

Impact of Christian Missionaries on Lepcha Culture

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Abstract

Lepchas are the autochthon race of the district of Sikkim and Darjeeling. The Christian missionaries on their expeditions for spreading Christianity first made their contact with the Lepchas; and the Lepchas in particular found the new religion accessible. This article is an attempt to understand the impact of the missionaries on Lepcha culture. It tries to examine whether the use of non-Lepcha language in preaching Gospel, government language policy to promote non-Lepcha language in official work, and rising non-Lepchas demography were some of the compelling forces that alienated Lepchas from their original culture. The modern education initiated by the Christian missionaries transformed Lepchas to adapt the idea of self-sustainability and made them resilient when they were demographically outnumbered. Just like every process has its pros and cons, Christianization of Lepchas made them better in many sense but it also took away some of their uniqueness. Government policy on socio-economic development has contributed greatly on cultural alienation of Lepchas. Due to the demographic change in the Lepcha land they were forced to adopt a new culture as a survival strategy.

Keywords: Lepchas, Alienation, Similarities, Christianization, Scripture.

Lepchas are the autochthon race of the district of Sikkim and Darjeeling. The Christian missionaries on their expedition to spread Christianity in these regions first made contact with the Lepchas. The Lepchas in particular found themselves accessible to the new religion. In my quest, to find out the details of this aspect of study, three questions arose in my mind. Firstly, what were the reasons that made the Lepchas totally at home with a new religion? Secondly, what were the effects of embracing Christianity on the Lepcha culture; and thirdly, is Christianity responsible for the cultural alienation of the Lepchas?

A simplified answer to the first question is that the Lepchas found similarities between Christianity and their own indigenous beliefs; therefore, they embraced Christianity readily.

The following are some of the similarities that deserve attention:

Creation and The Tower of Babel

In Genesis Chapter 1, God created the first man, Adam and the first woman, Eve. In the Lepcha creation history, we find that *Aitbu Deburroom* (the God of Creation) created the first man, *Fudongthing* and first woman, *Nazyong-Nue* out of pure snow of Mt. *Kingchumzonboo-Chyue* (Mt. Kanchenjunga).¹ Hence, *Fudongthing* and *Nazyong-Nue* can both be loosely compared to Adam and Eve as mentioned in the Bible. Genesis, chapter 11 describes how the people made up their minds to ascend to the heavens by building a tower. But due to the confusion owing to different languages, a punishment for their pride and ambition, their dreams of ascending the

¹ *Myths and Legends*, American India Foundation, <http://aif.org/2013/01/myths-and-legends/>, (Accessed on 01.05.2017).

heavens were shattered. In the Lepcha myth too, we find that, they had tried to ascend into the heavens by piling up earthen pots in *Taloom-e-Partam* (present day Daramdin in Sikkim State). The person on top of the tower wanted to put some kind of an anchor on the heavens in order to fix a permanent hold and for that he asked his friends below for a hook. He shouted to the Lepcha artisans working below, “*Kaok Vim Yang Tal!*” meaning ‘send up a hook’. The artisans working below heard it as “*Chyek Ta*” meaning ‘knock it down’.² The friends on the ground below could not hear him clearly owing to the great distance between them. After failing to communicate the correct message from the top the person got irritated and said “yes” to the people below following which they actually struck the tower down. So their dream of reaching heaven was shattered. Interestingly, in both cases, that is tower of Babel and the tower of earthen pots, language was the main reason of the failure of their efforts.

Story of the Great Flood

In Genesis Chapters 6, 7 and 8 one finds that Noah was saved from the flood for his righteousness. There is also a similar story relating to a flood among the Lepchas. The destruction caused by the flood was unbearable to the Lepchas. So, the Lepchas invoked the name of *Itbo-debo-rum* to protect them from the havoc of the flood. They climbed up on a hilltop called *Tungrong* (ladder), present day Tendong hill situated near Namchi, in South Sikkim. God came down to the Lepchas in the form of a bird *Ko-ohm-fo*, the partridge. The partridge sprinkled *chi* (country beer) towards heaven as an offering and as a result the rains stopped. Thus, the Lepchas were saved from their version of the deluge.

