the Buddhist and Christian Lepchas. There was a time when the Christian Lepchas had an easier access to education because of the missionaries but with the development of the education system, Buddhist Lepchas are on equal footing today.

They have both been educated, exposed and eager about the role of education in reinforcing their traditional values. One example can be taken of Miss Keepu Lepcha, a teacher and retired government servant who started keeping poor Lepcha children at the house she inherited, giving them education. The humble initiative and the assistance of generous donors helped her establish a school where 400 children study today. But at Miss Keepu's home, also known as "Lepcha Cottage" a little more than hundred children stay where only Lepcha and English are spoken. Her goal was to foster education and create awareness about Lepcha community. While working in the education department she saw the plight of the Lepchas from early on and decided to do something for her community. She is an educated Buddhist Lepcha whose name was also proposed for the Nobel Peace Prize in 2005. She also featured in an Indian news channel episode "Real Heroes: Ordinary People Extraordinary Lives in 2012". It was reported, 'education is the biggest gift that Miss Keepu has given to her community' (Northeast Today 2012).

While parents want their children to know about their traditional culture, they are also keen on giving the best education to their children, which often means sending them away from the village, or even to a different state for further studies. There is fear of losing one's culture in the plethora of cultures they get exposed to, but it is often those places where the cultural consciousness begins. One prominent Lepcha youth leader of Kalimpong often tells his story of searching for his roots when he was in Kolkata for further studies. Having attended a missionary school all his life, he did not speak the language nor did he hear of the Lepcha oral traditions while growing up. So he

was ashamed of not knowing anything about his culture when away from home and made a vow to educate himself about his traditional heritage. He read books on Lepchas. He started speaking, reading and writing the language. There was zeal in his quest as he said, "it is already in us, we just need to make the effort to speak." Today, he has become the poster child of a Lepcha who grew up in a non-Lepcha environment but with enough passion and enthusiasm, he managed to master his mother tongue. He can also be heard giving speeches in Lepcha at different Lepcha events. He is credited for the birth of the Lepcha Association of Kolkata, which has become a support group for Lepchas away from the hills. With a growing number of students and young professionals in Kolkata, this initiative was a positive step in uniting Lepchas of different regions under the same umbrella. It was important for the Lepcha youth to identify with an organization when away from home and the Kolkata *shezum* has been able to provide that. It is interesting to note that among Lepchas, it is not the student organizations unlike other tribes of Northeast India but the *shezum* that has acted as a cultural space for them when away from home. In their modest ways, their annual activities include *naambun* celebrations and are known to look after each during sickness and troubled times. Likewise, the Delhi *shezum* exists with their own share of minuscule events for Lepchas in the capital city. But it is in the above two examples of Miss Keepu and the youth leader, that we see education and educated Lepchas become champions of Lepcha culture and identity. They have become promoters of tradition and a fight for the betterment of the tribe. The religious divide of the yesteryears have slowly disappeared as the community has instead 'strengthened the spirit of nationalism'

(Kanjamala 2009: 121). It has made them aware of their culture and encouraged them to engage in activities that can sustain their identity. Education is no more an exclusive domain for the Christian Lepchas as 'conscientization through education' (Mawrie 2009: 133) is extensively taking shape in India today.

But in Nepal, education still has a long way to go. "The main reason for the backwardness of the Lapcha is education," writes Jahar Singh Rai in his M.A. thesis, and it only proved to be true while conducting the household census in Jilbong. Most Lepchas would respond *sadharan* (basic) for the level of education while the wives would giggle and say they could write their names. But the overall picture of the status of education was disheartening. Although they would have started school, there was a high level of school dropouts between fifth and seventh grades. Those who attended secondary school did not always make it to tenth grade and towards their School Leaving Certificate (SLC), a nationwide examination mandatory for students completing tenth grade. In Jilbong, there were two students who had appeared for SLC but failed and only one student who was in Kathmandu pursuing his twelfth grade. There were no college graduates and post-graduate students from the village. In a report submitted to the NEFIN, there were 17 SLC pass, 4 graduates and 2 post-graduate Lepcha students from the whole of Ilam (Roy 2004). The lack of emphasis on education is a matter of concern among the Lepchas of Jilbong. There was one Shree Sharda Primary School near the village but one has to walk to the next village to attend secondary school. And if one were to attend college, he/ she would have to walk uphill to Harkatey and take a bus/ van to reach Fikkal. In such instances it was easier to stay at home and help around

