Chapter 8

Summary and Conclusion

'It is very heartening to report that all Lepcha Pastors, Elders, Fathers and Lamas, unanimously agreed that they are first and foremost Lepchas' (Aachuley 2012).

This report in the Lepcha Bilingual News Magazine was the epitome of the production of Lepcha identity. The article was titled ‘Lepcha Renaissance’ as it reported the meeting of Lepcha mun-bongthing, head lamas of Lepcha monasteries, Lepcha pastors and fathers from different churches of Darjeeling hills to work for better communication and for the future course of action between the religious heads and the Indigenous Lepcha Tribal Association. The report further read,

'A series of meetings between the Lepcha heads of different churches and Lepcha monasteries certainly implanted, rekindled and rejuvenated the idea of Lepcha unity, identity, dignity and honour in Mayel Lyang' (Aachuley 2012).

By reading through the report, the impression we get is extremely positive. Emotions are running high from this reunion as the Buddhist and Christian Lepchas vowed to work together. The possible erasing of the religious boundary can be seen as a major landmark for the advancement of the tribe. It would be a start of the “flourishing” Lepcha that was preferred by members of the community. But it will not be easy. It will
take time. The silent antagonism between the two sides and the feeling of ‘us’ and ‘them’ will still remain. Their religious identities cannot disappear over night yet the effort has been made, especially as an excellent display of how the Lepchas want to be identified today.

In this study we have examined the influence of Buddhism, Christianity and Hinduism among the Lepchas of three geographical regions. Being exposed to three different religions and living in three separate regions, the creation of varied identities was bound to be problematic at the core of Lepcha identity. But we know that, ‘identities are never fixed within themselves, nor do they emerge from nowhere; they are constructed primarily in and through relations, and are always involved in a process of translating’ (Karlsson 2000:19; Longkumer 2010: 12). In the case of Lepchas, the exposure to these world religions meant cultural changes and the construction of new identities that has proven both advantageous and disadvantageous at different levels and contexts.

The study outlined the traditional religion of the Lepchas in the background of the coming of Buddhism, Christianity and Hinduism that Lepchas thought fit to emulate. They were a people group with no word for religion till they started following these world religions and identified themselves with those religions. The acceptance of their newfound religions altered the lifestyle, worldview and the identity of the tribe. In case of Buddhism, Lepchas were able to retain the left over from the previous tradition as they practised both religions side by side promoting syncretism in not just the religion
but in their culture as well. In doing so, they were able to form an alliance of convenience with the Bhutia community with Buddhism as their common ground, which led to the formation of a shared identity. The “B-L” identity was not fixed and could be crossed back and forth depending on context. If need arises, the Lepchas can actually discard the hyphenated tag especially with the present “primitive” identity that has been given to them by the Government of Sikkim. Converting to Christianity was the beginning of a modern lifestyle for most Lepchas. The only error was the divorce from traditional culture that labelled them as traitors almost. Their confidence in their Christian Lepcha identity was challenged by the Buddhist Lepchas who held them responsible for neglecting traditional culture. A boundary was built between Buddhist Lepchas and Christian Lepchas creating religious identities that differentiated ‘us’ and ‘them’. For long, they remained in their respective spaces attributed by the religions they had embraced creating an unnecessary divide to the larger ethnic identity. Today, the Christian Lepchas are willing to embrace both their religious and ethnic identities and have proven indispensable to the production of a larger pan-Lepcha identity. Hinduism on the other hand was never formally introduced like Buddhism and Christianity. It had no missionaries but its all-pervading existence was hard to ignore as Lepchas absorbed the Hindu traits that questioned their religious identity. Lepchas influenced by Hinduism were also to syncretize not just the culture but the traditional Lepcha religion with Buddhism and Hinduism as well. Having outlined the basic gist of this study where Buddhism, Christianity and Hinduism have been characterized by syncretism, conversion and absorption respectively we sum up the cultural changes that
occurred in Lepcha social institutions across three geographical regions influenced by three different religions. Despite the knowledge of shared traits, there were many similarities and differences with regard to social institutions of Lepchas living in Dzongu, Kalimpong and Ilam.

