

*Two Waves of Transformation and Construction of Lepcha (Mon) Identity in Sikkim:
An Assessment of Intra-Community Divide*

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Introduction

Culture changes and is not always static. But alteration in culture does not always mean it is in the state of collapse or demise thus, societal change and culture may not necessarily share a negative relation. Nonetheless the two variables are in a continuous state of negotiation with self and other. Sometimes, culture changes with the change in society but sometimes it might not. There might be various reasons for the above statement. Analogous is the case of Lepcha experience and identity formation process.

Historically Lepchas were animist for whom the holy were their own natural surroundings. They believe the first Lepchas were formed out of the pristine snow of holy mount Kanchendzonga the second highest peak in the world by a *Rum*¹, and thus trace their origin to the mountains. Lepchas, to infer, were in close harmony with nature. Their daily needs like food, clothing, and shelter were procured from nature and consumed with minor modifications.

Lepchas had their own indigenous identity, culture, tradition, and religion in the state of Sikkim.² There is no disagreement amongst Sikkimese that they were the *rahithanay*³ of the once independent kingdom. But these very features that make them unique were replaced in the gradual process of Lepcha societal development first, with the advent of Kham Tibetan rulers who later founded the Namgyal dynasty, introduced Buddhism and overshadowed their indigenous beliefs with their own religion and culture and second, the arrival of Christian proselytization missionaries who bestowed a completely new outlook to their religious belief system, culture and identity. I have presented here only two forces of foreign intrusion though anthropologists would argue that there were three (Gorer 1938) and possibly four waves of foreign occupation (Foning 1987). This paper categorizes only two waves because of the fact that these two groups were the only occupant that left a lasting impression over the mental-cultural-ideational makeover of the tribe which still finds resonance in the intra-community divide. These two experiences have led to the amalgamation and gradual fabrication of modern Lepcha culture and identity on the one hand and loose Lepcha intra socio-cultural divide on the other. What this brief study would analyse is the extent of such fissure and the pragmatic reasons behind such divide.

A Brief Profile of the Mu-tanchi-Rong kup/Lepchas

Lepchas like to be self addressed as *Mu-tanchi-Rong kup*.⁴ They traditionally were and some are still of the view that supernatural power organizes and animates the material world. Each of the Lepcha clans has sacred origin of their own. They primarily followed

¹ The literal interpretation of Rum is God or the Lepchas synonym for Mother Nature or the Ultimate Mother of Creation, namely Itbu-Debu-Rum.

² Sikkim used to be an independent Eastern Himalayan Kingdom till it formally merged with the Indian Union in the year 1975 and became the 22nd state of the Union.

³ *Raithanay* in Nepali diction denotes “native” or “aboriginal”.

⁴ The Lepchas believe that they were created by Itbu-Debu-Rum (the mother creator) out of love and affection and are her favorites of all the other creations therefore the interpretation of Mu-tanchi-Rong kup would be *God's favorite chosen children*.

*Bon*⁵ religion. This belief is clear during many of their ritualistic practices. For examples major *Rum Faat*⁶, shamanistic healing, birth and even death sacrament are generally performed by a *Bungthing*⁷ where nature is a manifest point of reference. A *Bungthing* can either be a male or a female. The Lepcha male *bungthings* are sometimes called, *Yabaa* and female *bungthings* as *Yamaa*. Foning (1987) labels this discrepancy in terminology as the influence of *Tsong*⁸ community over the Lepchas. But a Lepcha *Mun*⁹ named La Tsangmoo aged 74, resident of Lower Dzongu contest that the spiritual power of *Yamaa* could accompany a *Mun* and it is up to her to invoke *Yamaa* during rituals or remain neutral. *Bungthing* historically had an important position in a Lepcha society as in the absence of a '*Panu*' or a Lepcha king he would be entitled to look after the affairs of the administration until a new king was chosen (Gurung 2011).

