

Locating Lepcha Identity: Folktales, Myths and Legends of the Lepchas

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Introduction

The Lepchas are the indigenous inhabitants of Sikkim and Darjeeling Hills. They call themselves *Rongpa* or *Raongkup* or *Rumkup* and their country *Mayel Lyang*, meaning 'the land of the hidden paradise'.¹ Little is known of the history of Sikkim before 700 A.D, when the Lepchas were first recorded as living in the *Mayel Lyang* Valley.² The Lepchas worship Kanchenjunga as their guardian deity and share an intimate relationship with the land on which they depended for subsistence. The Lepcha place names testify to the intimate history the Lepchas share with the region. The Lepcha people had an in-depth knowledge of the flora and fauna plants of the region. They had names for all the plants and insects to which Sir Joseph Dalton Hooker, the renowned botanist of the "Himalayan Journals" fame prescribed Latin names. In recent times, with the proposal of the Hydel power project in Sikkim and West Bengal, the Lepcha community was threatened with the fear of losing their land. They finally found their voice, though it was a voice of dissent. They were protesting against the building of dams which would change the topography of their land, deplete their resources and anger their deities. They wanted to protect Dzongu, which is now a Lepcha reserve, considered as the heart-land of the Lepcha community. Hunger strikes and public rallies were organized by the Lepchas to make the authorities concerned aware of their sense of hurt at having to part with their land in the name of 'progress' and 'development'.³

This paper seeks to read critically the popular folktales, myths and legends of the Lepchas. Tales, myths and legends are the repository of a community's lived experiences, knowledge, wisdom, belief systems and memories. They are a key to understanding the dynamics of the community concerned and are instrumental in the making of a community's history and identity

Tales, Myths and Legends

The Lepchas have many folktales which have been transmitted orally and compiled in written form. A. R. Foning devotes an entire chapter entitled "The Luntun Sung" in his book *Lepcha, My Vanishing Tribe* where he talks about the *Luntun Sung*, or "stories from our ancient mythology, legends, and other folk-lore which included stories of animals, birds, insects and the like, and fairy tales" (87). He also stresses the influence of the *Luntun Sung* on the Lepcha mindset and behavioural patterns. He claims:

The reason why we behave today as we do is because we are taught this way through stories, parables, fables and mythological, and legendary tales. These apparently unimportant and childish tales seem to have a deep and lasting effect on us. If we do anything outside what is sanctioned by society, we are at once reminded that we are on the wrong path, by being told some relevant stories of days of yore (88).

Foning clearly indicates that these *Luntan Sung* guide behavioral patterns and also prescribe the informal rules for moral conduct. Lepcha folktales play a significant role in prescribing and reiterating social roles. They contain the unwritten rules that shape and sustain their society. A close reading of their folk tales would therefore be significant and indispensable in understanding the dynamics of the Lepcha society.

William Bascom discusses the various functional roles of folklore in his essay "Four Functions of Folklore". According to Bascom, myths, legends, tales, proverbs and riddles provide amusement, validation of culture justifying rituals and institution, education and help in maintaining conformity to the accepted patterns of behavior applying social pressure and exercising control. He also talks about myths validating conduct, proverbs helping to solve disputes, riddles helping to sharpen wits. He calls folklore an "important mechanism for maintaining the stability of culture" and explains :

It is used to inculcate the customs and ethical standards in the young, and as an adult to reward him with praise when he conforms, to punish him with ridicule or criticism when he deviates, to provide him with rationalizations when the institutions and conventions are challenged or questioned, to suggest that he be content with things as they are, and to provide him with a compensatory escape from "the hardships, the inequalities, the injustices" of everyday life. Here, indeed, is the basic paradox of folklore, that while it plays a vital role in transmitting and maintaining the institutions of a culture and in forcing the individual to conform to them, at the same time it provides socially approved outlets for the repressions which these same institutions impose upon him (18).

