



AN ESSAY ON THE LEPCHA COMMUNITY: THE AUTOCHTHONES OF SIKKIM AND DARJEELING

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ABSTRACT

The Lepchas, a kind and gentle, but a docile race is believed to be the autochthonous tribe of the Eastern Himalayan part of Sikkim and Darjeeling. They are also found in few other pockets of Eastern Nepal and Western Bhutan. Over the ages, the Lepchas of Sikkim and Darjeeling came in contact with the Tibetans, the Bhutias, Nepalese, the Europeans and many other communities from the mainland India. As such through their intercourse with the Tibetans, they have come under the heavy influence of Buddhism. Through such constant interaction with different races and people, the original Lepcha culture not only came in contact with the alien culture but over the period it was strongly influenced by them. This incessant process had its strong implicit and explicit impact on the original Lepcha culture and their ways of life. Besides, over the ages, they also lost their socio-political dominance, and from being the ‘dominant’ community, today they are reduced to just a mere ‘minority’ in their own sacred land – the “Nye Mayel Lyang”. Through this research, an attempt is made to explore the Lepcha community and their past and also examine the impact of the dominant culture on them. It also tries to shed light on the current issues of the Lepcha society, especially that of Dzongu.

Keywords: ACT, Autochthones, Dzongu, Hydropower, Lepchas, Sikkim, Teesta

1. Introduction

The Lepchas, the aboriginals of the Southern Himalayas have become subjects of three countries - India, Nepal, and Bhutan. This tribe is not migratory in nature as has been referred to by the early anthropology, as their spread within this region can be narrated through their political history, which has been attempted to be explained by this section. Therefore, one will focus on the numerous changes in the political scenario of the Lepcha land, where these tribals were subject to different political authorities at different times.

The Lepchas call themselves “Rongkup Runkup” or in short “Rong”, which means “the son of the snowy peak, the son of God” (Ghatak, 2005). The Lepchas call themselves ‘Rong-Kup’ or ‘Mutanchi Rongkup’. ‘Rong’ meaning both ‘to wait’ and ‘peak’, ‘Mutanchi Rongkup’ means ‘Mother’s loved ones’; mother here standing for Mother as creator whom Lepchas call ‘Itbumoo’.

The Lepchas call their land “Nye Mayel Lyang” which according to their historical records was said to have spread over a large area of land starting from Arun, Tamor, and Koshi river(now in Nepal, in the west up to the Tagong La, Thong La, and Rudok river(now in Bhutan) in the East. In the north, the land included the Kanchenjunga, Gopmochi peaks and Chumbi valley(now in Tibet) and was extended up to Titiliya in the South in Bangladesh (Roy; 2005).

2. Theories of Origin

The Lepchas firmly believe that they are the autochthones of Sikkim and Darjeeling. However, various authors and historians, past and present, have given conflicting and confusing theories about the actual origin of the Lepcha race, but most firmly believe that the race first originated in Sikkim itself, while some say that the Lepchas migrated from the north and quite a number say they came from the east. There are also people, who conjecture that they have come from the west. According to Lama (2007) “.... the Lepchas call themselves ‘Mutanchi Rong’ meaning the beloved children of God. Their original ancestors, ‘Foodongthing and Nazong-Nu’, the first man and woman were created by God from the eternal purity and holy snows of the Himalayas, as such even to this day, Lepchas worship the Himalayas as their guardian deity (ibid).”

The Lepchas claim themselves not only as an indigenous race of the Sikkim and Darjeeling district, but also the very primeval people of the world (Tamsang; 2007). However, as far as the origin of the Lepchas is concerned, many foreign writers, anthropologists, linguists, and serologists have conflicting opinions and views. Mackean, Shafer, Siiger and many others are of the opinion that the Lepchas have migrated from the east in ancient times and permanently settled down in Sikkim and Darjeeling. Many others have the suppositions and imaginations that the Lepchas may have migrated from the north. Many say that the Lepchas have definitely migrated from the west, for the Lepchas have in some way descended from the European stock, that is, the Lepcha race was founded by three warriors who had remained behind from the campaign of Alexander the Great (ibid). However, Tamsang asserts that the Lepchas and their language must have gone to other parts of the world in the distant past and hence the Lepchas are the autochthones of Sikkim and Darjeeling. Whatever are the minor differences of opinion about the actual origin of the Lepcha tribe, there is absolute unanimity on the assumption that the Lepchas are the most ancient tribe and undisputedly the original aborigines of Sikkim and their life and culture revolve around Kanchenjunga mountain and the rivers Teesta and Rangit, which are considered as their 'sacred deities'.

3. Lepcha Language

The Lepcha language is very ancient, the language is highly developed and comprehensive that it can express anything and everything and for all purposes. According to Tamsang (2007), "...the Lepcha language is most copious, abounding in synonyms, antonyms, and homonyms and it possesses words to express every slightest meaning. It admits of a flow and power of speech which is most wonderful and which renders it capable of giving expression to the highest degree of eloquence...all the inconceivable diversity of trees... variety of plants and flowers with which the forests are filled, the Lepchas can tell the names of all, and this nomenclature extends to beasts, to birds, to insects and to everything around them, animate and inanimate." The script existed much before the advent of Tibetans in the thirteenth century (Tamsang; 2007; Dahal; 1984). According to Graham (1897), the Lepcha language is far anterior to Greek, and perhaps not less old than Sanskrit. Gorer (1938) also expressed the same tone. According to him,

“...it is impossible that a people with language so comprehensive; with manners, though primitive, so superior, as to entitle them to rank high among civilized nations... The language is monosyllabic one (though not altogether an isolating one, as it possesses in a degree – as all languages however primitive do—an agglutinative structure) and is unquestionably far anterior to the Hebrew or Sanskrit.....I think I may without fear of misrepresentation, state it to be the oldest language extant. It is a most comprehensive and beautiful one; regarded alone, as a prolific source of derivations and etyma of words; it is invaluable to the philological world.”

