

THE THEORIES OF ORIGIN OF THE LEPCHAS: AN INDIGENOUS TRIBE OF THE KANCHENJUNGA BASIN

Dr. Shera Pandi Molommu*

Abstract

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We human beings have since our conception always been on the move. Moving and settling looking for greener pastures has always been in our genes. Through this study we shall try to take a glimpse at how the Lepchas came to settle in the Kanchenjunga basin in the dim past. This mongoloid tribe has no record of migration but some researchers believe that they had to come from some place and give us strong references to stress their view. Others believe that the Lepchas have not moved from this place at all and this basin is their home from time immemorial.

* Assistant Professor, HOD, Deptt. Of History, Kurseong College, Dowhill Road, P.O. Kurseong 734203.

1. INTRODUCTION

It is a well known fact that we as Homo sapiens first evolved in Africa and then rapidly spread all over the planet. As we began to evolve as Homo sapiens our appearance, colour and structure began to change in adaptation to the place in which we settled. Races like Anglo Saxons, Aryans, Vikings, Negros and Mongols evolved all over the world, from these races other smaller races also evolved, the Lepchas are a small tribe of mongoloid origin who was first introduced to the world by European explorers from the then unexplored world of the Kanchenjunga basin. The endeavours of Sir .J.D. Hooker in the 1850's with the assistance of the then Superintendent of Darjeeling, Dr. Campbell are the first written historical facts recording the Lepcha tribe. General Lloyd, the first European to have ever visited the hill tract of Darjeeling, is quoted by H.V.Bayley has written that the people of the region were no doubt 'semi-barbarous'¹. W.B.Jackson, an inspecting officer, while recommending that the hill people of Darjeeling should be brought within the pale of civilization, has compared them with the hill tribes of Bhagulpore to say that they were "a wretched unmanageable race, living the life of wild animals"². Darjeeling primitive was then an inaccessible tract of forest, and the confinement of the tribes. D. Dewan states "Their societies, thus, being still in a 'primitive' stage they could not readily communicate with others, especially the alien groups. Except what the forest and land provided they had very little to imbibe or absorb from the human environment. Satisfied with what they had from nature and a little cultivation they were quite 'improvident' people".³ The fascination of an unexplored land and newfound tribe then brought other historians, anthropologists and sociologists to this land, the valley of Mt. Kanchenjunga always known to the Lepchas as 'Mayel – Lyang' now Sikkim. A Grammer of the Rong Language as it Exists in the Darjeeling and Sikkim hills by G.B.Mainwaring in 1876, Among the Himalayas By Major L.A. Waddell in 1899, Sikkim and Bhutan by J Claude White in 1909, The Lepchas of Sikkim by Geoffery Gorer in 1938 and The Gazetteer of Sikkim by H. H. Risley in 1928 gave us much needed insight into the world of the Lepchas before independence. It was only after independence that Indian historians were able to set foot into Sikkim and Darjeeling hills and here after some scholars have tried to unravel the mystery of the Lepchas. J.D.Hooker observed and stated that the Lepchas were "A more interesting and attractive companion than the Lepcha I never lived with: cheerful, kind, and patient with a master to whom he is attached; rude but not savage, ignorant and yet intelligent"⁴.

Their obscurity is so deep that ‘even in the classificatory schemes as territorial classification, linguistic classification, and occupational classification the Lepchas do not find mention’⁵. ‘Mayel Lyang’ their homeland is the valleys of the Mt. Kanchenjunga which are difficult to access. Pranab Kumar Bhattacharya states, “According to a Lepcha tradition, the original home of the Lepchas was in the neighbourhood of the great mountain range Khang-Chhen-Dzonga which is the Tibetan name for the Mt. Kanchenjunga, and which means ‘Five Repositories of the Great Snows’. The Lepcha name of this snow range is King-tzum-song-bu literally ‘the highest over our head’. This snow-clad mountain is believed by the Lepchas to be the habitat of their gods and spirits. For ‘King-tzum-rum’ translates to the Lepcha god of Happiness, and ‘Rum-King-tzum’ is the Lepcha god of Destiny”.⁶

