



Indigenous Lepcha Tribal Association: It's Role in Upholding the Cultural Identity of the Lepcha's in West Bengal

Dr. Shera Pandi
Molommu.

Head of Department, Department of History, Kurseong College,
Kurseong

ABSTRACT

It is well known that when a culture dies a race ceases to exist, following this trend it has often been lamented that the Lepcha's are a dying race. This has been amply documented by the title of eminent Lepcha scholar Arthur Foning's book "Lepchas: My Vanishing Tribe". With the help of this study we will try to take a glimpse at the commendable work being carried out by the Indigenous Lepcha Tribal Association in guiding and forging the Lepchas into a strong tribal organisation, upholding old cultural traditions and acting as a medium between the common Lepchas and the Government. We will see how this dying race has been given a new lease of life not by circumstance but by the tireless efforts of this organisation.

KEYWORDS : Lepcha, Indigenous, Tribal, Organisation

Introduction:

The Lepchas also known as Rongs are a small indigenous tribal community who habituated the ravines and valleys of the Kanchanjunga basin. Their history is mired in obscurity as hardly any written data has survived the period of time. The little that we do know is through religious scripts of Buddhism that they practised after the advent of the Tibetans, their old animist religious scripts too seems to have been adulterated by the zealous Tibetan monks. Language slowly ceased to be of use as soon as the British settled in Darjeeling and the tea garden labourer's lingua i.e. Nepali came into prominence. Old Lepchas customs and traditions were dealt a blow when most of the Lepchas converted to Christianity in the 19th and 20th century, slowly all rituals eroded from their way of life as modern festivities took over. The Lepcha Association Headquartered in Kalimpong was established in 1925 as a non political organization and was later renamed as The Indigenous Lepcha Tribal Association with effect from 8th March 2004. The Indigenous Lepcha Tribal Association (ILTA) is the one and only registered organisation of the Lepchas, its Registration Number is S/1L/20431 of 2003-2004. It has its registration and affiliation with the Akhil Bharatiya Adivasi Vikash Parishad, Government of India. Formed with the sole objective of preserving, conserving and protecting the culture, traditions and customs of the Lepchas, this small democratic body is the only medium between the ordinary Lepcha and the Government. The name of the association is 'MUTANCHI RONG SHEZOOM' in Lepcha or 'INDIGENOUS LEPCHA TRIBAL ASSOCIATION'. The Registered Office of the Indigenous Lepcha Tribal Association is located at the Lepcha Boys' Hostel-cum-Museum-cum-Culture Centre, Lower Bom Bustee, Kalimpong. The annual subscription to the Association by a Lepcha Household is Rs 120 only and a lifetime membership of the Association is Rs 1000. Organizationally the association is divided into three parts which function autonomously but are linked together; the Keyong Shezoom, the Thoom Shezoom and the Poom Shezoom. The Keyong Shezoom is the village level organisation, the Thoom Shezoom is the sub divisional level and the Poom Shezoom is the highest level organisation of the Lepchas. All three tiers are linked together functionally and organizationally. The Executive members of each body are elected democratically from all of the members of the community.

Aims and Objectives:

- To safeguard, protect, and secure the rights and privileges provided to the Lepchas as a minority community and very backward indigenous tribes in the Constitution of India.
- To unite all the Lepchas of the West Bengal, in order to make them conscious and aware of their basic rights and duties as the citizens of India.
- To fight against the continuing exploitation of the poor, illiterate, and Lepchas by vested interest.
- To promote, foster, and develop cultural activities, language and literature.
- To establish and maintain Lepcha schools, colleges, museums, research and study centres, and other institutions for the Lepcha children in the Darjeeling District, West Bengal.
- To seek and provide financial aids to those members who are be-

low the poverty line.

- To purchase, take on lease or accept as gift any land, building, structure, and sell, exchange, mortgage or lease the land or building; to construct, alter, and pull down buildings and rebuild for the purpose of the Association.
- To print, publish and circulate magazines, journals, periodicals, books, pamphlets to propagate Lepcha culture.
- To arbitrate or provide arbitrators for the settlement of disputes of any sorts between members and persons of the Lepcha community.
- To make representation, to communicate with the Local, State and Central Governments.