The Lepcha tale of two brothers (Tamsang 30), wherein the younger brother realizes the value of his brother and of family relations when his friend abandons him is an educative tale that teaches the value of family relations. "The Story of 'Lanyen-Laphu', Cicada" (Tamsang 58) involving an unsocial couple who live and die alone, warns against unsocial behavior. The creation myth which relates the story of the first siblings, *Phadongthing* and *Nazongnyu* who fall in love against the dictates of their god Rom warns against the incest. The first seven children born to the couple, who are thrown away by their parents, grow up to become powerful demons (Kotturan 20). The story of sweet potatoes (Kotturan 79) wherein a brother and sister die of starvation warns against ecological imbalance. A failure of crops due to a dry spell with no rain is responsible for the starvation and untimely death of the siblings who die looking for some sweet potatoes. "The Lepcha Earthen Tower", the story of the Lepcha people's aspiration to reach heaven by way of a ladder made of earthen pots which they smash on the verge of reaching their destination due to a gross miscommunication¹ warns against the dangers inherent in miscommunication. In the tale of the rivers Teesta and Rangeet, lovers who decide to race one another to the plains, the girl Teesta (*Rongnyu* in Lepcha) wins and Rangeet is livid with rage at the thought of being beaten by a woman and floods the river bank causing a great deluge. While this tale breaks patriarchal convention by allowing the girl to win it also reiterates gender roles. The great deluge that occurs when Rangeet floods the river banks could have been avoided had the male Rangeet won. The great deluge wreaks havoc and the Lepcha people take refuge in mount Tendong to escape death by drowning. Even today, the Lepchas worship mount Tendong expressing gratitude for having saved their ancestors during

the deluge and praying for protection in the future.² The tale of Teesta and Rangeet is significant in the context of the present day struggle of the Lepcha people against the hydel power projects which threatens to obliterate the community's intimate relationship with the ecology and the land which is sacred to them.

In the Beginning: The Lepcha Myth of Creation

The Lepcha myth of creation locates the genesis of the Lepcha tribe in the mighty *Kongchen Kongchlo* or Kunchenjunga. *Kongchen Kongchlo* means "the Big Stone" (Wangchuk and Zulca 30), the mountain that had witnessed the birth of the first Lepcha man and woman *Phadong Thing* and *Nazong Nyu*, created by the Lepcha God Rom or Itboo-Deboo. In fact they had been made from "the pure and virgin snows of Mt. Kanchanjunga's pinnacle" (Tamsang 3)¹. Another variation of the creation myth suggests that it was the mother creator, Itmoo-moo who created "everything upon earth and in the heavens" including "Kongchen-Konghlo" (Foning 88). The first Lepcha man and woman become "Children of the Snowy Peaks" (Doma 1). The genesis of the Lepchas therefore becomes intrinsically linked with the mighty Kanhenjunga which had been in existence since the beginning of time. This myth therefore functions as a validation of the indigenous status of the Lepchas who call themselves *Mutanchi Rong Kup Rum Kup* meaning the "Beloved Children of Mother Nature and God" (Tamsang i). This is how the myth of creation for the Lepchas becomes an attempt on their part to construct a sense of beginning and a sense of belonging to the land of their birth. Lepcha myths, legends and tales can therefore be perceived as sites where identities are shaped and consolidated and sites which become central to the process of identity-formation. The Lepcha myth of creation establishes a sacred association between the mighty *Kongchen Kongchlo* and the Lepcha people. The idea of purity linked to the mountain peaks from where life-giving rivers flow seems to endow great value and prestige to Lepcha tradition and culture.

The Great Deluge

The tale of the great deluge also links the Lepchas very intimately with the topography of their land. The two lovers, rivers Rangnyoo (Teesta) and Rangeet decide to go down to the plains when their affair becomes public. Teesta chooses the snake 'Paril Bu' as her guide while Rangeet chooses the bird 'Tut Fo' to guide him (Tamsang 20). Teesta reaches her destination way ahead of Rangeet as she is guided by the snake who slithers smoothly down to the plains. The bird, however, stops to make meals of worms and grains and has to be reminded by Rangeet that they were actually in a race and could not afford to make any detours. To this the bird defiantly replies: "Well, one must eat to fly." (Kotturan 34)

Unable to come to terms with the fact that Teesta reaches before him, Rangeet begins to rave and rant thus causing a flood, uprooting trees and houses. The Lepchas are said to have taken refuge in the mountain peak of Tendong for which reason they worship Tendong every year in the month of August. Tendong Hlo Rum Faat is an annual event when the Lepchas offer prayers to Tendong Lho Rum, the God of Tendong. By offering *Chi*¹, flowers, vegetables, and fruits they appease Him and ask him to protect and save mankind from the kind of natural disaster that had plagued their ancestors once. They also pray for the well being of the humans, animals, insects

and the plants- in effect, for the entire ecosystem. The discourse of the Great Deluge again establishes the Lepchas as sharing an intimate relationship with both the past and the significant events that marked that past. The coming together of the two rivers, the confluence of the Teesta and Rangeet that can be seen from a view point, known as "Lover's Meet", now a tourist spot a little above Teesta bazaar (a township on the banks of the Teesta river). The name "Lovers' Meet" is inspired by the Lepcha tale of these two rivers.