2. THEORIES CLAIMING THE LEPCHAS CAME FROM CHINA

It is believed that races and tribes have to come from some place or the other, it also holds true with the Lepchas but no one has the concrete evidence as to their lineage. Their mongoloid features lead one to believe that they may have come from some Tai clan from the Indo-China border. Some credence may be given to this as the Lepchas call themselves ‘Mutanchi Rong’ and at some period of time the Tai had a king with the name “Mao – Tai – Ching – Rong”.⁷ From certain peculiarities of language and religion, some authors like Stocks have suggested that the tribe is an ancient colony from Southern Tibet.⁸ Renowned historian of the Kirats of Nepal Iman Singh Chemjong also tends to believe in this theory and goes on to state that the Lepchas that came from the north were known as Khamba Lepchas and the ones that came from Unan province of southern China were known as Rong Lepchas.

3. THEORY CLAIMING THE LEPCHAS CAME FROM ASSAM AND BURMA

Writers like J Claude White hold a different view that the Lepchas could not have crossed over the impenetrable Himalayas, he says that the Lepchas may have wandered along the foothills of the Himalayas from the direction of Assam and Upper Burma into Sikkim. He further corroborates this fact by stating that the Lepchas physical structure does not in any way resemble that of the Tibetans and Chinese from the north.⁹ He claims that the Lepchas are smaller in built with finer cut features, more pronounced cheekbones, flat faces, stocky legs and slender wrists; with regards to the Tibetans from across the Himalayas who were physically taller, stronger and

sturdier with Tartar type features. It is interesting to note that there exists wide ranging similarities of culture and customs between the Lepchas and some tribes of north-east India like Nishi, Adi, Apa-Tani, Miri and Mismi. To give one striking example we have this Lepcha word for salutation- Kham-ri. In Meiti, one of the ethnic languages of Manipur, it is Khurum-jari! Perhaps all these tribes are genetically linked and were partners in their explorations of new lands in the dim and distant past.

4. THEORIES OF IMAN SINGH CHEMJONG

According to Iman Singh Chemjong a renowned personality in the history of the Kirat People the Lepchas he believes are the decendants of ‘Mung Moorong’ who along with his followers arrived to Sikkim via Assam and Burma from south China. He says that the present race of Lepchas is a hybrid of three different races. The first group of people to come to Sikkim was from the west or from Elam of southern Persia; they settled in eastern Nepal and were called Ellamu of Elamite family. They were also called Arramu or the residents from Aram lands, the modern name of this place being Syria. The second group of people who came from the north and were known as the Khamba Lepchas, these people came from the Kham province of Tibet. The third group was the Rong Lepchas who had come from Nam Maw and Tai Tombe Nam Gam Tembe of Mon Wan locality of the Unan province of southern China, via north Burma with their leader Mung Moorong. These three groups intermingled freely in east Nepal and later began to call themselves Rong or Mutanchi Rong.¹⁰

5. THEORIES CLAIMING THE LEPCHAS ARE ONE OF THE LOST TRIBES OF ISRAEL

Mr. D. R. Foning holds the view that the Lepchas are one of the lost tribes of Israel , he holds this vastly contentious view based on the fact that Lepcha folklores like the great floods and the stairway to heaven built by the Lepchas at Daramden relate with the stories of the Bible (the Tower of Babylon, and the floods), he also point to the fact that the names of Lepcha places are remarkably same to some names of places in the Old Testament, places like Illam, Araot Hlo and Sadam sound similar to Illam, Ararat and Sidon.¹¹ These facts are not strong enough to encourage us believe this lead, as we find many Indo – European languages sound pretty similar to the Lepcha words, some words like seem, hook, poke, roll and cub are words found in the

