

SAKYU-RUMFAT (SK7U - RUMFA) of the Lepchas: A Philosophical Reading into their NAAMTHO-NAAMTHAR-S

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Abstract

Philosophising from the indigenous context – an attempt to reflect over the wisdom(s) of the indigenous people – has always met with scepticism and severe criticism, especially in an intellectual world that has been dominated by western philosophies. However, these critics seem to forget that each community carries an inherent capacity to nurture, nourish and philosophise on its indigenous wisdom. From this standpoint, thus, it is not only possible to philosophise from the indigenous context of the Lepchas, but one should invariably begin philosophising from the existential questions of this community in order to complement the larger Himalayan philosophical queries. The philosophical traditions of the indigenous Lepchas may have started with the ordinary experiences of life, in their interactions with the unfathomable depths of the nature; through their interaction with the nature, they reach or try to reach the Ultimate. In the Lepcha worldview, nature, god and the humans meet and co-mingle on a same level. Seen through Sakyu-Rumfaat, the primeval philosophy of the Lepchas could be considered.

Keywords: Lepcha, Indigenous philosophy, *Sakyu-Rumfaat*, Naamtho-Naamthars, Eco-sophy

Introduction

Philosophising from the indigenous context – an attempt to reflect over the wisdom(s) of the indigenous people – has always met with scepticism and severe criticism. In an intellectual world that has been dominated by western philosophies, it has been a challenging task for the exponents of indigenous wisdoms. Paradoxically, the critics, including the Indian thinkers, seem to forget that each community carries an inherent capacity to nurture, nourish and philosophise on its indigenous wisdom. From this standpoint, thus, it wouldn't be wrong to say that it is not only possible to philosophise from the indigenous context of the Lepchas, but one should invariably

1 This paper is the edited version of the paper presented at the National Seminar on *Indigenous Philosophies of the Himalayan Communities* sponsored by the Indian Council of Philosophical Research (ICPR), New Delhi, organised by Salesian College, Sonada, at Don Bosco Malbaisey, West Sikkim on 8-9th May 2009.

begin philosophising from the existential questions of this community in order to make the Himalayan philosophical queries a complete one.²

However, the scope of this paper is limited. Here, the author intends to show that there are varied ways and means for philosophising from the indigenous contexts of the Lepchas. It is a new and unique venture altogether in interpreting the traditional wisdoms of the Lepchas. Therefore, venturing into the philosophical reflections from the indigenous context of the Lepchas shows a paradigm shift in doing philosophy. It is an effort to look into the primeval wisdom of the indigenous people in order to acknowledge and bring forth their irresistible spirit hidden in the pages of their traditions. Justification of seminal wisdoms of the past lies in its ability to guide the present generation in its forward movement. Hence, as far as it is possible, we should be ready to look into any source of knowledge as objectively as possible.

The Lepchas and their Philosophical Roots

Lepchas are the indigenous³ tribe of Sikkim-Darjeeling⁴ who also inhabits the Ilam district of Nepal and the southern part of Bhutan till date. They have their indigenous wisdom hidden in their oral traditions, and also in written traditions called *Naamtho-Naamthaars* (*naamtho-naamthaars*).⁵ These are the collections of *Lungten Sungs* (*Vluten*) (traditional stories) of the Lepchas in manuscript forms.⁶ These collections of indigenous wisdom literature of the Lepchas could be considered as one of the valuable sources of their philosophy. Thus, the indigenous philosophy of the Lepchas can be derived

2 Even as this article is being edited, it is learnt from the local News papers that around 400 Lepcha youths from Darjeeling district are camping at Tenzing Norgay Bus Terminus of Siliguri to pressurise the State and Central governments to give them the clear status of the Indigenous people of the land. The Lepchas have been robbed of their land, their identity and culture both because of unsympathetic governments and also because of the complacency and ignorance of this indigenous people themselves.

3 Indigenous status of the Lepchas was conferred very recently through the intervention of the government of Sikkim.

4 Sikkim and Darjeeling are hyphenated purposefully because; Darjeeling was integral part of Sikkim, the land of the Lepchas (*Mayel Lyang*) till 1835, when Darjeeling area was gifted to the British by the Sikkim Maharaja.