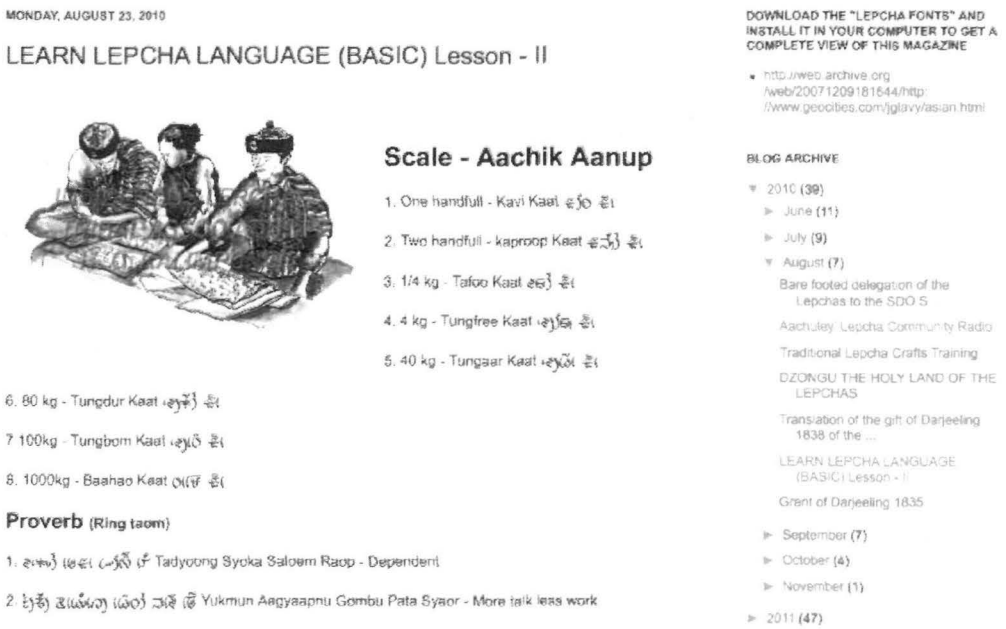
the house and in the fields. The parents too would appreciate an extra help and did not seem to make the effort to encourage their child to go to school, as it tends to get expensive to send a child to school. Another reason is the students' failure to be promoted to a higher grade. Lepcha children have to attend schools where the mode of instruction and examination is not in their first language and they are at a disadvantage when they have to compete with students whose first language is Nepali. It is perhaps in their lack of educated Lepcha individuals that they are not confident to pronounce their Lepcha identities as in the case of Sikkim and Kalimpong.

*Blogs*

Some of the educated, internet savvy Lepchas have taken into online journals called blogs to share their knowledge, experience and wisdom on Lepcha related issues. While blogs have transitioned from simple to sophisticated, the blog updates also vary depending on the mood of the blogger. There are some who only post once or twice while there are others who have dedicated their blogs solely for Lepcha information. Of the many blogs on the internet talking about Lepchas, I shall refer to three blogs that are most frequently visited by internet browsers to give a sense of the kind of narratives being constructed to affirm the Lepcha identity.

Lepcha Aachulay Magazine [aachulay.blogspot.in] is the first result to pop up when you google "Lepcha blog". *Aachuley* in Lepcha means 'hail the mountains' and it is the most common phrase used among Lepchas. The blog is owned by Azuk

Tamsangmoo Lepcha and hosts the most extensive information about Lepchas on the internet. It was initially started to put articles from the Lepcha Aachulay magazine on the web as he titled the blog in the magazine's name. But he has outdone himself with the kind of information that is available there. From photographs to videos from various events, Lepcha language lessons to downloadable Lepcha font, news articles to scholarly write-ups, the blog is impressive in its ability to cover various sphere of Lepcha culture and history.


