

## Ethnic Awareness Among the Lepchas of Darjeeling Hills

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### Abstract

The Lepchas are considered to be the most ancient of all communities, the original inhabitants of Darjeeling and Sikkim, having a rich and varied culture and tradition. They believe that they are the descendants of Fudong Thing (the first male) and Nuzong Nyu (the first female) and strongly believe that they are the very primeval people of the world and whose origin is as old as the Himalayas. Scholars have described the Lepchas as a 'dying race' or a 'vanishing tribe'. The rate of growth of population among the Lepchas is less than one percent. Modernisation has brought about drastic changes in the socio-religious life of the Lepchas. The Lepcha elites are trying to bring about a revival of their community, utilizing culture as their main tool. Though the Lepchas have remained socially, politically and economically backward, today they are becoming conscious of their identity and asserting their rightful place in the society. Under the leadership of the Indigenous Lepcha Tribal Association (ILTA), the Lepchas are eager to carve their separate identity, are called upon to preserve, conserve and maintain their cultural heritage and language, and to protect their land around which their culture and identity are linked and interwoven.

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**Keywords:** Lepcha, Ethnic identity, Indigenous people, Indigenous Lepcha Tribal Association (ILTA)

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### Introduction

It was a welcome relief to the Lepchas, when recently it was declared that they could wear their own traditional attire during the month long cultural festival in the Darjeeling hills instead of the Nepali traditional dress, the *dawra suruwal* and the *Dhaka sari*. No doubt, even though the Lepchas are often referred to as the *pitale bhara*, a connotation to their compatible and easy going nature, the Lepchas are considered to be the most ancient of all communities, having a rich and varied culture and tradition: "they are probably the only indigenous race east of Israel, who claim themselves to be the children of God."<sup>1</sup>

Historians like Gorer, E. C. Dozey, G.B. Mainwaring, J. C. White, Christopher Haimendorf and others point out that the Lepchas are the original inhabitants of Darjeeling and Sikkim, which the Lepchas fondly call the *Mayel Lyang* or the 'Abode of

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1 Lyangsong Tamsang Lepcha, *Aachuley: A Quarterly Lepcha Bilingual News Magazine*, Kalimpong, Indigenous Lepcha Tribal Association, 2002, p. 20.

the Gods'. There are different versions regarding the term 'Lepcha'. One version says that it was the Nepalese who called them 'Lapches', meaning vile speakers. Another version says that 'Lapche' was a type of fish found in Nepal, having the characteristics of being submissive like the Lepchas. But the Lepchas themselves prefer to be called *Rongs* or *Mutanchi Rongkup* meaning 'Beloved Sons of the Mother of Creation'. Yet some believe that the word Lepcha comes from the word Lep meaning a well of creation in *Mayel Kyong*. Legends have it that it is the door through which the first among the Lepchas, *FudongThing* (the first male) and *NuzongNyu* (the first female) were made to step down from paradise into this world.

Another important issue is their story of migration. Gorer says that there is no tradition of migration among the Lepchas. Ram Rahul also believes that the original home of the Lepchas is Sikkim itself because the hills, mountains and streams of the region have Lepcha names. J. C. White believes that the Lepchas might have come from the east of the mountains of Assam and Upper Burma.<sup>2</sup> But the Lepchas themselves believe that their original home was in the neighbourhood of the great mountain, *King-tzum-song-bu*. 'King' meaning highest part of the forehead, song-bu means highest, therefore meaning the highest over our head. They believe that they are the descendants of *FudongThing* and *NuzongNyu* and strongly believe that they originated here itself and 'they are the indigenous people of Darjeeling and Sikkim, the very primeval people of the world and whose origin is as old as the Himalayas.'<sup>3</sup>

### **Understanding the Growth of Lepchas through Census**

The Lepchas were vanquished by the Tibetans in the 17th century, by the Bhutanese in 1700, by the Gorkhas in 1780 and by the British in 1835 and 1865. When Darjeeling came under the British for the first time in 1835, only about hundred souls were there, perhaps a sprinkling of Lepchas, Limbus, Magars and Gurungs. But by 1901, it was recorded that 'the dominant race in Darjeeling was the Nepalese with a strength of 1, 34,000, accounting for more than half of the population'.<sup>4</sup> So by 1901, according to records, 61 percent of the population was of Nepali origin (including Brahmins, Chettris, Rais or Jimdars, Newars and others), 27 percent belonged to the Indian plains (including Rajbangsi's, Oraons, Mundas, Santhals, Meches and others), Lepchas, Bhutias (including Sikkimese, Tibetan, Sherpas, Bhutanese Bhutias or Dukpas, Kagatey or Yolmo Bhutias) were of 3 percent, Tibetans 1 percent, and the remaining 4 percent belonged to the upper Hindu Castes, Muslims and non tribal Christians from the plains and Europe.