The Lepcha language has been recognised as a State language along with Sikkimese Bhutia and Nepali in Sikkim and the same is being taught in schools, colleges, and the Government publications are being issued in the language.

4. Religion of the Lepchas

Lepchas were traditionally worshippers of nature prefer to call themselves “Mutanchi Rongkup” which means the loved ones of mother nature. At present, the Lepchas are either Buddhists or Christians. The old religions of the Lepchas were the Munism and the Bongthingism religion. However, nowadays, we do not find many following this faith, but some people in the interior still practice this religion side by side with the Lamaist Buddhism. However, Buddhism as well as Bongthingism was simultaneously followed by the Lepchas (Graham, 1897).

The general view about the present Buddhist Lepchas is best expressed by Gorer (1938), where he said, “It is possible that before the conversion to Lamaism, the Lepchas felt more strongly that they possessed the only correct way of dealing with the supernatural; but now that they have accepted the idea that there are two alternative methods for dealing with nearly every devil they can accept without difficulty further alien methods founded on similar hypothesis”. The religion followed by the Lepchas in the present days is a synthesis of Buddhism and Bonism (Nirash, 1982).

5. History of the Lepchas

While trying to provide an account of the history of the political scenario of the Lepcha land, the different political changes and regimes for the sake of conceptual clarity will be divided into different phases. To begin with, the first phase would include the coming of the Tibetans to

Sikkim or “Renjyong Lyang”, as it is still fondly referred to by the Lepchas. Approximately, during 1420, the Lepcha chief was ‘Turvey Pano’ after who followed the legendary and famous spiritual leader, ‘Thi-Kung Tek’, aided by his wife, a priestess, ‘Nikung Aal’. This was the time when ‘Renjyong’ the so-called Sikkim was handed over to the Tibetan chief, ‘Khye Bhumsa’, and a treaty was signed between the Lepcha and the Tibetan chief at Kabi Longchok, 17 km away from Gangtok which was marked by a stone, now called the Statue of Unity is located near the Thakur Bari in Sikkim.

Pang Lhabsola unique festival in Sikkim commemorates the signing of the oath and Blood treaty between the Lepcha priest Thekong Tek and Kaye Bhumsa, the ruler of Kham region of Tibet. This festival is celebrated on the 15th day of the seventh month according to lunar calendar that usually falls on the end of August or the month of September. The ‘Pang Lhabsol festival’ or ‘Neassy’ is celebrated throughout Sikkim, a unique and worships the snowy peaks of the guardian deity of Sikkim - Mount Kangchenjunga.

The signing of the Blood treaty, therefore, set the stage for the beginning of the supremacy of the Tibetans as the first alien ruler over the Lepchas, and the Tibetans thus paved their way for a very long Tibetan rule in Sikkim. It ultimately aided ‘Phunsto Namgyal’ to ascend the Sikkimese throne in 1642, after which the simple Lepcha tribal became a subject in their own land.

The second phase is marked by the Bhutanese rule in Sikkim and Kalimpong. The Bhutanese managed to create an artificial cleavage between the Lepchas of Sikkim and Kalimpong. Bhutan attacked Sikkim and Kalimpong and fought with the legendary Lepcha ruler “Pano Gayboo Achyok” at his Dalim fort in Kalimpong, and managed to take over the entire kingdom from, 1700 to 1710. At the request of the then Dalai Lama, Bhutan reseeded from Sikkim but refused to give up “Damsang Lyang” or Kalimpong. Therefore, since 1707 the Lepchas in “Damsang Lyang” came under the rule of the Bhutanese.

The third phase is marked by the entry of the Gorkhas from Nepal. They would constantly attack and harass the Tibetan rulers in Sikkim, and the boundaries between the two nations never remained fixed as there was constant warfare. The area east of Arun, Koshi, and Tamer rivers were originally the homeland of the Lepchas. In 1790, the Gorkhas managed to get as far as into Sikkim and in the next 30 years they drove the Sikkimese kingdom as far as the

Teesta river and took over the Terai region i.e., the lower hills between the Teesta and the Mechi river. It was only after the Anglo-Nepalese war of 1816 that the Terai was ceded back to Sikkim, through the treaty in Titalia in Bangladesh. Even today Nepal controls the land east of Koshi and the boundary of present-day Darjeeling and Sikkim. As per the 2001 census of Nepal 3660 or 0.02 percent of Lepchas are recorded in Nepal.

The fourth phase is marked by the British rule in Kalimpong and Darjeeling. As a mark of friendship, the Darjeeling District was given over to the British by the Namgyal or King of Sikkim in 1835, with the purpose of constructing a sanatorium or a hospital for the British soldiers. The relation between Bhutan and the British were always full of turmoil, and in 1864 the British annexed Kalimpong from Bhutan and placed it under the administrative control of Darjeeling. Therefore, the residents of the proud 'Damsang Lyang' now became the subjects of the British.

