Chapter 6

Hinduism and Lepchas in Ilam

“Dashain is not our festival,” said Bir Bahadur Lepcha, President of the *Rong Shezum Thee* (Lepchas Association of Ilam). It is the biggest festival for the Hindus, but we have never claimed Dashain to be our festival, he added. The radio FMs announced Dashain to be the “national festival” and the festivities could be seen and heard all over Ilam. Shopkeepers were busy selling more sweets than regular days and travellers were finding harder to find seats even on local buses. It was that time of the year when school children enjoyed almost a month long vacation while everybody looked forward to new clothes, good food and visiting relatives from both far and near.

Dashain is known to be the longest religious festival of Nepal. It is an important celebration that usually lasts for 15 days. For a country officially known to be the *ekmatra Hindu rajya*, the only Hindu kingdom in the world until 2008\(^1\), Dashain was the uncontested national festival. It was the Ranas who turned Dashain to be a national festival par excellence (*Gellner 2005: 768*). Hinduism was the dominant religion and the King was regarded as an incarnation of the Hindu God Vishnu. Citizens even lined at the gate of the royal palace in Kathmandu to receive *tika* from the king. It was also seen as a ‘ritual of state power’ (*Schneiderman 2009: 562*). Post monarchy, however, the Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities (NEFIN) comprising 59 people groups

\(^1\) On May 28, 2008 Nepal became “a secular, federal, democratic, republic nation’ as they abolished the monarchy that had ruled the country for the last 239 years.
decided that Dashain was not their festival, and that it was the ‘encroachment of the
dominant Hindu people and their culture have posed great threats to both culture and
nature of indigenous peoples’. So the minority groups of Nepal united against Dashain
celebrations. The idea of boycotting Dashain is described by Susan Hangen (2005: 50)
as a “strategy” used at the national level by ethno-political organizations representing
different minority groups in recent years.

In this chapter, we shall look into the spread of Hinduism among the Lepcha
population of Ilam. We have taken the village of Jilbong for its “traditional” tag. It is
believed to be the most Lepcha village one will find in Ilam and the people here are
known for their ‘community feeling’ (Schwerzel et.al 2000: 41) in trying to keep the
culture alive. We shall look into the various spheres of society where direct and indirect
permeation of Hindu culture has taken place. It will discuss the various culture changes
resulting contact with Hinduism and an attempt will be made to discuss whether they are
Hindus or Buddhists because almost all Lepchas of Ilam profess Buddhism as their
religion.

**Spread of Hinduism**

*Dashain vs. Nikung Pundee Rum Faat*

In the Lepcha settlement of Jilbong, houses were being cleaned and freshly daubed with
red mud. It was Dashain time which also meant it was time for the annual “autumn
cleaning” along with the eating, drinking and merry making attached to this festival. Villagers were seen to be going to Harkatey or Fikkal bazaar to buy new clothes especially for their children and to replenish their food stocks that was unavailable in the village. Daughters who had married elsewhere would be coming home and it would only be proper to serve them the best food. Every Lepcha house you visited would offer the local ci and fried pork intestines. While mutton was the preferred meat for Dashain, pork was usually served in Lepcha homes. The ninth day of Dashain festival was known as maarko din (the day of kill) when hundreds of goats were slaughtered to appease the goddess Durga. Even the poor saved money throughout the year to be able to buy a goat/duck/chicken for slaughter on this day. On this occasion, Lepcha households were seen to slaughter pigs instead. They had their own rituals and practices attached to the day of the kill, which was very different from a typical Hindu home in Nepal. At a certain Buddha Lepcha’s place, the slaughter had been taking place every year for the last few decades. The house had been cleaned and freshly painted with red earth, but it was not the Dashain ritual that awaited us there; the Lepcha family would be celebrating the Nikung Pundee Rum, an annual ritual conducted to appease the ancestors. “We have to give our forefathers the Dashain bhaag,” (Dashain share) often an act of sharing food items to neighbours and friends, making it seem like it was a part of Dashain celebrations.