5 Lyangsang Tamsang writing on '*Naamtho-Naamthaar*' says that *Naamtho-Naamthaar* is the manuscripts of the Lepchas. The etymological meaning of *Naamtho-Naamthaar* is derived from the word 'Naam' which in Lepcha means: Year, and 'tho' meaning registration or recording. Again the 'thaar' comes from the verb '*thaarshyong*' meaning to sharpen a bamboo cylinder or wood slanting. According to him, the metaphorically '*Naamtho-Naamthar*' are the "refined literary records of the Lepchas." He has categorised the *Naamtho-Naamthars* into two categories: i) Lepcha manuscripts purely based on the original Lepcha subjects, topics, issues and (ii) Lepcha manuscripts purely based on the translation works from Tibetan Buddhist text books into Lepcha. According to this point of view the following are the original texts bearing original concerns of the Lepchas: (a) *Chu [Chyu] Rum Faat*, (b) *Lyang Rum Faat*, (c) *Tungrong Hlo Rum Faat*, (d) *Sakyoo[sakyu] Rum Faat*, (e) *Muk Zek Ding [Mukjyekding] Rum Faat*, (f) *Tunghong Faat*, (g) *Nyoo Thing Laom Fron*.

6 Nowadays, as the result of the initiative of the government of West Bengal, some *Naamtho-Naamthaars* in typed forms are also available.

from their oral and written traditions, so full of myths⁷ and folklores.⁸ Between the oral and the written traditions, the former has been most prevalent in passing on the myths and folklores of the Lepchas down the ages but it is a fast eclipsing tradition today.⁹ It is because the story telling capacity of the community which was a powerful medium for communicating the indigenous wisdom is fading away very rapidly under the influence of 'modern day story tellers', i.e., the modern gadgets such as internet, television, radio, movies etc. As the indigenous communities are by and large turning into passive listeners, they have stopped being a medium of communication of the traditional wisdoms. Subsequently, their indigenous narratives are dying out.

Speaking from this background, one would certainly question the ability of an indigenous community to possess the power of philosophising. What would be the methods of philosophising in these communities? What would be the subject matter of their philosophical discussions? Will their philosophical thoughts have authenticity and weight seen in contrast with other better known philosophies of the world? Should we at all compare these indigenous thoughts with other philosophical thoughts? How did such philosophy develop, if they have developed at all? Is systematic integration of the scattered thoughts and wisdoms of the primeval community like that of Lepchas still possible?

First and foremost, it is essential to understand that the philosophical traditions of the indigenous Lepchas may have started with the ordinary experiences of life. Their philosophy was born when they toiled in the fields (*nyot*) (**o J**) with spade '*takchu*' (**t Xq U**), short-knife '*banpaok*' (**baNp**) and hunted in the jungles (*pazaok*) (**p ! z**) with '*Chaong-Salee*' (arrow and bow) (**Vo q -s i l**). It was born when their *Bongthings*¹⁰ (**Vo b V T**) and *Muns*¹¹ (**mN**) chanted and danced, inspired by the awareness of the presence of the divine in and around them. Their philosophy was born when these people became aware of the sacred space they shared with the rest of the cosmic realities. Their philosophy evolved when they gazed at the gorgeous mount Kanchenjunga, their guardian deity with absolute awe and wonder.

7 Heleen Plaisier writes, "A myth is a story or a traditional account that manifests a view of the world and of human existence. Myths support the unity, confidence and determination of a community. They are considered to be authoritative, but their truth and value is [are] not historical or scientific". Cfr. *Heleen Plaisier, Catalogue of Lepcha Manuscripts in the Van Manen Collection*, Leiden, Kern Institute, 2003, p. 37.

8 C. De Beauvoir Stocks has contributed a lot by collecting a large number of folklore and customs of the Lepchas. Cf. C. De. Beauvoir, *Stocks, Folklore and Customs of the Lapchas of Sikkim*, New Delhi, Madras, Asian Educational Services, 2001. (Reprinted from the Journal and Proceedings of the Asiatic Society of Bengal: Anthropological Number, New Series Vol.xxi, 1925, No.4). See also: Lyangsong Tamsang, *Lepcha Folklore and Folk Songs*, New Delhi, Sahitya Akademi, 2008. The author has compiled, translated and edited almost all the folklores and folk songs of the Lepchas till date.

9 Before the advent of televisions in the villages, the elders told stories to the younger generation. This story-telling capacity of the community is gone. Thus, the memory of the past is also lost.

10 Lepcha religious priest who performs all the religious ceremonies of the traditional Lepchas.

11 Lepcha religious priestess who is involved in the religious ceremonies of the traditional Lepchas.

Secondly, the philosophy of the indigenous Lepchas was born in their interactions with the unfathomable depths of the nature because it is rooted in such primeval awareness of the nature. Hence, the indigenous philosophy of the Lepchas could be called the 'indigenous eco-sophy'.¹²

Thirdly, the eco-sophy of the Lepchas is not limited to the indigenous philosophical thinking alone. It turns out to be eco-theosophical¹³, because *Rum* or God is the ultimate being who is very close to these people. Through their interaction with the nature, they reach or try to reach the Ultimate. Therefore, indigenous philosophy of the Lepchas turns out to be the philosophy of religion. It is the spiritual experiences of these people which have evolved as a collective-consciousness that leads us into an understanding of their philosophical perceptions.