Such drastic changes not only resulted in the Lepchas being reduced to the status of subjects and workers for the ruler, with the loss of political control not to just one but many groups. But such shuffling and reshuffling in political control had important repercussions on the cultural and religious life of the Lepchas and had set the scene for widespread syncretism in their lifestyle.

6. The Traditional village administration of the Lepchas

The Lepchas have no caste distinction. They are divided into a number of patrilineal clans (ptso), which are believed to have originated from supernatural and mythological ancestry. At present, the main function of these clans is to regularize marriages and prevent incest, through exogamy. (Ghatak, 2005; Joshi, 2004).

A.R. Foning (1987) detailing an insider perspective in his book, 'Lepcha My Vanishing Tribe' said, "Contrary to the general belief, and what has been said and written about us by foreigners and others, we Lepchas have no class, creed, and ranking among ourselves. No one is big and no one is small, there is no gradation as such. In our dealings with our fellow beings, it is only the seniority of age that is considered. Whatever our seniors utter or do is sacrosanct to us".

The traditional Lepcha village used to be headed by a 'Mandal'¹. However, at the beginning of the 20th Century, on the insist of 'Maharani' of Sikkim the office of 'Muktair' was instituted (Groner, 1938). The Muktair was superior to Mandal. He had to supervise all tax account, and visit each village twice a year and see that grains have not been planted in excess of the amount on which tax had been paid; he also had to register birth and death.

The office of the Mandal was heredity. He was often spoken as of the 'landlord' of the village, and the other households were called 'tenants'. In relation to other villagers he stands in the position of an elderly relative- father or uncle, or elder brother; he arranges the marriages of most of the young people, he looks after everybody's welfare and happiness, giving advice to personal or agriculture matters where they appeared needed, and acting intermediary between the villagers and the courts². He also regulates most of the private affairs of his villagers, scolding and helping if they are extravagant and quarrelsome, or uncooperative. In the event of the Mandal dying young without a suitable heir, the Youmi will act as a substitute until the householders have chosen one of their members to become the Mandal. Youmi is selected by the Mandal with consultation with all the householders. The youmi had no privilege of any sort beyond such prestige as the title gives, but they too had comparatively less work. Apart from this, there is Gyapon. The chief administrative work was the responsibility of the gyapon. Each householder of a village, in turn, had to hold the office for three years. The work of the gyapon was distinctly arduous, as he had to do most of the work; he had to collect tax from each household, when there used to be any quarrel the gyapon had to be the first one to go to both the houses and find out the cause of the quarrel and, if possible, to a third neutral person as witness. He tries to solve the problem and in case he fails to resolve the case, it is reported to the Mandal (Gorer, 1938). The object of the four above name offices was twofold; the regulation of the intra-village affairs and collection of taxes for the state, and within the village crime had to be prevented and possibly punished, quarrels stopped, and the poor and needy helped (ibid).

Today though the traditional village administration exists to some extent in some of the Lepcha villages and runs parallel with the Panchayati system, it is very much dormant. The

¹ The term Mandal is not a nor even a Sikkimese word. It is the common word for the head of the village throughout Northern India.

² Court here refers to the king's court at Gangtok.

village administration can hardly take any decision regarding administrative or any important matter, which is mostly looked after by the panchayat. Hence, the role of the traditional village administration is reduced to negligible, and it is the panchayat who manages the whole administration and take important decisions in the village. This was also true with the hydropower project, all the decision regarding the dam was consulted with the panchayat at the local level.

7. Distribution of the Lepchas

The Lepchas the distributed in the Eastern Himalayas, in the areas of Sikkim, Darjeeling District in West Bengal, and East Nepal and Western Bhutan. The Lepchas call their land 'Mayel Lyang', which means the land of hidden paradise. The demographic profile of the Lepchas in Sikkim and Darjeeling were only available after the British moved into these areas. The Lepcha population was very less from the very beginning, and when the British first came into these lands, they found that the land was mostly inhabited by the Lepchas. On the 1st of February 1835, when Darjeeling was officially handed over to the British by the Rajah of Sikkim, there was a collection of 20 huts. When the region of Kalimpong was annexed from the Bhutanese in 1865, it only had a population of 1200 people. In the state of Bengal, the Lepchas are found only the Darjeeling district and their number compared to the rest of the population is 2 to 3%. Whereas in Sikkim the population remains approximately around 40,000 in the year 2001. The Census documents for both the states of West Bengal and Sikkim reveal that the growth rate of the population of the Lepchas is very alarming. In some decades the i.e. 1911, 1921, 1971 the census shows even a negative growth trend of the Lepcha population, which is indeed alarming. This matter is of great concern for many scholars and a few of them like A. K Das (1975), S. Ghosal (1987), R. N Thakur (1988), have tried to examine into the causes of the slow and sometimes negative growth of the Lepcha population. The tribe has not been able to receive the varied population that came into their homeland, uninvited, and as rightly said by Mainwaring, the earliest scholar to study the Lepcha population, that the entry of the Europeans was the first blow to the Lepchas received after which their downfall began.

One of the major factors for the decline in their population of the Lepchas was also the disappearing forests, on which they were solely dependent and their lifestyle, culture, and

religion were drawn from it. The Lepcha population is more or less stagnant with some declining trend during various census periods.