MONDAY, AUGUST 23, 2010

LEARN LEPCHA LANGUAGE (BASIC) Lesson - II

**Scale - Aachik Aanup**

1. One handfull - Kavi Kaat
2. Two handfull - kaproop Kaat
3. 1/4 kg - Tafoo Kaat
4. 4 kg - Tungfree Kaat
5. 40 kg - Tungaar Kaat
6. 80 kg - Tungdur Kaat
7. 100kg - Tungbom Kaat
8. 1000kg - Baahao Kaat

**Proverb** (Ring taom)

1. Tadyoong Syoka Saloem Raop - Dependent
2. Yukmun Aagyaapnu Gombu Pata Syaor - More talk less work

DOWNLOAD THE "LEPCHA FONTS" AND INSTALL IT IN YOUR COMPUTER TO GET A COMPLETE VIEW OF THIS MAGAZINE

- http://web.archive.org/web/20071209181644/http://www.geocities.com/jglavy/asian.html

BLOG ARCHIVE

- 2010 (39)
  - June (11)
  - July (9)
  - August (7)
    - Bare footed delegation of the Lepchas to the SDO S...
    - Aachulay Lepcha Community Radio
    - Traditional Lepcha Crafts Training
    - DZONGU THE HOLY LAND OF THE LEPCHAS
    - Translation of the gift of Darjeeling 1838 of the ...
    - LEARN LEPCHA LANGUAGE (BASIC) Lesson - II
    - Grant of Darjeeling 1835
  - September (7)
  - October (4)
  - November (1)
- 2011 (47)

Screen shot of a page in the aachulay.blogspot.in

Secondly, 'The call of the rungnyu ung -- A (Lepcha) rongkup's soul' [zorbongthing.blogspot.in] is another blog with photographs and interesting analysis on present day news related to Lepchas. Writing under the pseudo name of *Zor Bongthing*, this person is opinionated and does not shy from expressing what he has to say. He

usually gives a "modern" Lepcha angle to various issues perplexing the community and does not hesitate to challenge the traditional ways either. His is a voice that resonates with the urban-based Lepcha youth. "*Go Rong Aring Mayen*" (I do not know the Lepcha language) is one of his popular posts, which talks about the first thing he learned in Lepcha was to say he did not know the Lepcha language. He argues that this was 'the one dreaded sentence that destroyed the essence of being a Lepcha'. An interesting mixture of Lepcha history, philosophy and current trends, the blog draws not only Lepcha visitors but non-Lepchas who are keen to hear his side of the story.

Finally, *Ani Sikkim Runcha* (And Sikkim Cries) [weepingsikkim.blogspot.com] is the blog that garnered world wide attention during the dam protests in Dzongu. It was able to make a political impact during that time giving online voice to the activists. It had articles on the struggle, opinions for and against the dams while updating the calendar of how many days it had been since the protests. It was started by non-Lepcha youths on the first day of the hunger strike to 'keep a cybertrack of their protest' (Wangchuk 2007: 42). They received a lot of pressure from the government to close it down and at one time they even shut it but the support was too overwhelming to ignore, as it still posts updates about the situation of not just dams in Dzongu but their solidarity to similar kinds of struggle elsewhere in the world.


Statue of Unity as the masthead of weepingsikkim.blogspot.in

*Facebook and fashion*

Even if you don't have a computer at home, many young people have access to facebook today. With easy access to internet on cell phones, Lepchas have also been found to be active users of facebook. We the Indigenous group "LEPCHAS-RUMKUP-RONGKUP" is the facebook page for Lepchas on the world wide web. There are about 745 members and was started sometime in 2011. The page has been used for Lepcha related events and news taking place around the region. It was used to politically mobilize Lepchas of Kolkata during the *dharna* conducted by the Lepcha Rights Movement. But today, it has become a platform to share new year greetings to news announcements. It has also been a place for Lepchas not raised in Lepcha speaking environment to ask basic questions like "What is the meaning of *aa-chu-ley*?" promoting the mother tongue while facilitating book releases and updates on youth seminars encouraging young people to be involved in community affairs. One recent facebook success has been the organizing of Himalayan Ethnic Lepcha Fashion Event (HELFE). At first facebook users started discussing about a Lepcha fashion show, then they met in person and coordinated with Sikkim and Kalimpong Lepchas to jointly organize this grand event that showcased Lepcha designers and models in their own improvisations of the traditional Lepcha attires. They started their own facebook page and the aim of the event was disclosed in their facebook page,

> 'It's not just a fashion show as our motive behind organizing this show is to keep our tradition recognized by every individual of the world. This is just a small initiative

towards our community to keep our self away from being called VANISHING TRIBE....'