Hence, we won't be able to speak about the philosophical thoughts of the Lepchas if we fail to understand their closeness to the nature, the gate-way to the divine. In fact in their metaphysics, the traditional hierarchy of beings breaks down.¹⁴ Thus, cosmotheandric¹⁵ realities: Universe (nature), God and humans seem to meet and co-mingle on the same plane. Such philosophical attitude can be seen in most of the original Lepcha *Naamtho-Naamthaars* (**n aMT-n aMaR**). The main characteristic feature of an original *Naamtho-Naamthaar* (**n aMT-n aMaR**) is its direct reference to the Lepchas' worldview.¹⁶ As a matter of fact, these *Naamtho-Naamthaars* are in the safe custody of the community for a long time.

Mun-Bongthings (**mWobViT**)¹⁷: the Custodians of Oral Traditions

Muns and *Bongthings* are the primeval Lepcha priestesses and priests who are very closely involved with the lives of the people. They were the moving centres of oral traditions. *Muns-Bongthings* were the main custodians of the oral traditions for a long time. With the vanishing of the *Mun-Bongthing* tradition, the bulk of this oral tradition is vanishing too.¹⁸ Nevertheless, everything of the past has not been lost. The

12 In my earlier article "Mukjyekding (**mXj Xkd**) Rumfaat (**r Mf a^**) of the Lepcha Tribe : Tribals' Outlook on Nature: Through Nature to God" presented at the 33rd Annual Meeting of the Association of the Christian Philosophers of India held at Praggaloy, Kolkata, West Bengal, I tried to bring out this aspect of the Lepchas philosophical thoughts.

13 This word has been coined by combining the words: Ecology (study pertaining environment or nature); theology (study of God); and Philosophy (love of wisdom).

14 The folklores and folktales of the Lepchas are so full of such examples where plants, animals, humans and gods (*Rums*) interact as if they belong to one degree of existence.

15 The word cosmos in Greek means the universe or the orderly universe; Theos means God; and anthropos means the humankind. Thus, Cosmotheandric reality means the composite identity of these three.

16 Ren Lyangsong Tamsang opines that such manuscripts are purely based on the Lepcha subject matters.

17 *Mun-Bongthings* are the religious or spiritual heads of the Lepchas. Lepchas have stories of how these *Muns* and *Bongthings* came into being. This deliberation cannot incorporate the details.

18 One of the reasons for this is the loss of purity and clarity in their ways of doing things due to various influences from other faith traditions of the place. For example, it is told that there are some *Bongthings* who invariably interpolate the names of the deities from Hinduism, which of course could be due to an incomplete

traditions and traditional values have also been perpetuated through the other literary media enriched by the writings of many scholars both from within and outside of the community.

The literary traditions of the Lepchas seem to have begun out of a certain necessity, i.e., to record the valuable truths (**Vo n VyaAali r**) (*naongyang-aaring*) of the Lepcha world. The creation of the *Naamtho-Naamthars* could be an answer to such a necessity. In and through these *Naamtho-Naamthars*, the learned Lepchas of the past tried to pass on the subtle socio-religio-cultural truths of the Lepchas to posterity.¹⁹

Though there are some written collections of the traditional thoughts of the Lepchas, a larger bulk of these thoughts are still in the form of oral traditions. In the course of time, some of the oral traditions were written down, either under the Buddhist influence or separately or simultaneously. Nevertheless, we could infer the existence of the original literary works having philosophical and theological values even from the passing remarks of some of the authors who wrote on the Lepcha topics and themes.²⁰

Talking about the ancient literary works of the Lepchas, Halfdan Siiger makes a profound remark which could be useful while attempting to formulate an indigenous philosophy of the Lepchas. He mentions that apart from the allegedly translated Lamaist works or those which are influenced by Lamaism, there are some so called the 'odd ones', "very concentrated and difficult to understand...it still remains so full of obscure points that I have been compelled to leave it out of consideration."²¹

It would not be correct to rule out the possibility that those 'obscure' looking writings could have been the original "*Naamtho-Naamthars*" of the Lepchas which actually carried the spirit of antiquity, the philosophical roots of the Lepchas since time immemorial. Since, these *Naamtho-Naamthars* are authorless writings,²² and they

knowledge of the traditional worship or it could be because of the practical need to reach out to the clients other than the Lepchas.

