



Lepcha Community In Colonial And Post Colonial Period (1835-2011)

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Abstract: The indigenous Lepchas of Darjeeling and Sikkim Himalayas have endured a long history of conquest, subjugation and colonization under the Bhutias and the British. The deep valleys, dense forest, ranging rivers, biodiversity and commercial prospects impelled the rulers to establish domination over the highlands. 'The lord of the land' i.e the Lepchas were turn into 'inferior subject race'. The Lepchas are probably the only indigenous race in India who claim themselves to be the 'Children of God' and 'mother nature'. They have mongoloid morphological features and lived in the Himalayas on the southern and eastern slopes of Mount Kanchenjunga.

Key Words: Colonization, identity, encroachment, migration, immigration

Primeval Lepchas proudly address themselves as 'Mutanchi-Rong-Kup' or simply 'Rong' which means most cared and loved offspring of Mother Nature. According to K. P. Tamsang the word Rong means 'sons of snowy peaks'. Some colonial officials opined that the word Rong means 'the squatter of the land of the cave'.¹ But colonization, immigration and settlements which were resulted in cross-culture interaction evolved the indigenous culture and traditions and in this process the autochthonous of this region lost their own identity. The word 'Lepcha' derived from the derogatory Nepali term 'Lep-che' meaning 'nonsense talker'. Epistemologically the word is also close to the Bhutanese Dzongkha word 'La-chhu', La means hills and chu means river, hence it means people living between hills and rivers.²

¹ TAMSANG, K. P, The unknown and untold reality about the Lepchas Luen Sun Offset Printing Co., Hong Kong, 1983

² Anira Phipon (2007), Socio-economic Transition of the Lepcha in Post Colonial Darjeeling District with Special Reference to Kalimpong, in Dr. Sailen Debnath, ed. Social and Political Tensions in North Bengal Since 1947

After the advent of the British colonizer, the aborigine Lepchas were referred as 'wild tribe' by Dr. A. Campbell, the first superintendent of Darjeeling. W. W. Hunter in his Statistical Account of Bengal, Vol. X described them as 'Pre- Aryan people of the interior of India'. When the first proper censuses of India was undertaken in 1881, the aboriginal Lepchas were included in the list of 'forest tribe' and within the broader category of agricultural and pastoral castes. In 1901 and 1911 census, Risley and Gait added them in the list of 'animists' along with the other indigenous forest dwellers. In the next census Lepchas were remained in same division, but the heading was changed from 'animism' to 'tribal religion' and 1921 onwards the tribe and cast distinction became prominent. So the practice of animism became the symbol of all tribes of India and they were viewed as 'lower classes' or 'backward Hindus'.

In the pre colonial period the geographical position of the area has accentuated its isolation from rest of the populated plains and long term isolation from the outside world shaped the aborigine tribal economy. Sikkim and its neighboring areas were first colonized by the Tibetans prior to the beginning of the seventeenth century and led the Tibetan or Bhutanese influx from the north. The process of 'Tibetization' among the Lepchas was started when they came in contact with Tibetans monks and traders. Later the Tibetan monarchy established domination over these shy, peace loving, animist Lepchas and converted them to the Lamaistic form of Buddhism. The intermarriage between the Lepchas with the Tibetan resulted in the formation of 'Sikkimese Bhutias' and new ideas, customs and culture slowly filtered into the Lepcha society.

The impact of colonial rule had a great socio-economic and cultural ramification on the indigenous Lepcha tribes. When the Bhutias colonized this area they remained aloof from the subordinate tribes. But as a colonizer the British were much more sophisticated, precise and well organized for extracting the natural resources of the colony by using the men power of conquered areas. They wanted to build Darjeeling as commercial centre which resulted in the growth of enormous amount of employment opportunity and a huge demand of manual labour. So Dr. A. Campbell, the first superintendent of Darjeeling encourage the neighboring Nepalese to settle down in the British territory and thousand of poverty stricken people of south Nepal started entering in the British territory.

The ethnic sense of this region rapidly changed with the multiplication of the number of Nepalese. The demographic change in these areas was largely responsible for the socio-cultural change of the Lepchas during colonial period. The cross culture interactions which arose as a result of immigration, settlements and colonization reshaped the tribal society and economy. Within thirty years (1871-1901) the population of these regions increased more than 2¹/₂ times. In 1901, the Nepalese were multiplied to 51% of total population and the Lepchas were reduced to 19% of the total population. The remote and untouched market economy rapidly expanded particularly after the introduction of the Railways in 1881. But the unsuitable condition, growing urbanization and the reservation of forest encouraged the Lepchas to give up their age old nomadic cultivation and leave their ancestral land. Some of the Lepchas migrated to Kalimpong, Sikkim or Bhutan where still some

forest left. The forest act of 1865 and 1878 evicted the aborigine Lepchas from their own forests. To the British jhuming was a wistful style of cultivation. In a single stroke the Government's claim over the forest became legitimate, and hunting, food gathering or cutting the forest trees become illegitimate.³

