

The Lepchas of Sikkim

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There are numerous tribes and castes in our country, which is the land of unity in diversity. The Lepchas are one of them. They inhabit Assam, West Bengal and Sikkim. They are a scheduled tribe and have a unique culture of their own.

Meaning of the word Lepcha

'The Lepcha' is the name given to the tribe by the Nepalese. In a Parbatiya dialect of Nepal 'Lep' means 'speech' and 'cha' means 'unintelligible' i. e. the 'Unintelligible' speaker. It is referred to as 'Lep-Cha' or 'Lepche' for not adopting the Parbatia language. It calls itself 'Rongpa' which means ravine dweller. Rong also means peak or mountain, (Tulsiram Sharma 1970). According to Dr. Suniti Kumar Chatterjee, Lepchas are 'Kiratis'. Rais, a Nepalese sub-tribe refers to its first parents as "Parrungo-Father, Simenima-Mother", who have three sons Lapcha, Jimdar and Meche. This theory associates the Lepchas with the Nepalese.

The Lepchas are 'Mutanchi RONG' KUN-rum-kup which means beloved sons of the Mother of Creation and Almighty God. (Tulsiram Sharma, 1970). The Lepchas are 'Mutanchi RONG' and not Rong simply. Their sentiment is rather more attached to 'Mutanchi'. Hence, occasionally they omit Rong and put 'GO MUTANCHI GUM', the meaning of which is I am Mutanchi, i. e. 'I am a Lepcha'¹. During the remote past SIKKIM was known as 'RONG-LYANG', i. e., the waiting places (for the Lepchas going to Tibet for salt). In course of time the people of 'RONG-LYANG' came to be known as the 'Rong'².

According to Lepcha folk stories, the first Lepcha was born when a Rum god was attracted by a Lake and turned into a Monkey to marry her.

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1. Rudranand and Sonam Wangdi, Anthropological studies on the Lepchas, 1981.
 2. Nayen T. Lepcha, 1970.

Their Original Homeland

Opinions differ about the original homeland of the Lepchas. According to some historians, they are said to be of Tibeto-Burmese and Chinese origin. We are told that they came from KAILASA parbat in Tibet. Some scholars associate them with Nagas but modern scholars with the Japanese.

Religion

The primitive Lepchas followed 'Bon' religion. They were worshippers of trees and other natural objects and ancestral spirits. The concept of Bong - Thing or medicine man, believed to be the son of gods, is the most remarkable point in this primitive religion¹. They expressed the idea of god by the word 'Rum'. They had the word 'Mung' to express demon, harmful to men. They believed in animal sacrifices like most of the tribals to propitiate the gods. Later, they came in touch with Buddhism, the religion which was made the state religion by the Namgyals. The religion practised by them now-a-days is a synthesis of Buddhism and Bonism. Some of their important religious beliefs like the idea of exorcising the sick with the help of the Thekyong-Tek and Nyekong-Tek priests who like Jhankaris and Ojhas of the Nepalese and Naga society, respectively, are foreign to Buddhism. The Lepchas of Sikkim do not go on pilgrimage like other Bhutias (Buddhists). The most sacred place for them is 'Phur-tsa-chu' i. e. hot water spring in west. A large number of them have been Christianized.

Disposal of the Dead Bodies

In the remote past they used to bury their dead. The system has undergone some changes in course of time and at present they cremate their dead bodies.

Family and Marriage

The Rongpas or Lepchas have no joint family system. The women have equal rights with men. Female progeny is favoured. The

1. C. D. Beauvoir Stocks, Folklore and Customs of the Lepchas of Sikkim, Asiatic society, Calcutta, 1927.

women are respected and allowed to take part in community functions. The higher education is favoured among the willing. Marriage ceremony is simple and still as in their remote past based on the idea of dignity of labour, rather than the romantic alliances. A bridegroom in order to prove his worth has to render hard labour in the cardamom field at least for a year and before getting married is expected to live with the girl's parents. The bride price is claimed by the parents. The Lepchas who practised polygamy in the remote past are gradually taking to monogamy. The number of wives a man maintained previously varied according to the number of fields, he was expected to take care of. This was not looked upon by the society. This tradition is also preserved by the Lepchas of the inaccessible difficult area of the region called the 'Dzongu'.

Caste System

There is no caste system among the Lepchas. Their society is based on the system of equality. The only distinction that is noticed is made, keeping in view the region they inhabit and the religion they profess. There are four different kinds of Lepchas seen in the Eastern Himalayas, (1) Damsang Lepchas, (2) Illam Lepchas, (3) Protestant Lepchas Christians, (4) Catholic Lepchas Christians¹.