19 At this juncture, we could try another interpretation of the *Naamtho-Naamthars* which will help us to go beyond the meaning we are familiar with. Etymological meaning of the *Naamtho-Naamthars* could also be derived from three words: *Anaam*, *Atho* and *Athor*. From the root *Anaam* which means this year, the word *Naam* can be derived. The word *Naam* literally means 'year'. In the Lepcha language, time is called '*Tukchot*'. In naming *Naamtho-Naamthar*, the literary author may have used the word '*Naam*' to mean 'time'. Thus, if we consider '*Naam*' as derived from '*A-naamtho*', then the meaning of '*Naamtho-Naamthar*' would approximately be 'keeping of that time or that year.' It could also mean 'in keeping with that important time.' Similarly, '*Atho*' literally means 'high'. Thus, '*Atho*' used as suffix in '*Naamtho*' will mean 'a time of importance.' Thirdly, '*Athor*' in the Lepcha means 'escape'. This '*Athor*' could have become '*Thaar*.' From this perspective, '*Naamtho-Naamthar*' could have come from '*Naam-atho-sa-Naam-athor*.' This would give us the meaning 'fleeting moment of an important time.' Thus, this *Naamtho-Naamthar* becomes 'the very important records of very precious times in the world of the Lepchas'.

20 Halfdan Siiger writes, "Quite a number of Lepcha "books" or scriptures written in Lepcha script are known, and still more are said to exist or to have existed..." Cf. Halfdan Siiger, *The Lepchas: Culture and Religion of a Himalayan People*, Copenhagen, The National Museum of Denmark, 1967, p. 23.

21 *Ibid.* What the present day scholars could do is to go after those "odd ones", "very concentrated and difficult ones" which unfortunately were left out by the former compilers and collectors like Halfdan Siiger.

22 The authorlessness of ancient texts was a common feature in almost all the traditions because it is believed

are very close to the oral traditions, the unnamed authors could have been either a learned *Bongthing* or *Mun*, or someone very well versed with the socio-religio-cultural traditions of the Lepchas.²³ It wouldn't be so inaccurate even if we were to attribute some of the *Naamtho-Naamthaars* as the creation of Thikung Men Salong, a Lepcha scholar, an adventurer, a *Bongthing*, the inventor and compiler of the 'Lazaong' (**l aVo z**), the Lepcha syllabic scheme.²⁴

Therefore, philosophizing from the indigenous context of the Lepchas will require a special study of their religious scriptures and literary traditions which are found both in oral and written mythological forms.²⁵ Furthermore, it is important to pay attention to the scriptures and myths of the indigenous Lepchas because "religions arise from sacred scripture and myths..."²⁶

This paper titled "*Sakyu- Rumfaat of the Lepchas: A Philosophical Reading into their Naamtho-Naamthar-s*,"²⁷ tries to look into the philosophical implications of the traditional religious worship of the Lepchas. For this reason, I have chosen Sakyu-Rumfaat of the Lepchas to support the view that the Lepchas too have their philosophy. Seen through *Sakyu-Rumfaat*, the primeval philosophy of the Lepchas could be considered as 'theosophical.'²⁸ This is because we don't find a straight-jacketed separation between philosophy and theology in the Lepcha way of thinking.²⁹

Traditionally, *Sakyu-Rumfaat* is seen and understood as the worship of the fertility Goddess *Mayel Aamu* (**mayeAamu**) who resides in the *Mayel-Village* or *Mayel Kyong* (**mayeVo k 7**) in *Kongtchen* (**Vo k C 7**) or *Kingchumjaongbu chyu* (**Vi k q 7z aVoA bU cU**) or

that the people of ancient or near ancient times believed that such works were the treasures of the community. Hence, the authors left the works unsigned.

23 *Sakyu Rumfaat* has been one such writings.

24 Ren Lyangsong Tamsang in his article, 'Naamtho-Naamthaar', The Lepcha Manuscripts writes, "'Lazaong' is the most wonderful, invaluable, unique and rare, 'Naamtho-Naamthaar' of the Lepchas." In reality, it is the key to Lepcha language. It is the 'Lepcha tongue-twister', 'the Lepcha primer of phonetics', 'the root of the Lepcha glossary and lexicons.' From Lazaong alone, the Lepchas can construct 6,660 words.

25 Halfdan Siiger writes, "As the Lepcha scriptures are very important historical and religious sources, attention should be drawn to them." Cfr. Halfdar Siiger, *The Lepchas: Culture and Religion of a Himalayan People*, Copenhagen, The National Museum of Denmark, 1967, p. 23. (cf. #5).

26 G.A. Gaskell, *Dictionary of All Scriptures and Myths: A Classical Reference Guide to the Sacred Language of the Religions of the World*, New York, Avenel Books, Julian Press, (Reprint), 1960, p. xvii.