Indeed, there has been interest in using this form of social networking to develop more awareness and facilitate cultural consciousness but 'facebook is an awkward social space' (Postill 2012). Plus there are not enough Lepcha facebook users to gather momentum as it did with the Egyptian revolution and occupy movements across the world. Having said that, a facebook revolution for the Lepcha community might not be a long time in making as the ideas are already floating around. Unfortunately, there were only 3 likes on Rinzing Dorjee Lepcha's status of, "a revolution is needed to save our identity.. wat say?"

**Rinzing Dorjee Lepcha**

a revolution is needed to save our identity.....wat say?

Like · Comment · Follow Post · March 22, 2012 at 1:53am

3 people like this.

**Conclusion**

When Dawa and Tenzing Lepcha sat on an indefinite hunger strike from June 20, 2007 to protest the proposed dams in Dzongu, they had no idea how big an impact they would make in changing the course of Lepcha history. In their silent, non-violent way, the fasting duo proved to the world that they were not the complacent Lepchas the world

knew about. They were willing to remain bone dry in order to safeguard their "holy land". They were persistent with their demands and were constantly exchanging ideas with the Kalimpong Lepchas participating in a 'feedback loop' (2009: 116) that gave rise to new concepts. At one time a Sikkim politician was even heard saying, "What are the Dzongu Lepchas doing with the *aatankbadi* (terrorist) Lepchas?" referring to the Kalimpong Lepchas. Perhaps also because Dzongu Lepchas have always been thought to be the "backward" people still isolated in the "reserve" area. The politican tried to draw a regional boundary between Dzongu Lepchas and Kalimpong Lepchas but it was too late. The docile Lepchas of the yesteryears had been educated. At one time, education and its perks had formed the Christian Lepchas vs. Buddhist Lepchas divide, but today education had taught them to put aside their religion-based identities and work together for the betterment of the tribe. Today, Lepcha youths are connecting through social network sites, across religious and regional boundaries to work together and assert their ethnic distinctiveness. Earlier times, Sikkim Lepchas would organize an event and expect Kalimpong and Ilam Lepchas to attend, but today they have planned events like HELFE together also increasing the 'visibility' (Barkataki-Ruscheweyh 2011:1) of the tribe. However, the youths have also realized that to maintain their distinct identity, the responsibility lies in their own hands. The goal however is not just the preservation, promotion and production of Lepcha culture but who should 'control the pace, the direction and the process of change' (Guneratne 2007: 104). Lepcha youth leaders have led by example in many cases and made the youngsters realize that speaking the language and wearing the dress alone does not make them Lepcha. It is

about how they use the language and what they do with the dress that gives them a sense of belongingness. The Lepcha fashion show is a good example of the awareness about one's ethnicity despite wanting to be modern. The educated Lepchas are also vocal about their displeasure in being labelled as the "vanishing" tribe. It is interesting that the first time Lepchas were believed to be vanishing was two centuries ago when Mainwaring wrote, 'the once happy people are fast dying out' (Mainwaring 1876: xix). Time has proven that Lepchas are denouncing their vanishing status and 'flourishing' instead. They have realized that the 'loss of religion, culture, custom, language, literature can be regained and preserved only by the Lepchas themselves' (Roy 2009: 27). Fostering solidarity across regions and religions, the modern secular Lepcha youths are indeed the key players in the emergence of a cultural revival taking place for the trajectory of their ethnic identity. They have worked in the traditional framework of the *shezum* system bypassing student movements, which is non-existent among Lepcha students in various institutions across the country. Their political struggles often in the form of protest politics are downplayed as social struggles refusing to be politically motivated and practicing solidarity with the various struggles across the borders. In their own unassuming ways, they are becoming culturally and politically visible 'maximizing their opportunities and minimizing perceived threats' (Deka 2011) as they articulate a broader definition of Lepcha culture and identity in the maintenance and reproduction of a pan-Lepcha identity.