English dictionary. If it was just based on phonetics then these are strong evidences to lead us to say that they are from the Anglo – Saxon bloodline. We do find other similar words in the Tibeto – Burman family but rather than say that the Lepchas came from and brought these words with them, the flipside could also be true that it was the Lepchas that generally migrated and spread and hence these similarities. It can also be said that the people who came into contact with them were influenced by their language and folktale and when they wandered back home they took with them some of these things.¹² We do know that the Tibetans came into contact with the Lepchas only in the seventeenth century according to written logs of the Tibetans. We also know that most of the Lepcha manuscripts were destroyed by the Tibetans in their quest to convert the Lepchas into Buddhists. We can obviously state that before the Tibetans there were bound to be other people who had come across the Lepchas like the Limboos and the Magars who may have lent from the Lepchas.

6. THEORIES CLAIMING THE LEPCHAS ARE THE ORIGINAL INHABITANTS OF THE REGION

Mainwaring wrote “having no written or authentic traditional records regarding their migration into this country, I have not yet been able to discover the exact point at which they arrived”.¹³ The assumptions that the Lepchas came from here or there can be challenged by the notion that the Lepchas were the Aboriginal tribe of the region. The history of Sikkim and the Darjeeling hills is the History of the Lepchas would not be a wrong statement as the name Sikkim professes. The story goes this way “One Lepcha chief decided to get married to a Limbu princess , the princess his third wife when she came to her newlywed home named the place Su – Him or my new home”.¹⁴ G.Tshering writes from the lap of Mt. Kanchenjungs till Titalya was the kingdom of the Rong of Sikkim and Darjeeling.¹⁵ Scholars and historians do hold the view that the Lepchas have been residing in the valleys of the Kanchenjunga from as early as the 4th century.¹⁶ Chunakh-Aakhen, an old Lepcha book on their history, mentions that a Lepcha king Pohartak Panu sent his army to Takshashila to help Emperor Chandra Gupta fight the invader Alexander the Great, Chandra Gupta is Chandra Gop Panu in Chunakh-Aakhen corroborating that this race has indeed been residing in the Kanchenjunga basin for a pretty long time. E.C. Dozey has said, “Lepchas, or as they call themselves, the Rongpa or Ravine folk; a most charming people, whose origin is obscure, though it is thought they migrated to their present abode along the foothills of

the Himalayas from the east, not from Tibet. They are a distinct race, with a language, both spoken and written, of their own, and with very marked characteristics. Their features are distinctly aquiline, a marked contrast to the usual Mongolian type seen about these parts...”¹⁷ He has further said, “the aborigines of that land, the Lepchas” referring to Sikkim and further beyond in the same page, we find written, “the Lepcha once possessed all the hill territory of Sikkim and Darjeeling, including the Daling sub-division”.¹⁸ Geoffrey Gorer has said, “There is no generally accepted theory among those anthropologists who believe that every tribe originally came from somewhere else as to the place of origin of the Lepchas. Various parts of Tibet and Mongolia have been suggested and a certain similarity has apparently been found between the Lepcha language and some dialect spoken in Indo-China. The Lepchas themselves have no tradition of migration and place the home of their ancestors – people of Mayel – in one of the inaccessible valleys of Kinchenjunga.” He has further said “It seems certain that they were originally the only inhabitants of this large mountainous land”.¹⁹ O’Malley has said, “The Lepchas are the aboriginal inhabitants of the country, who call themselves Rong, i.e., the squatters, and their country the land of caves. Formerly they possessed all the hill country of Darjeeling and Sikkim”.²⁰ W.W. Hunter has written, “The Lepchas are considered to be the aboriginal inhabitants of the hilly portion of the district. At all events they are the first known occupiers of this tract (Darjeeling tract) and of independent Sikkim”.²¹ Fred Pinn has said, “when for countless generations they (Lepchas) had been used to roam large parts of Sikkim, being the original inhabitants of the country”.²² Sanchita Ghatak has described Lepchas as “the principal tribal people of Sikkim.” She has further said “Lepchas are supposed to be the original inhabitants of Sikkim”.²³ Ram Rahul comes to the conclusion that the original home of the Lepchas is Sikkim itself because the hills, mountains and streams of the region have Lepcha names.²⁴ It is a well known fact and has more than often been stated by the European settlers that the Lepcha people are great naturalists and have a great knowledge of their flora and fauna.²⁵ They also state that the Lepchas diet consists of a vast array of food from the jungles and they had been subsisting on it, oblivious of the fact that grains could be procured by money.

