

## Indigenous Lepchas: Philosophy of Life and Worldview

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### Abstract

The Lepchas, an indigenous race of the Darjeeling district of West Bengal, Sikkim, and Illam Himalayas of Nepal, were once a ruling race, equal in power and status to many contemporary rulers of other races and countries. The Lepchas believe that they are among the very primeval people of the world whose origin is as old as the very Himalayas. They have a distinct language, literature, culture, custom, tradition, myths, sagas, legends, religion, almanac, festivals, civilization, history, and a way of life and living. The Lepchas are very close to nature and in particular land. They believe that this world is given to them by God to protect, to take care and to enjoy its fruits. Hence the whole knowledge system is drawn from God. Their philosophy of life is centred on God. In a nutshell, we can say, 'live and let live' is the philosophy of the Lepchas. However, of late, owing to the influence of various religions like Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism and Islam, their indigenous concept of God is changing. The influence of modern education and globalization and its allied aspects on the younger generation has also contributed to this change, as well as their worldview.

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**Keywords:** Lepcha, Indigenous culture, Language, Philosophy, Worldview

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### Introduction

The Lepchas, an indigenous race of the Darjeeling district of West Bengal, Sikkim, and Illam Himalayas of Nepal, are basically nature lovers. In ancient times, this region was known as *Mayel Lyang*, which means 'the land of hidden paradise or the delightful region or abode'. They were once a ruling race, equal in power and status to many contemporary rulers of other races and countries. Formerly, their land extended from the Himalayas down to Titaliya in the vast plains of India, now in Bangladesh; to the East, it extended up to Gipmochi Mountain, the tri-junction of Sikkim, Bhutan and Tibet, now Chinese Tibet, and in the West, it extended as far as the River Aroon, now in Nepal.

The history of the Lepchas in India goes back to the time of Chandragupta Maurya. Sri Dharnidhar Dahal in his book, *Sikkim ko Rajnitik Itihas*, has mentioned that during 330-320 BCE the Lepcha King, Pohortak Panu had helped Chandragupta to capture Takshila. The condition for helping Chandragupta was that, if he won Takshila, the King would grant the Lepchas the area comprising the Gangetic belt. Unfortunately, it

is said that Chanakya, the advisor to Chandragupta, refused to fulfil the condition and murdered the Lepcha King. Out of this outrage, the Lepchas plotted to kill Chanakya. They tried to finish his life with the help of tantric prayers. However, this was not effective. The Lepchas found out the secret behind it. Chanakya, being a Brahmin, had worn a sacred thread on his body. Hence, the Lepchas mixed *chi* (country-made fermented millet stuff) with Chanakya's food. This made Chanakya mentally ill and he went into the forest where it is said that he was killed by wild animals.<sup>1</sup>In the same book it is mentioned that, during the Khilji rule in Delhi, Sikkim was ruled by a Lepcha King named Tarve Panu (1230-1316 CE).

The Lepchas believe that they are the very indigenous race of Sikkim and Darjeeling, the primeval people of the world whose origin is as old as the very Himalayas. They have a distinct language, literature, culture, custom, tradition, myths, sagas, legends, religion, almanac, festivals, civilization, history, way of life and living. This indigenous people's knowledge system and their world-view can be discussed under the following topics:

### **The Myth of Creation and the fall of Human Beings**

God, the creator (*Itbodeboo Rum*) created the first human primogenitors, *Fodongthing* (male) and *Nazongnyoo* (female) from the pure virgin snows of the pinnacle of *Kingtsoomzaongboo Chyue* (Mt. Kanchenjunga). God had spoken with them in a language which, the Lepchas believe, is their own language called Rongring (Lepcha language).

The belief in the fall of wo/man goes back to *Fodongthing* (male) and *Nazongnyoo* (female) having had children without prior permission from God. So, fearing God's wrath, they hid them in a cave. They continued to do this for their seven children. Unfortunately, upon the birth of their eighth child, God came to know of their disobedience. Therefore, as a punishment, the erring couple was sent down nine storeys to the earth (*Lanku Kukyot*) and, subsequently, the Lepcha population on earth grew. In the meantime, the abandoned children, who felt aggrieved, united and started harassing the people on the earth. The Lepchas prayed to God for salvation. God heeded their prayer and sent *Azor Bongthing* and *Nyolik Nyosong Mun* to liberate the Lepchas from the harassment. This *Azor Bongthing* is also referred to by some as *Tamsangthing*.