At the corner of the house, an arch like shrine was built using the local titeypati (mugwort). The top part was covered with banana leaves, which were also used to carpet the area of worship. A copper plate with some rice was placed in the middle of the
shrine with a copper vase that held some mugwort plant wrapped in banana leaves. This arrangement was supposed to depict the *pundee rum* (queen god). Also on the plate was an oil lamp and an egg, which was supposed to represent the “hunter”. Bamboo sticks were placed in four corners surrounding the plate within the shrine, which were supposed to have walked alongside the hunter. There was also a spear nearby which would later be used to kill the pig.

Before the *bongthing* presided over the ceremony, the eldest person in the house came over and lit the oil-lamp in the shrine and listed the names of the family members of the house. Then the *bongthing* took over as he faced the shrine and placed a bowl of water and added pine on an ember lit lamp. The burned pine produced sweet incense that was a part of the worship. He then held a wrapped banana leaf and used it like a wand by dipping its tip in the bowl of water every now and then as he initiated his recitations. Seated next to him was his assistant holding a young rooster that would also
be used during the ceremony. The rooster was required because the pig to be slaughtered was a female and the presence of a cock balanced the need of a male-female pair for the ritual. The incantations were short and very simple. The bongthing would sprinkle both rice and water on the shrine and the rooster in between his chants. It was important that the rooster shrugged off the water and that was also expected of the pig as the bongthing went out to the sty in the middle of the ceremony and sprinkled grains of rice and water on the pig as well. The shrug by the pig and the rooster was an indication that they could now go ahead with the slaughter. Upon his return to the shrine, he offered bits of the newly harvested rice grains, millet, marcha and cracked the “hunter” egg with a wooden baton. Thereafter the cock was hit with the same baton and its blood offered to nikung pundee. The bongthing then heated the blade of the spear on his incense lamp and handed the spear to be used to kill the pig. Once outside, it took just one strike with the spear and the pig was left squealing as it slowly bled to death. The Lepchas do not have strict rules about pure and impure food items. And killing a pig during Dashain had now become a tradition in Lepcha households. While the meat was consumed for feasting and merry making, he added that it had an economic advantage in selling the meat to villagers at 140 rupees per kilo.

So for the daughters who visited once a year, they can look forward to eating pork at home. Interestingly, the daughters do not receive the same kind of reception as in other Hindu homes. Lepcha families do not practise one of the main customs of Dashain, which is the receiving and giving of tika, which is prepared by mixing rice, yogurt and vermilion applied on the forehead. Lepchas do not adorn their foreheads with
the red *tika* popular and significant to Dashain customs as red is to symbolize blood relations. Often times, the visiting daughters were those who had eloped with a non-Lepcha and these visits can be seen as an occasion for renewing ties between daughters and sisters who married out from their natal kinsmen, as well as between these women and their affines (Caplan 1970: 184-185). But since Dashain is not their festival, the visits could be superficial and no different than when visiting their parents’ home on a non-Dashain occasion. Their non-Hindu orientation prevents them from knowing stories and myths related to the festival and falls short of ‘these visits as a context for rehearsing customs, relating myths and legends and in other ways demonstrating shared cultural background’ (Caplan 1970: 185). The homecoming could be nostalgic including stories and memories of childhood but it did not necessarily facilitate the meaning and significance of Dashain.

However, Dashain for Lepchas could be seen as local interpretations of the national festival serving as an opportunity to ‘negotiate their relationship with the state and each other’ (Pfaff-Czarnecka 1996), as *Nikung Pundee Rum* is the local ritual running parallel with the state’s Dashain celebrations. Although the Lepcha observance of the local ritual does not have much in common with the Dashain tradition, the Lepchas have an excuse to “celebrate” the national festival and are known to feast the hardest. “It is somebody else’s festival but we celebrate it longer than they do,” said a Lepcha villager as we found his friend drunk even after the holidays were over. His statement itself was an indicator that for Lepchas Dashain does not mean anything and unlike the prolonged celebrations, *Nikung pundee Rum* is only observed at the main
houses and lasts for a mere one hour or so. Still it was an occasion for the Lepchas to celebrate Dashain because they have to for owing citizenship to the nation. But they are also not celebrating Dashain because they have substituted the Hindu festival with their own annual ritual as they look forward to celebrating Dashain every year.

