Research Paper History

The Nomenclature of the Lepchas: A Case Study

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ABSTRACT

In this study I shall delve into this topic and try to find the truth regarding the different names of the Lepchas like Rong, Rongpa, Lapche and Lapcho and bring forth the different theories from other authors. The name 'Lepcha' with which they are associated now has a vague past and is a bone of contention between many scholars as to how it came into existence. The Lepchas call the basin of the Kanchenjunga their home, they were the first to set foot here and others came later on. Different races call them with different names and slowly with the passage of time this race came to be known as the Lepchas. This was definitely a name given to them by the Nepalese settlers which got anglicized in British rule. This paper shall discuss the same and try to shed some light on this nomenclature.

KEYWORDS Lepcha, Rongs, Nomenclature, Name

Introduction:

We are in the process of finding how the Lepchas got their name and what does this name imply. It is of great historical importance that we try to extract as much as we can these facts from the Lepcha vault. We can confidently say that this vault that we are going to open is not a Pandora's Box; the little that we know about them is through the early expeditions of the Europeans. The endeavours of Sir J. D. Hooker in the 1850's with the assistance of the then Superintendent of Darjeeling (Dorjiling) Dr. Campbell are the first written historical facts recording the Lepcha tribe. It was only after this that the world came to know about the existence of the Lepchas. General Lloyd, the first European to have ever visited the hill tract of Darjeeling, is quoted by H.V. Bayley he has written that the people of the region were no doubt 'semi-barbarous' (Bayley,1838). W.B. Jackson, an inspecting officer, while recommending that the hill people of Darjeeling should be brought within the pale of civilization, has compared them with the hill tribes of Bhagulpore to say that they were "a wretched unmanageable race, living the life of wild animals" (Jackson). Darjeeling primitive was then an inaccessible tract of forest, and the confinement of the tribes. The fascination of an unexplored land and newfound tribe then brought other historians, anthropologists and sociologists to this land, the valley of Mt. Kanchenjunga always known to the Lepchas as 'Mayel – Lyang' now Sikkim. A Grammer of the Rong Language as it Exists in the Darjeeling and Sikkim hills by G.B.Mainwaring in 1876, Among the Himalayas By Major L.A. Waddell in 1899, Sikkim and Bhutan by J. Claude White in 1909, The Lepchas of Sikkim by Geoffery Gorer in 1938 and The Gazetteer of Sikhim by H.H. Risley in 1928 gave us much needed insight into the world of the Lepchas before independence. It was only after independence that Indian historians were able to set foot into Sikkim and Darjeeling hills and have tried to unravel the mystery of the Lepchas. J. D. Hooker observed that "A more interesting and attractive companion than the Lepcha I never lived with: cheerful, kind, and patient with a master to whom he is attached; rude but not savage, ignorant and yet intelligent" (Hooker, 1849).

O'Malley has said, "The Lepchas are the aboriginal inhabitants of the country, who call themselves Rong, i.e., the squatters, and their country the land of caves" (O'Malley, 1907).

Different Theories about the Name:

The name Lepcha is also shrouded in mystery. The people call themselves as Lepchas but strangely enough they do not address themselves as Lepchas. To them they are Rong or Mutanchi Rong. Then what is the significance of the term 'Lepcha'? Mainwaring mentions that 'it is doubtless a denomination of the Gurkhas. The meaning of the word 'Rong' is 'Ravine folk' (Mainwaring, 1876). Das and Banerjee maintain that Rong means dwellers of rocky lands and the word Rong has been derived from the word Rinjong meaning rocky land full of respectable people (Das & Banerjee, 1962). Dalton and Hooker wrote that the Lepchas know themselves as Arrat this is totally misleading and untrue. In the Lepcha language Arrat is used to denote the Tibetans, error of this magnitude may have come forward due to the lack of understanding of the Lepcha language and the use of interpreters (Thakur, 1988).

Nepalese Theory:

We cannot exactly say what the name Lepcha really means and how it came into being but what we can do is throw some light into how it may have come into being. Early historians like Hooker and Waddell state that the Lepcha word came into being from the word 'lep' meaning 'vile' and 'Che' meaning 'speakers' in Nepali (Waddel, 1899). They hold the view that it was the Nepalese that gave the name Lepcha or Lapche. Many do contest this view by saying that this cannot be true because the meaning 'vile speaker' does not in any way personify the Lepchas, as stated in almost every book the Lepchas are the most humble and docile people, thus their speech is also pleasing to the ear. Lepcha scholars like K. P. Tamsang outright oppose this 'vile speaker' theory and states that "it is most derogatory and unfavourable to the Lepchas, for, the Lepchas are in truth not scurrilous speakers. Because their language is the most simple and pure one and not a single abusive, indecent, obscene, slang or vulgar word exists in the language as commonly found in all the other languages of the world" (Tamsang, 1983). Dr. Kumar Pradhan states that he did not find a Nepali word 'Lapche' meaning vile speaker in the Nepali vocabulary (Pradhan, 1991).