After the coming of the British, the Lepchas deprived of their home and natural habitat, animals, birds, insects, the natives, receded more and more into the interior. This was the reason behind the miserable picture in the very first census report published by the Government in 1891. The figures show 5761 in Sikkim, as against 1000 in Darjeeling.

8. Cultural and Social Change

When looking into the history of this tribe, they have had very close social contact with other groups, such as the Tibetans, Bhutanese and the Nepalese immigrants, which has come into being due to invasions by these groups (Bhutanese and Tibetans). Thus, accordingly, even the culture of the Lepchas has undergone many alternations under the influences of these groups. According to the official Gazetteer of the Darjeeling District, the Lepcha territory around Kalimpong was invaded by the Bhutanese, and also speaks about how the Lepchas have intermixed through marriages especially with Limbus and Bhutias. In Sikkim, according to Gorer, Lepchas subsisted in mixed communities, acquiring, the habits, culture and even the languages of Bhutias and Nepalese, sharing Lamaism, which was the official state religion. According to Fanning, the unrestricted immigration of the people from the west, that is, the Nepali which had a profound effect on the aboriginal inhabitants. He says it adversely affected the Lepchas and a process of disintegration began similarly to that of the coming of the Tibetans earlier. He speaks of the adoption and absorption of an alien culture aided greatly by inter-marriages with the newcomers. Therefore, he says that today, there is hardly any family that has not been touched, in the Darjeeling district. Before the four centuries of invasion, it was very certain that they were the only inhabitants of this large tract of mountainous land, but their land has been taken away from them by conquering invaders, the Tibetans, the Nepali and finally the English.

The Lepchas themselves have no tradition of migration and place the home of their ancestors in the valleys of “Mayel Lyang”. The Lepchas do not seem to have resisted migration as Sikkim was colonised by the Tibetans, at the beginning of the Seventeenth century, which was not just a feudal lordship that was imposed by a small minority on the Lepcha population. The

simple tribal were also subject to a strong hegemony. They were led to believe that they were an inferior group of people compared to the ruling Tibetans. Thus, their culture, that included their nature-worshipping religion, 'Muk-Jyok-Ding', their traditional attire, their food, their literature and their tribal way of life on the whole. The implications of such a strong hegemonic influence still have had many repercussions on the way of life of the Lepchas. Many Lepchas, have today forgotten to wear their traditional attire and adorn the attire of the Tibetans, many in the initial days of invasion changed their name to new ones such as "Kazi", etc, meaning feudal lords. The reflections of such repercussions today can be seen in the fact that Lepchas in Sikkim do not remember the significance of many historical places in Sikkim itself, that lie in and around them, mentioned in Lepcha literature and mythology. Therefore, post-independence the King of Sikkim began to appoint Lepchas from the Dzongu, where authentic Lepcha way of life still survives.

When one looks specifically at the Darjeeling District, it formed a part of the dominion of the Raja of Sikkim, which was ceded to the East India Company, who had drawn out the Nepalese invaders, and a treaty was concluded in 1817. According to the deed of Grant, the Rajah of Sikkim presented Darjeeling for a yearly allowance of Rs. 3000, as compensation in 1841 and the grant was raised to Rs. 6000 in 1846 (Gazetteer of Darjeeling District, 1927) but the early European settlers hardly found any Lepchas, as prior 10 years, 1200 Lepchas had fled Nepal, due to oppression from the Rajah, according to Captain Hubert.

The Rajah of Sikkim officially handed over Darjeeling to the British on 1st February 1835, this region of Kalimpong was annexed from the Bhutanese in 1865, with a population of 1200 people. Just before the eleventh century, Tibet colonized the Lepcha areas mentioned above, which was feudal overlordship imposed by a small minority on the Lepcha population since the early eleventh century. A major change that occurred was the speedy conversion the Lepchas to Buddhism. Nevertheless, more important one cannot overlook the hegemony that still exists, among the Sikkimese Lepchas, as a token of the past. The Lepchas in Sikkim still view their culture, language, dress and most important religion as inferior and at all times unconsciously and consciously imitate the more powerful Tibetan – Sikkimese culture. This is clearly manifested in the attire, the food, the diction they use, the religious practices they imitate. The Lepchas in Sikkim to Tibetan monasteries, where they read the holy books not in their language but in the language of the invaders. There remain the holy books of Mahayana

Buddhism that were translated in the Lepcha language, called the “Namthaars”, but they have lost their significance in the Sikkim hills.

In Dzongu, there is a certain positive element that still remains. It is here we find a much less diluted Lepcha culture, of course, Buddhism, made its inroads among the Lepchas. The guardians of Lepcha culture is strongly are found here.

9. Socio-Economic Profile

The economic profile of the Lepchas over two main time frames – the pre-British and the post-British period. In the words of Campbell, Hunter, Hooker, Temple, Mainwaring, Risley and Waddle, we find the description of the shifting cultivation among the Lepchas. They called this form of cultivation “Zomal”, where the males lead by digging the earth, and the women followed the men by inserting paddy. The Lepchas were heavily dependent on the forest, and if the agricultural output was not enough, they obtained fruits and tubers from the forest in order to subsist.

It was during the during the British period that the Lepchas started adopting settled agriculture. According to O’Malley, “with the introduction of settled cultivation and reservation of forest, they have to give up their old nomadic cultivation, and have lost much of their jungle craft, but they have learnt in its place how to make terraces for rice fields and the methods of agriculture practiced by the Nepalese” (O’Malley,1907). Thus, the use of forest became restricted and the Lepchas became completely dependent on terraced cultivation, and their economy became based on subsistence agriculture. They began producing the crops that they needed most, which were rice, maize, millet, Buckwheat, Barley, and Vegetables.