The question of liberation is associated with God sending *Azor Bongthing* to rescue men from the attack of *Laso Mung Panu* (the spirit of the abandoned children). These evil spirits were not easily driven because they would change themselves into the form of the twelve different animals of the world viz. rat, ox, tiger, eagle, thunder, snake, horse, sheep, monkey, hen, dog, and pig. Eventually, man could win over the evil spirits with the help of *Azor Bongthing* and *Nyolik Nyosong Mun*.

1 Cfr. Dharnidhar Dahal, *Sikkim ko Rajnitik Itihas*, Part I, Gangtok, Subba Prakashan, 1984, pp. 2-3.

## Concept of After-Life

The Lepchas have no concept of Heaven and Hell. Though the first man and woman were created out of pure snow from *Kingtsoomzaongboo Chyue* (Mt. Kanchenjunga), each clan, after the downfall of man, had its own lake and mountain. Hence, after death, a Lepcha soul will rest in the lap of his ancestors who are residing in their respective clan's mountain and lake. Therefore, for Lepchas, there is no Heaven.

The soul after death cannot reach its destination unless it is taken by a *Mun* (priestess) or *Bongthing* (priest). When a baby is born in a family, the parents and relatives invite the *Mun* or *Bongthing* to baptize the child. The *Mun* or *Bongthing* inform the ancestors who are resting in each *Chyue* that one of their souls has taken the human form as a new-born baby. So, they beseech the ancestors to take care of the baby till his or her death. After his or her life span is over in this earth, the soul has to be accepted by the ancestors. The baby is given the name on that day. This entire ceremony is called *Tungbongfat* (baptism). When the child takes the first step of his life, the parents tell the child, '*Loomdo! Loomdo!*' which means 'make your own path towards your ancestors'.

After the death of a man, the soul is taken to the lap of the ancestors by a *Mun* or *Bongthing*. In case the man dies in an accident, then what will happen to his soul? The Lepchas believe that, since the first parents disobeyed God and were sent down to the 9th storey on earth as a punishment, the life-span of human beings has nine stages. During his lifetime, he has to rise up from the lower stages to the upper stages as he grows older. In case of accident or suicide or murder, that particular person would not have completed the stages. In such a case, the *Mun* or *Bongthing*, with their prayers, completes the remaining stages for the deceased person. Hence, the soul reaches the ancestral abode safely.

## Philosophy of Life

Life, for Lepchas, is to enjoy fully, live fully. Even amidst struggles in life due to hunger, thirst, sickness, one must enjoy one's life. What is needed for today is enough, do not worry about tomorrow. Nothing is seen in terms of business. Do not labour too much just to earn. The body needs rest. Even for ploughing the field, do not overwork. This will harm the animal that you are employing. They too have a life. Therefore, relax, do not take any anxiety. This type of philosophy of life could be the reason for their jovial nature. Most of the Lepchas are happy and jovial. Nature is their habitation. They live with nature. The tone of their language is like the tone of the birds.

Life is associated with the environment because the Lepchas love nature, worship nature, and plays with nature. Their music originates from nature. They cut trees only according to their requirements viz. construction of houses, use of firewood, irrigation, etc. They never cut trees for commercial purposes. They observe an environmental day called *Mukzingding Rumfat* or '*Worship of God of Greenery.*' The *Mun* or *Bongthing* thank the nature on behalf of the Lepchas for its abundant gifts.

Similarly life is associated with the land because land for Lepchas is their mother. They call land as *Lyngfat Amu* i.e. Mother Earth. Earth gives everything for the survival of life. Water, air, food, shelter, everything is given by earth. Life without earth (the land) has no existence. That is why the Lepchas have great respect for all the creatures found on this earth. They worship an earth festival which is called *Lyang Rumfat*. Nature is an inseparable entity for the Lepchas. Even the *Muns* (priestesses), in their annual ceremony called *Soogi*, offer 108 flower garlands to God and pray the whole day and night by chanting hymns in praise of God. They chant their hymns in the tune of birds, wind, waterfalls, and rivers which are part of Mother Earth. Earth has everything for the Lepchas. The souls of the ancestors rest in the Chyue which is situated in this very Mother Earth. They are born here, live here, die here, and their soul rests here after death.