In the context of Tendong Hlo Rum Faat, Tamsang says that the Lepchas pray for the well being of all people, including the ones they had welcomed to their Mayel Lyang, the Tibetans with whom they had sworn brotherhood and friendship in the 13th century². Khye Bumsa "The Wandering Prince" (Doma 100) is said to have come to Sikkim seeking for a cure to his sterility. Thekong Tek, the Lepcha had blessed him with three sons. This incidence is said to mark the beginning of "an era of friendship between the Lepchas and the Bhotias" (Kotturan 87). The Blood Brotherhood Treaty also paved the way for the institution of the namgyal dynasty in 1642. De Beauvoir Stocks observes how the Lepchas were painfully aware of fact that they were ruled by a Tibetan king: "Though the lap-cha is very loyal, I have heard him say, " we Rong-folk have no ruler as the Maharaja in Gangtok is in reality a Tibetan" (Stocks 12).

According to legend, when the Blood Brotherhood Treaty had been signed by the Tibetans with the indigenous Lepchas of Sikkim, Khye Bumsa the Tibetan prince had promised the lepcha Chief Thekongtek never to take over Sikkim (Lama 15). A.R. Foning in his book *Lepcha My Vanishing Tribe* says this treaty came about after Khye Bumsa "contrived to get the Lepchas to acknowledge eternal friendship and brotherhood with the Tibetans" (122). Stocks also observes that the alliance is said to have been formed chiefly because Khye Bumsa had the "conversion of the Rong-folk to Buddhism in prospect" (11). But with the establishment of the Namgyal dynasty in 1642, the treaty was disregarded and the Lepchas, feeling betrayed had cursed the House of Namgyal: the first born son would never ascend the throne and he who sat on the throne would always suffer from some physical deformity (Lama 15). The last Chogyal of Sikkim who sat on the throne on the verge of Sikkim's merger with India, Thondup Namgyal had a stammer and his elder brother Paljor Namgyal had died while serving with the Royal Indian Air Force in 1941. The crown prince Tenzing Namgyal (the last king's eldest son) died in an accident in 1978. The *Bongthing* (Lepcha priest) of Kanchenjunga is said to have remarked that ever since the yak offering during the annual worship of Kanchenjunga had been stopped by the Chogyal in 1973, times had "stopped being good for Sikkim". Some Lepchas of Dzongu (the heart land of the Lepchas and a Lepcha reserve) were also convinced that the discontinuation of the offering led to the dissolution of the three hundred year old Namgyal Dynasty (Wangchuk and Zulca, 52). Rene De Nebesky-Wojkowitz in his "Tibetan Religious Dances: Texts and Translations of the Chams Yig"³ talks about a lepcha *Mun* (priestess) who would be possessed by the the spirit of Thekong Tek as she prayed at the royal chapel of Tsuklakhang on the eve of Pang Lhabsol. In her trance, Norkit (the *Mun*) would reproach the Chogyal for the fault of his ancestors because of which the Lepchas were marginalised. Hope Cook, Sikkim's last queen has also mulled over the predicament of the Lepchas in her autobiography *Time Change*:

During the dances [Pangtoed Chaam]- which despite their Buddhist construction, seem to be a harmonious compromise of Buddhist and pre-Buddhist animist tradition- an animist priest, in the true spirit of Himalayan religious tolerance, is busy performing cathartic rituals on the fringes of the dance area. Afterward he will come back to the little chapel in our house [the Palace] for a longish prayer service enjoining the royal family's prosperity, which he half chants, half sings in Lepcha, the aboriginal language of the country. I am curious to find out more of the cross influences between the two religions, as I think this would explain a good deal of what still remains mysterious about Sikkim to me, but have found it one area better left unexplored; there is a defensiveness, a denial of the connection between the two.

Perhaps it is this marginalization of the Lepchas that leads them to seek security in their tales and legends. The enduring legend of Gebu Achuk testifies to this need of the Lepcha people to reiterate the exploits of an iconic warrior.

The Legend of Gebu Achuk

Tales about the exploits of the legendary Gebu Achuk, who organized the Lepchas to fight against Bhutia oppression, suggest how the Lepchas had been marginalised:

The Lepchas who came under the British rule were happy because they were well treated and lived in peace. But those who remained in their ancestral home Denjong or Sikkim were troubled by the Bhotias, who had forgotten the friendship that existed between the two peoples from the time of Khye Bumsa and the holy Lama Lhatsun Chhembo. They began ill-treating the Lepchas and the oppression had gone to such an extent that the very word 'Bhotia' produced terror in the mind of the peaceful Lepchas. The mothers used to frighten their babies in order to make them obey just by saying "The Bhotias are coming" (Kotturan 106).