*Naga Panchami*

*Naga Panchami* (festival of snakes) is another Hindu festival where they worship snakes or images of snakes. In Nepal, they post pictures of snakes above the doors of their homes to ward off evil spirits, offer prayers to Nagas, and offer sweets, milk and honey for the snakes. Lepcha homes were no different from Hindu homes as posters of snakes were placed above the door. Complying with the general belief that snake posters above and at the door would ward off evil spirits and lessen snakebites, Lepcha homes followed suit. Besides the general knowledge of *naga panchami*, they were not fully aware of the mythological reasons behind the snake posters nor the festival yet, they were keen to welcome the Brahmin priest who visited different houses and distributed the snake posters for this occasion. “We give him a few rupees and he does the *puja* for us,” said a resident of Aaitabarey where Lepchas were found to be living alongside other communities. But the occurrence of the snake posters was less evident in Jilbong although not totally absent.
Naming Ceremony

In Lepcha tradition, the typical naming ceremony known as the tungbaong faat of a newborn baby takes place after three nights of its birth. It is believed that a 'newly-born child is not in full possession of its soul until three days after its birth (Morris 1938: 207). So, the bongthing is called on the fourth day to perform the ci faat to bless the child and offer prayers to their respective clan peaks by calling upon the deities of birth. In Ilam, however, the bongthing was often replaced by a Brahmin priest challenging his role and changing the Lepcha names to Hinduized names. There have been occasions when the bongthing would have given a particular name like “Birmit” but the Brahmin priest would take a look at a patro (religious calendar) and rename the child to “Harimaya”. We can here see the ‘direct infiltration’ (Bose 1996: 177) of Hindu culture through a Brahmin priest in Lepcha society. Despite having a Lepcha name, it seemed
like the societal pressure to have a name acknowledged by a Hindu priest gave more validation and acceptance, as it would be easier to pronounce amongst neighbours. One lady mentioned that she had both the bongthing and brahmin names, but she preferred to use the latter.

In other instances, the baby would have a Lepcha name but when they would go to the VDC to register the baby, most of the workers would not be able to write or pronounce the Lepcha names. So they would give the baby a new and an “easy” name to pronounce and that would be registered as the official name of the child. Even visits to health posts to treat the child resulted in a change of name as the worker would name the baby at his/her linguistic convenience. Prem Tshering Lepcha and Buddha Maya Lepcha were the kinds of names in practice today as they combined both religious and ethnic connotations. These days, there was also a trend of mixing a Nepali/ Hindu name with a Lepcha suffix. Such as Buddhamit with mit being the suffix that is usually added to female Lepcha names.

In Jilbong, majority of the villagers gave their Hindu-inspired names during the household census. There were only five individuals in the village that used their Lepcha names. Though they have an “official” and a Lepcha name, they often tend to use their non-Lepcha name. Sometimes there is a deliberate attempt to hide the “Lepcha-ness” that is attached to a given name. One Meera Lepcha mentioned how ashamed she was of being a Lapcha and that she would try to hide her surname and mention that she was either a Rai or a Limbu when she was in school. Though her case might not ring true for
the entire population, there has always been an inferior kind of self-perception among the Lepchas in Ilam.