### Philosophy of Language and Culture

The Lepchas believe that their creator, *Itbodeboo Rum*, spoke to them in a language which is still spoken by His children, the Lepchas. The Lepcha language is a very ancient language of the world because there are no traces whatsoever of Mongolian, Semitic, or Indo-Germanic origins.<sup>2</sup> This language has been described as 'Ursprache', one of the oldest languages, according to Colonel G.B. Mainwaring.<sup>3</sup> The Lepcha language does not have a single word of abuse or slang. The Lepcha language also attests to the astonishing knowledge possessed by them. It is a mono-syllabic one. All the names of the different anatomical structures of the human body or animal originate with the root letter, 'A'.

|      |               |       |
|------|---------------|-------|
| E.g. | <i>Amik</i>   | Eye   |
|      | <i>Athong</i> | Leg   |
|      | <i>Alut</i>   | Heart |
|      | <i>Athyak</i> | Head  |
|      | <i>Aboo</i>   | Lungs |

Names of the seasons start with the letter, 'S'.

|      |                |        |
|------|----------------|--------|
| E.g. | <i>Sosa</i>    | Spring |
|      | <i>Somyang</i> | Summer |

All the names of the rivers commence with the letter, 'R'.

|      |                 |        |
|------|-----------------|--------|
| E.g. | <i>Rongnyoo</i> | Teesta |
|      | <i>Rong Eet</i> | Rangit |
|      | <i>Rali</i>     | Relli  |
|      | <i>Rangpo</i>   | Rongpo |

<sup>2</sup> Cfr. K. P. Tamsang, *The Unknown and Untold Reality about the Lepchas*, Hongkong, Luen sun Offset Printing, 1983, p. 11.

<sup>3</sup> Cfr. Colonel G. B. Mainwaring, *A Grammar of the Rong (Lepcha) Language*, Calcutta, Baptist Mission Press, 1876, p. 20.

Likewise, the names of the trees, plants and animals start with the letter, 'S'.

|     |                      |                 |
|-----|----------------------|-----------------|
| Eg. | <i>Samal Kung</i>    | Cedrela toona   |
|     | <i>Sambrang Kung</i> | Schima walichii |
|     | <i>Sathong</i>       | Tiger           |
|     | <i>Sachyak</i>       | Leopard         |
|     | <i>Salock</i>        | Rhinoceros      |

The Lepcha language has 28 consonants, 9 vowels, 9 finals, 1 circumflex sign, 7 co-joined consonants, and 2 are fixed consonant signs.

The Lepchas have an indigenous culture of their own. The life of the Lepchas is inseparably related with bamboo. They believe that God created bamboo along with the Lepchas. They use bamboo in building houses, rafts, bridges, handicrafts, bows, arrows, utensils, sticks, water-jugs, baskets, flute, etc. The Lepchas make use of 22 varieties of bamboos. The bamboos give bad signs such as of great famine if they flower. For the baby, cradle is made of bamboo and baskets made of bamboo are used to carry the dead body to the burial place. Hence, bamboo is the friend of the Lepchas from the cradle to the grave.

Music forms a part of Lepcha culture. The indigenous Lepchas have their own distinctive folk songs, dances, music, etc. The Lepchas believe that this music and the accompanying musical instruments were offered to them by the God of Music called *Narok Rum*. Their music, songs and dances reflect their way of life, their joys and sorrows. Therefore, Lepchas think that their culture was given by God and has to be preserved. The culture reflects the way of life and the way of life enriches one's culture. The whole philosophy is that everything is centred on man and on God. They believe that whatever they do is the gift of God.

The Lepchas live in the community. There is no rule as such as to live life in a particular pattern. However, Lepchas are very obedient to the orders of elders. Democracy is a word which we can use in the system of the Lepchas' rule. Everybody's will is respected. Even at home, in the family, sons and daughters are treated equally. Women have great respect in the society. Lepchas owe their allegiance to their rulers. Yet, there is neither dictatorship nor autocracy. They show great respect to the priest and the priestess. Those who hold a higher social status do not remain aloof. They mix with ordinary people. The acts of plundering, killing, winning name and fame, are not at all found in the Lepcha world. 'We share, we care' is the policy of the Lepchas.

### **Concept of Economy**

The Lepchas are mostly agriculturists. They possess huge land areas where they cultivate seasonal crops. They help each other to till the land, sow the seed, weed the field, and harvest the crop. Everything is done as a community. They are not worried too much about their future. Contentment is their treasure. They do not hoard the seed

for themselves. They store food for their future use but not beyond their needs. They eat, sing and enjoy life. They always preserve the seeds for the next sowing season. Their business is simple, not profit-making. Nothing is seen from the commercial point of view.