It is interesting how Kotturan presumes that the Lepchas were "happy" under the British rule and makes no bones about suggesting that the British were good for the Lepchas just as the Bhutias were bad for them. The legend of Gebu Achuk remains alive in the community's memory through tales.

The killing of Gebu Achok in treachery is also explicitly discussed by Kotturan's tale:

It was in a conflict with the Bhotias that Achuk was killed by treachery. Finding that the Lepchas under his leadership were being victorious in the battle the Bhotias asked for peace settlement. So meetings were started and a peace-treaty signed by them. The Lepchas celebrated the ending of the conflict with a lot of drinks and dance as was their habit. Soon they were drunk and went to sleep in their camp. Taking this chance, the Bhotias who were waiting nearby, fell on them (107).

Gebu Achuk is said to have been caught unawares by the unscrupulous Bhutias who went back on their word and killed him when he was defenseless. As if the betrayal was not enough, it is said that the Bhutias hacked his body into several pieces. It was a gory murder of the Lepcha legend. Foning talks about tales of the legendary king who is said to have been born of a woman past childbearing age, being endowed with supernatural strength (272). Gebu Achuk (Panu Gaeboo Achyok) is hailed as the last Lepcha King of Damsang, a region now known as Kalimpong. He is said to have been murdered by the Bhutanese at Daling Fort, Damsang, in 1781

(Tamsang iii). The legend of Gebu Achuk infuses in the Lepcha people a sense of pride and hope, like most legends are bound to.

Conclusion

The folktales, legends and myths of the Lepchas thus contain slices of their history and the markers of their identity. It is a community's folklore that lends it meaning but it is folklore that is getting relegated to the background in our times in which values and attitudes are changing at a break-neck speed. Living in a world that is constituted by globalisation and multiculturalism, it becomes important for one to go back to one's roots at some point of time, to be able to relocate one's self. This desire for roots strikes each one of us at different points in our lives. Our folk beliefs, tales, legends and myths are the avenues through which we can embark upon that wonderful journey back to our roots, back to where we belong.

Notes

- ¹ See, K.P. Tamsang, *The Unknown and Untold Realities about the Lepchas*, Kalimpong: Mani Printing Press, 1998 2nd edition, p.1.
- ² See, Alice S. Kandell, *Sikkim, The Hidden Kingdom*, New York: Double Day, 1971. p.36.
- ³ The hunger strike was launched in June 2007 by youth associated with the ACT (Affected Citizens of the Teesta) and CLOS (Concerned Lepchas of Sikkim), two organizations committed to protecting the homeland of the Lepchas.
- ⁴ "The artisans at the top of the tower when they required a hook, shouted to the Lepcha artisans working below, 'Kaok Vim Yang Tal!' meaning to send up a hook. The lepcha artisans working below heard it, 'Chek Ta' meaning knock it down and shouted back, 'Chek Ta!'. The artisans at the top repeated 'Kaok Vim Yang Tal' several times but the workers at the bottom, somehow heard it 'Chek Ta' only. Screaming with frustration, the artisans working at the top shouted back, 'Ak,ak' meaning yes, yes. The Earthen Tower was thus knocked down, destroyed and many lepchas were killed." See "The Lepcha Earthen Tower" in *Lepcha Folklore and Folk Songs*, Lyangsong Tamsang, 2008. p. 14.
- ⁵ Tendong Lho Rum Faat is celebrated each year on the 8th of August to commemorate mount Tendong's protection of the Lepcha people and to intercede for protection in the future.
- ⁶ See also Yishey Doma's *Legends of the Lepchas: Folk Tales from Sikkim* where it says the first man Fudongthing was made from "a ball of fresh snow" and the first woman Nazong Nyu is was made from Fadonthing's *ayong* or marrow.
- ⁷ Fermented millet or rice which makes for an alcoholic beverage Lepchas use specifically during festivals, marriages and generally as a refreshing beverage.
- ⁸ The Blood Brotherhood Treaty is said to have been signed between Thekong Tek the Lepcha Chief and Khye Bhumsa, a scion of the house of Minyak in the eastern province of Kham with Kanchenjunga as a witness. The ceremony was consecrated at Kabi Longstok, where stones (which stand even today) were erected at the spot to mark the event. Every year Pang Lhabsol is celebrated to commemorate this treaty.
- ⁹ Quoted in *Khangchendzonga: Sacred Summit*. Kathmandu/Gangtok: Pema Wangchuk, 2007. p. 56.

¹⁰ Ibid. pp. 56-57.

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