Chapter 7

Trajectory of Lepcha Identity

'They are wonderfully honest, theft being scarcely known among them; they rarely quarrel among themselves, and I have never even seen them strike one another. “Do you ever fight?” was asked of an intelligent Lepcha; “No, never, (was the reply) why should we, all Lepchas are brothers, to fight would be unnatural’ (Campbell 1840: 386).

The above is an extract from ‘Notes on the Lepchas of Sikkim’ (1840), one of the first articles written on the Lepchas. Affirming what was said earlier, Hooker found them to be ‘timid, peaceful, and no brawler’ (Hooker 1855: 118). They were ‘people of a mild, quiet and indolent disposition, loving solitude’ (White 2000: 7) who were always portrayed in ‘highly positive and some even bordering on paternalistic words’ (Subba and Wouters Forthcoming). Mainwaring even went on to say, ‘their peaceful and gentle character is evinced by their numerous terms of tenderness and compassion, and by the fact that not one word of abuse exists in their language’ (Mainwaring 1876: xix). Lepchas were always in the good books of the Western eyes, ‘I believe that Europeans in our district trust the Lepchas generally’ (White 2000: 7). Their ‘amiable, obliging, frank, humorous, and polite’ (Morris 1938: 35) attitude had won the hearts of not just the British administrators and anthropologists, but also made similar impact with the ‘home-grown orientalists’ (Po’dar and Subba 1991: 78) who used comparable language to describe the Lepchas. But with the changing demographics in the hills and sensing a
disadvantageous position for their favourite people, the scholars were worried about the future of the Lepchas. They thought that the Lepchas were ‘disappearing’, ‘sinking and shrinking’ (Awasty 1978: 36), and appeared to be ‘a dying race’ (Gorer 2005: 37). They began to be known as the ‘vanishing tribe’ (Foning 1987) – a term further popularized by a Lepcha scholar in his *magnum opus*, which had become the basis of Lepcha self-perception and identity until recently. Feeding to whatever has been written and re-written about their character, culture and civilization, Lepchas’ self-perfection and self-presentation also considered themselves to be the simple, shy and submissive kind.

In this chapter, we shall examine the reconstruction and direction of Lepcha identity in terms of the various socio-political developments responsible for the emergence of a common ethnic identity. They have realized that the various boundaries between different Lepcha groups are only imagined realities as they have begun interacting with each other to overcome the religious and geographical divide. Overlooking the differences of the past and determined to change the course of history, they are refusing to accept the language of yesterday. They are embracing their assertiveness and are refusing to be the almost extinct community in the hills. Today, none of the Lepchas in any of the three-field areas agree that they are a “vanishing tribe”. They prefer to use the word “flourishing” instead of “vanishing” as they are all in the same bandwagon to safeguard Lepcha culture. They have realized that the ‘loss of religion, culture, custom, language, literature can be regained and preserved only by the Lepchas themselves’ (Roy 2009: 27). They are making conscious attempts in the production of a pan-Lepcha identity as we see the emergence of a shared identity.
overlooking the religious boundaries consciously fashioned in a way that strengthens the social and political position of their fight for survival. There are intentional efforts to keep the differences between these three religions aside and work with each other in the production of a shared culture and identity.

**Political Identity**

There was a time when Lepchas were perceived as a demographic group whose vote did not matter, ‘No political party can count upon their votes because they are numerically small and politically insignificant’ (Thakur 1988: xii). According to the Census of 2001, the Lepchas of Sikkim totaled 35,728, while Lepchas of Darjeeling totalled 34,000 and the Lepchas of Ilam totalled about 3000. The total population of Lepchas in the world came to less than one lakh. Besides, Ilam Lepcha leaders claim there is discrepancy in the way census is conducted, as the strength of Lepcha population is never accurately represented. In 2011, the Lepchas of Darjeeling boycotted the Assembly polls for the ‘step-motherly treatment’ (zeenews 2011) by both the state and central government after it showed only 43,000 Lepchas in West Bengal in Census 2011. True enough, their numerical status has been a matter of concern and one of the reasons for being given the “primitive”, “scheduled tribe” and “endangered” titles in Dzongu, Kalimpong and Ilam respectively. These ‘externally generated’ (Grothmann 2011: 1) categorizations are for the upliftment of the “backward” people telling us of a community that is on the receiving end. While it does not speak for what the tribe thinks of themselves, Lepchas
do identify themselves with the official tribal identities that have been given to them by their respective governments. In all three regions, Lepchas can be seen as the marginalized group that is getting the government push through these categorizations with regard to seat reservations and stipends in education, employment and development of the tribe. Politically, there has never been any party or a single politician to speak on behalf of the Lepchas. There have been Lepcha candidates who fought elections and won because of the Lepcha vote. But they have often been criticized for sticking to party lines and not doing anything for the community including their own kith and kin. “Lepchas are not good in politics” they have been told and for long Lepchas believed in those words and stayed away from it. But recent developments in the three regions of Dzongu, Kalimpong and Ilam has seen the emergence of a new generation of educated ‘tribal elite’ (Shah 2010: 15), who are changing the political scenario and the identity of the Lepchas. The following paragraphs will visit the political movements in the three regions and examine the voices that are resounding in these hills.