The concept of wage labour was unknown among the Lepchas, and agricultural activities were carried out the family itself. But with the large scale of immigration the Lepchas began using the land a little more seriously, thus they differentiated two categories of lands, wetland (Zo Nyaot), used for the cultivation of paddy and dry land(Maong Nyaot), for the cultivation of millet, (Zo, means rice and Maong means millet in the Lepcha language). They further went ahead by cultivating certain cash crops such as cardamom, cucumber and other vegetables and ginger. Today cardamom is the main cash crop grown in Sikkim and is the leading producer in India.

According to 1991 censuses, the highest proportions of the Lepchas were agriculture. Thus, the Lepcha economy can be viewed as an agricultural economy and even to this date, they continue to maintain a close link with nature, by being dependent on it for livelihood.

It is important to know a brief historical background of the educational system available to the Lepchas, before looking at their current literacy rate. The Lepcha tribe had their own script and language when they were invaded by the Tibetans in Sikkim and later Darjeeling, invaded by the Bhutanese and later the British. When the King of Sikkim signed the Deed of grant, for handing Darjeeling over to the British, one of the languages that it was written in was the Lepcha language.

Although there is no evidence of the Lepchas having educational institutions in their past, Roy (2005) calls them the most knowledgeable community of the region of Sikkim and Darjeeling. This region is covered with a diversity of flora and fauna, and the Lepchas can tell you the names of all, they can at a single glance distinguish each species of plants, which would normally require the skill of a botanist and a similar kind of nomenclature extends to animals and birds.

Many of the older generations of the Lepchas narrate that after their arrival the Tibetans collected and destroyed a great number of manuscripts and the fire from this incident seemed to have lasted for almost as long as a week. Thus, began the conversion of the simple nature worshipper to Buddhism, due to which they lost a valuable portion of their traditional mythological literature. There existed no formal system of teaching among the Lepchas, before the arrival of the British, and they learned in order to enrich themselves about the knowledge of their surroundings or to acquire religious knowledge from the monasteries. The first people to print the Lepcha script were the Christians as the Baptist Mission Press had cast a Lepcha front by 1849. The earliest attempts to reach modern secular education to the hill people were made around A. D 1850 by Rev. W. Start, a private missionary. (Gazetteer of Darjeeling – 1980:479).

10. Dzongu and the Lepchas

10.1. History

Dzongu, the personal estate of the Maharaja of Sikkim was made the ‘Lepcha Reserve’, perhaps in the wake of unchecked entry of more and more outsiders into Sikkim at the beginning of the

20th century. This was done to ostensibly keep the Lepchas protected, but the prime objective may well be to keep the Lepchas there unaffected by the outside influences. Dzongu situated at the base of the Kangchenjunga and included in the Kangchenjunga National Park, is almost triangular in shape, having approximately forty miles on each side. Dzongu must have been so named because it was made to look like a fort or jail from the outside since 'Dzong' usually indicates fort or jail in Bhutanese territory. No outsiders were allowed to visit Dzongu area of Sikkim except with the specific permission of the Durbar and there was a total restriction on the transfer of land to outsiders. The area used to be administered by one of the Kazis on behalf of the Maharaja. Thus, the place was protected from the outside and the people there were left to fend for themselves. Except for occasional sending of Lepcha youths to the palace to work as servants from time to time and for the routine annual payment of rent to the Kazi through the Mandal and Mukhtair, the people there were least disturbed. There were no health and education units in the area, neither the people knew anything about basic health and education. These simple people practically lived there in a state of nature and neglect, with their hunting, and farming and their own superstitious beliefs inherited from their ancestors, least aware of what was taking place in the civilized world outside. There was no crime or theft in the village. The only public infrastructure they could boast of and where they assembled from time to time was the monastery.

The good thing the government did was allocating a reserve for the Lepchas and that way their hearth and homes were protected from the hordes of immigrants, but very fewer efforts were made to improve their way of living. No doubt, the immigrants' invasion in the Dzongu region was checked, but there was no protection against the wiles and exploitation of the Marwaris. The place became some sort of an island in the midst of a sea. In such an atmosphere and circumstances, the people there depended on nature and natural products supplemented by whatever agricultural produce they could manage from the cultivated lands. For lack of basic health and sanitation infrastructure, there was high mortality rate. Morris (1938) had written to the Raja suggesting for certain improvements in the area, but the same was not heeded. The authorities were least interested in the plight of the poor Lepchas. Despite the hazardous and difficult situation and having to cope with extreme deprivations, the Lepchas there at Dzongu,

could live undisturbed by the outside influences, pursuing their own traditional way of life in their own 'semi-Mayel Lyang'.