_Caste among Lepchas_

The Lepchas do not practise the caste system but their citizenship to a Hindu country has compelled them to be a part of the caste hierarchy. The caste system incorporated non-caste societies and attempted to integrate them. Even Buddhists were incorporated to the caste system although they did not strictly comply to it. It was how the state promoted the language and religion of the high-caste Hindus as ‘the national culture of Nepal to create a homogenous nation of Nepali speakers who followed Hinduism’ (Hangen 2005:). Unlike the Indian varna system of Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishyas and the Shudras, Nepal followed the *Muluki Ain* (1854), which was the country’s first legal system for many decades. It was rooted in Hindu philosophy and categorized the population in terms of purity and pollution. ‘It laid down a complex system of rights, obligations and permissible forms of behaviour which varied according to different ethnic communities belonged in its categories’ (Guneratne 1999: 163). It divided the citizens into two castes but a third category was added in between to accommodate the tribals who were known as _Matwalis_. While the Limbus, Rais, Gurungs and Tamangs were included in this category, Lepchas were not listed in the _Muluki Ain_ that imposed the caste system. It could be the reason why Lepchas of Ilam feel free to say, “we have no caste”. Their exclusion from _Muluki Ain_ gave them the liberty to speak from outside
the rigid caste system. But the society is not ready to accept that anyone in Nepal would have no caste because it is a 'state mandated caste hierarchy' (Guneratne 1999: 163) and if you are not included in the books, it could only mean you must be in the bottom rank; as a Bhujel neighbour listening to our conversation was quick to remark, "Since Lepchas are without caste, they are lower than the lowest caste". Bhujels themselves belong to the low caste and in that hierarchy, the fact that Lepchas have no caste could mean that they are of the lowest caste. It is only possible that their interacting with low caste people made them feel smaller than Bhujels. There was a definite feeling of inferiority as the Lepchas were poor and economically dominated by the other groups. Yet Lepchas were not making any effort to climb the social ladder either. 'They did not rise in revolt even when they were relegated to a lowly position within Hindu society' (Bose 1996: 175). They seemed unmoved about the position they were given in the caste system because they had managed to maintain a distinct identity outside the caste system. Acceptance of caste has also been seen as the 'first step of Sanskritization' (Jones 1976: 68), and the Lepchas, indifference to the caste system somehow kept them away from this phenomenon. While tribal groups are known to be absorbed by the Hindu social structure as the 'caste system is not exactly immutable it is generally assumed to be' (Bose 1996: 172), Lepchas stayed on the outside and absorbed only those that fit with their liking and refrained from a full-fledged membership of the Hindu society.
There is no denying that Hindu ideas had been socially absorbed and noticeable in their everyday life. One of the main characteristics of Hindu method of tribal absorption was ‘worshipping a Hindu goddess’ (Bose 1996: 169) and Lepchas are far from this invocation. While *ganesh puja*, *saraswati puja*, and *laxmi puja* are observed as state holidays, Lepchas do not go to temples and invoke these gods. But an indirect appeasement of Hindu gods and goddesses could be seen through posters in bedroom walls. While this could be seen as mere decoration in the otherwise plain wall, it could also be an acknowledgment of the good fortune associated with gods and goddess like Ganesha and Laxmi as seen in the picture below.

Regardless, Hindu traits found their way in Lepcha homes in a very unassuming fashion. As part of their daily make-up, young girls were seen putting a *tika* dot on their foreheads with a kohl pencil. *Tikas* are Hindu identifiers as it could also mean the third eye of Lord Shiva, it has also become a fashion statement. Likewise older women were seen to be wearing the *potey*, the glass beads which were worn by married women in
Hindu culture. These were negligible yet absorbing features besides the inconspicuous participation and observation of various Hindu festivals and celebrations. Indeed, Hindu religious ideas had penetrated into their culture dominating and absorbing Lepchas within its ‘economic and social framework’ (Bose1996: 173).

Cultural Change in Ilam Lepchas

Lepchas were most influenced by Hinduism because it was the majority religious tradition. Hinduism was also the official state religion for a long time in Nepal, the exposure to which was inevitable. Hinduism believes to be a non-proselytizing religion. So Lepchas were never converted to this religion. However the assimilation and absorption of their cultural and religious ideas of Hinduism dominated the tribal worldviews. The following paragraphs will look into the cultural changes Lepchas have faced or retained since cultural contact with Hindu society.