27 Geoffrey Gorer reports that "Sackyou [sakyu] Rum faat is one of the chief offerings to the people of Mayel; the other being Lafet sacrifice". Cfr. Geoffrey Gorer, *Himalayan Village: An Account of the Lepchas of Sikkim*, Gloucester, Allan Sutton Publishing Limited, 1938 (Reprint, 1984), p. 235.

28 'Theo-sophy' has been coined by joining two words: Philosophy which is coming from two Greek words, *Philia* meaning love and *Sophia* meaning wisdom. Theology comes from two Greek words, *Theos* meaning God and *logos* meaning study. Theosophy includes theosophical reflections.

29 This is also the main characteristic feature of the Indian philosophy. Unlike in the case of Western philosophy, in Indian philosophy, we find the combining of philosophy and theology,

Kanchenjunga.³⁰ Tamsang refers to it as *Maayelmookyong* (**mayɛ̃mUW ʌ**).³¹ According to the sayings of the Lepcha elders, it is a mythical Lepcha village hidden in the depth of mount Paki and mount Mendong where the seven immortal Lepcha couples live in seven traditional Lepcha houses, *Dukyemoolee* (**du ʌ mU i**).³² This *Mayel-Village* or *Mayel Kyong* is considered as the place of origin of the seeds of cereals, fruits and vegetables of *Mayel-Lyang* ((**mayɛ̃ – v i 7a**))³³ the courtyard of the creator. In other words, the people of *Mayel Lyang* depend on the generosity of *Mayel-Village* or *Mayel Kyong*. Although *Mayel-Kyong*, has been spoken of in a mythical sense; *Mayel-Lyang* ((**mayɛ̃ – v i 7a**)) is a physical reality which has been described both geographically and historically.³⁴

In order to situate our discussion, we shall recall the mythical story of *Mayel Kyong*. After that we shall look into the philosophical implications of *Mayel Kyong* and *Sakyu-Rumfaat*.

30 This worship takes place mainly on two occasions, after the completion of sowing and during the harvesting of dry rice, millet and maize.

31 K.P. Tamsang, *The Lepcha-English Encyclopaedic Dictionary*, Kalimpong, Shiva Mani Pradhan Mani Press, 1980.

32 So far two versions of the same mythical Mayel kyong are existing. According to one version, there are seven couples of Mayel people living in seven traditional Lepcha houses. The other version as recorded by Geoffrey Gorer mentions about seven men of Mayel kyong of whom only two, namely, Adoo Yook and Alau Yook have their wives called Talyeu Nimu and Sangvo Nimu. (Cfr. Geoffrey Gorer, *Himalayan Village: An Account of the Lepchas of Sikkim*, Gloucester, Allan Sutton Publishing Limited, 1938 (Reprint, 1984), p. 237. In order to give benefit of doubt to the readers, I have tried to record both the versions in this article.

33 This Mayel Lyang has been addressed as the 'courtyard' of the creator-God. E.g., **A n u k a yMaZy, i A ʌ u r M A a d s a i S_mayɛ̃ i 7a yMaZy**. (11). Cfr. Sonam Tshering Lepcha (comp.) *Sakyu-Rumfaat*, Kalimpong, Mutanchi Rong Shejum, 2005.

34 Geographically, the Mayel Lyang of the Lepchas covered a vast area. According to some authors, it extended from the Himalayas to Titalaya (Present day Bangladesh), upto Gipmochi mountain (trijunction of Sikkim, Bhutan and Tibet) in the east and upto Aroon river in Nepal in the west (Ren Tamsang version). This claim can be further corroborated with what Ren Arthur Foning gathered from the Lepchas folk songs. They described their *Mayel Lyang* in the following words: "*Chuk-lat, Po-nok take* (Sunrise [the east] upto *Punakha*); *Chuk-kyer, Ru-chan Rang-a* (Sunset [the west] upto Aroon and Tambur); *Chuk-gyom Tal, Chyu-bee Bong* (on the left of the sun [the North] upto the foot of the mountains; *Chuk-veem, Zo-la-see Brong* (on the right of the sun [the south] upto rice growing Duars [where there is plenty of rice]. In the Lepcha language, sachuk means the sun. Thus, the lyricist, used Chuk- as pre-fix. Cfr. D.T. Tamlong, *Mayel Lyang & The Lepchas (About Sikkim & Darjeeling)*, Darjeeling, Mani Printing House, 2008, pp. 14-17. Quoting from Ren K.P. Tamsang's *The Unknown and Untold Reality about the Lepchas*; R.N. Thakur's *Himalayan Lepchas*; A.R. Foning's *[Lepcha] Lepcha My Vanishing Tribe*; R.Moktan's *Sikkim: Darjeeling*; Dr. Sonam B. Wangyal's *Sikkim & Darjeeling*; the author tries to prove that the Lepchas had geo-historical space where their rulers ruled over the autochthons and the people lived happily. This geo-historical area of *Mayel Lyang* could possibly have covered still greater area than what has been told to us by the above mentioned authors. Should the historians succeed in proving the Kingdom of Monyul mentioned in the history of Arunachal Pradesh and in the history of Bhutan, then, the area will expand upto Arunachal Pradesh in the East and Tibet in the North. According to the historians, the northern parts of Arunachal Pradesh were believed to have been controlled by the Monpa kingdom of Monyul which flourished between 500 BCE and 600 CE Cf. www.arunachalpradesh.nic.in (accessed on 2nd May 2009). Again, the history of Bhutan also mentions about the existence of Lhomon (literally meaning Southern darkness) or Monyul (dark land) a reference to the Monpa aboriginal peoples of Bhutan. According to the historians of Bhutan also, there was a kingdom of Monyul, which existed between 500 BCE and 600 CE.