10.2. The present condition of Dzongu

As mentioned above the Dzongu region is provided with special status under Article 371 (F) of Indian Constitution for preserving the Lepcha culture. Any outsider, even a Lepcha living outside Dzongu, has to apply for a permit to enter it. Only Lepchas from Dzongu can own land here. This was a good step was done to protect the sacred land, the dying community, and its culture. So, after the merger with India and with the dawn of civilization everywhere, the Lepchas of Dzongu could also enjoy some fruits of development in that region. There are now quite a number of literate persons holding important positions under the Government at Gangtok. Since the merger with India, the State Government has made it a policy to provide special stipends that included the full cost of boarding and tuition for the students from the region. Dzongu may no longer be as backward as it was thirty years ago, but still; it continues to lag behind other villages in the State. Even now, the Government is not providing proper extension and technical service for cardamom and other agriculture. Many cardamom fields now have become barren due to disease, and the people there are heavily indebted to moneylenders. Still now, to all Sikkimese and outsiders, the name 'Dzongu' evokes a picture of backwardness and lack of civilization.

10.3. Proposed Hydro Project in Dzongu

A gold rush is on in Sikkim for hydroelectric projects. Entrepreneurs from across the country have rushed to the Himalayan state to set up hydro projects. The magnet for these projects is the river Teesta, a turbulent river that drops from an elevation of 5, 280 meters to about 230 meters over a distance of 175 km, making it ideal for a cascade of hydropower projects.

With the ministry of power's special thrust on hydropower, Sikkim has been aggressively promoting its potential over the past few years. The Government has finalized a proposal for executing the hydro project in the catchment areas of the river Teesta and has proposed around 29 hydropower projects across the State, of these, six projects were in Dzongu, and this is causing great concern to the people who are facing the horns of a dilemma. Of the six projects,

four projects were scrapped in 2008. The remaining two projects are the Teesta Stage IV (520 MW) and the Panan Hydro Electric Project (300 MW). A large part of Teesta stage III (1200 MW), the largest Hydropower projects of Sikkim too is inside the Dzongu reserve. These projects are a part of the Central government's master vision of the Northeastern region as "India's Future Power House", with around 168 dams planned (Menon & Kohli (2005).

Dzongu is considered a sacred region in the heart of the Lepchas as the place is associated with the mythological genesis of the Lepcha race. It has been claimed by some that Guru Rimbochhi i.e., Padma Sambhava, preached Buddhism to the Lepchas at this place in the 8th century and some believe that the sacred Namthars³ written on the stone slabs, the equivalent of the Ten Commandments of the Christians has been embedded near the Tholung monastery. On one hand, there is the possibility of the desecration of a sacred and historical place by the execution of these projects, simultaneously having the fear of an unchecked influx of population, and on the other, the opportunity to usher civilization, progress, and prosperity in the area. Many have the fear of eviction from their hearth and homes in the event of the acquisition of considerable acreage of lands and many others are concerned about the eventual environmental hazards, like pollution, landslide, water scarcity, etc that such huge project brings in its wake. There are many who are apprehensive that the launch of the projects may pave the way for unchecked infiltration in their secluded area by the new settlers, who would be encroaching and unsettling their way of life. Unfortunately, most of these concerns of the locals have come true with the commissioning of the Teesta Stage V hydropower project in May 2008 where most of the impact could be seen. Many people from Dzongu feel that by building power project in the Lepcha-protected area and allowing such a large influx of migrant labour, the government is violating its own laws. There are only 7,000 Lepchas in Dzongu. The building of hydropower projects will severely affect them because these hydropower projects will uproot the people from their land and traditional livelihood. The cultivable land in the area is very less and the community mostly depends on agriculture for their sustenance, but the construction of hydropower projects will lead to the huge land acquisition which will result into more hardship

³ A Namthar is a spiritual biography or hagiography in Tibetan Buddhism. Namthar literally means 'complete liberation', since the texts tell the stories of yogis or Indo-Tibetan Mahasiddha who attained complete enlightenment.

for the people who are already struggling with their present condition. Further, these projects will not only be outnumbering them but also their culture and tradition will be under threat.

However, in a situation where India faces a severe energy crisis, should we reconsider and cancel hydropower projects over the river Teesta? M K Pandit, the director of the Centre for Interdisciplinary Studies of Mountain and Hill Environment (CISMHE) who supervised a carrying capacity study of the Teesta basin is of the view that Teesta Stages I to III of the Teesta project are neither environmentally advisable nor feasible. He warns that many of the hydropower projects on river Teesta are located in the high-risk zone IV of the seismic zoning map (CISMHE).

Similarly, Choudhury documents intense local opposition to the projects located in Dzongu that is due to fear of influx and settlement of outsiders, culminating in the loss of Lepcha culture while bringing crime and disease in this restricted- access area. She even recommends that Teesta projects should not be implemented by ignoring either these local sentiments or the vocal opposition of the indigenous communities affected by them (Choudhury 2007).

10.4. The Movement Against Hydropower Projects

Large dams have been projected as necessary for irrigation, water supply, power generation and flood control. However, these dams have entailed large social and environmental costs. Over the years, and especially in the last two decades, many strong struggles have emerged over these issues. In many cases, the people affected by large dams have been in the forefront of such struggles; in many cases, NGOs concerned with social, environmental issues have been active (Dharmadhikary, 2008).

Emboldened by the successes of such agitation programs reported in India and abroad on similar issues, some of the people of Dzongu started an agitation under the banner of an organisation, called “Affected Citizens of Teesta”(ACT) against the move of the Government of implementing several hydropower projects in Sikkim. It was one of the most inspiring youth-led campaigns of recent times, which received both national and international attention.