## Chapter 8

## Summary and Conclusion

> 'It is very heartening to report that all Lepcha Pastors, Elders, Fathers and Lamas, unanimously agreed that they are first and foremost Lepchas' (*Aachuley* 2012).

This report in the Lepcha Bilingual News Magazine was the epitome of the production of Lepcha identity. The article was titled 'Lepcha Renaissance' as it reported the meeting of Lepcha *mun-bongthing,* head lamas of Lepcha monasteries, Lepcha pastors and fathers from different churches of Darjeeling hills to work for better communication and for the future course of action between the religious heads and the Indigenous Lepcha Tribal Association. The report further read,

> 'A series of meetings between the Lepcha heads of different churches and Lepcha monasteries certainly implanted, rekindled and rejuvenated the idea of Lepcha unity, identity, dignity and honour in Mayel Lyang' (*Aachuley* 2012).

By reading through the report, the impression we get is extremely positive. Emotions are running high from this reunion as the Buddhist and Christian Lepchas vowed to work together. The possible erasing of the religious boundary can be seen as a major landmark for the advancement of the tribe. It would be a start of the "flourishing" Lepcha that was preferred by members of the community. But it will not be easy. It will

take time. The silent antagonism between the two sides and the feeling of 'us' and 'them' will still remain. Their religious identities cannot disappear over night yet the effort has been made, especially as an excellent display of how the Lepchas want to be identified today.

In this study we have examined the influence of Buddhism, Christianity and Hinduism among the Lepchas of three geographical regions. Being exposed to three different religions and living in three separate regions, the creation of varied identities was bound to be problematic at the core of Lepcha identity. But we know that, 'identities are never fixed within themselves, nor do they emerge from nowhere; they are constructed primarily in and through relations, and are always involved in a process of translating' (Karlsson 2000:19; Longkumer 2010: 12). In the case of Lepchas, the exposure to these world religions meant cultural changes and the construction of new identities that has proven both advantageous and disadvantageous at different levels and contexts.

The study outlined the traditional religion of the Lepchas in the background of the coming of Buddhism, Christianity and Hinduism that Lepchas thought fit to emulate. They were a people group with no word for religion till they started following these world religions and identified themselves with those religions. The acceptance of their newfound religions altered the lifestyle, worldview and the identity of the tribe. In case of Buddhism, Lepchas were able to retain the left over from the previous tradition as they practised both religions side by side promoting syncretism in not just the religion

but in their culture as well. In doing so, they were able to form an alliance of convenience with the Bhutia community with Buddhism as their common ground, which led to the formation of a shared identity. The "B-L" identity was not fixed and could be crossed back and forth depending on context. If need arises, the Lepchas can actually discard the hyphenated tag especially with the present "primitive" identity that has been given to them by the Government of Sikkim. Converting to Christianity was the beginning of a modern lifestyle for most Lepchas. The only error was the divorce from traditional culture that labelled them as traitors almost. Their confidence in their Christian Lepcha identity was challenged by the Buddhist Lepchas who held them responsible for neglecting traditional culture. A boundary was built between Buddhist Lepchas and Christian Lepchas creating religious identities that differentiated 'us' and 'them'. For long, they remained in their respective spaces attributed by the religions they had embraced creating an unnecessary divide to the larger ethnic identity. Today, the Christian Lepchas are willing to embrace both their religious and ethnic identities and have proven indispensible to the production of a larger pan-Lepcha identity. Hinduism on the other hand was never formally introduced like Buddhism and Christianity. It had no missionaries but its all-pervading existence was hard to ignore as Lepchas absorbed the Hindu traits that questioned their religious identity. Lepchas influenced by Hinduism were also to syncretize not just the culture but the traditional Lepcha religion with Buddhism and Hinduism as well. Having outlined the basic gist of this study where Buddhism, Christianity and Hinduism have been characterized by syncretism, conversion and absorption respectively we sum up the cultural changes that

occurred in Lepcha social institutions across three geographical regions influenced by three different religions. Despite the knowledge of shared traits, there were many similarities and differences with regard to social institutions of Lepchas living in Dzongu, Kalimpong and Ilam.

