Socio Economic Condition of Lepcha Community of Sikkim (India)

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Abstract
In Sikkim Lepchas appear to subsist fairly well in the mixed communities, to a very great extent adopting the habits, culture and even the language of their neighbours; they share with them the religion of Lamaism, which is the official religion of the state. In India they constitute only a tiny minority of the population of the districts; they appear to have lost almost all-corporate unity they have practically completely forgotten their own language and it would appear that none of the children round Kalimpong at any rate can speak anything except Nepali.

Keywords: Lepchas; Communities; Lamaism; Sikkim; Minority; Nepali Kazi

Introduction
The indigenous Lepcha culture which is a product of the hills still clings precariously in the areas where Lepcha are numerically big. The Lepcha political and social status in the set up was that of an inferior class. Once raised to the status of a Kazi, their social elevation dependent on their acceptance of Bhutia superiority in culture and spiritual matters conceivable the Lepcha commoners then as they do now lived a separate life wedded to their age old tradition and looked down upon the aristocracy with benign indifference.

The Lepcha leadership fully condoned this unequal arrangement and agreed to be counted as a composite ethnic group, Bhutia-Lepcha in the political man oeuvres of the ruling elite immediately after India independence. By that time a new danger to the Bhutia political supremacy had been thrown in by the emigrant Nepali settler, and their aspiration for democratic rights. There after the history of Sikkim is a chronicle of continuous conflict between the establishment that is the ruling Bhutia and Lepcha elite and the emergent aspiration of the people, mostly let by the now numerically predominant Nepali settlers.

Socially, however this did not rise to any violent turmoil. The political differences of the elite at Gangtok seldom reached the common man who continued to live in harmony in their isolated hamlets in the vast starch of mountain terrain. Even communications with Gangtok were few or far between. The ethnic groups were left unhindered to lead their own way of life in their settlements. As a protectorate under the republic the status quo was maintained.

When finally revolution struck this tiny Himalayan state in the early seventies, three parallel social steams were discernible. The Lepcha stream, submissive accommodating and introverted, based on a latent attachment to animistic beliefs and tribal norms but openly subservient to the Lamaist hierarchy. The Bhutia streams was more aggressive having had the support of the chogyal and aligned to the Tibetan in religious and cultural norms and the Nepali streams of the settlers which were still striving to get of food hold in the country.
Early settlement of Lepchas in Sikkim:

During the early stages of the development of their civilization, they settled near the river Teesta and Rangeet and dense forest of the Himalayas and the region known called ‘Dzongu’. There language is also called cha Lepcha and is of Tibeto-Burmese origin. Their script was introduced by five Lepcha stages (i) Targey (ii) Sayoon (iii) Goley (iv)Tungrab and (v) Dorrning. According to Mr. K.P. Tamsang, the lepcha alphabet was invented by Thling Mensalong, who was an administrator to the earliest lepcha king. The third ruler of Namgyal Dynasty, Chador Namgyal invented these scripts according to the Gazetter of Sikkim. It seems that the scrip was invented by the Lepchas and further improved by the Namgyal, king of Sikkim in the 17th century. A grammar was written in 1876 by General Mainwarning, the folklores were mostly compiled by Europeans and there literature consisted of translations of Tibetan scriptures only. Till very recently the Lepcha language was not taught in school. After the merger of the state with the union of India, the language is receiving proper attention, it is being taught in the school. The directorate of education is publishing text books in Lepcha, which is taught up to VIII.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE:

A review of related literature is a vital component of the research process. Many studies on the socio-economic condition of lepchas is conduced abroad. To cite a few, it is observed that most of the studies related to political right, economic right etc a study conducted in north east Asia focused on investigation of origin, culture, tradition of the Lepchas. As the present study focuses on socio-economic conditions of Lepcha community in Sikkim.

Bhasin in her book “Ecology, culture and change Tribals of Sikkim himalays” he has made a study on the long term change in the Lepcha economy, where by agriculture system, as agriculture is their primary occupation.

