Chapter 4

Influence of Buddhism on the Lepchas of Dzongu, North Sikkim

Following the September 18, 2011 earthquake in Sikkim, a badly damaged old Buddhist monastery in Hee Gyathang, a village in the Lepcha reserve of Dzongu in north Sikkim was being considered for demolition. The 6.9 Richter scale earthquake damaged the monastery in such a way that some villagers thought it best to destroy the structure and rebuild a new one. But there were others who did not support the idea as this was a very old monastery and the cost borne entirely by the villagers themselves and they preferred to keep it as it was, so to perhaps promote it as a heritage site in the near future. There was an attempt to save the site because of the community’s involvement despite being a Buddhist place of worship. The third voice came from those who did not want to promote the age-old monastery because it was a Buddhist place of worship and traditionally Lepchas were not Buddhists. The third voice is a recent but an important voice that is being heard among Lepchas today. In the end, the monastery was to be renovated and it is being promoted as a ‘community building’ (Little 2011: 66) today. It is not just a Buddhist monastery but a Lepcha monastery because it represented the combined effort of Lepcha villagers.

In this chapter, we shall explore the arrival of Buddhism among the Lepcha population of Dzongu and its different dimensions that added to an open acceptance of
an alien religion. It will also look at the various arenas where Buddhism intermingled with the traditional religion and created a syncretised version of the Lepcha religion.

**Advent of Buddhism**

Buddhism was officially introduced in Sikkim from seventeenth century onwards. It was a gradual imposition by the Tibetan migrant-rulers from the north who translated many Buddhist texts into Lepcha language to bring Lepchas under the Buddhist fold. It was the beginning of ‘Tibetization’ (Bhasin 2002: 4) of the Lepchas. Initially Lepchas were hesitant about the new faith in the beginning as there was ‘stubborn resistance’ (Nebesky- Wojkowitz 1955 :121) where 14 Lepcha bongthings even plotted to kill the king with black magic. Nonetheless, Lhatsun Chenpo, the patron saint of Sikkim traveled across Tibet studying in different monasteries when he realized the many hidden messages left by Guru Rinpoche. He felt he was called to open the Northern gate of the hidden country and ‘develop that country religiously’ (Kotturan 1983: 27). So he made way southwards and changed the history of Sikkim.

‘He opened the hidden land, created a sacred environment according to Buddhist ideals of the universe, partly by redefining Lepcha sacred sites as Buddhist, established a political entity and converted the indigenous population’ (Balikci 2008: 84).

Lhatsun Chenpo consecrated the first King of Sikkim in Yuksam in an elaborate ceremony that lasted for 21 days. He belonged to the Nyingmapa sect and discovered
many sacred texts and established Buddhist monasteries, including the Tholung monastery inside the Dzongu reserve. He promoted Mt. Kanchenjunga, the Lepcha source of origin as a Buddhist God and incorporated Buddhist ideas into their traditional religion. Lepchas began practicing both Buddhism and traditional religion keeping those they found fit and throwing away that was not necessary. They had syncretised the two to produce a religion that worked to their advantage. While this trend of mixture between ‘Buddhism and shamanism’ is not new to the Tibetan Buddhist tradition’ (Ortner 1995: 357), Lepchas had comfortably created a ‘double-layered religious system’ (Torri 2010: 149), which had been well noted by anthropologists over time.

‘The discussion of the Lepchas’ religion is rendered extremely complicated by the fact that they practise simultaneously, and without feeling of theoretical discomfort, two (or possibly three) mutually contradictory religions...’ (Gorer 2005: 181)

True enough, the parallel practice of Buddhism and traditional religion was very much present in Tingvong. Almost everyone in Dzongu professed Buddhism as his or her religion as it has permeated to all walks of village life. Often times, there was no separation between Buddhist culture and Lepcha culture as the two intertwined to create a common culture.

Guru Rinpoche in Dzongu

‘Guru Rinpoche is said to have tamed all the supernatural beings of the land, including the mountain god Kanchendzonga, during his eighth century visit to Sikkim and to have
bound them through solemn oaths into being protectors of the faith and to refrain from causing harm to sentient beings. By this act, and having hidden spiritual treasures to be discovered in later times, Guru Rinpoche is seen as having brought Buddhism and a civilized way of life’ (Balicki 2008: 83).