By 1931, 52 percent of the population was of Nepali origin, 21 percent were of the Scheduled Castes and Tribes from the Indian plains, Lepchas and Sikkimese Tibetans

2 J. C. White, *Sikkim and Bhutan: 21 Years on the North East Frontier (1887-1908)*, London, 1909, Longmans, Green, p.7.

3 K. P. Tamsang, *The Unknown and Untold Reality about the Lepchas*, Hongkong, Luen sun Offset Printing, 1983, p. 10.

4 L S S O'Malley, *Bengal District Gazetteers – Darjeeling*, New Delhi, Logos Press, 1907, p. 41.

formed 4 percent, Bhutanese 1 percent, Tibetans 1 percent, and the rest were the upper caste Hindus, Muslims and non tribal Christians. The year 1941 further showed the increase in the Nepali population numbering 2, 54,608 or 67.6 percent.<sup>5</sup> The people of Nepali origin, according to the Census of India numbered around 2, 81,952 in 1951, 5, 24,797 in 1961 and 6, 16,800 in 1971. But the Lepchas in West Bengal numbered 13,430 in 1951, 14,910 in 1961, 14,568 in 1971 and 23,493 in 1981.<sup>6</sup> Further by 1991, out of the total tribal population of West Bengal (3,808,760), and Darjeeling District (1,79,153), the Lepcha population in Darjeeling district numbered 26,920 and in West Bengal 27,888. Therefore, out of the total tribal population of West Bengal only 0.73 percent belongs to the Lepcha community and in the Darjeeling district it numbers only 15.02 percent. The total population in Darjeeling district in 2001 numbered 1,605,900 and it consists of a majority of Nepalis. In the survey report of tribal dominated mouzas under the Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council based on 2001 Census, the total Scheduled Tribe population (including Lepchas and Bhutias) numbered only 85,038 out of a total population of 790,591, i.e. only 10.88 percent according to the District Welfare Office, Backward Classes Welfare Department D.G.H.C., Darjeeling.

No doubt, as it is but a human trait, the numbers of the Lepchas have been increasing over the years. But the growth rate is comparatively very slow. Bagchi noted that between 1931 and 1961, the annual growth of the Lepchas was only 0.77 percent compared to 3.6 percent among the Bhutias and 4.0 percent among the Nepalis. Various factors may be attributed to this including low sex ratio, low fertility and high mortality among the Lepchas. The practice of levirate called *Aangaop* in Lepcha, i.e. widow remarrying the younger brother of her deceased husband, women marrying beyond their marriageable age, the inter-marriage of Lepcha women with men of other communities may also be added to the slow growth rate amongst the Lepchas. In the 1930s itself Gorer had written that the "Lepchas are a dying race."<sup>7</sup> Morris also wrote that their "number is decreasing year by year."<sup>8</sup> Foning, a noted Lepcha scholar, has lamented the decrease in the number of Lepchas and has called them a 'vanishing tribe'.

### **Re-tribalisation and the Indigenous Lepcha Tribal Association (ILTA)**

The Lepchas and the Bhutias, who have been recognised as the tribals of the region, have been living with the Nepalis and together with the plainsmen (consisting of Marwaris, Bengalis and Biharis and others). The three hill groups, Nepalis, Bhutias and Lepchas had all come together to form the Hillmen's Association in the second decade of the 20th century itself. They have also been fondly termed as the 'Nebula', meaning the Nepalis, Bhutias and the Lepchas. Modernisation and urbanisation has helped in the

5 Cfr. A. K. Banerjee & Others, *West Bengal District Gazetteer*, Darjeeling, 1980.

6 Cfr. Das & Banerjee, *Census 1971, Series 22, West Bengal District Handbook*, Darjeeling, 1981.

7 G. Gorer, *Himalayan Village: An Account of the Lepchas of Sikkim*, London, Thomas Nelson & Sons, 1938, p. 37.

8 G. Morris, *Living with Lepchas*, London, William Heinemann, 1938.

spread of education amongst the Lepchas, brought slight increase in their literacy rate and social mobility. But together with this, there has been a process of de-tribalisation and therefore a change in their social values, norms and attitudes, habits, practices and customs. Though majority in the rural areas still practice agriculture, many of them are into teaching, government services and in business too. It is this professional class of the Lepcha elites, who are trying to bring about a revival of their community, utilising culture as their main tool.