They have always lived in perfect harmony with the surrounding environment. This is why Lepchas could be entitled as the true sons and daughters of nature. The outlook is evident in their belief of "sacred origin" as stated in the preceding paragraphs.¹⁰ In relation the tribesmen are often referred as shrewd botanist because of the exquisite and intricate medicinal knowledge of numerous plants found in the Himalayan belt. The tribe's practice of hunting, gathering is also indicative of the close relation they share with nature. It proved to be very essential for men especially during their hunting expeditions and also to sustain their own families. They are of the belief that every inanimate object has a soul of its own by the virtue of being a part of nature.

Lepchas are the "*eldest sons/daughters and thus elder brothers/sisters in Sikkim*". Many of the places within Sikkim bear Lepcha names too, example are the villages located in south Sikkim which are named Rong-Lee and Rhenock literally meaning the *Home of the Lepchas* and *Black hill*. As the autochthones and to show a token of respect Lepchas were and are situated in a separate reserve, Dzongu¹¹ in North Sikkim, privileged during the Namgyal dynasty then and by the Indian government now. It is to be noted that when Sikkim merged with the Indian Union in 1975, the tribal privilege was upheld in the constitution of India under article 371-F¹² attributing a sign of honor to the indigene of the region.

⁵ Bon is a primitive spiritual practice which has a strong inclination towards shamanism and animism.

⁶ Rum Faats are sacred rituals accompanied by incantations and prayer recitals to please the gods and goddesses residing in all the natural surroundings (for example the mountains, rivers, forests etc). Chyu Rum now perverted into Chirim Rum Faat commemorated usually in the month of June and led by a *Bungthing* is one such ritual.

⁷ *Bungthing* are male Lepcha shamans. They are often known as the medicine man of the tribe.

⁸ *Tsongs* are the Subba tribal community of Sikkim. Some anthropologists consider them to be the indigenous of Sikkim along with the Mon or the Lepchas.

⁹ *Mun* are the Lepcha female shamans.

¹⁰ Lepcha believe their ancestors had a sacred origin by the virtue of being created by Mother Nature or supreme *Rum*.

¹¹ Dzongu is a separate reserve meant only for the Lepchas of Dzongu proper. Even Lepchas who resides outside the reserve but is a resident of Sikkim are not permitted to enter the region without prior permission of the state authority and procure land within the established boundary of Dzongu.

¹² Article 371 F ascertains Dzongu as a special reserve meant for the Lepchas of Sikkim under the Indian Constitution.

Generally the traditional Lepcha houses are raised from the ground and rest on wooden pillars which in turn rest on flat stones. The space in between were used as sheds for cattle and poultry. It had thatch roofs with normally a fire place in the kitchen. The Lepchas wore simple dress traditionally made of nettle fiber which was meticulously waved and prepared by Lepcha women. This is one of the reasons why the tribe is often referred to as the *nettle weavers*. Silk, gems stone, bamboo were often used to craft fashionable outfits. The skill of weaving was passed down across generations in families especially from mother to their daughter. *Dumvun* in Lepcha and *Gaadha* in Nepali dialect is the end product worn by women and *Thokro* is solely men's attire. *Toh-roo* a white head scarf worn only by the women, *Lyaak* (necklace), *Sambrang-bur* a multiple silver waist amulets resembling a *bur* (flower) of a special tree (sambrang), and multi colored belt called *Nomrek* usually accompanies the female attire. To complement the Thokro, Lepcha men wear *Tomu* or baggy quarter pants with *Athyektuk* (bamboo hat) or *Shyambu* (normal hat made of cloth). Finishing the Thokro would be a Nomrek tied around the waist.