The Golden ladder and the Ascension

In Genesis, Chapter 28:10-22, one finds Jacob seeing a golden ladder in a dream. Similarly, in the Lepcha story, there is a mention of a golden ladder. The first Lepcha lady, *Nazyon-nue*, went to meet *Fudongthing* from *Nahonathar* Lake who was living in *Narim* Mountain. She went on this journey by means of a golden ladder. Jesus Christ in the New Testament (Acts 1:6-11): ascended into heaven amidst his disciples. Similarly, in the Lepcha story of ‘*Tushi-thing*’ send to save the Lepchas from inundation in the flood there is a mention of the saviour figure ‘*Tushi-thing*’ ascending into heaven.

Ten Commandments and the Leader

Exodus 20: 1-20 describes how Moses was given the Ten Commandments by Yahweh. Similarly, according to ‘*Namyuk Namthar*’ (book of records and events) the Almighty gives his people (Lepchas) a book of Precepts or directions. The Lepchas heard a voice from heaven saying “Read and meditate on what is written in this book. I have given this book from heaven for your wellbeing. Live your lives as it is written here.”³ The Israelites were liberated from the clutches of the Pharaoh of Egypt through the able leadership of Moses. According to the Lepcha

² Azuk Tamsangmoo Lepcha, Creation Myth of the Lepchas, *Aachuley: A Bilingual Journal Illustrating the Lepcha Way of life*, Sunday, October 31, 2010, <http://aachuley.blogspot.in/2010/10/creation-myth-lepcha.html>, (Accessed on 01.05.2017).

³ D. T. Tamlong, Mayel Lyang & The Lepchas (About Sikkim And Darjeeling), *Aachuley: A Bilingual Journal Illustrating the Lepcha Way of life*, Thursday, July 1, 2010, <http://aachuley.blogspot.in/2010/07/mayel-lyang-lepchas-about-sikkim-and.html> (Accessed on 01.05.2017).

belief, *Tamsangthing* was sent by God as the savior to liberate the Lepchas from the evil king *Laso-Mung-Panu*.

Tamsangthing killed *Laso-Mung-Panu* in *Sukvojor Partam* (land of the dead) and the Lepchas celebrated the occasion of this liberation in *Tarkyol-tam-e-tam* (The liberated place).⁴

Hence, one can infer easily why the Lepchas became Christians so easily. The Missionaries found these people gentle, mild and easy to approach. In 1814, William Start of the Baptist denomination first came to Tukvar in Darjeeling and worked among the Lepchas. He was a German Baptist Missionary. They are called Moravian Missionaries. Another Protestant Missionary Macfarlane came to Kalimpong in 1875 and by 1887, about 600 Lepchas converted to Christianity.

There is also a mention of the Scandinavian alliance mission that worked in Darjeeling at Ghoom but was not that influential. The Protestants came to Darjeeling much earlier than the Catholics. The Loreto sisters came to Darjeeling in 1846 and in 1882; and the French missionaries came to Pedong, Kalimpong in the expedition of preaching the Gospel in Tibet. Late Martin Rey CR - in a souvenir of the centenary of the Pedong Parish 1882-1983 writes, “On the 25th December 1884, the three missionaries blessed the first stone of the new church dedicated to the sacred heart of Jesus. Only two Christians were ready for baptism, a Tshering Ongden (58) and his daughter Runchi.”⁵ At present almost 50 percent of Lepchas are Christians of different denominations.

Impact on Culture

As mentioned above, the Lepchas very comfortably adopted the Christian philosophy of the creation owing to its similarities with their own story. The role of the Missionaries in the spread of Christianity among the Lepchas was undoubtedly great. This brought about a new beginning, a new lifestyle and socio-cultural transition for the Lepchas.