Legends of Guru Rinpoche speak about the seeds of Buddhism sown in eighth century when he passed through Sikkim on his way to Tibet. However it was not so easy for him to win over the Lepchas as he had to battle a Lepcha priest to prove his worth. Bentley uses the term ‘magical contest’ (Bentley forthcoming) while referring to the verbal and physical disputes between the Lepcha bongthing and the Buddhist saint. The Lepcha counterpart is believed to be someone with supernatural powers, and different people have various versions regarding who actually contested with Guru Rinpoche. So as to not confuse the story, I shall refer to the most popular version of Thikung Mensalong, the Lepcha bongthing-cum-scholar, who fought with Guru Rinpoche. The two met when Guru Rinpoche was passing through Dzongu, confronting the spirits of the Lepcha land. Mensalong charged him and the conversation between the two heated up when Guru told Mensalong to ‘follow the lessons of the Lord Buddha’ (Kotturan 1983: 17). The two argued for a while and decided to compete with their supernatural powers to settle the dispute. Mensalong won and Guru accepted his defeat but he did not leave before saying the people were ‘primitive and wild... and just not profitable to preach them the doctrine of the Buddha’ (Ibid). Grothmann (2012: 130) writes about Tibetans using words like “barbarian” “savage” or “wild” to characterize the non-Buddhist population of the Southeastern Himalayas and it rings true in the case of
Lepchas too. Guru is believed to have said, this area is not ready to be tamed, but later a lama will return, subdue the demons and convert the Lepcha people to Buddhism. Soon enough, Lhatsun Chenpo entered Sikkim and so did Buddhism fulfilling the words of Guru Rinpoche who has become a revered figure localized in Lepcha homes today. Most Lepcha households hang photographs of Guru Rinpoche in their worship altars or the living room but outside, the Dzongu landscape is full of stones and mounds telling his stories. On the way to Tholung monastery, there is a collection of stacked rocks, popularly known as Thigong, which have withstood time and are known to be the library where he hid the sacred texts. Another rock has a footprint fossil, believed to have been of the holy one as nobody dare put his or her feet on top to measure the foot size.

Nearby in a small opening to a cave where Guru Rinpoche’s little finger had gotten stuck. Indeed, the Sikkim Buddhist tradition mentions that he had left ‘writings on the noble teachings’ (Kotturan 1983: 17) in the many caves and many other secret places, which he hoped later on, some dedicated monk would pick up and give to the
people. Further up is a resting area where he is believed to have had lunch on his way to Tibet. The “sacred” sites in the Tholung landscape can be easily recognized by any newcomer in the area because there is always a white silk scarf or wax remnants of candles lit by locals who pass through. Further up in Kishung lake, there is a thin white passing through the middle of the lake, believed to have been Guru’s path on the way to Tibet. Nearby are rice grains believed to have been remnants from his lunch as they have been growing ever year while nobody actually plants them. There is a saying that if the grains in Kishung are healthy, the rest of Dzongu would have a good harvest too.

As convincing at it is to the local believers, it is not easy to verify the stories of his visit to Dzongu as there are no historical records. However, the belief of his presence and the myths and legends that have been passed down are far too many to be left unaccounted and ‘dismissed as sheer fabrication’ (Kotturan 1983: 25).

_Tholung Monastery and Pang Lhabsol_

‘Talung Monastery is one of the most sacred monasteries in Sikhim, and is full of very beautiful and interesting objects of veneration, nearly all real works of art. During the Nepalese invasion of 1816, many of these objects were removed from other monasteries and brought here for safety, and have remained here ever since’ (White 2000:66).
Located at an altitude of 8500, one has to walk almost half a day to reach the revered Tholung monastery. Built during the time of Lhatsun Chenpo—the patron saint of Sikkim, this monastery is historically significant for safeguarding the national treasures during the time of Gorkha invasion. It is believed that the treasures inside the monastery are not disturbed because ‘Lhatsun Chenpo left it in charge of certain devils who would immediately take revenge if anyone tried to touch it’ (Morris 1938: 54). It also holds the remains of Chagdor Namgyal, the third King of Sikkim. Upon the King’s death, Lepchas brought the corpse from Gangtok to Tholung to give him a proper Lepcha burial because they believed him to be their Rong Pano—Lepcha king. It is remembered that Chagdor Namgyal was a keen advocate of the Lepcha people and the people were equally fond of him. So they followed tradition, buried the dead king and also slaughtered a pig offered by the kazi from Linkgo. The lamas opposed any forms of animal slaughter, especially within the monastery premises, as one of the key moral obligations for a lay Buddhist is to not destroy life (Fraser 1982: 80). But the Lepchas went ahead with the animal slaughter and buried the dead King inside the monastery.
About three years after the burial, people spoke of different kinds of animals emerging out of the dead body and attacking the people. They feared that they had wronged the funeral rites and decided to cremate the already buried dead body. When they pulled out the corpse, they noticed that the blood in the body felt alive and if it were delayed by even a few days, perhaps the corpse would have raised itself from the dead. So, they finally cremated their King and the ashes have been placed inside the *gombu* ever since. Traditionally Lepchas buried their dead but the Buddhist tradition is to cremate the dead, and this event in history symbolizes the victory of the Buddhist tradition over Lepcha ways of life. There was a near clash when the gods were not properly appropriated. But time and experience has taught the Lepchas to make both religions work in their favour.