The Lepcha family is still a very small unit, as they prefer nuclear families in all three regions. Their clan system has undergone a major change from parallel to patrilineal descent. In the bid to revive this system, Lepcha organizations have been trying to change the last name of girls who write their father’s name in official documents, but it has proven too late in most cases. Unless the child is born today and the parents feel the need to retain the parallel descent, it seems impossible to change the already existing last name of the father. Of late, many Lepcha women who have married non-Lepcha men talk about giving their title to their offspring in case of a girl. It is almost nostalgic but it also shows an attempt to retain and revive the Lepcha identity even after being married to a non-Lepcha.

Marriage among the Lepchas was clan exogamous. Intermarriage between Dzongu and Kalimpong Lepchas was more popular than between Dzongu and Ilam, and Ilam and Kalimpong Lepchas. Inter-community marriage on the other hand was popular because of growing interaction between people from other communities. It was desirable to find a partner from the same community but they were not too strict about tribal exogamy. Trends of late marriage were still very common in Ilam because of the small Lepcha population and the strict clan system, which limited choices about marriageable
partners. The kinship system was still intact although it was undergoing some linguistic changes because of the Lepcha kinship terms being replaced by either Bhutia or Nepali terms.

There has been an ‘awakening’ (Anderson 2006: 74) about the Lepcha language. The birth of Lepcha language schools in Kalimpong and Ilam shows an attempt to reclaim their authority in their mother tongue. Sometimes Lepchas who already know the language are known to create a linguistic boundary excluding those who do not know the Lepcha language. But ‘language is not an instrument of exclusion’ (Anderson 2006: 134), anyone who makes the effort can learn the language and for that Lepchas are headed in the right direction. The Lepchas of Sikkim have been privileged to find the school system recognizing the Lepcha language up till graduate level. Kalimpong Lepchas are optimistic with the Government of West Bengal announcing the introduction of Lepcha language in the school system. Unfortunately for Ilam, the lack of governmental facilities to safeguard the Lepcha language is a matter of concern.

One of the strongest boundary markers when it comes to food was the consumption of ci, the Lepcha alcoholic drink usually made of millet. It is the one thing that separated the Christian and the Buddhist Lepchas. Because of its alcoholic nature, a line is drawn between those who consume and those who do not, putting the Christian Lepchas in the latter category. But why was ci such a huge boundary marker? One of the main reasons is the offering of ci to the gods, known as ci faat, which is done before almost every event. Several drops of the alcoholic liquid are sprinkled in the air usually
with the pipe that is used to sip the same. It also plays an important part in rites of passage – birth, marriage and death and other occasions too. Most villagers do not know the story of the origin of *ci* but they do recall the famous saying, ‘if you know how to drink *ci*, it is medicinal, if you don’t know how to drink *ci*, it is poisonous’ (Tamsang 2001: 13). Indeed, the intake of *ci* has also been cited as the reason for the downfall of the community. But with its mythological origin and the tales attached to it, Plaisier sees ‘the brewing, preparing, drinking and of offering of *ci*’ as an ‘important unifying phenomenon’ (2011: 288). Crossing the boundary and accepting *ci* as an integral part of Lepcha culture could be a start for Christian Lepchas to be a part of the ‘traditional medicine for light heartedness’ (Plaisier 2011: 284).

The changes were inevitable and it is the dynamic configurations of religion, culture and identity that continually interact with each other that have reshaped the Lepcha identity too. With the decreasing differences between their religious and regional boundaries, the Lepcha belongingness lie in certain movements and developments that represented the Lepcha cause. Their political voice has become more pronounced, and the demand for their rights as first citizens of the land in all three regions is a noted phenomenon. It has allowed them to be in solidarity with each other across geographical boundaries displaying a stronger unified front. The religious divide of the yester years is no more a problem as Lepchas are seen to be embracing a secular religious identity that overlook the religious differences and promote religious pluralism instead. So far they have been successful in recognizing the different religious traditions followed by the Lepchas and in creating a cultural consciousness that has facilitated
group solidarity. For the time being, there is the much needed one-ness of that 'Rong romance' flourishing in the hills of Mayel Lyang.