Language

For the Evangelical purposes the missionaries translated the book of Genesis and a part of Exodus, along with the Gospels of St. Mark and St. John. Macfarlane went to Kalimpong from Haridas Hatta, Darjeeling in 1875. He went there to find a suitable atmosphere for his Evangelical work. “He found the local population consisting almost entirely of the plain, simple and unsophisticated Lepchas.”⁶ In this regard Dick B. Dewan in his book *Education today: A Darjeeling Hill Region-Perspective* remarks, “Although the Lepcha language was very much in use at the time of the opening of this hill station, Nepali became the lingua-franca later on.”⁷

⁴ Azuk Tamsangmoo Lepcha, Creation Myth of the Lepchas, *Aachuley: A Bilingual Journal Illustrating the Lepcha Way of life*, Sunday, October 31, 2010, <http://aachuley.blogspot.in/2010/10/creation-myth-lepcha.html>, (Accessed on 01.05.2017).

⁵ M C.R. Rey, A Souvenir of Centenary, Pedong Parish, 1880 to 1983, page 7, Kalimpong, Mani Printing Works, 1983, p. 7.

⁶ A. R. Foning, *Lepcha my Vanishing Tribe*, Calcutta, 2003, p. 159.

⁷ Dick B. Dewan, *Education today: A Darjeeling Hill Region - Perspective*, Kalimpong, Sharda Enterprise, 2009, p. 74.

In order to entice the Lepchas into Christianity, Macfarlane revived their language, besides printing Christian religious books. In 1903 a Catechism book was printed and in 1911 a Hymn book was published. Prayers were recited in the Lepcha language. The missionary preachers preached their sermons in the Lepcha language too. Hence, the Lepchas were completely taken upon by the new religion because it was made accessible to them. As A. R. Foning says, "In short the word Lepcha became synonymous with the word Christian."⁸ The Baptist Mission, Calcutta, brought out a font for Lepcha and printed a number of Lepcha books from this press. The credit goes to C. J. Page of the Baptist Mission, who worked tirelessly for the purpose of printing Lepcha books.

Missionaries undoubtedly in the first half of their evangelization project made use of the Lepcha language extensively. In course of time, there was a paradigm shift from Lepcha language to Hindi for the purpose of preaching Gospel. After the First World War, i.e. 1914 converts were mostly non-Lepchas. They had to be preached either in Hindi or Nepali. On top of this, modernization of Darjeeling started taking shape. Dr. Campbell, who had already served as a Resident in Nepal, was given the responsibility to fulfill this purpose. He ignored Lepcha and started communicating with the people in Hindi or Nepali as many Nepalese were brought as workers for the tea gardens and for making the new roads. It was also because of the Government policies that missionaries had to change the medium of Evangelization from Lepcha to other languages. As A. R. Foning says "Most likely, the language followed and encouraged by them was in keeping with language policy adopted by the Government. The main reason was that because of the changes in circumstances and times, the Nepali language had started receiving more attention in their evangelical and other mission work."⁹ Ganga Prasad Pradhan worked hard for the spread of Nepali language. Prayer books, hymn books, and parts of Bible were translated into Nepali. The missionaries were circumstantially forced to accept Nepali as the medium for preaching the Gospel. One of the important factors of demographic transformation in Darjeeling was the role of the Government under the mentorship of Campbell, who was entrusted with the project of establishing a sanatorium for the British officials in Darjeeling.¹⁰ This was the determinant factor to replace Lepcha language in the evangelical mission of these foreign missionaries. As the whole worship was done in Nepali, the original language spoken became obsolete. Language is the foundation of culture. Thus, the result was an adverse effect on the Lepcha culture. From this point of view the autochthons of Darjeeling, the Lepchas were alienated from their culture. Though in 60's and 70's some catholic missionary priests like late Benjamin Stolke and Jean Brahier C.R. tried to revive Lepcha language, it was probably too late. It is to be noted here that Benjamin Stolke managed to translate some parts of Old Testament into Lepcha language. Gone were the days when the carol singing in the Kalimpong area was done in Lepcha language. Owing to the demographic change in the region, the Lepcha language turned out to be obsolete. However, some missionaries tried to revive it amidst all odds, and managed to do something for the survival of the language in the inception of their missionary works.