The Lepchas protested the dams on many grounds: that as nature-worshippers their land is sacred and should not be destroyed by development; that Dzongu is recognised as a reserve, and since only Lepchas who are from there are allowed to enter the reserve without a special

permit from the government, it should not be the site for the hydro projects. They also argue that the projects will bring several thousand workers from outside Sikkim into Dzongu for many years while work is completed who will outnumber the Lepcha population and, since the migrant workers have different customs and beliefs, their dominant presence will soon dilute and destroy Lepcha culture.

The protest is also on environmental grounds, the ACT claimed that the delicate ecology of Dzongu, which is partially inside Mount Kanchenjunga National park and part of the Himalaya Biodiversity hotspot, is, like the rest of Sikkim prone to landslides and earthquakes, and will not survive the development. Their claim is supported by M.K Pandit, director of the Centre for Interdisciplinary Studies of Mountain and Hill Environment (CISMHE), who warned that many of the hydropower projects on the Teesta River are located in the high-risk Zone IV of the seismic zoning map (Arora 2008)

However, the root of the moment against the hydropower project in Sikkim started long back in 1991-92, when a group called 'Dzongu Salvation Council' (DSC), headed by the present president of the ACT, Mr. Athup Lepchaprotested against the Teesta Stage III HEP project. Along with the protest, there was other policy issue within the government because of which the project was shelved. Nothing much happened in between but in 1998-99 when the government started Teesta Stage V(510 MW) HEP, a group called 'Joint Action Committee' (JAC), protested against the project but in the end, they settled with the government on conditions, though none of the conditions were carried out and eventually Teesta Stage V was started. Even in 1993-94, another group called the 'Concern Citizen' (CC) protested against the Rathong Chu (96 MW) HEP in West Sikkim. The protest continued until 1996-97 and ultimately the government had to scrap the project.

After 2002-2003, all of a sudden, the government came up with so many hydropower projects, six of which were inside Dzongu. During this period, few local people mainly the youths of Dzongu started going from village-to-village, meeting people, bring awareness among the people of what they considered to be the harmful effects of the Hydropower projects. The aim then was to fight the large Teesta River hydroelectric projects slated for Dzongu (The Telegraph: 2004). Initially they concentrated only on Dzongu, but still, they did not have Affected Citizen of Teesta (ACT) that time. They were working under an Adhoc Committee, which was formed in

July 2004. Finally, after getting a positive response from the people, the Affected Citizen of Teesta was formally launched in August 2005.

The ACT blocked the road into Dzongu at the Sankalang⁴ Bridge on 4th September 2006, to prevent officials from entering Dzongu. They were arrested but were released; however, it raised the profile of ACT as the action brought blanket media coverage.

In December 2006 ACT shifted their base to Gangtok to get wider support and on 12th December 2006, the ACT held their first public meeting in Gangtok at B.L. House. The initial aim was to hold a rally and candlelight vigil outside the state government building at Mintokgang⁵, or at the Statue of Unity, but this was called off after the government invited for talks and the activists agreed, however, hold a public meeting, more than 450 Lepchas attended the meeting. After the meeting, ACT member met with the Chief Minister (CM) of Sikkim who promised to review every aspect of hydroelectric projects in North Sikkim. However, the CM did not keep his promise and there was no review of the projects.

After months of inaction by the state government, the activists took decisive action on 20th June 2007. Dawa Lepcha (36) and Tenzing Lepcha (25) sat in front of BL House and started an “*indefinite hunger strike*” that gripped Sikkim for 63 days and spread news of the protest beyond Sikkim’s borders. Their hunger strike was, like many protests in India, contextualized in the spirit of Gandhian non-violent protest. The Lepchas’ hunger strike was *the* major news story in Gangtok. This created tension in official circles, which accelerated to the point where the government demanded ACT stop the hunger strike or that they would use force to remove them from BL House. At various stages of the protest, there have been threats and arrests.

Initially, after carrying on Hunger Strike for more than 60 days, the ACT leaders Dawa and Tenzing, who were at the hospital, responding to the repeated requests of the Chief Minister, when he promised to review the projects, broke their fast on August 21st, 2007 at S. T. N. Hospital. They, however, decided to continue the protest until their demands were fully accepted. The relay hunger strike however continued and the same was resorted to at Kalimpong and Darjeeling. The C.M. had earlier, publicly assured to preserve the sanctity of Dzongu and

⁴Sankalang Bridge is a check-point and border of Dzongu.

⁵It commemorates the treaty between the Lepcha Chief and Bhutia King, which symbolizes the formation of the Kingdom of Sikkim.

constituted a Committee headed to look into the problem likely to cause by the projects (Tamsang,2007).

The review committee was formed but with a scope for the *implementation* of the projects, instead of the expected review of the *proposal*. The ACT called for a correct review of the projects as a whole. However, nothing happened. Therefore, seven months later they started a “second indefinite hunger” strike in March 2008. Another activist from the ACT, Ongchuk Lepcha, joined Dawa and Tenzing for the second strike and Very soon, they were back in the hospital and on feeding tubes, where they stayed for more than 90 days.

The initial hunger strike of 2007 had attracted many supporters, like the Lepchas from West Bengal who joined the battle to save the Lepchas’ “motherland”. More than seven hundred Lepchas from West Bengal cut off Sikkim’s lifeline to the rest of India by staging a blockade on the national highway. The involvement of the West Bengal Lepchas elevated the pressure on the government and gave ACT much-needed resources.