My Interpretation on the Topic:

I would like to state my own interpretation to this theory. I would like to state that the meaning 'vile speakers' according to Waddell may have been rubbed the other way by subsequent readers. It is not the Lepcha language that has to be blamed here, nor is it the speech, what I feel has transpired here is that the Lepchas who had been speaking the Indo-Burmese dialect for a considerable amount of time may have found speaking the Sanskrit based Nepali language testing. The phonetics of a foreign language must have been difficult to their tongue to pronounce, it must have been a sight them speaking Nepali and the Nepalese hearing their language been spoken in this way termed them 'Lapche' or vile speakers. Even today it is a sight to see some of the Tibetans who came at a later date utter Nepali in Darjeeling and Sikkim. The Nepali language has different roots and hence there are a lot

of ways that one can address the other, with love or contempt to a junior, with friendliness to a peer or a friend and with utmost respect to the elders and honourables.

Difficulty of new Language and Phonetics:
The Lepchas when they came in contact with this myriad barrage may have picked up only the basic and the words of contempt with which I think they were addressed thus they picked up these words and used it to all and sundry. Words in Nepal like 'Tah' meaning you with love or contempt to a junior, 'Timi' meaning you addressing a colleague or a friend, 'Tapai' meaning you addressing an elder, hence were too much for the Lepchas to handle as they were used to the same one word when addressing others and offered their respect with their actions rather than words. "All foreign languages sound funny or odd while hearing for the first time and trying to speak or utter the same is also a difficult task. That must have happened to a Nepalese also while hearing Lepchas speaking in their mother tongue or trying to speak Nepali. But the name has stuck. There are instances of people criticising fellow members or other persons when the latter speak with odd or wrong pronunciation. A typical Lepcha finds it difficult to speak in Nepali and it is natural for him to make mistakes and thereby becoming an object of criticism. There are no 'Bha', 'Gha', 'Jha', 'Dha' etc. alphabets in Lepcha, and so instead of 'Bhat'('rice' in Nepali) the Lepchas utter 'Bat'('talk' in Nepali) and instead of 'Ghans'('grass' in Nepali) they pronounce 'Gans' ('morsel' in Nepali) and so on. Similarly for 'Dhan' (riches or paddy in Nepali), Lepchas pronounce 'Dan' i.e, gift in Nepali. Further, there are some Lepcha words, the equivalent pronunciations of which are not found in Nepali and other languages. For example 'Jo' (rice) in Lepcha is pronounced somewhat like 'Zo' or 'So' for which there is no equivalent in Nepali. Similarly, Pazok (forest) in Lepcha has now become Peshok for the general majority of people. In such circumstances, there was bound to be criticism in the way a person spoke a foreign tongue" (Tamlong, 2008). This lends credence to them being labelled as 'Lapche' or vile speakers which consequently with the English and their Anglo-Saxon trained tongue phonetically became Lepcha. We believe that the Nepali language traces its roots to Sanskrit thus the term 'Lapche' may its original meaning there. Chemjong states that "In Nepal's context, the word originates in 'lyapche', which is one's inked thumb chops placed on deeds and documents as signature. This fingerprinting was required of Rong signatories in Ilam who were illiterate then, especially in Gorkhali, the official language of the Shah Kings who amalgamated Nepal as their kingdom. Hence the indigenous Ilamus were and are known as Lapche or Lapcha in Nepal, even in the Nepali-language media" (Chemjong, 1966).

Other Views:
The other notion held as to the christening of the name Lepcha according to A.K.Das "Lapche is a fish found in a river in Nepal which has peculiar behaviour, it has been said to be submissive and timid like the Lepcha and is known by the name Lapcha. This name is not in contempt but to give credit to its submissive behaviour. However the name Lapcha has been corrupted to Lepcha in English pronunciation (Das & Banerjee, 1962). There is opposition to this theory too Rev. Subba states that he has heard a lot of names of fishes found in Nepal but till now he has not come across a fish named Lapcha. He further goes on to state that the dictionary published by the Royal National Language Society of Nepal does not contain the word Lapcha so no credence can be given to this interpretation (Subba, 2009). Another authority enquires whether it may refer to the Hindi 'Lap – thi' the name of a kind of skate fish, *i.e.,* of a flat fish, a term which may have been applied by the Nepalese to the Lepchas on account of the flatness of their face. None of these derivations are convincing, but none are offered by the people themselves (Risley, 1894)

Lepcha Scholars Views:
Lepcha scholars state that 'Lapchoo' word from the lepcha vocabulary was corrupted into the word Lepcha. In the earlier days people from all over the surrounding areas used to gather in and around Sikkim to ply their trade with Tibet and get the precious Tibetan salt, it was the only source of salt in the region and Nepal, the journey they had to undertake was perilous and fraught with danger, wild animals and dacoits used to frequent the paths that led up to Nathula pass then known as 'matho lho' meaning the high neck pass. The people used to gather in great numbers because numbers guaranteed safety, the place where they used to gather was known in as 'Lapchoo', hence these people were called 'Lapche' corrupting the word 'Lapcho' which with the advent of the English became Lepcha (Taknilmoo, 1968).