⁸ Foning, p. 160.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 164.

¹⁰ History: Pre-Independence, <http://darjeeling.gov.in/darj-hist.html>, (Accessed on 01.05.2017).

Education

If the Lepchas have managed to survive to this competitive age, the credit goes to the efforts of missionaries who took initiative in educating them. The missionaries' role in educating the Lepchas is commendable. Due to their efforts, the Lepchas are now leading the different churches in the region. For the advancement of Lepcha on Christian faith, missionaries opened many schools where most of the teachers were also Lepchas. Due to social and political changes in this area non-Lepchas outnumbered them in education. Many Lepchas dropped-out due to the difficulty of adopting a foreign language. However, it was the education started by the missionaries that brought about a radical transformation in the life style of the Lepchas.

Economic Development

It was the missionaries who saved Lepchas from the bonded labour system. The Lepchas used to work under different communities for the repayment of dues, incurred during sicknesses or death, and marriage. As Indira Awasthi remarks in her book *Between Sikkim and Bhutan: The Lepchas and Bhutias of Pedong*, Christianity hit the Lepchas at the end of 19th Century and a surprisingly large number had been converted. The reason may be found in the disadvantageous economic and social position in which the Lepchas found themselves after the advent of the Bhutias and Nepalis. The Lepcha society and religion was not organized enough and the Buddo-Mun religion not so firmly believed in to resist the impact of the beneficent material advantages offered Christian fold.¹¹

She goes on to say, "Christianity has brought in the benefit of reducing the expenses on marriages, on death and on expensive Lama Rites in case of illness and misfortunes."¹²

Lepchas are fond of drinking Chyee (millet beer). They are shy by temperament and it is difficult to make friends with them at first. But once the barriers are down, the Lepchas are very friendly and hospitable and generous to a fault. The excessive habit of drinking had made Lepchas physically and psychologically weak and economically deeply in debt. The missionaries played a huge role in bringing them out of this vicious circle of addiction and debt through their spiritual guidance and counselling.

Among the earliest Lepchas there was some polyandry with two brothers sharing a wife. Now-a-days monogamy is prevalent. Widows are freely remarried. The Lepchas are carefree people. They have mortgaged their lands for many years on account of borrowing and sometimes even small amounts of money.

Christian missionaries working among the Lepchas since 1890 have tried to educate them, give them medical facilities and teach them about health and hygiene, initiated them into better farming methods, provided leadership to fight land disputes and to get back mortgaged land, in turn having generally improved the life style of the Lepchas. The roles of missionaries for the economic uplift of Lepchas are no doubt appreciated. The educated Lepchas are now serving in the church and even as civil servants in government departments.

¹¹ Indira Awasthi, *Between Sikkim and Bhutan: The Lepchas and Bhutias of Pedong*, Delhi, 2004, p. 32.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 32.

Conclusion

The effect of Christianity has been mixed. Missionaries certainly imparted education, awareness and health facilities to the Lepchas; they also had the effect of obliterating the uniqueness of the Lepchas. By embracing Christianity, the Lepchas began to live a Christian life and gave up their original ethnic way of living, its customs and culture. The inimitability of Lepchas has transformed over the period as an effect of their new faith. The Lepcha culture woven around their old faith has now been replaced by Christianity. Their language is replaced with other languages due to the dynamics of demography and governance. They are fast losing their cultural identity and leaning more towards Nepali social customs. In one way missionaries were the saviors of the Lepcha race and in another way, they fueled the transformation of Lepcha culture. In the first phase of missionary effort to preach the Gospel among the Lepchas it was in their native language. Later, in course of time, owing to socio-politico changes, they adopted non-Lepcha languages for their purpose of evangelization. This compounded with the demographic and governance factors led to the alienation of the Lepchas from their own culture.