Because of its distance, not everyone in the village can visit the Tholung monastery any time they want nor participate in the occasional religious visits of different Buddhist leaders. But during *Pang Lhabsol*, villagers from Dzongu make a point to participate in the activities that has long been a mixture of Buddhist and Lepcha traditions. *Pang Lhabsol* is the state recognized festival in Sikkim commemorating the blood brotherhood between the Lepchas and the Bhutias. It is known as the festival of unity across Sikkim. Devotees invoke Mt. Kanchenjunga, the guardian deity of the state to protect the land and look after the people. And the villagers from Dzongu are no different in contributing their share of offerings by collecting from each household and taking it to the Tholung monastery every year. Different villages take turns every year to bring the *khokpa* – a whole pig, along with *ci*, grains, beaten rice, maize, vegetables and fresh fruits from the village. Gyathang was the chosen village in August 2010 as they
carried the offerings and made way to the monastery in huge numbers. About 50 villagers from Gyathang alone made their way to Tholung and this was a large contingency compared to ten or less participants from other villages. While the monastery premises do not have enough room to accommodate large groups of people, there are small log houses for each village to host their pilgrims lest they have to take shelter for the night. But tradition has it that villagers from the “chosen” village were not to be denied a place of rest nor sent back hungry when they reached the Tholung monastery. Suppose a pilgrim from Gyathang were to reach late at night and the cabins were already full, arrangements were to be made to house the tired travelers who had walked many miles to reach the place of worship. The next morning, people assembled at 10:00am inside the monastery as the head lama popularly known as Kongsho Thikung presided over the ceremony. Though attired in his maroon lama robes, Kongsho Thikung automatically took on the role of a bongthing as he started with selected prayers and incantations in the Lepcha language and performed a faat ci. He was no different from any bongthing in the command over his inexplicable chants as he went on to tell the names of the Kings, the places, and the story attached to this occasion. Thereafter he repeated the same in Bhutia language. Since he was calling on the names of the dead Kings, he feared that they would not understand Lepcha and had to invoke their spirits in the language they understood as well. He was compelled to speak in two languages because there were no other bongthings who would know of the names of the different kings that would be required for the ceremony. Likewise, the invocation of gods in front of a slaughtered animal could be seen unacceptable to his role as a
Buddhist lama, but the *bongthing*- cum-lama had managed the mixture of two traditions by appeasing both the local gods and the dead kings.

*Buddhism in Tingvong*

‘I had my camp in the western part of the village of Tingbung, House No. 1 is situated almost in the middle of Tingbung village and belongs to rig zing, the gya pan or the local headman, I made this house my starting point for a survey tour of the whole district, using some of the local men as guides’ (Siiger 1967: 46).

Following Siiger’s footsteps, I arrived in Tingvong and found lodging at the same place where Siiger had camped. While he had pitched a tent, I was fortunate to find a clean and luxurious place to live during my fieldwork in Dzongu. The office of the headman ceased to exist since the introduction of the *panchayat* system and the headman’s house had turned into a homestay promoting ecotourism and allowing tourists to rent a room, and spend a night or more with the headman’s family, eating their food and doing the things they do. With the introduction of *panchayat* system, where the *panchayat* is an elected head of the village, the headman’s legacy was still carried on as the current *panchayat* of Tingvong was the first born of the headman. Interestingly, the headman *Rig zing*, mentioned by Siiger had two wives and the *panchayat* was the first son of his first wife. The homestay was at the second wife’s house. But like the headman, the *panchayat* still held most of the say in the village. As for the homestay, it was an ideal gateway for travellers and tourists who came to Tingvong and found themselves
transported to a different world. Tingvong held that sense of serenity as the fluttering of faded prayer flags on the road and the wind powered prayer wheels rotated on its own. The village monastery was a short walk from the last vehicle stop and although it remained closed most of the time, people still visited the same.