Protests for Dzongu

On June 20, 2007, Dawa and Tenzing Lepcha started an indefinite hunger strike to oppose dams in Dzongu. Supported by the Affected Citizens of Teesta (ACT), Concerned Lepchas of Sikkim (CLOS) and the Sangha of Dzongu (SOD), this protest went on to become a record-breaking resistance movement in the history of Sikkim. Of the 26 dams to be constructed in Sikkim, six were to be built in Dzongu, the Lepcha
‘homeland’ (Lepcha 2007: 121). Hydel projects were creeping into their sacred spaces, as people feared of losing their ancestral land. While they were being pressured to call off the strike, the duo remained unmoved. Encouraged by their persistence, many youths from Dzongu took turns to be a part of the relay hunger strike at the Bhutia-Lepcha (B-L) house in Tibet road, Gangtok.

They received fellow Lepcha visitors from neighbouring Darjeeling hills, Ilam and Bhutan along with well-wishers from other communities too. Of the various people who came to see them was Medhha Patkar, the outspoken activist popular for her role in Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA), which brought the much-needed media attention to the anti-dam movement. In their most unassuming way, the Dzongu protests had garnered international support especially through their web-log of weepingsikkim.blogspot.com. The blog became very popular, received several hits and documented extensive feedbacks even from indigenous communities facing similar
situations from across the world. But the Lepchas from inside Sikkim were in a fix. Their Chief Minister labeled the agitation “anti-Sikkimese” and those employed by the government were too scared to openly show support to their fasting brethren. In the home front, Dzongu Lepchas were only a handful and it would have been difficult to sustain the movement had it not been for the much needed support and solidarity shown by the Lepchas of Kalimpong. A month into the protests on July 11, 2007, the Rong Ong Prongzum (Lepcha Youth Association) of Kalimpong blocked national highway 31A that connects Sikkim with West Bengal for two hours in protest of hydel projects in Dzongu. “Dzongu is sacred to us and any attempts to destroy it will have to be stopped,” the Prongzum president said. The Kalimpong Lepchas were pronouncing Dzongu as their “holy land” which was later taken up and ‘used aggressively in Sikkim’ (Wangchuk 2007: 49) as well. Elders began pronouncing Dzongu as the very source of Lepcha origin and life (see Chapter 3) on mythical grounds, and Lepchas of Dzongu relied on the Lepchas of Kalimpong for the ‘cultural content’ (Shneiderman 2009: 135) on which the claims were made. While this claim was criticised and contested by State government and the pro-hydel lobby, Lepchas went ahead and even formed the ‘Dzongu Holy Land Protection Joint Action Committee.’ Alongside the sacred as a political narrative (Little 2008: 230), the Kalimpong youths also started their indefinite hunger strike on August 23, 2007. In less than two weeks, the Lepcha youth of Darjeeling also commenced their relay hunger strike in support of Dawa and Tenzing. Though these protests did not last as long as the one in Gangtok, it had created a fight for the one cause to save Dzongu. Lepchas between two regions were communicating and
exchanging ideas of the production of a shared identity, which is called the ‘feedback loop’ (Shneiderman 2009: 116). Indeed the idea of Dzongu as “holy land” was intriguing and enlightening to educated Lepcha youths from outside Dzongu. On the 200th day of this historic satyagraha, the Rong Ong Prongzum from Kalimpong decided to pay homage to the “holy land”. After meeting with those fasting in the Bhutia-Lepcha house, the group of forty Lepchas youth from the neighbouring hills made way to Dzongu. On the third day, they reached the Lingza falls at about 50 feet high and overwhelmed with the feeling of belongingness to Dzongu, they decided to revoke their Christian and Buddhist beliefs and rechristened themselves with Rong abryangs (Lepcha names). “We were born-again Lepchas,” they said, ironically from the Christian tradition, and felt it necessary to take the step so as to regain access to Lepcha culture. This process of altering ideas and creating new ones to fit into the bigger scheme of Lepcha identity can be seen as a part of the role of Lepcha youths in redefining Lepcha society. But the joy was short-lived. They received news that their permits had been cancelled by the District Commissioner and were told to depart immediately. The pro-hydel lobby (which included Lepchas) was quick to make them feel unwelcomed as they hurried out from Dzongu. In a short report submitted by a youth from that pilgrimage, he wrote;