The Lepchas have a large-hearted nature towards guests and friends. Whatever they have, they share with their guests. This is very well depicted by Fred Pinn in *The Road of Destiny*. He mentions that, when Captain Lloyd went to meet Lepcha Dingpon at Pudamtam, Dingpon gave food items as a gesture of his respect to the guests.<sup>4</sup> There is no desire for abundance but there is contentment in need. In a nutshell, we can say, 'Live and let live' is the philosophy of the Lepchas.

### **Social Life**

There is no caste system among the Lepchas. In society, all are equal and there is no division on the basis of labour. The Lepchas have great respect for their women folk. The husband and the wife go together to attend social functions. Polygamy is rare in the Lepcha community. Men and women all take part in social functions. The girls carry their mothers' lineage while the boys carry their fathers' lineage after their birth. Although Lepcha society is patriarchal in case of clan there is peculiar blending of both patrilineal and matrilineal. Thus it gives equal respect to the men and women folk.<sup>5</sup> The Lepcha society is based on community life. Whenever any dispute arises, it is settled within the community. The headman, with the cooperation of the community, settles the dispute.

### **Conclusion**

The Lepchas are peace-loving people. They believe that this world is given to them by God to protect, to take care and to enjoy its fruits. Hence the whole knowledge system is drawn from God. Their philosophy of life is centred on God. However, they believe that Mother Earth has everything since it is conferred to them by God. But, of late, this concept has been slightly changing, especially in the minds of the Lepcha youth. There are certain factors affecting this original philosophical thought.

The Lepchas have the concept of a cosmic religion. They believe that the Mother Nature is the manifestation of God. They do not have meta-cosmic religion i.e. institutionalised religion. In other words religion for them was a way of life. But these simple people were marginalised by the Tibetans rulers. Since Tibetans were Buddhists, they imposed Buddhism on Lepchas. Many Lepcha young men joined the monastery to become Lamas and later they preached and practiced Buddhism in their respective villages. The old practices and rituals on birth, marriage and death were

4 Cfr. Fred Pinn, *The Road of Destiny Darjeeling Letters* 1839, New Delhi, OUP, pp. 82-87.

5 Cfr. Lyangsong Tamsang Lepcha, *Aachuley: A Quarterly Lepcha Bilingual News Magazine*, Kalimpong, Indigenous Lepcha Tribal Association, (July, 2008), p. 35.

replaced by that of Buddhism. The monks who revised the Lepcha Holy books *Namtho-Namthar* had some elements of Buddhism added. In the beginning of 19th century, the Lepchas came under the influence of Christianity, especially the Protestants. Many Lepchas were converted to Christianity. Later they came in contact with the Catholic missionaries from Canada, Belgium, France and Switzerland. Now we find half of the population of Lepchas as either Buddhists or Christians. Today we have many Lepcha pastors, priests and nuns working in and abroad.

The Lepchas are under the influence of Hinduism too. Many Lepchas have joined the different Hindu organisation like the RSS, Bajrang Dal and Satya Sai Baba. A few Lepchas have embraced Islam too. As a result, the original philosophy regarding their faith in God, creation story, concept of soul, and the earth have changed drastically. Inter-caste marriage and the children born out of these mixed culture have failed to realise the importance of Lepcha ancestor's belief and the cultural tradition, and this has a great impact on the ethnic concept of God and the worldview. These factors have led to the decline of original Lepcha view on religion and world.

The modern education has transformed the old ways of thinking about life and the world. Modern youth are critical about the ideas that are handed down to them by their older generations. This also has led to the decline of original world view and life. The influence of mass media has brought about a change in the idea of God and the worldview of the Lepchas. This has an important effect on their language, culture and beliefs too. The influx of the outside population has created a big disparity between the Lepcha community and the other communities living in and around the district. They come here in search of jobs, business etc. They have outnumbered the Lepchas and this has affected the Lepchas in their outlook of the world.

The decline of the agriculture in the Lepcha land, and the subsequent migration of Lepcha youth to the different cities in search of jobs, has brought in modern influence among the youth. This has brought in drastic changes in their worldview and their belief about God. However, the original view of the world, life, and God for the Lepchas remain unchanged. As long as the Lepchas remain happy, their original philosophy of life will never change.

As long as Earth remains fertile  
Lepchas, the children of God, smile  
Because their *Itboo Rum* ever remains agile.