There was a time when Tingvong did not have its own monastery. During those times everyone would refer or visit the Tholung monastery. The heads of the Tholung monastery were of the ‘Nang-pa clan of Tibetan origin with permits to reside in Dzongu reserve’ (Arora 2009: 66). It is only obvious that a Bhutia clan would be the owners of a monastery but for them to rule inside Dzongu was almost appalling. Their dominance was present in the unfair way they treated Lepcha monks. The Lepcha lamas were always denied of their rightful place in the monastic order. Of all the lamas from Tingvong, Chodar Lama had traveled to Tibet to study Tibetan Buddhism and reached the level of a head lama, returned to occupy the coveted seat but disagreements with the
Bhutia and Lepcha lamas created a division and Chodar brought back some of the idols and texts from the Tholung monastery and built the Tingvong monastery. Prior to his arrival, the **gombu** in Tingvong was made of bamboo and the first lama was Sambukmu Thikung who apparently had no family or relatives, and nobody knew where he came from. The second lama was Norden lama who was succeeded by Chodar lama, the third lama of Tingvong monastery. With his extensive knowledge of the new religion, Chodar turned out to be a reformist bringing many changes with set rules of dos and don’ts for the Lepcha villagers. He stopped the killing of animals in monastery premises. He advocated *ahimsa* and discouraged the consumption of meat and alcohol. Meat meant game and Lepchas used to live off the land. So the new order was a restriction to the hunting and fishing culture of the Lepchas. It meant that the fathers were unable to teach their sons how to hunt and fish in the way their fathers and grandfathers traditionally did. Likewise, giving up on alcohol meant giving up on the customary *ci* and its significance in many spheres of life. Buddhist Lepchas however do not strictly necessarily abstain from *ci*. Chodar Lama also introduced the monastic *sedab* school in Tingvong and encouraged Lepcha children to join the school. Today the *sedab* school is a government recognized institution called Govt. Rikzing Tarling Monastic Primary School where novice lamas are taught other subjects like Mathematics, English, Environmental Science besides the religious studies. But during Chodar’s time, the children would only learn the religious texts of Tibetan Buddhism. In promoting lamaistic form of education, Chodar also made it mandatory for each family to send their second son to the monastery to be a monk like in Bhutia families. While there are
families who still send their second sons to be a monk, the practice was not enforced on those who did not want to because to be a lama was not to hold a separate job or earn big money. Most lamas would be engaged in the normal everyday life of a villager unless they had periodic ceremonies at the monastery or were called to different homes for special occasions. While the money at the monastery would not be so rewarding, the private parties could pay a good amount. However, the lamas were required to know certain prayers and chants for different occasions in Tibetan language and this might have been difficult for the young monks to learn by heart as repeated cases of runaway monks were found. Likewise, young boys did not always prefer to be a monk and had other aspirations, so it was only natural to hear them run away from the institution and come back home. At one time, a villager and I were waiting for the jeep to take us to Tingvong when he told me about how the driver had gone to be a lama but ran away from the monastery and was driving the jeep today. However, lamas who stuck around and got educated at the seda school in Tingvong had gone to different monasteries in Gangtok and Mysore today. But the senior lamas carried grievances regarding the inferior treatment they received in their monastic order. The usual complaint was how a Lepcha never becomes a Rinpoche despite having served in the monastery all his life. Today, most lamas in Sikkim are either Lepchas or Bhutanese. In that context, the Lepcha lamas can be seen as agents holding on to the Tibetan Buddhist culture in Sikkim.

Indeed, the prayer flags that flutter around Tingvong giving the village a Buddhist identity was a carrier of Tibetan culture because when one looked closely at
the inscriptions on the flags, it is written in a script unrecognizable to the Lepchas. The prayers are written in Tibetan and a normal Lepcha villager would not necessarily be able to read through the prayers. In the village of Lingko, there were prayer flags right outside the bongthing’s house. This could be seen as a blend of religions, because here was a traditional ritual specialist who adorned his house with Buddhist prayer flags. But these instances were an accepted norm and nobody questioned the bongthing’s loyalty to the traditional religion. Likewise, the people of the village never missed the dates when new flags needed to be replaced every year following an auspicious occasion or the death anniversary of a certain family member. In that, the death rites had changed. If the ancestors used to be buried, the descendants were being cremated today. The dead is cremated in the Buddhist tradition but a bongthing is initially required to separate the path of the dead and those of living. A mun usually guided the soul back to where the person originated, but in Tingvong there was no mun and the lamas took over the funeral ceremony. At one funeral, the lamas were in the room where the corpse was kept reading their prayers and clanging cymbals. In the next room, the bongthing sat with us drinking tea as any other villager who came to visit the house. Later too, the rites were conducted in a Buddhist fashion cremating the corpse. The burning of the dead was also seen as a prime reason why there has been a decrease in the number of traditional ritual specialists. It is believed that the spirit of a bongthing is destined, although if the father or the grandfather was a bongthing, then the son or grandson had higher chances of becoming one after the death of his father/grandfather. But when the funeral is conducted in the Buddhist tradition, their belief in reincarnation makes it difficult for the
soul to be reborn as a *bongthing* himself. It is a possibility but it might take a longer
time for the dead soul to reincarnate itself. Hence the practices of Buddhist death rituals
have contributed to the dwindling number of traditional ritual specialists in Lepcha
community.