ILTA's Focus on Language:

One such area where the ILTA has focused its attention most is their language. One of the oldest and richest languages of the world, the Lepcha language is found to be in a much neglected state today in Darjeeling District of West Bengal. It is known that the Lepcha language was the 'Official Language' of the Darjeeling Hills until 1911. The Association had been fighting hard to introduce their language in the schools and colleges of Darjeeling. The representatives of the Association met the top leaders of the country and placed their demand for long. Finding no response from the governmental side the Association on its own initiative had started opening Lepcha Night Schools in different Lepcha dominated villages. A few years ago there were fifty two such schools catering the need of Lepcha language among the young Lepchas of Darjeeling. The Indigenous Lepcha Tribal Association, has established a 'Lepcha Language and Literary Award' since 1996. It carries a citation, and a cash prize of 16,000.00 (sixteen thousand) rupees. It is given annually to one of the best, deserving Lepcha Night Schools or a person who have contributed for the development of the Lepcha language and literature. The School Education Department, Government of West Bengal finally decided to introduce the Lepcha tribal language in the Government Primary and Secondary Education Schools in the Darjeeling Hills, West Bengal for the Lepcha children as an optional subject with effect from February 2011. It was officially announced during a meeting by the Hon'ble Minister-in-Charge, School Education Department, Government of West Bengal, Shri Partha De at Bikash Bhawan, Kolkata on Wednesday, 8 September 2010. The Indigenous Lepcha Tribal Association, Headquarters Kalimpong has been involved to give its expert opinion, suggestion and advice to the Committee to formulate its plan and policy on the introduction of Lepcha language in the Government Primary and Secondary Education schools in Darjeeling District. Even though 46 Para teachers were given appointment by the Government of West Bengal in April 2015 there has been a difference of opinion between the state government and the Gorkhaland Territorial Administration, the appointed Lepcha teachers have found themselves in the middle of a power struggle between the two and this matter is yet to be resolved and ILTA and Lepcha Development Board have been giving support to these Lepcha youths. ILTA with financial assistance from different non-governmental organisations has published Text Books up to twelfth standard. Among the financers the important ones are: M. Way Charitable Trust, England;

Foundation Fund for Indigenous people in Asia, etc. ILTA encourages and provides scope for the young writers to write poem, article, essay etc both in English and Lepcha language for their quarterly news magazine 'Aachuley' and annual magazine 'King Gaeboo Aachyok Birth Anniversary News Magazine'. These two magazines in a great way help in safeguarding and preserving Lepcha language..

Reviving Old Customs and Traditions:

The Indigenous Lepcha Tribal Association has started celebrating different rituals and cultural programmes in orthodox old Lepcha style. Some such important celebrations are: King Gaeboo Aachyok Birth Anniversary, Aathing Sando Tshering Tamsang Traditional Lepcha Archery Contest, Renyoo Azem Rebecca Namchyoo Songs and Dance competition etc. Death and Marriage rituals are the two very commonly used rituals where the Lepchas use booklet published by the ILTA. The Indigenous Lepcha Tribal Association has been at the forefront and the only Lepcha association that has been voluntarily trying to revive and assist the survival of all old customs and traditions. The Lepcha museum situated at Lower Bong Busty, Kalimpong houses many important artefacts of the Lepchas which do not find use nowadays, some musical instruments and kitchen utensils shows the dexterity and ingenuity of the early Lepchas

Upholding the Old Religion:

The religion of the Lepchas is a complex issue and can be broadly classified into three types, Animism, Buddhism and Christianity. Their religion has evolved with time, exposure to other races and with their own social mobility. Some call their old religion Bonism others Munism, what we do know for certain is that their religion was old fashioned and this gradually by the end of the seventeenth century with the advent of the Tibetan Buddhists slowly got mingled with foreign Buddhist teachings. Later on the Lepchas of Darjeeling were converted into Christianity by the British and their zealous missionaries. It has come to such an extent that the old Lepcha religion is hardly practised and the Mun and Bongthings are very difficult to be found nowadays. The Indigenous Lepcha Tribal Association is very well aware of this problem and the rapid erosion of their old religion and is organising training for Bongthing, i.e. Lepcha priest. Lepcha society is casteless and anybody well versed in Lepcha language and well aware of Lepcha culture can perform the duty of Bongthing. The Association is trying to increase the number of Bongthing through training so as to preserve some of this old religion among the Lepchas. Many of the old religious festivals are being followed under the aegis of the Indigenous Lepcha Tribal Association some of which are:

Tendong Lho Rum Fat: Celebrated on 26 August each year in Kalimpong. This is paying homage to Mount Tendong, it is an important religious occasion participated by all Lepchas irrespective of their social, political and economic differences. This celebration of the Lepchas has grown so much in significance that the Sikkim Government has declared 8th August as a State Public Holiday with affect from the year 1997 in Sikkim.

Chu Lho Rum Fat: Chu in Lepcha means the Himalayan peaks with pure white snow and Rum means the God. It is celebrated in the month of October before the onset of winter.

Muk Zik Ding Rum Fat: In Lepcha Muk means greenery and the Lepchas give much importance to this festival; this is an offering to Mother Nature and in normally held jointly at the village level. Almost related to the Sansari puja of the Hindus it is held in February.