It is very clear that like any other group of people in the world, the Lepchas of the greater *Mayel Lyang* too were trying to answer the knotty questions of cause and effect. They were searching for the causes of the phenomena which surrounded them. Faced with awe and wonder, they might have used their indigenous intelligence to produce conclusive myths which explained ordinary things in extra-ordinary languages and expressions and vice-versa. One thing is very sure that such myths wouldn't have originated if the Lepchas of the greater *Mayel Lyang* didn't have any point to make or any message to give to posterity. It is said that "myths are intelligent productions of the self-conscious brain-mind of man... [they are] extraordinary historical survivals and it is surely reasonable to expect that they have originated in a manner also extraordinary."³⁵ What then are the points that these creators of the myths might have wanted to make?

Tamsang, in his book *The Lepcha-English Encyclopaedic Dictionary* explains *Mayel Lyang* as '*Shangri-La*', a paradise on earth, a secret land of eternal purity, a hidden paradise on earth, that is, Sikkim, a hidden and mysterious land, the eternal land of the Lepchas."³⁶ However, according to the popular beliefs of the Lepchas, this *Shangri-La* exists somewhere up there in *Kongchenchyu* or the mount Kanchenjunga known as *Mayel Kyong*. The road to the *Mayel Kyong* is guarded by three guardian spirits called *Sok-po* or *Sok-pa*. The eldest among them is known as *Mayel Yook-rum* or *Pong-rum*³⁷, the second is *Mi-tik*³⁸ and the third one *Tom-tik*.³⁹ In the past, the road leading into this *Mayel Kyong* was open to the ordinary humans, but now it is closed. The people who live there are somewhere between the gods and the ordinary human beings. They consist of seven brothers (couples)⁴⁰ living in seven huts (traditional houses); each person having a specific name and a huge goitre. These seven members of the *Mayel Kyong* are considered as the progenitors, ancestors and guardians of the Lepchas. Since they live on earth, they are not gods. However, they are not finite and mortal like humans, so they are not humans either. They are immortal but paradoxically they live-with-time and within time. They are mortal, however they represent the cycle of eternal time. In both the mythical versions, complementarity between the masculine and feminine characters are shown. In the mythical symbols, the masculine gender relates to desire,

35 G.A. Gaskell, *Dictionary of all Scriptures and Myths: A Classical Reference Guide to the Sacred Language of the Religions of the World*, New York, Avenel Books, Julian Press (Reprint), 1960, p. xix.

36 K.P. Tamsang, *The Lepcha-English Encyclopaedic Dictionary*, Kalimpong, Shiva Mani Pradhan Mani Press, 1980.

37 This guardian spirit is considered as the patron of the hunters. A religious ceremony called *Pong-rumfaat* of the Lepchas is performed in honour of this. Each hunter is supposed to offer a piece of the flesh of the game killed to guardian of the hunter and the hunted.

38 *Mi-tik* and *Tom-tik* are cruel carnivorous deities who are known for killing and eating both men and animals.

39 *Tom-tik* is a bear like cruel carnivores deity on the way to *Mayel Kyong*.