**Cultural Changes due to Buddhism**

Lepchas have always known that Buddhism was not their original religion. They also
know that Buddhism was the religion of the rulers and they often strived to be like them.
In Dzongu, however, there is no yardstick for Buddhism because they have all been on
the receiving end. They practise what has been taught and do not question the authority.
But in recent days, Lepchas are owning Buddhism to fit to their culture. Buddhist chants
are being written in Lepcha language today. They have not just been transformed from
traditional religion to Buddhism, but are also making efforts to transform Buddhism to
fit to Lepcha religion.

*Om mane peme* in Lepcha  
Prayer flags in Tibetan
The following paragraphs will examine the various Lepcha social institutions that might or have not been changed due to the influence of Buddhism in the Lepcha reserve of Dzongu.

Family

The family size in Tingvong is slightly larger than the regular Lepcha family elsewhere. The average number of children is 5 and there are cases of infant mortality too. There is a trend of male out-migration leaving only the women in the village. Most houses have the mother, daughter and daughter-in-law working in the fields and taking care of the children. Despite the mother and daughter-in-law squabbles we usually hear in other societies, the Lepcha women hardly raise their voice. They seem to avoid confrontation as much as they avoid conflict. During the entire time in Tingvong, the present researcher did not hear any arguments in the village. Most children go to the village school unless the parents desired to send them to Mangan or Gangtok. When the children return home during winter vacations, they are found to take part in household chores like grazing the sheep and looking after the cows. Practice of polygamy is present in a few cases when the man keeps two wives but have different houses for each wife. The husband spends equal time with both wives and also gives equal attention to children from both the wives.
Marriage

During marriage, we can see the co-existence of traditional religion and Buddhism as both the bongthing and the lama are present to officiate the wedding. The bongthing starts off by invoking the spirit of the clans that were being united and offer ci and rice to Mt. Kanchenjuna and the rivers Rongyoo –Rangeet. Then the couple is called upon to drink ci from the same bowl. Thereafter the lamas chant their share of prayers, which is not necessarily understood by the newly weds nor themselves because the chants would be in Tibetan often memorized as they have different set of prayers for different occasions. Marriages usually take place between Lepchas within Dzongu itself. If not from the same village, they could also find possible partners in Mangan and Gangtok. There have been cases of marital union between Lepchas of Dzongu and Kalimpong. Marriages are seen as a union between two families, clans, villages and geographies. There are a few cases of Lepcha men bringing non-Lepcha wives to the village. There are two cases of men from Kalimpong who stayed on in Dzongu and became the kamok myok or sons-in-law. In case of polygamy, the husband is believed to have gotten the consent of his first wife and even if she is not willing, there is nothing she can do when the husband decided to bring another wife.

Kinship

Tingvong is organized in clusters of houses of close kins. Those belonging to the same clan are seen living nearby. For instance, all households in Kusoong belong to the
Khamyangmoo and those in Lingko belong to the Paki clan. Dzongu Lepchas do not practise or know about parallel descent. They have been taking their father’s clan name since ages. But the origin story of Tingvong and the taking of the girl’s clan name for the Arampotso’s speak of a possible practice that existed and has since been forgotten. They also do not use the term moo while referring to the clan. They use the term ptso instead. It is also claimed that moo referred to female clan and ptso represented the male clan. So, the absence of taking mother’s clan name meant the moo disappeared after marriage. They were of the idea that only Kalimpong Lepchas practise and promote parallel descent. The kinship terminology has remained the same although there is a tendency to use Bhutia terminology when the Lepcha was a little better off. At one point, the girl who stayed with my host started calling me aai meaning elder sister in Bhutia and my host yelled at her for trying to emulate the Bhutia ways.

Language

Everyone in Tingvong spoke the Lepcha language. The children learned to read and write their mother tongue in the village school as Lepcha language is incorporated into the education system in Sikkim. Textbooks often included Lepcha stories and poetry exposing students to learn Lepcha history in school itself. There was a trend of sending students to Mangan or Gangtok for further education and those students were found to be speaking in Nepali even when they came home during breaks. Most villagers who frequented Mangan or Gangtok were bilingual. In the monastic sphere, the
lamas knew their prayers in Tibetan by heart, but did not necessarily know the Tibetan language. Even in 1938, Morris recalls that the lamas were ‘merely repeating the scriptures as they happened to know’ (Morris 1938: 289). Indeed, ‘texts are chanted and the lamas learn a paralanguage associated with texts: proper pronunciation, cadence, gestures, secret passages, and ritual acts closely related to particular moments in the recitation of a text’ (Holmberg 1984:702).