Lepcha dialect is widely accepted to be a Tibeto-Burman language spoken in the tribal inhabited land of Sikkim, Darjeeling (West Bengal), Ilam (Nepal) and even Samtse district of south-western Bhutan (Plaisier 2007). And Lepcha script is said to have been invented at the end of 18th century and the beginning of the 19th century by the then king Cha-dor (Gorer 2005). However this postulate stands challenged, reveal Foning and Gurung in their respective study of the ethnic aboriginal tribe and political dynamics in Sikkim (Foning 1987; Gurung 2011). Tamsang (1983) on the other hand has argued it to have been developed by Thling Mensalong an official of early Lepcha king (Tamsang 1983). But he too has failed to mention the exact year in which it was invented. The tribe had an interesting mode to preserve and transfer their culture from one generation to another in the form of oral history. In addition to the arguments by Gorer (1938) and Foning (1987) this could be another reason why they did not feel the necessity to maintain a written history or literature like that of the other tribes inhabiting the Eastern Himalaya.¹³ It is therefore the tribes' legacy that folklores and ancestry are transferred from one generation to another in the form of a monologue. This is why the village elders, family head (generally male counterpart) were and are the prime keepers of folktales around which the 'consciousness of belonging'¹⁴ of the Lepcha youths are built even today.

Two waves of Transformation

The indigenous tribal identity of Lepcha was hit and subsequently altered by two different groups of foreign forces. Though Foning would have a counterview against this

¹³ Gorer sums up in his study of the Himalayan village that the Lepcha literature and the knowhow of Lepcha scripture were lost due to the obliteration that it met in the hands of the invading forces of Tibet which ruled over the indigenes till monarchy was finally abolished in the latter half of the 20th century whereas, Foning contends that the Lepcha scripture and its legacy gradually faded into oblivion because of the lack of enthusiasm on behalf of the latter Lepchas for whom the spirituality which was maintained with the decades long copying of the Namthars or Lepcha Holy texts stood lost due to overriding influence and use of Nepali and Hindi languages.

¹⁴ By 'consciousness of belonging' I mean to highlight the perception that shapes their identity and in turn makes them aware of their origin and cultural roots.

proposition, the two forces mentioned have had the most profound impact over the tribe. Foremost were the migrants from the Kham region of Tibet who later founded the Namgyal dynasty and ruled over Sikkim till the latter half of the 20th Century and second was the advent of British East India Company and subsequent expedition of Christian missionaries in the region. These two external forces shaped and for some Lepcha populous (re)shaped their identity and culture.

Advent of the Tibetans and Construction of Lepcha Buddhist Identity

In the history of Sikkim, Phun-tShogs rNamgyal or often Penchoo Namgye¹⁵ of Tibetan origin a descendent of Khye Bumsa was coronated by three 'Red Hat' sect Lamas at West Sikkim as the first Chogyal (king) in or around 1641-42 (Foning 1987; Gorer 2005; Wangchuk and Zulca 2007; Rislely 2010; Gurung 2011). After such sanctification in the 17th century we can conjunct Sikkim politically came under the Tibetan influence. The consequence of such a consecration was the dawn of a new uni-linear relation of the ruler and the ruled where the interests of the Lepchas were represented by a single monarch. In the end once independent land mass was transformed into the inherent property of the Namgyal dynasty. Subsequently the indigenous identity constitutive of culture/tradition/religious sermons of the tribe began reflecting the dominance of a foreign culture. In addition when Lamaism was adopted as the state religion of Sikkim the ethnic group had no option than to follow suit (Das 1983; Gorer 2005; Sinha 2008). In the subsequent phase the tribal identity was shaped according to that of its Sovereign. However, the traditional tribal culture of the Lepchas was not completely forsaken with the advent of Lamaist culture. A part of the culture of the Lepchas was maintained as a safety valve to weaken the likelihood of uprising against the monarch and the ease of administration. It resulted in a monarchical establishment where Lepcha culture was given relative autonomy.