Like the Bhutias before them, the educated middle class of the Nepalis rejected the separate ethnic and linguistic identity of the Lepchas. In fact they were looked upon as one of the Nepali sub-groups. Today due emphasis is laid on numbers, the majority versus minority. The Nepalis are culturally dominant because of their numerical and political superiority. The Lepchas and Bhutias have learnt the language of the Nepalis but not vice versa. The Lepchas are not only politically and numerically at a disadvantage, they are also socially and economically weak. The Lepchas are fast being overwhelmed by other groups and they are being designated as a vanishing tribe. But what is being witnessed today in the Darjeeling Hills is a process of re-tribalisation amongst the Lepchas. They are eager to carve their separate ethnic identity and further their claims as the indigenous community of the area.

The Lepchas are either animists or follow a type of Bon religion together with Lamaist Buddhism. Many of them have converted to Christianity. The Buddhist Lepchas have elaborate death rituals, and they donate generously for the building and maintenance of *gompas* or monasteries. Their marriages also involve heavy bride price and elaborate wedding feasts. Regarding their dress, the common dress of the Lepcha woman consists of a blouse, tugo and a lower garment called *Domdyam*, a piece of either cotton or silk cloth woven around the waist and tied neatly on both the shoulders with the help of some pins. The male dress is called *Dompra* a long cotton vesture, thrown around the body and leaving the arms free and it reaches up to the knee. They also adorn the Lepcha hat called *Somoak*, which is made up of fine cane splits. The Lepchas, because of their numerical weakness, have not received the attention they deserved. But today especially under the leadership of the Indigenous Lepcha Tribal Association (ILTA) which has its origins way back in 1925, the Lepchas are eager to carve their separate identity. They are called upon to preserve, conserve and maintain their cultural heritage and language and to protect their lands around which their culture and identity are linked and interwoven. There is also the Lepcha Culture Centre which was formed in 1967. Today there are *shezums* or Lepcha associations seen in every village. It is mandatory for the Lepchas to become members of the *Shezum*, which is ultimately under the aegis of the Lepcha Association. It is this association that is helping the Lepchas to speak for their community and has the following objectives namely, (i) Recognition and introduction of the Lepcha language in the schools and colleges for Lepcha children in Darjeeling district, (ii) Recognition of indigenous tribal Lepchas under the list of Primitive Tribal Groups, (PTG), (iii) The correction of Census data and publication of genuine and authentic figures for the Lepcha population.

## The Lepcha Language and Education

In Darjeeling Hills, initially, though the medium of instruction in schools was not Nepali, the language had developed into the *Jatiya Bhasa*. This in turn produced a whole lot of Nepali writers. They wanted to improve the quality of their language, to produce a body of literature and give it the status with other literary languages of India. It was only natural that they also wanted Nepali to be the medium of instruction in the hill schools.

By 1924, the Nepali or *Khas Kura* was already taught as a vernacular subject till the Bachelor of Arts level and had the recognition by the Calcutta University. In 1957, the demand to make Nepali as the medium of instruction till the Matriculation stage was accepted. Today Nepali is taught as an Honours subject and till Post Graduate and doctoral levels in North Bengal University and the Benares Hindu University. Further, the West Bengal Official Language Act, recognizing Nepali and Bengali as the official languages in the three sub-divisions of Darjeeling, Kalimpong and Kurseong, was passed on 25th December, 1961. This move opened up more economic and educational opportunities for the Nepalis. Nepali was also included in the VIII Schedule of the Indian Constitution in August, 1992.

Though Nepali, Bhutia and Lepcha languages are considered to be the three fraternal languages in the Darjeeling Hills, the Lepcha language has not received adequate encouragement. In the various villages and hamlets, where the Lepchas live in compact areas (e.g. Mani Gumba, Bong Basti, Tashing, Tanek, Ngassey), they know their language when compared to their urban counterparts. But they usually converse in the Nepali language with other communities. Today the linguistic consciousness has gripped them and they are eager to keep their language and culture intact.

The Lepchas have a rich and highly developed script. It is believed to have been invented by Thekong Mensalong, a legendary figure, who lived towards the beginning of the 17th century. Others say it was given by Mother Creator, *Itbu Moo* herself along with the mountains, rivers and lakes. Another version is that it was invented by Chador Namgyal, the third consecrated ruler of Sikkim.