Sonam Rinchen his book “the Wealth of Sikkim” he have made the different valuable information regarding the different communities living in Sikkim including Lepchas.

Rajesh Verma in his book “ A Guide and a Hand Book of Sikkim” explain the historical aspects of Lepchas of Sikkim and focused on the political side of the Lepchas history, where he states after the last named Panu(king) the name Thekung Thek comes up prominently as the leaders of Lepchas.

Maitreyee Choudhury, who has studied the changes which are forth coming in the life style of different communities and in their traditions and festivals focusing mainly on the younger generation.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. To understand the life style of the Lepcha living in the ancient time and to compare their lifestyle with Lepchas of today.

2. To know about what changes has taken place from the ancient scenario to the present scenario in the lives of the Lepchas.

3. To understand what type of relationship did the Lepcha and with the other communities.

METHODOLOGY

The methodology that was used for the present study of the problem was a survey intensive field work together with the thorough accounts of ground reality, its problem and nature. The study was conducted mainly on the basis of primary data collected through interview schedule prepared with earlier studies on the topic. But, some secondary data were also used.

RATIONALE OF THE STUDY

There is insufficient knowledge about the lepchas race, religious, custom, tradition and economy. But the Lepchas were tried to fine out the better life style and earning and have started living in the place where there is diverse and mixed socio-cultural practices. The present study will explore and analyze
different socio-economic and political aspect of the community which will be helpful for the policy makers and planners in formulating policies for the development of this community.

Research work have been carried out on Sikkim’s society, polity, economy etc but studies on the Lepchas who are residing in Sikkim has attracted less attention from modern day researches. Therefore, keeping all the above in view this work has been done with the objective of creating awareness among the masses about the Lepchas residing in Sikkim hills.

MAJOR FINDINGS

Lepcha cultivate patches of ground below the elevation of 6,000 ft. Which are situated to the growth of rice their staple food. They also cultivate different other crops such as millets, buck wheat, Indian corn, particularly the Murwa. Their wants being few they get all that they need from the forests of Sikkim. Being party of nomadic habits, they generally roam at large in the thickets in search of food, in common with the monkeys whose flesh they ear. They consume what their harvest yields in less than three months and hence they are nicknamed together Menthurgya or improvident, who do not think the narrow. Being thoughtless of the future, the Lepchas wander merrily about the forests inhaling health, plucking wild fruits during almost all the seasons.

The primitive Lepchas had many great interesting tales and legends which evidenced largely, their simplicity and liveliness of fancy and their innocent and guileless character. Formerly it was customary with them to invoke, after they had taken their daily meal, the cup-bearer goddess for more good cheer. She was supposed to preside at every fire-hearth. They also used to pay great obedience to the serpents because they had a legend that the serpent king Mur-Nyobu, let the waters from Ta-lyade in Tong-dek. And it is owing to this that they are very fond of bathing in the rivers. Another tradition among the Lepchas is that before the Tibetans emigrated to the south of the Himalayas, Sikkim was inhabited by three tribes, called Na-ng, Chang and Mon of these the Na-ng was the earliest inhabitants.

The polyandry marriages are permitted amongst the Lepcha although this is now becoming very rare. The nuptial customs are quite intriguing after both the parties have evinced interest in establishing martial relations; the boy’s maternal uncle approaches the parents of the girl with some bottles of liquors, Scarf and some money. The marriage came easily be ended but the husband have to pay some money to the girl’s parents. The government feels protective towards the Lepchas, believing that they represent a conservative force- a balance wheel which helps save a way of life from being overwhelmed by western culture.

Originally, the Lepchas were hunters. They gradually stated domesticating animals. Agriculture was also one of their main occupations. In the remote past they were the self-sufficient people, who were economically well off. They lived in closely knit community of their own.

CONCLUSION

The Lepchas now take to weaving, make beautiful baskets, hats and carpets. They display their engineering feat by lying bamboo water pipes all over the area inhabited by them. They cultivate crops like rice, millet, cardamom and maize. They have a great affinity with the outside world and the civilization.

REFERENCES