Passang Lepchas View:
According to the Lepcha writer Pasang Tshering Lepcha the word Lepcha came from the word 'Lapchoo', he goes on to state that the meaning of this word is the meeting of two roads, and for the sense of direction people used to place stones to denote the right way, the other meaning he has stated for this word is a destined place for waiting for others, it was easier to fix a place like the meeting of the two roads for such matters, thus the name Lapchoo was given to such places, when some Nepalese people came across these tribesmen at one such meeting place and asked them who and what their tribe were, the aborigines not understanding the Neplase language thought they were asking for the name of that place and said Lapcho and thus the nomenclature of the tribe (Subba, 2009).

Arthur Fonings View:
According to Arthur Foning the Rongfolk when crossing ridges, a forested valley, huge boulders or other such natural obstacles offered appeasement to the resident mysterious supernatural spirits for their safe passage, often a few stones were put together to form a rough altar for these offerings, these altars were known as 'Lapcho'. He states "We call these altars 'Lapcho' hence seeing the autochthons so much concerned about these Lapchos, they started calling us Lapcho people, and ultimately our tribe became the 'Lapcha' tribe for them. Then when the British and the plains folk met us, we were known as Lepcha." (Foning, 1987). This interpretation has been taken as the right ones by all the Lepcha Associations (Lepcha, 2007).

Why do they call themselves "Rongs":
Whatever the Lepchas may be called but they do pride themselves in calling oneself 'Rongkup' , Rong here is said to come from the lepcha word 'Arong' meaning the highest point, the forehead, and here the highest mountain Kanchenjunga. 'Kup' in Lepcha means the sons and daughters, thus the word 'Rongkup' gives the meaning sons and daughters who have descended from the Mt. Kanchenjunga. The other name they call themselves is 'Rumkup', Rum in Lepcha means God, the eventual meaning comes to sons and daughters of God. In all of Lepcha history we find that the mountain Kanchenjunga plays a very significant role, it is said that the Lepcha never move far away from their mountain, the abode of their gods and their creation. R.P. Lama has written, "The Lepchas calls themselves 'Mutanchi Rong' meaning "the beloved children of God" (Lama, 2002). Their original ancestors, 'Foodongthing and Nazong nu', the first man and woman created by God from the eternal purity and holy snows of the Himalayas, Thus Fudongthing and Nazongnu means the 'most powerful' and the 'ever fortunate' (Maharaja Namgyal, 1908). As such even to this day, Lepchas worship the Himalayas as their guardian deity. According to Iman Singh Chemjong a renowned personality in the history of the Kirat People the Lepchas he believes are the decendants of 'Mung Moorong' who along with his followers arrived to Sikkim via Assam and Burma from south China. He says that the present race of Lepchas is a hybrid of three different races. The first group of people to come to Sikkim was from the west or from Elam of southern Persia; they settled in eastern Nepal and were called Ellamu of Elamite family. They were also called Arramu or the residents from Aram lands, the modern name of this place being Syria. The second group that came from the north were known

as the Khamba Lepchas, these people came from the Kham province of Tibet. The third group was the Rong Lepchas who had come from Nam Maw and Tai Tombe Nam Gam Tembe of Mon Wan locality of the Unan province of southern China, via north Burma with their leader Mung Moorong. These three groups intermingled freely in east Nepal and later began to call themselves Rong or Mutanchi Rong (Chemjong, 1966). K P Tamsang the eminent Lepcha scholar states in his book that this is an absolutely false claim and incorrect (Tamsang, 1983).

Tibetan Name:

In Tibetan the people of Sikkim are often called "Rong pa" or the dwellers of the steep country and "Mon pa" or the dwellers of the lower country, both these term the Lepchas as dwellers of the ravines and clefts. According to eminent Lepcha scholar K P Tamsang this is very contemptuous as it refers to the Lepchas as short tailed monkeys that dwell in ravines and clefts metaphorically referring to the Lepchas as a very inferior race on whom they had gained victory. He goes on to say that Lepchas should not be called Rongpa as this is absolutely incorrect and therefore unjust, unfair and indignant as most of it is based on hearsay, gossip and external information of non Lepcha guides (Tamsang, 1983). He goes on to state that "the Lepchas proudly call themselves as Rongkup, that is, the son of the snowy peak and Rumkup, that is the son of God, in short Rong" (Tamsang, 1983).

Conclusion:

In conclusion we come to know that the nomenclature of the Lepchas is not as clear as one thought, many theories have cropped up and researchers are finding many more and the deeper one goes the more blurred it becomes. It is almost certain that the Nepalese, British and the plainsmen had a hand in naming this tribe as the Tibetan name is not remotely close to the name 'Lepcha' that has stayed with them. What we do find is that analysis given by Lepchas like Pasang Tshering Lepcha, K. P. Tamsang and Aurthur Foning seem much more convincing as they are much closer to their language and its phonetics.

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