The Lepcha family is still a very small unit, as they prefer nuclear families in all three regions. Their clan system has undergone a major change from parallel to patrilineal descent. In the bid to revive this system, Lepcha organizations have been trying to change the last name of girls who write their father's name in official documents, but it has proven too late in most cases. Unless the child is born today and the parents feel the need to retain the parallel descent, it seems impossible to change the already existing last name of the father. Of late, many Lepcha women who have married non-Lepcha men talk about giving their title to their offspring in case of a girl. It is almost nostalgic but it also shows an attempt to retain and revive the Lepcha identity even after being married to a non-Lepcha.

Marriage among the Lepchas was clan exogamous. Intermarriage between Dzongu and Kalimpong Lepchas was more popular than between Dzongu and Ilam, and Ilam and Kalimpong Lepchas. Inter-community marriage on the other hand was popular because of growing interaction between people from other communities. It was desirable to find a partner from the same community but they were not too strict about tribal exogamy. Trends of late marriage were still very common in Ilam because of the small Lepcha population and the strict clan system, which limited choices about marriageable

partners. The kinship system was still intact although it was undergoing some linguistic changes because of the Lepcha kinship terms being replaced by either Bhutia or Nepali terms.

There has been an 'awakening' (Anderson 2006: 74) about the Lepcha language. The birth of Lepcha language schools in Kalimpong and Ilam shows an attempt to reclaim their authority in their mother tongue. Sometimes Lepchas who already know the language are known to create a linguistic boundary excluding those who do not know the Lepcha language. But 'language is not an instrument of exclusion' (Anderson 2006: 134), anyone who makes the effort can learn the language and for that Lepchas are headed in the right direction. The Lepchas of Sikkim have been privileged to find the school system recognizing the Lepcha language up till graduate level. Kalimpong Lepchas are optimistic with the Government of West Bengal announcing the introduction of Lepcha language in the school system. Unfortunately for Ilam, the lack of governmental facilities to safeguard the Lepcha language is a matter of concern.

One of the strongest boundary markers when it comes to food was the consumption of *ci,* the Lepcha alcoholic drink usually made of millet. It is the one thing that separated the Christian and the Buddhist Lepchas. Because of its alcoholic nature, a line is drawn between those who consume and those who do not, putting the Christian Lepchas in the latter category. But why was *ci* such a huge boundary marker? One of the main reasons is the offering of *ci* to the gods, known as *ci faat,* which is done before almost every event. Several drops of the alcoholic liquid are sprinkled in the air usually

with the pipe that is used to sip the same. It also plays an important part in rites of passage – birth, marriage and death and other occasions too. Most villagers do not know the story of the origin of *ci* but they do recall the famous saying, 'if you know how to drink *ci,* it is medicinal, if you don't know how to drink *ci,* it is poisonous' (Tamsang 2001: 13). Indeed, the intake of *ci* has also been cited as the reason for the downfall of the community. But with its mythological origin and the tales attached to it, Plaisier sees 'the brewing, preparing, drinking and of offering of *ci*' as an 'important unifying phenomenon' (2011: 288). Crossing the boundary and accepting *ci* as an integral part of Lepcha culture could be a start for Christian Lepchas to be a part of the 'traditional medicine for light heartedness' (Plaisier 2011: 284).

The changes were inevitable and it is the dynamic configurations of religion, culture and identity that continually interact with each other that have reshaped the Lepcha identity too. With the decreasing differences between their religious and regional boundaries, the Lepcha belongingness lie in certain movements and developments that represented the Lepcha cause. Their political voice has become more pronounced, and the demand for their rights as first citizens of the land in all three regions is a noted phenomenon. It has allowed them to be in solidarity with each other across geographical boundaries displaying a stronger unified front. The religious divide of the yester years is no more a problem as Lepchas are seen to be embracing a secular religious identity that overlook the religious differences and promote religious pluralism instead. So far they have been successful in recognizing the different religious traditions followed by the Lepchas and in creating a cultural consciousness that has facilitated

group solidarity. For the time being, there is the much needed one-ness of that 'Rong romance' flourishing in the hills of Mayel Lyang.