ILTA's Role in Safeguarding Lepcha Land:

Lepchas were hunters and gatherers as all aborigines are and had no permanent settlement and their land was easy pickings for the thrifty settlers from the neighbouring countries where land was sparse and infertile. Slowly all the fertile and cultivable land was owned by the resourceful Neplaese and Bhutias. After 1835 the Government recognised the problem and came out with a land settlement law under which no land was allowed to be transferred to outsiders from Lepchas and Bhutias. But land transfers continued in a large scale, although laws have been made in favour of the Lepchas. The Lepchas were pushed further into the forest lands and when the Indian government introduced the Forest Conservation and Wildlife Protection Act it made the forests inaccessible to them, thus the Lepchas became landless in their own land. The Indigenous Lepcha Tribal Association

has been steadfast in its commitment to saving land belonging to the Lepchas. ILTA confirms that Lepcha land should be retained with the Lepchas only. ILTA discourages sell of land by any Lepcha but in case of unavoidable situation ILTA confirms that it is sold to the Lepchas. In some cases ILTA purchased land from the Lepchas so as to restrict it to be alienated by others. ILTA successfully restricts land alienation in the present days.

Demonstrations against Dams in Dzongu:

The Indigenous Lepcha Tribal Association organised a long rally on 14th April, 2008 from Kalimpong to Dzongu against the construction of mega hydro electric project in Dzongu to help the members of ACT (Affected Citizens of Teesta), a Lepcha organisation of Dongu against the hydro projects in the holy land of the Lepchas. The Lepchas believe that after death the soul of a Lepcha goes to rest in Dzongu. In protest the Association organised- protest rallies, hunger strikes, road blockage, meeting top leaders at the state and central level, dharna at Jantar Mantar, New Delhi. Even though the members of ILTA faced opposition from people in Sikkim favouring the building of the dam, hostility gave them more resolve and they were successful in scrapping four out of the six Hydro projects in Dzongu.

Formation of Lepcha Development Council:

The Lepchas had been pleading, placing memorandums and speaking to the state government about the plight of the Lepchas in West Bengal for a very long time, this movement gained in momentum when six Lepcha youths were denied employment in armed forces as they were not able to produce Sikkimese and Gorkha Certificate. Being the original inhabitants of Darjeeling area and citizens of India this was a very painful reminder of the loss of their identity; spurred on by this consciousness the Lepchas under the leadership of Indigenous Lepcha Tribal Association started the Lepcha Rights Movement. The Lepchas first held dharnas and forwarded petitions in all the subdivision of the Darjeeling hills but this activism was met with deaf ears. The Lepcha Rights Movement sensing the haplessness moved its activism to Siliguri but the protests of Lepchas are not taken seriously and the protest becomes null after sometime. The Lepchas do not get justice and after 24 September 2010 they return back empty handed. The Lepchas feel the need to voice their concerns seriously and the Lepchas sit on Indifinite dharna in Raja Subodh Mullick Square on 16th August 2011, just when the movement was getting stagnated after 21 days it was given a new lease of life when noted social activist and novelist Mahasweta Devi lent her voice to the Lepcha cause. A huge rally of the Lepchas with various Kolkata based organizations, institutions and NGOs took place in Kolkata where many leaders, intellectuals, thinkers, scholars in supports of the Lepchas very seriously speak on the Lepcha tribes and their genuine demands. The Honorable Chief Minister, Government of West Bengal, Ms Mamata Banerjee, announces that a "Lepcha Development council" will be formed for the Indigenous Lepcha tribe of West Bengal. With this announcement by the Chief Minister of West Bengal, the protest rallies for their genuine demands were put to rest in Kolkata and Kalimpong. *On 5th February 2013 The State Cabinet passes the Mayel Lyang Lepcha Development Board. This Board would be responsible for the socio-economic development of the Lepchas. With this the Indigenous Lepcha Tribal Association has fulfilled one of its biggest hurdles of gaining acceptance and funding to help uplift the Lepchas.*

Conclusion:

The Indigenous Lepcha Tribal Association has been and is the only custodian of the early Lepcha way of life. It has been through their steadfast dedication through the years that the Lepcha traditions have weathered the multitude of onslaught by foreign cultures. This zealous organization has had no help whatsoever from Governments concerned and their operations are funded by donations from charitable trusts and help from other NGO'S. It is commendable that with all the financial and many other constraints that they face, this association has been able to bring the Lepchas under its fold and uphold Lepcha values for such a period of time. It is only through active participation that this association can bring consciousness among the Lepchas and spread the message that can help preserve this old culture. Lepchas old, young, males, females, Buddhists and Christians need to come together under one banner as this association has the mind and knows where to streamline a united Lepcha voice.

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