Lama Lhatsun Nangkha Jigma or Lhatsun Chhembo one of the three saints, the other two lamas being Sempah Chhembo and Rigdsin Chhembo, sanctified the coronation of the first king of Sikkim (Waddell 1984; Foning 1987). Lama Lhatsun Chhembo is said to have introduced Buddhism to the isolated tribe of the Lepchas in Sikkim. It is argued by Choedon (1995), that "while the rulers were busy in consolidating kingdom, the Lamas were engaged in spreading Lamaism" in Sikkim. The Lepchas never really resisted Buddhist cultural dominance which could probably be because they were party to a historic blood brotherhood agreement with the Tibetan/Bhotias Buddhist which was concluded between Thekong Tek (the Lepcha Chieftain) and Khye Bumsa (originally Tibetan) representative of the two sects at Kabi Lungchok situated 70 km north of Gangtok (current capital of Sikkim) and they did not want to trample upon the sacredness of such an agreement. This may be the reason why Foning (1987) considers the agreement a betrayal on the part of the Lepcha chief and his community as a result of which they were colonized later. Secondly, the Rongs were made subservient to the new religion by modifying the very rudimentary of Buddhism by incorporating some of the core values of their native Mon culture. It gave Tibetan Buddhism an essential Lepcha

¹⁵ Namgye and later Namgyal was the title conferred to the first king Phun-tShogs-rNamgyal by Lama Lhatsun Nangkha Jigma or Lhatsun Chhembo. The title was carried on by the dynasty to signify royal lineage.

overtone which was more acceptable to the tribe. Thirdly, Lepcha by nature are peace loving and a tribe with no known records of war making, violence and annexation. This very nature could have kept them from not engaging directly against the foreign cultural and political dominance. Nonetheless, when we recourse to Sinha (2008) we find some faint evidence that some of the Lepchas did stage marginal amount of rebellion towards the encroaching Tibetans but in vain.

This period could be marked as the first wave of Lepcha identity construction. The conversion could be labeled as a response to a structural pressure, from the above, rather than from the agential echelon. The demands to change surged from the dominant to the dominated. Because of this though contemporary Lepcha are aware of the fact that they were nature worshippers they now are more attuned in the line of Buddhist philosophy. Tibetan Lamaism is thus the prevalent religion of Buddhist Lepchas. They have a blend of two philosophies that is, Monism¹⁶ and Lamaist Buddhism. The salad bowl approach signified the partial end of Mon culture and the amalgamation of Lepcha style of nature worshipping along with Tibetan Buddhism. For example every rituals of Bungthing were accompanied with a live sacrifice which was discontinued after the adoption of Buddhism where live sacrifices were considered an act of sin. They termed sin as '*la-yo*' (Gorer 2005). The community life practiced by the Lepcha society was still strong during this phase.

Christian missionaries and (Re)Construction of Lepcha Identity

The Christian proselytization process of the Lepchas had a fair share of influence from two different groups. These groups could broadly be classified into two, first, the non-British (European) missionaries, and second, essentially the missionary efforts extended from Great Britain (Foning 1987). Nevertheless both the schools had contributed to the alteration of the Lepcha life-style and the future of the tribe. Gorer (2005) explains that Lepcha conversion in Sikkim represented the most successful missionary endeavors as it happened to modify the converts' character most profoundly than the earlier conversion to Buddhism (Gorer 2005).

British came to Sikkim during the 18th Century and their missionaries started converting a few of the Lepchas to Christianity (Das 1983). The British empire as in other parts of South Asia was actually in search for new source of raw materials and cost effective trade routes. The then kingdom became the protectorate of the British Raj since 1890 with the signing of a treaty between later Great Britain and China regarding Sikkim and Tibet (Kazi 2009). Nonetheless they started active participation in the internal politics of Sikkim after the first half of the 19th Century. Though we find the aura of the British strategy under Sugauli Treaty of 1915 concluded between East India Company-Nepal, it was Treaty of Titaliya of 1817 with Sikkim that precisely offered them with this economic and political end. It gave the British East India Company merchants and traders who desired to use the transit route through Sikkim, an opportunity and a corridor to exploit which could levy no transit cost (Gurung 2011). It also altered the political

¹⁶ Monism is the ancient belief among the Lepchas in the sacredness of nature which is accompanied by nature worshipping.

sovereignty of independent Sikkim as it now looked towards the crown to meet its foreign conducts and external threats.