Houses

The Lepchas during early stages built their houses scientifically supported by wooden pillars with thatched roofs. These can be compared to the lake dwellers of Switzerland. The lower part provided shelter to the domesticated animals. The house usually consisted of a big square central hall, with fire place 'Hearth' just in the centre around which the family could sleep. This may be compared to the modern central heating and can said to be the contribution of the Lepchas to the modern civilization. Their houses were never built of more than a single storey. Now-a-days as in the remote past the Lepcha villagers of Sikkim build their houses in the same old way.

1. Dr. Parasmani Pradhan, Himalayan Observer, 1982.

Food habit of the Lepchas

The Lepchas are still as in the remote past fond of roots, pork, flesh of monkeys, toads, fish and corn. They are fond of rice also. They prefer pork fat to any other oil. Both men and women drink 'CHI', an intoxicant prepared from millet,

Lepcha Costume

During the primitive stages of development both men and women used to wear a dress of knee length with pyjamas. The material used was only a multicoloured stiped cloth, the colour varied according to the economic and social status or the prestige of a person. Gradually, they were influenced by the Bhutias who came from Tibet and wore long robes, the Lepchas also adopted long robes, tied with belts and long sleeved blouses inside. This came to be called 'Gada' for women and 'Tharu' for men. The modern Lepchas still wear the same long dress. It resembles the dress worn by the Indus Valley people.

They claim to be the original inhabitants of Khang-Chen-Dzonga, (the house of five treasures). According to late Mr. Nayen Tshering Lepcha¹, they originated in China and belonged to Ta Tai group of Chinese people, whose ruler was Tao-Tai-Ching-Rong. We can regard them to be the original people of Sikkim.

Anthropological Classification

Anthropologists divided the Lepchas into two categories; (a) the nomadic shepherds, with high nose, big eyes, pale complexion and tall figure, (b) the agriculturists-short figured, flat nose, very small eyes covered by eyelids without eyelashes and extremely pale complexion. They belong to Mongoloid and non-Mongoloid stock, respectively.

Early Settlement of Lepchas in Sikkim

During the early stages of the development of their civilization, they

1. Kanchenjonga (Local Nepali Paper), 1970.

settled near the river Teesta and Rangeet and dense forest of the Himalayas, and the region now called 'Dzongu'.

Lepcha Language & Scripts

Their language is also called Cha Lepcha and is of Tibeto-Burmese origin. Their script was introduced by five Lepcha sages, (1) Targey, (2) Sayoon, (3) Goley, (4) Tungrab and (5) Dooring. According to Mr. K. P. Tamsang,¹ the Lepcha alphabet was invented by Thling Menselong, who was an administrator to the earliest Lepcha King. The third ruler of Namgyal Dynasty, Chador Namgyal invented this script according to the *Gazetter of Sikkim*². It seems that the script was invented by the Lepchas and further improved by the Namgyal, king of Sikkim in the 17th Century. A grammar was written in 1876 by General Mainwaring, The Folklores were mostly compiled by Europeans and their literature consisted of translations of Tibetan scriptures only.

Till very recently the Lepcha language was not taught in schools. After the merger of the state with the Union of India, the language is receiving proper attention, it is being taught in the schools. The Directorate of Education is publishing text books in Lepcha, which is taught upto class VIII.

Socio-Economic Structure

Originally, the Lepchas were hunters. They gradually started domesticating animals. Agriculture was also one of their main occupations. In the remote past they were the self-sufficient people, who were economically well off. They lived in closely knit community of their own.

The Lepchas now take to weaving, make beautiful baskets, hats and carpets. They display their engineering feat by laying bamboo water pipes all over the area inhabited by them, where the G. I. pipes are still unheard of.

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1. *An Encyclopaedia* published by the National Museum of Denmark, 1967, The Lepchas.
 2. H. H. Risley. *The Gazetteer of Sikkim*, Oriental Publishers, Delhi, (first reprint) 1973.

They cultivate crops like, rice, millet, cardamom and maize.

The Lepchas and the Outside World

They have a great affinity with the outside world and other civilizations. There seems to have been good contact with the outside world before the Bhutia invasion in the 12th century A.D. Their way of making "CHI" (intoxicant) is similar to the Aryan process of preparing Somras. Their story of creation of MONPA and THENPA resembles that of Christian's idea of Adam and eve. This bears testimony to outside world contact and cultural impact.

On the whole, the Lepchas are very simple peace-loving and shy people. In sikkim they inhabit the region known as the 'Dzong', isolated from the rest. They are a race of dying people, educationally and emonomically backward. Their uplift can be rendered possible if the 'Dzongu' is declared backward and 'Scheduled' under the article 224 and the 'Fifth' Schedule of the Constitution.