7. JUSTIFICATION TO THE ABOVE THEORY

Waddell does state here that the lepcha language does not have word for money,²⁶ when in his expedition to the Himalayas he offered some to the Lepcha ladies he states that they adorned it as

some ornaments, from the recorded evidences of explorers and expeditioners we come to know of Darjeeling and Sikkim as places which only had forests, blood sucking Leeches and the peepsa fly. Waddell states that necessary items like grains, rice and most edibles had to be got from the plains to Darjeeling and the transit of these items through rough terraneous roads made these items very dear. He also states on his ascent from the plains that he came across dead bodies of people venturing from the plains to the hills, he concludes that it may be because they were not well equipped for the journey and the lack of food and the harsh life of the jungles may have taken their toll, these observations does make one wonder as to how the Lepchas who had been living in the region for such a long time survived when other people found it hard to sustain themselves for even a few days. This strengthens the belief that only people who have lived long enough in isolation in a certain region can draw this kind of knowledge and subsist entirely from the forests; hence they knew their land well the land called ‘Mayel Lyang’.

8. JUSTIFICATION THROUGH NOMENCLATURE TO THE ABOVE THEORY

To further our claim all the names of the places, rivers trees and animals have Lepcha names, major settlements and rivers still bear Lepcha names nearly 250 years after it was first recorded. Darjeeling owes its name to the Lepcha word ‘Daar-jyu’ where ‘Daar’ means God, ‘jyu’ means to sit and ‘liang’ means land, thus The Lepchas claim that the name stands for ‘a paradise on Earth’ or ‘the abode of Gods’.²⁷ Lebong in Lepcha means the tongue shaped spur. Kurseong also owes its name to the Lepchas though there are two meanings that come out from the related Lepcha words, Kurson-rip, the small white orchid that grows plentiful around Kurseong and that it means ‘the place of the white orchid’. Another suggestion is that it refers to a cane which used to grow plentiful, Kur being the name of the cane and sheang meaning a stick. According to L.S.O’Malley these are the two meanings and the cane was found at the forest behind Eagle’s Craig.²⁸ Mirik is also a Lepcha name meaning the burnt hill, Mi-rek meaning the burning of jungle. The Lepchas believe that Kalimpong is the anglicised version of the Lepcha word Kalempung meaning the ridge where we play. Others like to believe that the name Kalimpong comes from a very different source, owing to the place having a lot of a species of tree known in Nepali as Odal (*Stercuria Villosa* plant) which was known to the Lepchas as ‘Ka-lhyam’. In Lepcha language ‘Kalyon Pung’ means ‘the hill of Kalyon – a paper plant’.²⁹ Waddell states ‘In their word ‘Kalyonpung’ originated the word Kalimpong’.³⁰ The Lepchas do consider Kalimpong