The number of hunter gatherer declined partly as a result of pressure from the growing number of tea estate, agriculture holdings and disappearance of forests. The last three decades of the 19th century shows that the colonial strategy remarkably affected the tribal economy and society by introducing plantation and commercialization of the region's agriculture. From 1870s onward the Nepalese immigrant started replacing the native folks. Because according to the alien rulers the Nepalese were born cultivators, resourceful, remarkably loyal and hard working then the un-enterprising, lazy and reluctant Lepchas. Large number of areas was encroached by the settlement of immigrant Nepalese agriculturists who taught the Lepchas about the method of the Himalayan agriculture and introduced cardamom cultivation and terrace farming in the hills. A number of English vegetables were also introduced and all these brought about a huge change in the agricultural landscape of these region.

Improvement in communication system stemmed the transition of economic and social structure of the Lepcha tribes. In 1880s the Railways connected the remote hills to the densely populated plains which enable the native Maharajas, western educated middle class Bengalis followed the foot print of their 'alien master' and reach the high lands. The possession of property in the hills becomes a status symbol for the affluent native Indian. The growing business opportunity in the hills also attracted the attention of the Bengali, Marwari and the Bhojpuri merchant class and the money lenders who found their market among the simple and shy Lepcha tribe.

The traditional economic structure of the native folk remarkably transformed along with the advancement of civilization. The early British officials described the Lepchas as 'careless race', 'un-enterprising' and 'noble savages'. At the same time they also appreciated their value as domestic servant. So many Lepcha men and women got jobs in the European dukbanglows. A British official wrote in 1910 'they [the Lepcha] make most excellent and trustworthy servant and are quite exceptional people, among whom it is a pleasure to live'. During this period some of the Lepchas were sent to Burma, Andaman, Nicobar, Sumatra, Borneo, Malay and central Africa for entomological works.

The aborigine who lives close to the nature became inferior in the views of the ruling race. The utilitarian thoughts had inspired the progressive colonizers to attack on the 'backwardness' of the hill tribes. Soon the European settlers became the 'self-appointed guardian' of 'uncivilized hill folk' and took the responsibility to modernize or civilize the tribes. The Scottish and the German missionary consider as the pioneer in the spreading of western education and the doctrines of Christianity among the hill tribes. In 1841, a Baptist

³ Ranjan Chakrabarti, 'colonizing the forest (1800-1900) in the quarterly review of Historical Studies, October, 1998- march 1999, No. 3 & 4; Vol-38, P-31.

missionary Mr. Start and a band of German missionary made the first attempt to bring the Lepchas under the light of Christianity and built the first school in the Darjeeling and its neighborhood to educate the hill folk. The missionaries become more successful in converting the simple tribes from their Animistic and Buddhist faith to Christianity. In census of 1901, the animist accounted 1.38% and the Christian strengthen to 1.8%, the number of Hindus dramatically increased and formed the three quarters of the total population. The spread of western education among the Lepchas also reduced the scope of the development of Lepcha language.

The aborigine tribal societies of these regions drawn various element from different origin and transform accordingly with time and constantly losing their distinctive identity. The process of assimilation of the Lepcha and Nepalese started during the early days of the Raj. The unrestricted matrimonial relation between the Nepalese and Lepchas in these regions resulted in erosion of the Lepcha population in the west of the Tista. Most of the Lepchas started speaking in the Nepalese language and dump their own language known as 'Rongaring' or 'Rongring', wore Nepalese or Tibetan dress and started to follow Nepalese culture, tradition and even rituals. For example the worship of Elaiji-nyou which was an entirely a Nepalese ritual performed in every year before the harvest of cardamom. But soon the Lepchas started sacrifice in the honor of super natural Elaiji-nyou for good harvest.

The Lepcha society was less seriously influenced by occidental culture, even after the colonization. But they have been greatly influenced and their way of life much modified by the contact and pressure of their more highly developed neighbors, the Sikkimese, the Nepalese and Tibetans.⁴ It is true that the commercial interest of the ruling class encouraged immigration into the terrain of the tribes. Across the boundaries, many tribes has a tendency to protest against the coming of the outsider when they interfere in the internal sphere of the tribes. But on the other hand the Lepchas adopted the language, religion and even the traditional technologies and the dresses of the immigrants, by losing their distinctive cultural identity and amalgamated with the outsiders. Lack of community sense, willingness to preserve traditional culture, marginalization and their reluctant behavior might be responsible their losing own identity. Because the culture of the majority has a power which always spread its root in the society of marginalize and influenced it to assimilate within the culture of majority.