In May 2008, a six-member team of NGO representatives under the banner of ‘Independent Committee on Big Hydro Projects of Sikkim’ undertook a study to assess the impact of hydroelectric projects in North Sikkim. The committee visited project sites several sites including the Teesta Stage V (510 MW) Project at Dikchu, the Teesta Stage III (1200 MW) Project under construction in Chungthang and the Panan Project (300 MW) coming up in Dzongu near Passingdang. The committee’s findings were widely reported by the media. The committee asked the government to suspend the Panan for five years and to take up small hydro projects instead:

“Broadly, we see that the Sikkim government, partly under pressure from the central government, has hastily committed itself to develop large number (42 on last count⁶) of big hydropower projects, without much consultation with Sikkim’s citizen, without considering the implications of the projects for the local people, environment, culture, future generations and even return on investment for the state and the people. It has also not seriously assessed the options available for electricity generation or options for development in general. This is evident in the way the Teesta V has been developed, the way Panan HEP MOU has been signed and Teesta III implementation has started.”

⁶This was when the committee undertook the survey in May 2008, but now there are 29 HEP either commissioned, under construction or proposed in Sikkim.

After receiving the Report of the Review Committee, the Government of Sikkim canceled four hydropower projects in Dzongu. However, decided to go ahead with the Panan and Teesta stage IV Project in spite of the Review Committees' warning. While scrapping the four projects the state government mentioned through a letter that, "*taking into consideration the sentiment of the local people and the need to conserve the environment these projects have been scrapped*". The State Government has scrapped both the Rangyong and Lingzya hydropower projects, which they had initially signed MoUs with private developers, while no definite proposals were made for Ringpi and Rukel power projects, both located inside the Khangchendzonga National Park in Dzongu. All these projects were inside Dzongu. The letter released by the government also pointed out that: "...*the government took a conscious decision not to allot these projects to any developer to conserve the environment and ecology of the area*". However, the letter also said that "*scrapping of Panan project would entail huge losses incurred towards survey and investigation, preparation of detailed project report, EMP reports, obtaining clearances, and land acquisition etc*".

The Government also said that the scrapping of Panan might also lead to the creation of negative environment against the hydropower development in other parts of the State. It also believes that the project is located in the downstream reach of Tholung Chu and will involve the least interference with nature".

It is important to mention the role that the media played in the struggle of the ACT. All the activities of the ACT were posted out daily on a blog called weepingsikkim.blogspot.com that helped to spread the moment beyond the national border. Many people from Sydney and Melbourne, Australia showed their solidarity for the moment and extended support for it. They were seen holding 'Save the Teesta' banners against the backdrop of the Harbour bridge (in Sydney). Videos of Dawa and Tenzing in the hospital were posted on YouTube, which was picked up by the influential UK *Independent* newspaper. The *BBC World* online also ran the story.

The prominent Indian social activist Medha Patkar too supported the moment. She came to Gangtok in April 2008, during the second indefinite hunger strike of the ACT, her presence was a watershed for ACT movement and her presence gave the protest legitimacy beyond Sikkim's borders. Soon after her visit, she invited ACT to join a Dharna [protest] held at Jantar

Mantar in New Delhi. A small delegation of the ACT went to the capital where they met with several NGOs who support the cause of ACT and give them a voice in New Delhi (Kerry, 2010).

10.5. The present Scenario

Mr. Dawa Lepcha says they have achieved what they wanted to achieve by putting up in Gangtok. However, they are determined to stop the other two projects of Dzongu, i.e. the Panan (300 MW) project in Upper Dzongu and the Teesta Stage IV (520 MW) project near Hee Gyatang in Lower Dzongu. In order to succeed, it is very important that public opinion in the villages is with them. There are hard feelings among friends and families who have differing views on the future of Dzongu. There is persuading to be done there – and educating - and rebuilding of relationships. Communicating needs to be personal and for that, the activists need to go back home.

Since the beginning of 2009, they have held meetings in the villages, to take their message to the community. In February 2009, ACT took action in response to a violation of guidelines of Ministry of Environment and Forests (MoEF) by the Panan project developers. Labourers are not allowed to stay back in Dzongu and must leave at the end of each working day, however, ACT claimed that at least 20 workers were staying in Dzongu in sheds built at the Panan dam site by the hydro company ‘in deliberate violation of the Clearance Condition of the MoEF’. Members of ACT visited the site and destroyed the sheds, resulting in the arrest of 43 members including Dawa and Tenzing. They were in jail for one month before being released on strict bail conditions, which includes not visiting any dam site in Dzongu region. Dawa’s bail conditions required him to stay in Dzongu most of the time, leaving for no more than ten days at a time.

11. Conclusion

The ACT represented, expressed and led the struggle for the economic, political, social and cultural rights of the Lepchas - the indigenous people of Sikkim, and gave shape to their assertion in challenging the unilateral, intimidating and coercive governance of the state. Dams over the Teesta, thus, became a serious political issue in Sikkim. With the state government’s repetitive appeal and assurance, after 915 days the ACT stopped the relay hunger strike on

September 27, 2009, and a meeting with the government was held, however, the government didn't keep much of the promises it had made. Though the hunger strike by the ACT members might have ended long back, the fight against the strong, unilateral, coercive state force is still on. The ACT is fighting many legal cases against the state government in the state High Court as well as at the Green Tribunal courts. In spite of the subdued energy and direct confrontation with the state force, the zeal and passion among the ACT members haven't faded and the battle for their sacred Dzongu – *the 'Nye Mayel Lyang'* continues.

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