Family

The Lepcha families of Ilam are small and close-knit. Daughters are found to help in the household chores from a very young age. Most families worked in their own fields and farm their own products. The constant help in the fields from the children has led to a high percentage of school dropouts among Lepcha children. It is important to know of one’s family origin or clan because different clans had different death rituals in
Jilbong. While most clans buried their dead, Pugongmoos of Jilbong have been cremating their dead since they can remember. On a side note, other communities residing in Ilam pay the Lepchas when they need to bury their dead. For instance, the Rais dig the grave, and before putting the corpse in the ground, throw in a few coins to pay to the original owners of the land to bury their dead.

Marriage

In Ilam, the limited number of clans make it difficult to find partners when Lepchas reach a marriageable age. Everybody is somehow related and the observance of nine generations on father’s moo and four generations into a mother’s moo make it difficult to find spouses. There is a wide occurrence of late marriage among the Lepchas of Ilam. They prefer to live in their ancestral homes and help around the house and the fields rather than finding a spouse of a different community and having to adjust to their
lifestyle. "We like it here. Why go to somebody's place and suffer?" said a woman in her late 30s. But there are also cases of a Lepcha girl marrying someone of a different community; she will automatically belong to her husband's community while the practice of son bringing a non-Lepcha daughter means the wife will take his family line. Some Lepchas also have cross-border marital alliances. Christian Lepchas from Ilam and Kalimpong are also seen to partake in cross-border nuptials. But otherwise, Lepchas of Ilam do not necessarily speak of relatives in India.

Kinship

Kinship terminology has mostly been replaced from Lepcha to Nepali. The term of reference for maternal uncle and aunt has changed from azyong-anue to mama-maiju. Marriage within the clan is not permitted hence clan exogamy is the rule of the society. They practise parallel descent in Ilam. So the son took his father's clan name, while the daughter took her mother's name. But they held on to the clan names and were knowledgeable about clan origin, an important feature to Lepcha society. Despite negligible population, Lepchas of Ilam seem to be the only ones in the field who know their clan addresses (see Ch. 2). Each clan member is able to tell the name of their peak and the lake where their soul was to return upon death.
The Molommoos are inconsistent with their chyu (peak) as three different names are given as shown in the list above. Likewise, Konchen Kongla Chyu* was repeated by the Lucksomoos, Molomoos and the Sandyangmoos. While it can be confusing, Kongchen Kongla is actually the name of Mt. Kanchenjunga in Lepcha language and people have started using Kanchenjunga as their peak of origin. Despite the knowledge, however, the influence of patrilineal descent and the practice of using father’s clan name is not uncommon because when one applies for the Nepali citizenship, father’s name is very important. So it was also necessary for the children regardless of their sex to take on the father’s clan name unless they have used “Lepcha” as the last name. Therefore the practice of parallel descent practiced by Lepchas is seen to be suffering a set back with the daughters taking their father’s clan name.
Language

Nepali is the national language of the country but ‘the *lingua franca* at Jilbong was Lepcha’ (Schwerzel *et. al* 2000: 41). Lepchas residing in that village speak both Lepcha and Nepali with the elders encouraging the younger generation to speak their mother tongue. “If we do not speak Rongring than the others will not be able to recognize us,” said Mrs. Man Maya Lapcha who thinks it is important to maintain the linguistic boundary of the community. They make a conscious effort to speak in Lepcha as the neighbours are also full of praises regarding their ability to speak in their own language and have themselves learned some Lepcha words and phrases. But there was a time when the Lepcha language was ridiculed, as villagers were quick to say, “*manche khaney bhasa boldai chha.*” (They speak the man-eater’s language). During the panchayat rule, when freedom of speech was non-existent, there were others who thought Lepchas were speaking the language of the government. So in order to avoid accusations and prevent attention, they refused to speak in Lepcha and spoke Nepali like any other villager. But in the last decade or so, Jilbong Lepchas have been organizing Lepcha language classes for both adults and children. They learned to speak, read and write in Lepcha. Being together in a classroom learning the ancient script also gave them a sense of togetherness and belongingness to their ancient culture. It was deemed important to organize the language school because of fear of the younger generation losing their linguistic traits and becoming Nepali. ‘Nepali is the language of the Hindu conqueror, (Jones 1976: 68) and it has become a must because that is the language used in government offices, to secure jobs, and to travel outside the village. But Lepcha
language is still spoken in Lepcha households. The villagers also take pride in the existence of many old Lepcha books for a long time. In an unfortunate event, an arson in the house of the last mun of Jilbong burnt most of the books, but there are still a few old books and naamthars. Among them, dotho naamthar is believed to have records for the last ten generations in Jilbong. At the moment, the language teacher is copying some old naamthars in his own handwriting.