## Appendice: List of Clan Names

1. Yangtamoo
2. Leekmoo
3. Aadik Puchu
4. Cho Sadamoo
5. Gokhakmoo
6. Chamoo
7. Eemusong-moo
8. Gowloogmoo
9. Mochum-moo
10. Hojom-moo
11. Syaza-moo
12. Yuksum-moo
13. Sahadupon-moo
14. Tamlong-moo
15. Eendee-moo
16. Gongtok-moo
17. Mongsong-moo
18. Molom-moo*
19. Kamret-moo
20. Sada-moo
21. Yangden-moo
22. Pharee-moo
23. Haklee-moo
24. Mongchong-moo
25. Karthak-moo
26. Kaher-moo
27. Sukden-moo
28. Tankalbee Kathop-moo

29. Kunyen-moo
30. Lingden-moo
31. Golobee
32. Basaboo
33. Lingda-moo
34. Gor-moo
35. Sandyang-moo
36. Simick-moo
37. Kunchudyang-moo
38. Tamsang-moo
39. Phipon
40. Kabo-moo
41. Foning
42. Bree-moo
43. Joreeboo
44. Fuyumosong-moo
45. Dinring-moo
46. Namphok-Katho-moo
47. Pathok-boo
48. Seple-moo
49. Taso-moo
50. Rongdong-moo
51. Rongong-moo
52. Takneel-moo
53. Go-moo
54. Tulum-moo
55. Dungbo-moo
56. Nuphye-moo
57. Kupzoo-moo

58. Sampo-moo
59. Yong-moo
60. Aaden-moo
61. Targain
62. Namchyu-moo
63. Yari-moo
64. Karva-moo
65. Paru
66. Fudong-moo
67. Sakma-moo
68. Tahyitak-moo
69. Namphok-moo
70. Gokgyop-moo
71. Taphigey-moo
72. Phyongtali-moo
73. Penlop-moo
74. Eethok-moo
75. Sada Saling-moo
76. Siyo bodo-moo
77. Sitang-moo
78. Molom-yukpho-moo*
79. Mikbe-moo
80. Aaden-Putso-moo
81. Sopong-gong-moo
82. Sayek-moo
83. Chyikyoksum-moo
84. Phoktali putso-moo
85. Sakom-moo
86. Milim mayeng-moo

87. Rongpat-moo
88. Eesa-moo
89. Ray-moo
90. Samling-moo
91. Phokrum-moo
92. Damsang-moo
93. Pathyeng-moo
94. Chyong-moo
95. Layo-moo
96. Saktee-moo
97. Sitling-moo
98. Yagey-moo
99. Mayar-moo
100. Burfong-moo
101. Sarphokli-moo
102. Gaykatok-moo (Borlen)
103. Mikbey YokSam-moo
104. Kati-moo
105. Resong-moo
106. Kabo Kachik-moo
107. Ningbong-moo
108. Kali Kasum-moo
109. Sukchee-moo
110. Saryong-moo
111. Pandi Rok-moo
112. Taktingrak-moo
113. Singso-moo
114. Phokling-moo
115. Pothop-moo

116. Mokpachee-moo
117. Lungden-moo
118. Ayreeikdi-moo
119. Aali lingda-moo
120. Peythong-moo
121. Song-moo
122. Meypit pam-moo
123. Hulung-moo
124. Phengdi-moo
125. Nabi-moo
126. Yeripochee-moo
127. Singsar-moo
128. Gitmolom-moo*
129. Kapher-moo
130. Liyokasu-moo
131. Noksong-moo
132. Yeri-yuksom-moo
133. Remurong-moo
134. Chyongyeksum-moo
135. Sung-gong-moo
136. Tor-gok-moo
137. Kheng-moo
138. Sam-dar-moo
139. Bur-myak-moo
140. Suk-Phong-moo
141. Pak-gey-moo
142. Mok-mok-moo
143. Ta-ling-moo
144. Ree-do-moo