*The Tashay Namthar* or *Namthur Tsung* containing the biography of Padmasambhava, the one responsible for taking Buddhism into Tibet "acted as one piece of literature that carried the torch of the written language of the Lepchas undermined for centuries together."<sup>9</sup> After the Bhutanese attack of *Mayel Lyang* in 1700's, the Lepchas came under the threat of the Gorkhas under Prithvi Narayan Shah. In fact when Darjeeling was granted as a gift to the British East India Company, the deed of grant was written in English, Hindustani and Lepcha. The British initially tried to bring about the progress of the Lepchas even though the missionaries among them wanted to bring about the conversion of the Lepchas to Christianity. It was mainly for this purpose that Genesis,

9 Cfr. Authur Foning, *Lepcha: My Vanishing Tribe*, New Delhi, Sterling Publishers, 1987, p. 154.

a part of Exodus, Gospels of Mark and John were translated into Lepcha and hymn books were printed in 1911. Christian prayers and hymns were also done in Lepcha. The Baptist Mission in Calcutta had also taken out a font for Lepcha. Colonel G.B. Mainwaring of the Bengal Staff Corps was so impressed with the Lepchas, that he married a Lepcha woman, learnt their language and also wrote the Grammar of the *Rong* (Lepcha) Language in 1876. The Lepcha language was also the language of the courts, administration and justice. Everyone inhabiting the region knew the language.

However, as Nepali was fast gaining pre-dominance in the hills, more attention was given to it rather than to the Lepcha language. Both A. Turnbull and W.S. Sutherland "had lamented the need for Lepcha literature, but the pressure of other work and lack of educated translators left this need unfulfilled."<sup>10</sup> In the 1920's itself, the Lepchas demanded that their language be introduced in the various schools. Unfortunately, the British government turned down their demand. On top of that, the Nepali Text Book Committee in 1926 gave the following arguments: (i) as there was no Lepcha text books, there is no point in teaching a boy Lepcha language, (ii) unless the language is actually dying out, the majority of the Lepcha boys will learn to speak it in their homes, (iii) the written language of Lepchas is of no practical use in daily life, (iv) the Lepcha boy already has to study both Nepali and Hindi at some stage or other, why add to his difficulty by teaching him to read a third language in which there is practically no literature.<sup>11</sup>

Even after Indian independence, it was felt that the West Bengal government had not given the Lepchas their due. Hindi, Tibetan, Urdu, Nepali, Bengali and Dzongka languages are accepted in the various schools and colleges in Darjeeling district. The Lepcha language has been ignored in their own homeland. Bhutia and Nepali are taught from the primary stage up to the University level but the Lepcha language, the oldest, richest and the most developed language has been debarred from being recognised as a language also. It was also believed that the Bengal Government too had shown a step motherly treatment to the Lepchas. It was mainly because of the various efforts of the Nepali Academy and the Nepali people's assertiveness that they succeeded in introducing Nepali as one of the subjects in various schools right up to the graduation and post graduation levels. It was also introduced as one of the official languages in the three sub-divisions of Darjeeling district. However, the Lepcha language failed to be introduced even in the primary level of education, let alone being the official language of the district.

The Indian Constitution has laid down various rights and privileges for linguistic and religious minorities. Article (350-A) says that "it shall be the endeavour of every state and every local authority within the State to provide adequate facilities for instruction in the mother tongue at the primary stage of education to children

10 Cindy L. Perry, *Nepali Around the World: Emphasizing Nepali Christians of the Himalayas*, Kathmandu, Ekta Books, 1997, p. 44.

11 Cfr. Report of the Nepali Text Book Committee, 1926, p. 14.

belonging to linguistic minority groups.” Though these provisions are clearly spelt out, the minority language of the Lepchas was grossly neglected, and hence the Lepcha children are forced to study in other languages. But in spite of indignation on the part of the Lepchas, there is no protest or revolt forthcoming from them. However, today under the aegis of the Lepcha Association, with its headquarters at Kalimpong, the language and cultural consciousness amongst the Lepchas is fast gaining ground.