Food

On the first day in the field, my hosts told me not to drink even water from a certain house when I went for household census. “Let nothing happen after drinking tea,” she cautioned. There had been cases of food poisoning in that house and my host wanted me to be on the safe side. As scary as it sounded, I was curious too. Surprisingly, a few houses with daughters-in-laws from outside were known to be practising food poisoning. ‘Poisoners were usually rich, successful and independent women who inspire jealousy in others rather than being poor and thought to be envious of others’ possessions’ (Balikci 2008: 179). Otherwise, there were no food restrictions and most residents of the village were non-vegetarians. In case of death in the family, they would stop eating meat for a few days, which was in contrast to the traditional ways of slaughtering an ox and feeding the village during funerals. Tibetan cookies known as khapsey and beaten rice was used as snacks with tea in a very Tibetan presentation.
However, *ci* was freely available at any time of the day and season. In Morris’ words, ‘all the Lepchas, men, women, and children, drink far too much; and in Jongu it was unusual to find any adult completely sober in the evening’ (Morris 1938: 287). *Ci* was readily available at people’s homes at any time of the day. One could find villagers consuming *ci* from early morning and for most of the time, they walked around with smiley faces going about with everyday work. When intoxicated, they seemed a little bolder to confront those who had wronged. One villager corrected me for spelling his name wrong during the household census after three weeks of noting his name. We were at a funeral wake and he came up to me and said, “Luponmoo, you have spelt my name wrong. It is l-e-d-a and not l-e-y-d-a.”
Dress

In Tingvong, most women wore the Tibetan *bakkhu* at home and around the village. Only a few elderly women were seen to be wearing the traditional *dumvun* of thicker material without the pleats in front known as *dumpin*. They said that the pleats only came to vogue in Dzongu after they attended a wedding in Kalimpong and copied from them. Despite *bakkhu*’s popularity, special occasions and events in the village like the Independence Day brought out the women in traditional *dumvun*.

Women in Tingvong wore pearl necklaces. From a young girl to an elderly grandmother, the beads would be from scanty to ornamented with precious stones.
Emergence of Lhomen Identity

The gradual incorporation of Buddhism into the Lepcha lifestyle permeated beyond the religious sphere of Lepcha culture. They were receiving more than they bargained for as the dominant Buddhist Bhutia culture and religion became a part of their everyday life. The Bhutias came from Tibet and were ‘the carriers of Tibetan culture, Tibetan language, the Lamaist Buddhism and a combination of Pastoralism and semi-settled agricultural practices’ (Thapa 2002: 28). The new arrivals were not seen as a threat but were accepted in the Lepcha land.

Blood Brotherhood Treaty

‘Being childless, Khye-Bumsa consulted his Lamas and was told to propitiate the heads of the Lepcha people. Accordingly, with a following of seventeen persons only, he crossed the Yak-la and Penlong and reached Sata-la near Rankpo: here he enquired who were the heads of the Lepchas, and was informed that they were Thekong Tek and his wife, Nyekong-Nal, but where they dwelt he failed to ascertain. Proceeding towards Gangtok, they came across a very old man quite black from tilling his recently burnt field, but could get nothing out of him. Suspecting he knew more than he chose to tell, the Tibetan party hid themselves, and when the old man left off work, followed him secretly to a house which he entered. Obtaining at last an entrance, they found their old man clad in a robe adorned with animals’ heads and seated in state on a dais,
worshipped by the other inmates, and thus discovered that he was the veritable Thekong Tek they were in search of" (Risley 2001:9).

History speaks of a time when the Tibetan noble, Khye Bumsa travelled to Sikkim in search of Thikung Tek, a Lepcha ‘divine priest’ (Tamsang 1983: 9) to seek blessings for his barren wife. The Tibetan couple longed for a child and Thikung Tek was believed to have magical powers to grant such wish. So they visited him and he blessed them not one but three sons. Khye Bumsa and his wife were thankful for the sons and returned to express their gratitude. They brought their sons along and when Thikung Tek lifted one of the sons up with fondness the child’s feet touched his forehead. This worried the old man as knew that this child’s descendents would rule Sikkim in the coming future. If that was to happen, he was concerned for the future of the Lepchas and made a blood brotherhood treaty between the two communities.