An old naamthar in Jilbong

Naamthar in progress

Food

The fields were ripe with millet when I reached Jilbong. It is one of the main crops that makes their diet. They also farm maize and rice. Most people are involved in agriculture. They grow their own vegetables and are seen to be farming ginger, which they sell in Fikkal bazaar. They are non-vegetarians. They are fond of pork and also rear them for economic reasons. Beef is not easily available but if served they are free to
consume it. Hoefer mentions Lepchas eating elephant meat (Hoefer 2007: 117) but nobody could confirm this information, and it must have been an isolated case of consuming elephant meat at that time. Lepchas have the knowledge of different fruits and roots available in the forest. They enjoy the roots and know how to separate the good from the bad. History speaks of a time in Ilam when Lepchas had to go to war but they did not want to go. So they fried poisonous roots and left it for the enemy to eat. Eventually, the enemies found those roots and ate them killing 1500 men. There are remnants of cardamom farming which is no more in practice today.

Dress

The Lepchas do not wear anything out of the ordinary from fellow villagers. The men wear regular pants, shirts and a jacket or a sweater, while the women wear lungis and blouses, salwar kameez and sarees when they go to town. It was also common to find a Lepcha man wearing the dhaka topi (Nepali hat) and the Lepcha women to be wearing a dhaka choli (blouse usually worn by Nepali women) around the village. Most men seemed comfortable with the dhaka topi on a regular basis. In the picture below of the second couple, the man is wearing a traditional Lepcha hat. While his wife is wearing the dhaka blouse and a pote (necklace) adorned mostly by married Hindu women. In the second picture, the husband and the wife depict an amalgamation that is happening in Ilam as they try to assimilate but retain their cultural identity through dress.
Unlike Sikkim and Kalimpong, the traditional Lepcha dress was not easily available in Ilam. The women’s gada was easier to find than the woven dumpra for men. Often times they brought the traditional dress from Kalimpong or Sikkim and the Ilam Lepcha Association was known to have bought and bought traditional attires from Kalimpong to make it available for Ilam Lepchas.

**Buddhist or Hindu?**

Despite the influence of Hinduism in different walks of life and the subtle acceptance of some of its practices, Lepchas do not accept Hinduism as their religion. They refuse to be identified as Hindus especially for census purposes. They choose to call themselves Buddhists instead. According to a report submitted to the NEFIN, Lepchas in Ilam are 99% Buddhists and 1% Christians. Buddhism is their accepted religion although the
practices show a syncretised version of Hinduism, Buddhism and traditional religion. Exposed to three religions, they have managed to pick and choose what fit best for their advantage and survival. While Buddhism is labelled the ‘second religion of the Lapcha of Ilam’ (Schwerzel et al. 2000: 36), it is difficult to come to this conclusion because Lepchas of Jilbong are very inconspicuous about the presence of Buddhism in their homes. They have no monastery in the village and do not hoist the prayer flags outside their homes. They do not have a resident lama and villagers do not observe the Buddhist calendar. Their shrines at homes are very simple and include only a picture of Buddha and some plants and flowers. There is one set of chorten (stupa) with a few prayer flags, which seem to suffice for their identity as Buddhists.