A protest rally was organised by them under the Indigenous Lepcha Tribal Association on 11th October, 2004 in Kalimpong. Its main demand was for the introduction of Lepcha language in the schools and colleges. Some Lepcha songs, music, folktales, dramas (like Teesta-Rangeet, a dance drama written by noted Lepcha scholar, author and linguist, K.P. Tamsang in 1960's), *Nalmit* (1970) were written and enacted. The Mani Printing Press in Kalimpong owned by a Nepali added to the already existing sections of English, Nepali and Tibetan. It helped to bring out a bi-monthly journal called *Aachuley*. The Annual bi-lingual magazine, *King Gyaeboo Achyok* is also there in English and Lepcha, first published on 20 December 1995.

They have various books to their credit including a huge Lepcha English Encyclopaedia Dictionary written by K.P.Tamsang. Some publications include P.T. Lepcha's *Mayel Pandaor (Treasure of the Lepcha World)*, an award winning book, *Rong Sung Gyaom (A Collection of Lepcha Folktales)* and others. The same author was also awarded the Bhasha Sammelan Award in the year 2000. It is no wonder that the Lepchas in the Darjeeling district, the indigenous community of the area are demanding that primary education should be given in their own mother tongue to the Lepcha children in lieu with Article 350-A of the Constitution.

The Lepchas of Darjeeling district compares themselves to their brethren in Sikkim. Lepcha was already taught in the various primary schools before Sikkim was integrated as a part of India on 19 April, 1975. It is also recognised as one of the ten official languages of Sikkim. The Pawan Chamling government of Sikkim agreed that Lepcha will be taught up to the degree level in colleges of Tadong and Namchi in Sikkim from the year 2000 onwards. “Even though the colleges in Sikkim come under North Bengal University, Lepcha language has been recognized out there, but not in Darjeeling district. It is discrimination against us, Lepchas of Darjeeling district” (Interview with General Secretary, ILTA, Lyangsong Tamsang). The ILTA on its own efforts has been successful in establishing Lepcha schools all over the district. (At present there are 30 night schools in Kalimpong sub-division, 2 in Darjeeling, 3 in Sittong (Kurseong), 1 in Mirik and also one each in Delhi and Kolkata. In Gnassey village, the Lepcha school was established in 1957 itself and it is still functioning. Presently there are 22 students in the age group of 16-35 years. Classes are held on weekends in the evenings for one hour. The same is true for other schools as well.

The survival of a community depends on its language. The Lepchas have a rich language but the problem lies in the usage of the language. They are today encouraged

to know, preserve and promote their rich language and culture. The K. P. Tamsang Language and Literary Award is given to persons and associations for the sustenance and promotion of the Lepcha language and culture. The language issue of the Lepchas is inseparably associated with their socio-economic development and also with their existence as an ethnic identity.

### **Lepcha's demand to be categorised as a Primitive Tribal Group (PTG)**

Today the Lepchas have become more politically conscious and assertive regarding their rights and privileges. There is also a better relationship between the Lepchas of Darjeeling district and Sikkim. Moreover, since the Lepchas of Sikkim have been recognised as a PTG in January 2005, it has encouraged the Lepchas of Darjeeling district to further the same demand. There must be four criteria for identification of PTG including (i) must be members of Scheduled Tribe, (ii) must have almost stagnant population or extremely slow growth rate, facing the danger of extinction, (iii) having pre-agricultural level of technology (iv) extremely low level of technology. The Lepchas have all the criteria to be recognised as a PTG but only three groups are identified as PTG in West Bengal namely Birhor, Toto and Lodha. Many of these groups have lost their traditional economy, language, earlier customs and rituals.

The Lepcha community today, under the leadership of the Lepcha Association, are raising their voice for the protection of their land, to which their very culture and identity are linked. Both the British and later the Bengal governments passed various laws to protect the land of the Lepchas. The transfer of lands by the tribals in West Bengal was restricted under the Bengal Tenancy Act, 1885. Later this was repealed with the enforcement of West Bengal Land Reforms Act, 1955. This Act restricts the transfer of land from tribals to non tribals. Notwithstanding the various loopholes in the land laws, lands from the Lepchas have gone to other non tribals. But the very survival of the Lepchas depends on how long they can hold onto their land. Today if they want to sell their lands, they have to bring the case before the Lepcha Association, where concerned discussions and meetings take place. It is only after strict vigilance and only in cases of deteriorated economic conditions that they are allowed to sell their lands at certain prices fixed by the Association, according to the current market valuation.