After the independence, diversity or heterogeneity of human population has become a dominant feature of this region's human ecology and the entire political equation of the region changed dramatically. Now the marginalized aborigine Lepchas were again segregated and came under the jurisdiction of West Bengal Government and Sikkim. In such a scenario Nepalese became dominant in the Darjeeling and its adjacent region and as a result the Lepchas were failed to create any political influence.

⁴ Geoffrey Gorer, 2005; 84

YEAR	POPULATION
1941	3,76,369
1981	10,24,269
1991	12,99,919
2001	16,05,900

Source:

- Census of India (1961), Language Tables, Vol.1, Part II - C (II), Pp - CL VII-CL IX.
- Census of India (1981), District Census Hand Book, Darjeeling District, WB
- Census of India (1991), District Census Hand Book, Darjeeling District, WB
- Census of India (2001), Provisional Population Totals, Series– 1

A section of western educated Lepchas in Kalimpong realized the Vulnerable condition of the Lepcha ‘Moo’ or Lepcha clan culture and founded ‘Indigenous Lepcha Tribal Association’ (ILTA) in 1925 to protect the Lepcha culture and tradition. At the beginning it was a brittle organization. But now in 2010 ILTA become a influential organization in Darjeeling and Kalimpong which unified almost 110 Lepcha associations of these area to secure the identity and the culture of the Lepcha people. The leaders like Lyangsong Tamsang always active in mobilizing the Lepcha for their rights as well as duties. They also publish bilingual online magazines like ‘King Gaeboo Achyok’ and books under the banner of ILTA to germinate the community feelings among the new generation who are constantly forgetting their own culture and heritage under the influence of modern educational system and globalization.

The census of 1991 and 2001 shows that the most of the Lepchas of the Darjeeling district resides in the remote rural areas without proper civic facilities and the literacy rate is very low in the Lepcha populated villages. Low fertility of the soil, scarcity of water, the use of traditional method of cultivation was responsible for the economic backwardness of the rural Lepchas. Land alienation is another major problem in Kalimpong area and the Lepcha leaders and scholars of Kalimpong believe that the Government of West Bengal is urgently required to amend the existing Land Transfer Act of the indigenous tribes of West Bengal, so that they can protect their ancestral land. On 15th December; 2006 the Lok Sabha passed the tribal right bill to

protect the right of the tribal communities to own the lands they live and to some of the forest resources they depend on and this might have relieved the Lepchas.

The marital status of a marginalized community played a determining role in the preservation of its culture and believes. The last census report shows that percentage of the Lepcha male is higher than the percentage of the female and it lead to the more intermarriage between the Lepchas with the Nepalese. Matrimonial relation with the other ethnic groups hampers the separate Lepcha identity also in the post colonial period. The census of 1991 confirmed that as good as 7727 Lepchas in the both sexes, in the age group of 15-44 remain unmarried. The vulnerable socio-economic factors are responsible for such developments.

In the post colonial era the huge influx of Christianity and Lamaism has led to the deterioration of the socio-religious identity of the indigenous Lepchas. In some parts of Darjeeling district they lost all corporate unity and have particularly forgotten their own language and it would appear that none of the Lepchas in Kalimpong and its adjacent region at any rate can speak anything except Nepali.

Now a day, the frequent social and political tension in Darjeeling has also created a sense of insecurity and marginalization among the Lepchas. Majority of the Lepchas do not regarded them as Gurkhas and opposed the demand of the separate statehood status in the Darjeeling hills. As the autochthonous of the land they believe that the land is belong to them but unfortunately their voice was surpassed by the aggressive attitude of the supporter of the Gorkha Land. Most recently on 4th October, 2010, the members of Indigenous Lepcha Tribal Association came to Kolkata, organized a meeting in College Square and demanded- introduction of Lepcha language in the educational institutions of the hills, primitive tribal group status for the Lepchas and reservation of seats in Darjeeling Gurkha hill council.

The marginalization and the deprivation of the Lepchas in the colonial and post colonial period was not an accidental phenomenon. It is a historical fact. The colonial government deliberately gives all importance to the migration of the Nepalese and neglected the indigenous tribes. British officers, civilians and the travelers often noticed the vulnerable condition of the Lepchas and referred them as 'vanishing tribes' but did not realized the fact that the arbitrary colonial policy was responsible for these. In the post independence period the marginalization and exploitation of the Lepchas continued and the cultural identity crisis of the Lepchas become much more prominent. The Lepchas believe in peaceful protest and they are never been vociferous. So their demands have been neglected by the concerned Governments both in colonial and post colonial period.

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