40 These people of the *Mayel Kyong* do not have wives. However, the two oldest of them named *Adoo Yook* and *Alau Yook* relate with the two spirits of the earth called *Taleu Nimu* and *Sangoo Nimu*. These two female spirits of the earth lie on their backs under the earth. Their bellies are the cultivable lands. The seeds sent by the people of *Mayel Kyong* go into the bellies, fertilize them, and become fruitful. In other words the two Spirits of the earth are fertilized by the *Adoo Yook* and *Alau Yook*, as a husband fertilizes his wife. Cf. Geoffrey Gorer, *The Lepchas of Sikkim*, New Delhi, Gyan Publishing House, (Reprint,1996), p. 237.

mind, spirit, and time. These Mayel beings living in the higher land in Kanchenjunga refer to the higher minds living in the higher recesses which are not easily accessible to ordinary mortals. They are infants in the morning, grown up people at midday and are old people in the evening.⁴¹ Furthermore, it is also believed that they wear the traditional Lepcha costumes made out of nettle cloth (*kajudam*) and small bamboo-hats (*Paapree Thyaaktuk/ paBr ÄXtM*). Thus, they are also the custodians of the Lepcha culture and customs.⁴²

The people of the *Mayel Kyong* are seen as *cosmic-divine* beings because they manifest the unity of the divine-human natures. At the same time, they are not absolutely eternal because the creator-mother or *Itbumu* or *Itbu-aamu* created them and bestowed upon them the responsibility to be the in-charges of food-grains like rice, millet and maize which she created. Symbolically understood, these seven couples of *Mayel Kyong* represent perfection, order, and seven spatial directions which could again be interpreted as the symbols of wholeness.⁴³ These people of *Mayel Kyong* are believed to be ideal people with proper blend of human character and divine bliss. They are the symbols of reconciliation between the two contradictory forces: the human and the divine. These seven couples of *cosmic-divine beings* are also pointers to the fact of superimposition of the divine nature upon the finite humans. In other words, they are the links between the spiritual and the physical. These cosmic-divine beings of *Mayel Kyong* symbolise the fusion of the celestial and the earthly.

This mythical narrative helps us to justify the claim of the divine-origin of the Lepchas having supernatural roots. Thus, they are called *Rongkup-Rumkup* (Child of *Rong*-Child of God). All these point to show that the myth of the *Mayel Kyong* and its inhabitants are mythological justifications of the existential facts of humans with divine endowments. Though it is very difficult to explain clearly and convincingly; the fact remains that there is a meeting point between the divine and the human, between the infinite and the finite. *Mayel Kyong* is that place where the perfect divine and the imperfect humans meet and interact. The seven couples of *Mayel Kyong* are the indication of the possibility of divine-human interaction.

41 There is a mythical story of a hunter from Sakhyong in Sikkim who once ventured in to the *Mayel Kyong*. He met a small child there and asked him about his father and mother. The child replied, "We are our own fathers and mothers; we are babies and young people and old people." They are all in one.

42 To someone who is in search of confirmation and validation of the cultural garbs, this mythical story gives foundation to the customs and practices of these people.

43 Cirlot, J.E., *Dictionary of Symbols* (translated from the Spanish by Jack Sage, New York, Philosophical Library, 1962. In his dictionary of the symbols based on the universal interpretations of the numbers he tells us that number 7 (seven) is the symbol of perfect, order, a complete period or cycle. The union of the ternary and quaternary endows it with exceptional value. It thus corresponds to the seven directions of space (the six existential dimensions plus the centre makes it seven). It also stands for the seven pointed star. Most extraordinary interpretation will be the reconciliation between the square and the triangle where the triangle is superimposed upon the square, as the sky is superimposed upon the earth.

Sakyu-Rumfaat (s k 7u - r Mf a) a Celebration of the Lepcha Root

Sakyu-Rumfaat has been universally accepted as one of the religious ceremonies of the Lepchas offered in honour of the seven couples of *cosmic-divine beings* of the *Mayel Kyong*.⁴⁴ However, to limit our imaginations to the fact of sowing and harvesting alone will be an intellectual insincerity because a careful interpretation leads us beyond the explicit and apparent reality. In fact, through the *Sakyu-Rumfaat* the *Rongkups* celebrate the origin of life, express their gratitude for the gift of life in its various forms and pray for the sustenance of it.⁴⁵ At the same time, this celebration also indicates that the sustenance of the children of greater *Mayel Lyang* is not possible without the blessings of the *Mayel-Aamu*. This ceremony highlights the collective responsibility of the created beings, most especially that of the human beings. The seeds have the responsibility to germinate, to bear fruit and to feed the children of *Mayel Lyang*. The children of the *Mayel Lyang* have the responsibility to receive the gift of life from the creator mother with gratitude and to preserve for posterity.⁴⁶ Ceremony of planting seeds reminds the children of *Mayel Lyang* of the need to participate in the procreative and creative act of the giver of life.⁴⁷ It is clear that the preservation of life is possible only when there is collaboration between the creator and the created. It is said, that “every soul is like a seedling in which is wrapped up a mysterious potency of life which may take long time to unfold but cannot be destroyed. As a giant oak is hidden away in every acorn, so is the life of God latent within the spirit of man waiting for unfoldment.”⁴⁸ In each *Sakyu-Rumfaat ceremony*, the Lepchas try to encounter this latent Spirit of God which unfolds as the ceremony progresses, led by the *Bongthing*.