‘...he (Thekong Tek) called on Khye Bumsa to swear blood brotherhood with him as a symbolic acceptance of Bhutias and Lepchas as equals. The blood brotherhood ceremony was consecrated at Kabi Longstok with the two sitting on animal hides and surrounded by blood of sacrificed animals’ (Wangchuk and Zulca 2007: 54).
They invoked Mt. Kanchenjunga to witness the solemnization as *longtsaoks* were erected to mark the 'eternal friendship and fraternity' (Foning 1987: 37) of the event. It has also been said that Khye Bumsa took a Lepcha wife to 'reinforce the equal status of the two communities in Sikkim' (*Ibid*: 54). The historical pact between the Lepcha and Bhutia ancestors had bound them together as an inseparable entity. Until the Bhutias betrayed the brotherhood treaty and a descendent of Khye Bumsa became the first *chogyal* (king) of Sikkim. Thereafter the kings kept taking Lepcha wives to continue the marital ties but the equality was short lived as the Lepchas became subjects and the Bhutias became rulers of the land. Intermarriage between the two tribes took a toll and a Lepcha Bhutia marital alliance was unheard of even outside Dzongu. Young Lepcha girls were told they could marry anyone but if they married a Bhutia then it was as if they were selling their soul. Both communities generally seemed to not trust each other. 'The aggressive Bhutias were never accepted whole-heartedly by the Lepchas’ (Subba 1989: 126). And this bitterness between the two communities was engrained from an early childhood. Lepcha mothers could be heard saying, “if you don’t go to sleep, the Bhutias will come and take you away.” Children out of fear would quietly go to bed. Young people were discouraged from wearing a Bhutia dress and Lepchas had plenty of reason to stay away from them. Bhutias referred to Lepchas as *Membo-Nah*, meaning “foolish Lepchas” while making derogatory remarks like *Membo-Dudum* meaning “tailless monkey” (Thapa 2002: 174). It was not just the betrayal of the blood brotherhood treaty but the Bhutia dominance over Lepchas on the religious, political and social fabric of Lepcha society had betrayed their trust. There were rumours about the
demand for Lepcha women from Dzongu for the Sikkim palace that added sour taste for those left behind. Lepchas would rather marry the Limboos or Nepalis instead.

But there came a time when the rapid growth of the Nepali migrant population and their dominance in all areas of Sikkim society was seen as a threat to the Lepcha Bhutia population of Sikkim. They felt insecure in their land of origin because they were easily outnumbered. This fear of cultural extinction and nostalgia over lost political dominance brought the warring tribes close to each other. Consequently, ‘several organisations were formed with a view to campaign actively for tribal unity’ (Thapa 2002: 88). Putting aside the animosity that had brewed for a while, the Bhutias and Lepchas came together to stand up against the majority Nepalis. They started searching for similarities between themselves as intermarriages between the two tribes were being entertained once again. It was necessary and paved way for a renewed cultural and social assimilation between the two communities. In this case ‘the common and uniting element’ (Oommen 2009: 4) for the Lepchas and Bhutias was religion. Buddhism proved to be the main factor in the rekindled friendship between the two. They were called to stand firm and not be shaken like ‘the meditating Buddha under a Bodhi Tree’ (Bhandari 2006: Foreword) as loss of these communities also resulted in a loss of ‘Buddhist heritage and peacefulness, which is rarely found’ (Chakraborty 2006: Forword). In these developments, the Lepchas put aside their reservations and differences to team with the Bhutias for a united fight. This coalition gave birth to a hyphenated identity for the Bhutia-Lepchas (B-L) beyond the Lho-Men-Tsong (Bhutia-Lepcha-Limboo) brotherhood that was formalized when the first King of Sikkim was
consecrated. The B-L alliance was key to the political representation of these communities as the verdict of the Supreme Court on February 10, 1993 upheld reservation of 12 reserved seats of Bhutia-Lepcha in the Sikkim Legislative Assembly. But the B-L alliance cannot be seen as a natural union. History speaks of the time when this brotherhood pact was broken creating mistrust between these two communities. They were enemies but today it has become necessary to join forces in the creation of 'negative solidarity' (Subba 1988: 169) regarding the interethnic relationship between tribes in Northeast India. Only time will tell when this alliance will be broken and new alliances be made.

Sikkim Bhutia Lepcha Apex Committee

Fostering tribal unity between the Lepchas and the Bhutias is the Sikkim Bhutia Lepcha Apex Committee (SIBLAC) that was formed on 5 September 1999 to protect the right of the Bhutias and the Lepchas. It is a consortium of different Bhutia and Lepcha associations with a 'battle cry for their struggle to retain their identity and dignity' (Chakraborty 2006: Q). Their main concern is the dilution of Article 371F in the subsection (k) which guarantees special provision for Sikkim within the Indian state. They feel that the weakening of constitutional rights threatened the survival of the oldest settlers of the land.

"With growing awakening among the indigenous Bhutia-Lepcha community who have been reduced to minority in their own native land, if their precious rights and interest are
not restored and safeguarded as provided in the Constitution of India, the very concept of integration, assimilation or pride in being an Indian, pride in being involved in nation-building will be undercut” (SIBLAC 2003: Introduction)

The SIBLAC is represented by members from both Bhutia and Lepcha communities. They are often branded as being communal although their activities have been relatively peaceful. They have their own flag, which is diagonally separated to saffron and golden colours with a dharma chakra in the centre.