One of these chortens is believed to be 200 years old and the other one older than that. It was built when some old people from the village went for a pilgrimage westward to visit the various Buddhist sites. It took them six months to reach those places and upon their return they decided to build the chorten because they feared that the younger generation would not be able to travel so far. So they built this sacred monument in the village itself. These chortens are believed to be less “pure” than before because some miscreants had vandalized them.
Shrine with Buddha's picture  Chortens in Jilbong

Shree Fensong Gombu

Only a few minutes walk from Fikkal Bazar stands the Shree Fensong Gombu behind the Rong Shezum Thee office. Located right behind the Lepcha Association office, some people think of it as an exclusive Lepcha place of worship but Buddhist devotees from other communities are known to attend the same too. The lamas from Fensong Gombu are known to visit both Lepcha and non-Lepcha homes for different Buddhist rituals and readings. Located in a prime site, the gombu hardly receives any recognition for its many years of existence. There is no written record as to when it was established but they trace it to the year of the rooster, which could mean about 165 years ago. Karsing Lucksom is believed to have donated the land to construct the monastery and also helped in its construction. Since the Lucksom clan in Ilam is believed to have come from Sikkim, it is speculated that there is a Sikkimese connection in the existence of this
monastery. The monastery follows the Nyigmapa sect. There are many different chyos in the gombu out of which setho chyo (book for the dead) is written in Lepcha. The tashe naamthar is written in Nepali although most chyos are written in Tibetan. The monastery has been entrusted to safeguard a powerful chyo, which still remains in the premises today. There are altogether 32 chyos and 6 ku's which also includes the Guru Rinpoche ku. There was a time when people from Sikkim had come to take back some of the things from the monastery too.

The head lama at Fensong Gombu is Chandra Bahadur Lapcha whose Buddhist/Lepcha name is Nim Tshering Lapcha. Originally from Malim, he took his first meditation at the Kazini Gombu. When the senior lamas were getting old, he applied for this “job” and became the head lama in 1996 and has since become the caretaker of this gombu for the last fifteen years. He lives with his wife and a son in the gombu quarters.
and teaches 15 pupils (all Lepcha) from different parts of Ilam. “Buddhism is a later addition to our culture,” he said fully aware of the presence of mun/ bongthing that is required to officiate religious Lepcha rituals. There is a simultaneous presence of the bongthing and the lama. In case the bongthing called for slaughter of an animal, the head lama gladly complied with it. He mentioned that the two work together and the lamas usually chanted the prayers mostly in Tibetan while the bongthing would be directly involved in the faat ci. He felt that the young people today did not see gods and demons and lacked proper guidance when it came to religion. An advocate of promoting the gombu as a religious tourist destination, the head lama had a few plans for the future of the monastery and Buddhism. But it has been said that the arrival of Yuklathup and his followers in 1826 was what aided to the firm establishment of Buddhism among the Lepchas of Ilam.

Yuklathup and his descendants.

‘The Sikkimese leader along with his 800 Lepcha followers then entered Nepal and Subba Jayanta Khatri welcomed and provided asylum to all these fugitives. Nepal not only provided shelter but also granted landed property both in Ilam and Jhapa for their livelihood’ (Mishra 2011: 98).

Still residing in Ilam was the eighth descendent of Yuklathup Kazi, named Padam Chandra Kazi who prides over the glorious yesteryears while worrying about the present state of Lepchas in Ilam. Prior to the arrival of the Sikkim contingent, he mentioned that
Lepchas were already living in Ilam, but it was only after the arrival of his forefathers that Lepchas lived as “rulers” of the land. He [Kazi Yuklathup] was allowed to retain the kazi title while employed as a Subba, an already existing institution to collect tax and rule over certain territories as instruments of administrative control in the settlements (Caplan: 190). He was also granted the *mana-chamaal*, a personal gift by the King of Nepal, and was exempted from certain taxes, which the other Subbas had to pay. This was officially declared in the *laal mohars* (red seal) given to the kazis which was also signed by Bhimsen Thapa, the first prime minister of Nepal.