145. Rong-rit-ru-moo
146. Rathong Rum-moo
147. Rong-bee-rum-moo
148. La-so-moo
149. Ka-let-rum-moo
150. Re-nok-moo
151. Yong-bee-moo
152. Bee-khe-moo
153. Ree-ma-sok
154. Payongsong-moo
155. Sang-mi-moo
156. Namsang-moo
157. Sam-bur-gyen-ding-moo
158. Sa-dok-moo
159. Tarzok-moo
160. Ragen-moo
161. Bomu gong-moo
162. Sumur-moo
163. Pasa-moo
164. Longchyok-moo
165. Aachan-moo
166. Dik nung moo
167. Deri Sukdyang-moo
168. Chyok-sing-moo
169. Sukdang-moo
170. Seep-moo
171. Laso Kaso
172. Dung-ya-boo
173. Sum-bur-dee-moo

174. Rong-gut- moo
175. Sik fong-moo
176. Tingbo-moo
177. Khumasa-moo
178. Seek-moo
179. Phok lee do moo
180. Galop-moo
181. Eetonsong
182. Mang-yong-moo
183. Kayikpochyum
184. Padi-moo
185. Ungtangbo-moo
186. Kayakyuk-moo
187. Hwekchee-moo
188. Nakphok-moo
189. Dasang-moo
190. Chyongmoo-Damoo
191. Singsa-moo
192. Eeyareemoo
193. Nyet-moo
194. Pathee-moo
195. Sing-pom-moo
196. Balimoo
197. Mongpher cheeka-moo
198. Suat-moo
199. Molom-moo yen-moo*
200. Rumdursung-moo
201. Aaram-ter-moo
202. Paki-moo

203. Pho-nyu-ruk sum-moo
204. Nambongsuk-moo
205. Kabi-moo*
206. Tak-nel-suk-dyak-moo
207. Lahek-moo
208. Digyok-moo
209. Lungdok-moo
210. Suk-puk-moo
211. Ga-jya-moo
212. Sedok-moo
213. Mung-som-moo
214. Geyzyo-moo
215. Namthok Katho-moo
216. Fuli-moo
217. Sanamgyel-moo
218. Sakom-moo
219. Zor-moo
220. Sungut Karthak
221. Numtsok Kaley-moo
222. Lungtong sumbo-moo
223. Tapok-moo
224. Monggong-moo
225. Dukgit Putso-moo
226. Mong putso-moo
227. Makcheng-moo
228. Marfa-moo
229. Mung dey pathing-moo
230. Marphatfa-moo
231. Sing-ee-thun-moo

232. Aarom-moo
233. Tar-ohm-moo
234. Kuk-chyu-kuk-puk-moo
235. Sing-so-moo
236. Pating-moo
237. Heng-moo
238. Sam-ling
239. Hek-fa-moo
240. Pikfamoo

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**CHARISMA K. LEPCHA**
Email: lepchack@gmail.com

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Education: **Doctor of Philosophy** in Anthropology

**Master of Arts** in Anthropology

**Bachelor of Arts** in Journalism

Academic Awards:

**Gold Medal** for securing first rank first class results in Masters Degree in Anthropology. NEHU.

**National Eligibility Test (NET)** cleared.

Training and Exposure:

**Presented paper** at the Conference on *Frontier India and the Northeast.* Nehru Memorial Museum & Library, New Delhi. February 1-2, 2013.

**Presented paper** at the International Workshop on *Performing Identity: Ethnicity and Ethno-Nationalism in the South-east Asian Borderland region of North-east India.* University of Goettingen, Germany. December 15-17, 2011.

**Presented paper** at the National Seminar on *Environment, Citizenship and the State.* Gauhati University. March 23-24, 2011.

**Presented paper** at the XXXIV Indian Social Science Congress, *India –Post 1991,* Gauhati University, Assam. December 27-31, 2010.

**Presented paper** at the International Seminar on *Language, Culture and Identity: Issues and Challenges.* Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh. Feb 8-10, 2010.

**Presented paper** at the 15th Cultural Studies Workshop on *The Sacred in Contemporary Culture.* Santiniketan, Kolkata. Jan 30- Feb 4, 2010.

**Presented paper** at the International Conference on *Buddhist Himalaya: Studies in Religion and Culture.* Gangtok, Sikkim. Oct 1- 5, 2008.

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