The flag for SIBLAC is a religious representation at some level with Buddhism at its base. The dharma chakra is one of the oldest Buddhist symbols meaning the wheel of life. It has also represented Buddha’s teaching of the eight-fold path to enlightenment. It represents the Bhutia population in its truest sense but for the Lepchas, it has been a place of compromise. There is no element of Lepcha-ness in the SIBLA flag and this rings true the further we decipher SIBLAC’s agendas. One of their main agendas has been to do away with the integration of six other ethnic groups namely Sherpas, Kagatays, Yolmos, Dukpas, Dopathapas, Chumbipas who have also been clubbed under
the "Bhutia" tag. The SIBLAC claims that these groups are not really Bhutias and has asked for an amendment of the Scheduled Tribe Order 1978. Here too, Lepchas have just been tagged along for a cause that does not really speak for them. While the SIBLAC alliance could be advantageous at a political level, villagers were honest to say that they do not need actually need the Bhutias to go forward. Some of them even feel that 'the Bhutias needed Lepchas because without them they would not be the indigenous people of Sikkim' (Bentley 2007:81). There are also those who say that SIBLAC has never taken up a Lepcha cause. Even during the time of protests over dams in Dzongu, SIBLAC’s voice was only a faint whisper. They failed to show solidarity to the Lepcha brothers and if they were functioning to champion the cause of both the Lepchas and Bhutias, their actions should have spoken more than a press release condemning the construction of dams in Dzongu. While the two tribes share a hyphenated identity, which has worked for their advantage at some levels, it is safe to say that the agendas and political aspirations of SIBLAC do not often match with the demands and struggles of the Lepcha people. And if they are to work together, they need more than religion to unite them and fight for their rights in the long run.

"Primitive" means first citizens

On August 8, 2010 the state government of Sikkim distributed 'certificate of primitive tribe group' to the Lepchas of Sikkim at the annual Tendong Hlo Rum Faat Celebrations in Mangan, North Sikkim. It read,
"Under the notification number 3(54) PA/518/2006, dated 18.11.2006, published in Sikkim Government Gazette Extraordinary number 375, dated 18th November 2006, the State Government has recognized and declared the Indigenous Tribal Community of the State as the Primitive Tribe Group in the State of Sikkim.

The announcement was made five years ago in 2005 while the notification came in 2006 after being passed in the Sikkim Assembly but the certificates were distributed only in August 2010. While it has been received with mixed response, the state notification says that it has been passed to 'protect and safeguard the vanishing tribe and to uplift their socio-economic, educational and political status'. A year later at the same event, Pawan Chamling, the Chief Minister of Sikkim said that the new identity had 'provided them with a clearer, more unique identity as the officially recognised “first citizens” of Sikkim, the people indigenous to this land since antiquity' (northeasttoday.in). There is indeed recognition for the first settlers of the land, but in a reverse manner. While most anthropologists and even the Government of India refuse to acknowledge the term “primitive”, this development has raised more questions than answered them. It has indeed separated them from the hyphenated B-L identity they held for a long time reinforcing their distinct identity and allowing them to exist on their own. But the provisions for the “primitive” group have not been outlined in a clear-cut manner. The only thing they have heard since the distribution of certificates has been the exclusive quota for the Lepchas of Sikkim in higher education to be implemented from the academic session of 2012 onwards. The elders are positive about this development while the youngsters are not too keen on being called “primitive”. There could be a
common ground if the state government replaced “primitive” with the “particularly vulnerable group” tag that is an acceptable feature with the Indian government and with people the in general. Then perhaps the educated Lepchas would also take advantage of their newfound identity and work for the betterment of the community.

Conclusion

The introduction of Buddhism and its incorporation into the Lepcha landscape was the key to an easy acceptance of Tibetan Buddhism in Sikkim. For instance, Mt. Kanchenjunga, the mythical place of Lepcha origin was incorporated into Buddhist belief and transformed into the guardian deity of the religious order of the Sikkimese kingdom. Since then, Lepchas are found to be practising both Buddhism and their
traditional religion where the lamas and the bongthings perform side by side and the religious practices are characterized by syncretism. 'The lama and the shaman do not contradict each other but co-exist as religious specialists due to a division of labour in their roles towards the individual, the family, the community and the polity (Arora 2006: 64).’ But there is an unspoken tension between the intertwined religions as Lepchas have also realized that they have accommodated Buddhism into their traditional religion, and the various Buddhist festivals and rituals are actually on its way to 'erode Lepcha identity' (Bentley 2007: 99). Nonetheless, Buddhism was the common denominator for the Lepchas and Bhutias to form an alliance against the rapid growth of the Nepali migrant population and their dominance in all areas of Sikkim society. For a long time, the two tribes showcased a united front but the recent provision of the ‘primitive’ tribe status for the Lepchas have given them their recognition that was due long ago. In that context, the educational reservation is a start to recognize the first citizens of Sikkim but it is still to be explored whether the ‘primitive’ tribe is just for namesake or for the true betterment of the Lepcha tribe.