*Laal mohar with Bhimsen Thapa’s signature  mana-chamaal laal mohar*

The kazis enjoyed their authoritative privileges and were known to consider themselves superior to Lepchas who were already in Ilam. They were considered “thulo Lepchas” (bigger Lepchas) and were known to isolate themselves from the latter. The common people do not have a positive picture of the Kazis as they charged more than the official rates and oppressed the people. It was remembered that some Lepchas even fled to Bhutan to escape the ruthless Kazi dominance. They had a negative perception of
the Kazis and detest them even today. But the Kazis at that time were in constant touch with the Sikkim palace and practise many of the customs brought from Sikkim. “Whatever the king of Sikkim did, we did here as well,” said Padam Chandra who showed pictures of him in a Sikkimese garb along with weapons his forefathers had brought from Sikkim. The guns that were given to them by the King of Nepal however had to be returned when the subba system was abolished.

One of the important imports from Sikkim was Buddhism and the construction of different monasteries in the area. Kazini Gombu was the first monastery and was believed to be a ‘truly traditional Lepcha monastery’ (Schwerzel et.al 2000: 39) as the architecture was very different from the usual Tibetan style. It was three storied but was
not maintained properly and some paintings and statues were stolen about 35 years ago. It is ten years older than Fensong Gombu. In between, there was a monastery called Matli Gombu in Panchakanya VDC, which was thought to be lost. But its mound exists near the Aaitabarey tea factory today. With the establishment of monasteries, different Buddhist rituals were observed and practised, introducing Lepchas to Buddhist worldviews and a different set of ideologies. Lamas of Ilam were not considered ‘highly skilled’ (Schwerzel et. al 2000: 37) and lamas from Sikkim still came for special occasions. In this case too, Lepchas had managed to select the rites that worked for them and discarded those that they did not think were necessary. The simultaneous practice of both Buddhism and traditional religion was evident in Ilam as well. Till today, the lama and the bongthing work together although Ilam is running short of bongthings with less than ten bongthings for the whole of Ilam. The demise of the Tungling mun from Jilbong was a huge blow to the traditional religion because there has been no one as powerful as he was. His son had taken up the cause but villagers believe that it was a forced affair so he died early on. Now, his great-grandson is seen to be practising bongthingism.

Conclusion

Having lived in contiguity with Hindu communities in a Hindu country with constant contact and exchanges, Lepchas of Ilam have gradually absorbed Hindu traits and ways of life. In Nepal, Hinduism was a state promoted feature. There was a time when the state tried to propagate minimal Hinduism as ‘respect for the cow’ (Michaels 1997) and
'participation in Dashain' (Gellner 2005: 770). Lepchas failed to meet both the standards with their non-observance of beef and a replacement of their own festival during Dashain. They did not meet the minimum requirements but lived outside the Hindu structure and absorbed some traits. Even if they denied their association with Hinduism, Hindu religious ideas had penetrated into their culture visibly through the inconspicuous participation and observation of various Hindu festivals and celebrations. They refused to be identified as Hindus and embraced Buddhism as their religion. But condemning Hinduism was also seen as a 'core part of the Buddhist revivalists' (Gellner 2005: 772) when Nepal promoted itself as the only Hindu kingdom in the world. But the kind of Buddhism embraced by the Lepchas of Ilam was connected with Sikkim and its Tibetan influence rather than Nepal's own Siddhartha Gautama and incorporating Hindu gods into the Buddhim. For instance, Buddhism in Nepal encouraged to look at 'Vishnu as bodhisattva' (Gellner 2005: 765) and since the King of Nepal was known to be the reincarnate of Vishnu, there was an interchange of ideas to ease the boundary between the two religious traditions. But Lepchas of Ilam refrained from the Hindu gods and despite their absorbing Hindu practices, they identified themselves as Buddhists who were willing to combine their traditional bongthingism in religious practices. While we set out to explore if Lepchas of Ilam were Buddhists or Hindus, we do not end up with a clear cut answer because the boundaries between Hinduism, Buddhism and traditional religion has blurred to create a syncretised religious identity.