This phase can be considered the second stage of (re)construction of the Lepcha identity. It was during this phase that many of the Lepchas abandoned their traditional way of life and began to toddle on a new path which promised them salvation from individual sin and promised better prospect of life. And it was the Christian Lepchas who received the benefits of first modern education which the missionaries saw essential for their moral, spiritual and socio-economic upliftment. Primarily, the conversion was a result of discontents (physical and social) in their own religious-cultural tradition. For example, many of the Lepchas felt that the Lamaist tradition had not much to offer regarding their spiritual upliftment and physical well being, whereas others felt the rituals conducted were too lengthy, costly and therefore economically unviable. Secondly, the growing admiration of the alien European culture resulted in the gradual alienation from their indigenous culture. This trait is prominent and visible in many of the ways they interact with their own tribesmen. For example, Khamrimoo as an expression of greeting has been replaced by Jai-Masi or Hail to the Masihaa/Savior (Praise the Lord) after the conversion.

The second phase of transformation was seen at two levels, individualistic and societal. At the Individualistic level Christianity replaced the spiritual life of the animist-Buddhist Lepchas of the then Sikkim and stood molded in the European Christian philosophy of sin, salvation and civilization. On the other hand it had a spill-over effect. The converts renounced their traditional Lepcha way of life completely which was to an extent maintained under the former Buddhist culture. They alienated themselves from their indigenous society and felt raised and civilized from individuals who still followed the traditional animist-Buddhist culture. Rightly so they received modern education in the hands of the Christian Missionaries too. The new Christian Lepchas converts were later bestowed with the providence of the very proselytization mission which they originally found themselves in. The converts during this era became the mouth piece of Christian values in the Sikkimese society. This phase saw the beginning of a fissure in the homogenous Lepchas society.

Varied Nuances of the two Conversions and Intra-tribal Divide

There are manifold implications of the two conversions. It shaped, constructed and (re)structured their identities accordingly. Reactions and counter reactions amongst themselves, viz the two divided son of the same great mother were therefore unavoidable. The dissatisfaction raised by the two poles has resulted in a benign yet sometimes strong divide between the two opposite poles.

Buddhist reaction towards the Christians

Hard liner Buddhist Lepchas are so much attuned to the Lamaist Buddhist way of life that they wield huge reservation against Christian transformations. They feel it is an injustice done to their traditional values and culture. The non Christian Lepchas lament the fact that many of their own have left their indigenous culture and have adapted foreign

practices. It is so because even though the Lepchas were converted to Buddhist ideals they were associated with their animist culture. The era of Buddhist conversion saw the healthy incorporation of both the traditions. They never were alienated from their customary practices in a real sense. This is why they associated and did not rebel against the acquired Buddhist culture than the second phase of conversion under Christianity which demanded the complete abandonment of the traditional values¹⁷. The Lepchas after confirming to Buddhist culture did not or were not obliged to completely abandon their traditional life style of worshipping nature. They were worshipping their own deities under the cloak of Buddhism. A hybrid religion was thus born that gave rise to a new blend altogether by grafting Buddhism along with nature worshipping. The practice of certain values like multi-theism¹⁸ was accepted in Buddhism as in the traditional nature worshipping customs of the Lepchas. But confirmation to Christian ideal would mean a whole new ball game all together. Under Buddhism, indigenous belief system, customary laws and majority of tribal rituals could be practiced as a part and partial of larger Lamaist Buddhist tradition whereas the same was completely forsaken when Christianity was adopted. The thoughts of the Lepcha Buddhists are clear that they were never Christians therefore has reservations against Christians converts.

Buddhist Lepcha feel that they are very close to their own traditional culture. They speak of maintaining their language, the practice of Mun and Bungthing and various Lepcha fests in Sikkim even today. The group portray themselves pristine as compared to the Christian Lepchas. The group is ethnocentric in the sense they do not want to entertain Christian beliefs and practices. There is minimum mutual recognition towards Christianity.

No Buddhist Lepchas performs Christian celebration and vice-versa however minor exceptions lies on both the sides. Some Christian Lepchas would still celebrate Lepcha *Namsung* or *Nambun* (nam –year, sung-to celebrate) meaning New Year which falls in the month of December every year but the numbers of such individuals are handful. This is especially true of Christian Lepchas of Darjeeling and Kalimpong Hills.¹⁹ But the scale of celebrating Christmas is much more than the normal Namsung fest which is just the opposite of ordinary Buddhist Lepchas.