to be the corruption of the word 'Ka-lhyam-bang' where 'bang' or 'bong' the bottom of anything, a foundation. People give names to places which earlier had or did not have a name, this legacy has carried on till date, names are not often changed, pronunciations differ and hence a slight variation may be found in the word with the passage of time. All these observations lead us to the belief that the Lepchas were the original inhabitants of Sikkim, the aborigines of the land and migration if any may have been from 'Mayel- Lyang' to other areas. The authors of *The Trees of North Bengal* mention that there are several local names including Nepali, Lepcha, Hindi, Bengali, Mechi, Garo and Modesia but 'Lepcha names are usually reliable'.³¹ It is interesting to note in this connection that the Lepchas, as pointed out by Gorer, have no tradition of migration and 'place the home of their ancestors- the people of Mayel-in one of the inaccessible Valleys of Kanchenjunga. ³² T.B.Subba, has written that, "The only community which is known to have originally inhabited this region (Darjeeling and Sikkim) is the Lepcha."

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9. MYTHICAL THEORIES OF LEPCHA CREATION

Whatever the Lepchas may be called by others but they do pride themselves in calling oneself 'Rongkup' , Rong here is said to come from the lepcha word 'Arong' meaning the highest point, the forehead, and here the highest mountain Kanchenjunga. 'Kup' in Lepcha means the sons and daughters, thus the word 'Rongkup' gives the meaning sons and daughters who have descended from the Mt. Kanchenjunga. The other name they call themselves is 'Rumkup', Rum in Lepcha means God, the eventual meaning comes to sons and daughters of God. In all of Lepcha history we find that the mountain Kanchenjunga plays a very significant role, it is said that the Lepcha never move far away from their mountain, the abode of their gods and their creation. R.P. Lama has written, "The Lepchas calls themselves 'Mutanchi Rong' meaning the beloved children of God".³⁴ Their original ancestors, 'Foodongthing and Nazong nu', the first man and woman created by God from the eternal purity and holy snows of the Himalayas, Thus Fudongthing and Nazongnu means the 'most powerful' and the 'ever fortunate'.³⁵ As such even to this day, Lepchas worship the Himalayas as their guardian deity.

A.R. Foning, describes the creation of first man and woman as follows: "Itbu-moo, the Great Mother Creator, after having created everything on land and in the sea and sky, created

Tukbothing to be Lord over them all and to enjoy it. After some time, feeling a bit of inadequacy in her project, from Takbothing's rib 'nungyong', literally meaning 'marrow', and in figurative meaning, 'wisdom', created Nazong Nu and gave her to him as a companion and helpmate".³⁶

Pema Wangchuk and Mita Zulca, have written, "Also, according to the story of origin, the first Lepcha couple, Tukbothing and Nazong Nyu, their Adam and Eve respectively, were created by Itbu Mu from the fresh snows of Khangchendzonga's summit".³⁷ They further state that the salutation that they offer to each other by saying 'Aachulay' is in fact a salutation to the great Kanchenjunga. The Kanchenjunga's significance to the Lepcha can be ascertained from the fact that 'Chyu Ruum Faat' festival that is held annually is in honour of the Mt. Kanchenjunga and the gods that reside there. They state in their book that in all the prayers that the Mun and the Boongthing performs they at first invoke the spirits that reside in the mountain and try to appease them. They offer many things to the gods that reside there so as to rid the people of all their sufferings." ³⁸

10. CONCLUSION

The Lepchas have come from their own stock and are indigenous people of the Kanchenjunga basin. The earlier assumptions that they are of Chinese, Tibetan, Assamese, Naga, or any other stock and they had migrated from these areas are being proved as unconvincing and false and further studied needs to be carried out. The Lepchas have a long historical memory of fear and threat of invasion from outside, viz the Tibetans, Bhutanese and the Nepalese. This categorically proves that the Lepchas were defending and surviving in this tract of land. Several other scholars of recent times also subscribe to this view.

It has to be said that from the dim past the Lepchas had learnt to survive in this forested and impenetrable track of land. They had learnt to provide for themselves from the forests and from subsistence farming for cereals. Their food habits were different from the majority living in the plains, as was their language, looks and social norms. Their indigenoussness is further proven by the nomenclature of all the rivers, peaks, mountains and important hamlets in the area.

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