The Lepchas have to preserve, conserve and maintain their cultural heritage if they are to survive as an indigenous and the one and only true sons of *Nye Mayel Lyang*. The Lepcha Association and the various *shezums* are trying to unite the Lepchas and safeguard their identity. They are doing this by recording various CDs, writing books and journals containing their folk songs, poems and legends. They have also submitted a memorandum for establishing a Lepcha Unit in All India Radio, Kurseong. They are reviving their traditional cultural festivals too. All of them celebrate *Namsoong* or *Naambun* or *Naam Aal* or the Lepcha New Year during December-January. Lepchas from Sikkim, Kalimpong and Darjeeling gather at Dzongu in Sikkim for this festival



which is a seven day festival. They also celebrate the birthday of Mensalong, who was a renowned *bongthing* or medicine man and who helped in syncretising Buddhism with the original Lepcha Bon religion. *Pang Lhabsol* is celebrated by both the Bhutias and the Lepchas with much gaiety to commemorate the blood treaty that was signed in 1275 CE between Thekong Tek and Khye Bumsa in Kabi Valley. The Lepchas call this festival *Chyu Rum Faat* which means offering to the Himalayan God. All of them come to celebrate the birthday of *Panoo Gaebou Achyuk* of Damsang Dee on 20th December every year at Kalimpong, the last Lepcha King who was assassinated by the Bhutanese at Daling Fort, Damsang in 1781.

Among the Lepcha community in Darjeeling district, there is an apparent religious divide between the Christians and Buddhists. Comparatively in Sikkim only about 8 percent of the Lepchas are Christians and the educated elites are drawn from the Buddhist Lepchas, who have a close affiliation with the Bhutias. In the case of Darjeeling, the Christian and Buddhist Lepchas are socio-economically almost equal. The former being more educated and urbanized have provided leadership to their Buddhist counterparts, but unfortunately, the latter could not gain full support and confidence in them. The Christian Lepchas have certain western influences in their traditions, culture and mannerisms. Their culture is an intermingling of the traditional and the Western cultures. Both the Christian and the Buddhist Lepchas have an equal degree of respect for their culture and tradition, and religion does not come as a dividing factor among them because they are already a minority community and it can only have an ill bearing on their ethnicity.

As mentioned earlier, today there is a better relationship between the Lepchas of Darjeeling and Sikkim. This could be seen when all of them came together under the Affected Citizens of Teesta, when the land of the Lepchas was demanded by the government of Sikkim for the construction of large hydroelectric construction projects. It was feared by the Lepchas that once the project on the Teesta starts, it would not only bring thousands of outside workers into the protected area of Dzongu, which is a Lepcha reserve, but it could also exploit this ethnic minority group, and could also bring environmental damages to one of the richest areas in terms of bio-diversity. Besides, the majority of the Lepchas reside in rural areas and are hesitant to come to the urban areas mainly because of their shy nature and also because they feel at ease working in close harmony with nature. The number of Lepchas going to big cities and abroad is very rare. But these few of them who have gone to urban areas have become ethnically more assertive, thus giving a call to their brethren to conserve, preserve and promote their culture and heritage.

There are a nominal number of Lepchas working in various government services and various other white collar jobs. But whatever has been achieved may be attributed to the fact that they have been recognized as a Scheduled Tribe by the Constitution of India. Today more communities have been recognised as Scheduled Tribe in the

Darjeeling hills but the total quota of seats reserved for them remains the same i.e. 6 percent. Hence, it has become increasingly difficult for the Lepchas to compete even for the reserved seats. The Lepchas, the indigenous community of the Darjeeling Hills have remained socially, politically and economically backward. However, they are becoming conscious of their identity and have begun to assert their rightful place in society.

### **Conclusion**

The Bhutias have always clubbed themselves with the Lepchas as tribals to counter the numerical superiority of the Nepalis. But in the long run, it is the Lepchas who have remained poor, with about 90 percent of the Lepchas living in rural areas and agriculture being their primary occupation. A nominal number of Lepchas are seen working in salaried central and state government jobs, private business or are self-employed. The Lepchas, who are seen as an amiable and friendly community and who once led a free and independent existence, has today become the poorest people of the region. Of course, the spread of education has in the process produced an elite or professional class amongst them. It is this class who are once again reminding the members of their community of their rich culture and heritage and to reclaim their lost identity. Moreover, the possibility of the recognition of all Gorkha or Nepali communities as tribals has brought insecurity and apprehension amongst this minority community, who have been enjoying tribal status since the enforcement of the Constitution. The only way to protect their security, they feel is by seeking the status of a Primitive Tribal group, so as to prolong their status as a 'vanishing tribe'.