The traditional abode of the Lepchas, Dzongu is not totally homogenous too. Christianity has grasped some of the Lepcha household and a Presbyterian Church has come in Upper Dzongu. Mangan which is the district headquarter of the north district has seen maximum conversions. Weddings show the greatest rift in their indigenous practices. While the Buddhist Lepcha are more akin to portray the traditional aspects of the marriage culture the same is completely abandoned by the Christians. Buddhist Lepchas still maintain the ancient custom of *sunkyo*²⁰ or the customs of sacred oath taking during the wedding

¹⁷ Traditional values are taken to be both the Animist and Buddhist culture which was prevalent before Christianity set foot in Sikkim.

¹⁸ Multi-theism in this paper is taken as a practice of worshipping multiple god and goddesses. This tradition was prevalent in both the animist culture of the Lepchas and the Tibetan Buddhist therefore a point of commonality could be secured easily between the two religious practices.

¹⁹ Darjeeling is a district and Kalimpong a sub-division of it under West Bengal.

²⁰ Sunkyo is the sacred custom of oath taking between the bride and the groom. It is pretty much like the western Christian oath taking ceremony during their wedding where the couple vows to be with the other

which is usually initiated by a Bungthing. It holds tremendous significance for the Buddhist Lepchas whereas the same is no more than a show for the Christians.

During the birth and death rituals there are certain compulsory practices which are put into practices in a Buddhist Lepcha household. For example after a child is born in the Buddhist household, after certain number of days which varies from three to four days, the family performs '*Tungbaong Faat*' that is the naming ceremony for the new born which is officiated by a wise elder or a Mun or a Bungthing. Even after death, the responsibility to make the soul rest in peace in their respective *Lyap*²¹ or the sacred place of their origin rests with a Mun and sometimes a revered Lama for the Buddhists.

Buddhist Lepchas often accuse their Christian brothers as the one who have forgotten their language, customary practices, animist culture and religion which they feel is important component of the Lepcha identity. This accusation has a grain of truth in it, but not holistically as there are numerous Christian Lepchas who are equally willing to learn and revive their indigenous language. Traditional dresses are still worn with fervor, nonetheless, occasionally by them during weddings, Rum Faats, Namsung etc. The emotional attachment that a Buddhist Lepcha have towards protecting their identity is considered stronger than the Christian converts. Buddhist Lepcha are proud to be a part of their traditional culture and heritage.

Christian grievances towards the Buddhists

Christianity is more than a religion for the Lepchas who have trodden in the path of the Christ. It is a personal relationship with the only true God. They believe that the non-Christian Lepchas do not know or have not recognized the ultimate truth. They feel that it is only through the words of the Bible and Christ that miracles in their lives could take place that can bestow eternal afterlife. In this sense Christianity is the spiritual structure that supports their physical life. Conversion as such cannot scale the importance of their sacred spiritual life and therefore the new converts are comfortable in calling themselves *transformed* rather than converts. They perceive that they represent a more modernized/civilized way of life than their non-Christian brothers. They behave that they are the embodiment of a finer ideal and are way ahead of the crude principles of nature worshipping and superstitions thus represent a more modernized/civilized way of life than their non-Christian brothers.

Practicing culture of Buddhism meant giving rise to a taboo identity under Christianity. A form of domination of one culture over the other was established as the Lepchas who adopted Christianity completely forsook the established customary practices. Every Lepcha Christian feels that it is a responsibility to protect their tribesmen. According to them those who dwell in other religious and customary practices are traversing in

till the end of their mortal life. The only difference being the use of chee or often chi (fermented millet) and butter which both the couple has to sip three consecutive times to validate the marriage ceremony.