44 Cf. Sonam Tshering Lepcha (comp.) *Sakyu-Rumfaat*, Kalimpong, Mutanchi Rong Shejum, 2005. He writes:

Vo s o s AaVo l nuka yMbaZy, A7a V l 7aVAU iA^t q^f enu iA^bU d bUrM
 hOd nu iA^t MU s k 7urM sonMMka yMbaZy (SRF . 1)
 s Vor s M J r 7UVwka naMM s AXa Vo QVwuka yMbaZy (SRF . 2)
 s k 7urM sonMAaMM lumen l uVoy AareM Vo s p_Vo Y ic Oz! l faM d_m0A . (SRF . 3)
 s k 7urMm, sonMMM, ic! l Oz! l Vo Y, ic Oz! l sa 0Q QuVon PubUka zu0b 0AZY
 sa z b a0d oM b00d sa m0V l u PuM d_m0A . (SRF. 4)

45 The following song used by the Tingbung Lepchas of Sikkim expresses their sentiment clearly. They sing:
 “This is our má yel place. It is your work. You are the creator of the seeds of rice, You are the creator of the seeds of maize, you are the creator of the seeds of millet, you are the creator of the seeds of wheat, you are the creator of the yam, a nyit a jom is creatress! *Shá sho rak rok* is creator!” Cf. Halfdan Siiger, *The Lepchas, Culture and Religion of a Himalayan People, Part I*, Copenhagen, The National Museum of Denmark, 1967, p. 91.

46 The act of keeping the ears of paddy in a well sealed container in the sacred and protected place is the symbolic way of upholding the sacredness of life.

47 Seed is the symbol of potency and hope. In the mythical language, seed symbolizes the presence of God, beginning of life and fulfillment of hope. Indispensability of seed/s during *Sakyu-Rumfaat* ceremony hints at the indispensability of God in our life. The procedure for preservation of seeds are mentioned as follows: s k 7urM
 faba AMz mbbXnu i l ka 0 l TaBa r 7U l a Oz! k? Aamu AaV f 70 i J baMU l U k 0ka r 7U l a 0tMMU
 az AaM MA re l Up baREN a ! l 0TbaNp_ sa t M z k uBSU0d l a TaBaNp_ faM u faXaNi l AaVo q [Aa]
 0T ka t M7 d M r ^0TbaNj M MU t BArenaMaX u Oz AaL Yuba] 0Aret M Eyu s k 7uruMfa_s a
 l Mnen l uVoy zXnu nMk 7U taV l 7U ka T7MTbaNaB a Oz rukUrM l daM u AanaB a Oz AaM
 0 l da l U 0A r ka E M a ! l nu A B aZz0d z M TbaN duNiC0pt k a_0TbaN Q QuVon sa Von ka paAaM
 AadMbU g a_m0A . (SRF. 58)

48 G.A. Gaskell, *Dictionary of all Scriptures and Myths: A Classical Reference Guide to the Sacred Language of the Religions of the World*, New York, Avengel Books, Julian Press (Reprint), 1960, p. 665.

Going through the oration of *Bongthings* during this *Rumfaat*, one could easily see how the cosmic-relatedness of the seeds manifests in the agrarian character of this religious ceremony. Feasts with agrarian features are one of the most important trademarks of the indigenous communities across the world.

Conclusion

Having analysed the possibilities of doing philosophy from the indigenous contexts of the Lepchas, especially after drawing out some of the philosophical implications latent in *Sakyu-Rumfaat*, it is quite clear to us that there is a possibility of developing an indigenous philosophy which will not only be the philosophical treasures of the Lepchas, but it will also be a philosophical basis for indigenous communities living along the Himalayan *Shangri-La*. If philosophy stands for the love of wisdom, the *Naamtho-Naamthars* of the Lepchas are examples of the love of wisdom manifested by the Lepchas of greater *Mayel Lyang*. Thus, in our attempt to put together the scattered philosophical thoughts of the indigenous people of the greater *Mayel Lyang*, the indispensability of a careful study of these *Naamtho-Naamthars* should not be ruled out, considering them as something 'odd', 'concentrated' and 'difficult to understand', but instead they should be paid attention to. *Naamtho-Naamthars* are the remnants of the wisdom literature of the indigenous Lepchas. These literatures are filled with tremendous potentialities for ongoing interpretation of their antiquity, which will in turn lead us into the deeper understanding of the evolution of the socio-religio-cultural consciousness of the indigenous people and of human kind.