²¹ Lyap refer to the sacred spot of origin for the Lepchas. They believe to be the descendent from the mountains and trace their lyap within it. They are of the belief that once a Lepcha dies and if that soul should reach their respective Lyap are the most fortunate as they would rest amongst their ancestors and everlasting peace.

illusionary world that they have weaved for themselves. So to speak it is a path of the unrighteous and sin which should be abandoned for the right cause, which is Christianity.

Christian proselytization missionaries bestowed a completely new outlook to their religious belief system, culture and identity. They believed everything to be the creation of God so the right path of worship is the devotion of the creator, not the created. This is one of the essential divergence points where the Christian Lepchas differentiate with their Buddhist brothers. There is no question of multi theism in Christianity as they believe in only one single God therefore forsaking him for some other gods is out of question. Therefore it is only he who can forgive the sins committed in this life, burden shared, and would ultimately be resurrected after death.

Weddings, births and death ceremonies of the believers of the new faith completely took a new turn. The wedding dress was changed from the tribal attire to western tuxedo and wedding gowns. The custom of sunkyo without which a Lepcha wedding would not be recognized was breached and took the form of official oath taking ceremony through a pastor. The spiritual witnesses were reduced from all possible things created under the sky to the only one who has created it. The birth and death ceremonies would be officiated only through a pastor and the holy-scripture. The hurt of death was successfully removed with the promise of an afterlife.

The level of belonging of the Christian Lepchas towards their tribe is virtually present however the non-Christians are not willing to accept this proposition. The non-Christians always question their divided sons and daughters whether they have in actuality any contribution to make towards the protection and safeguard their culture and identity. They still feel confirming and being subservient to the alien culture is not the correct road to take. They always propose to go back and trace the roots to where they have come from.

Conclusion

It is asserted that of the many tribes inhabiting Sikkim, Lepchas have preserved their language, culture, tradition and identity to a very large extent. However one should note that the intra-community divide runs strong in the Lepcha society of Sikkim. The divide is between the two groups, Buddhist and the later Christians Lepchas. There is a benign residue of the animist principles within the traditional Buddhist Lepchas where every object has a spirit of its own and is diametrically opposite to the rationale of the modern Christians Lepcha. The social life amongst them stands fractured.

Historically the Lepchas had a very strong community life. The societal responsibility was very high in a traditional homogenous Lepcha society. Every social activity from marriage, birth, Rum Faats, and death ceremonies used to be a community affair. It was not only the member of the concerned family that was actively involved but the whole society in such events. They made sure that the societal burden during such occasions was shared amongst the whole community. However, such social solidarity in the contemporary era has declined. Though there are formal interactions between the two divided groups, the respective community members do not identify themselves with the other as they previously used to.

Sinha contends that Lepchas retained their tribal practices after adapting Lamaist and Christian way of life (Sinha 2008). This might not be necessarily true because the Lepchas retained the practice of their traditional belief and customs under Lamaism but not Christianity. Thus a complete Identity transmogrification was witnessed in the case of Christianity conversion but not under the Buddhist culture. In the process of civilizational progress of the Lepcha society their identity does not seem vanishing as stated by earlier theorists and literatures but gradually transforming. This cultural difference has resulted in great strain in intra-community relationships as religious conversion is rigorous in the case of Christianity but not under the Buddhist culture. Under the latter there is no inverse relation between conversion and their tribal customs. It continues with the same zeal and vigor till the present days with minor modifications. And though Lepcha identity was transmogrified by both the waves, the former gesticulate proved to be much more persuasive in (re)inventing the distinctiveness of the tribe. Therefore there is a widening gap between them and the presence of ultra orthodox individuals in both the camps makes the reconciliation even difficult. An inverse relation between conversion and their tribal customs could be observed even if not in an explicit standard. The two experiences have led to the amalgamation and gradual fabrication of modern Lepcha culture and identity. Once homogenous community stands divided in the lines of acquired identities of its two foreign masters. And confirming to these ideals has led to a benign intra socio-cultural divide within the Lepcha community. But at the same time there is an assurance from the younger generation of Lepcha youths of 21st century Sikkim that reconciliation could be reached between the two as both the entities aspire to protect, promote, and conserve their unique identity for the times to come.

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