We felt very bad at not being able to complete the pilgrimage. Though we returned with heavy hearts, we did manage to bring smiles on our sunken faces for having at least stepped on the soil of our Holy Land, Foakraam Takraam, the place of our origin (Rongkup 2008: 21).
In the exchange of ideas and production of shared goals between Lepchas of two regions, ACT announced that Lepchas under the banner of ILTA was to undertake a “pilgrimage” to Dzongu to perform the traditional rites and ceremonies on the 250th day of the hunger strike. Before commencing the march, ILTA President told the crowd that the ‘pilgrimage to Dzongu was not motivated with political ideals and ambition’ (Tamsang 2008: 46). The pilgrimage was supposed to be ‘an ancient religio-cultural, enlightening and humanising experience’ (Ibid). In their own way, Lepchas seem to want to stay away from “politics” while undertaking actions that can be deemed political in the remaining world. Eventually politics found its way, when the pilgrims reached the Dzongu border the next day and were barred from entering the reserve. Members of the ruling party brought pro-hydel Lepchas from outside Dzongu who claimed that the visitors were ‘corrupting a developmental debate into an ethnic issue’ (Ibid). Avoiding confrontation, the pilgrims offered prayers from the far bank of the Teesta river and returned to their respective places. But we can see politics at play not only in dividing the community but also in giving the community a platform through these protest politics. The Dzongu issue lifted the voice of the Lepchas in Sikkim as the youth of Dzongu played a key role in defining the fate of the Lepchas and Dzongu. Dawa and Tenzing became ‘youth leaders demanding the rooting of morality, consensual politics, people-centred development, and a strong democratic ethos within Sikkim’ (Arora 2008: 28). Their role in drawing awareness about hydel projects in Dzongu and its environmental impact will forever be remembered as the combined effort of Lepchas from both inside and outside Sikkim to safeguard the Dzongu homeland has proven the
Lepchas to be a ‘determined minority’ (*Ibid*). A month after the incomplete pilgrimage, ACT president received a letter from the Secretary, Power and Energy Department stating that four of the five hydel projects proposed for Dzongu had been scrapped. The ACT responded by withdrawing Dawa and Tenzing from the 93rd day of their indefinite hunger strike. But, the remaining two projects were yet to be scrapped, as the relay hunger strike continued to days, weeks, months, years, and the uncertainty of its end seemed like a bottomless pit. So on September 27, 2009, ACT decided to end their historic protest after a 915 days run. Following an official letter from the Chief Secretary with offers on table for solving the issue, the decision was made to formally withdraw their relay hunger strike ending the longest protest in the history of Sikkim and Lepchas.

*Lepcha Development Council Detey Hobey*

While the Lepcha movement was gaining momentum in Dzongu, the Prashant Tamang phenomenon had gripped the Darjeeling hills with a renewed demand for Gorkhaland in Darjeeling hills. Fighting for a separate state called Gorkhaland, elderly Lepchas were heard saying “This land is already ours. We don’t need a Gorkhaland.” But who would speak on behalf of the Lepchas? Lepchas had already received the first warning when Bimal Gurung, leader of the Gorkha Janmukti Morcha (GJM) demanded everyone including the Lepchas to wear *daura sural* in Darjeeling hills because it was the traditional dress of the Gorkhas. It was seen as an ethnocentric move by the dominant
majority to dilute Lepcha culture with Gorkha culture through a dress code diktat and that did not settle well with the Lepcha community. But the dress code imposition was a wake up call for the otherwise politically silent Lepchas of North Bengal who knew that their slumber days were over and if they did not act now, they might regret in the days to come. While Lepchas have been patronized for not being organized and lacking good leadership, this time around they were seen making extra efforts to give a strong voice to the community.

For long, the shezum or the ‘council system’, popularly understood as the Lepcha organization has been the only voice of the Lepcha community. It has been around since 1925 in a system of three-tier governance. At the base is the kyong shezum, which is a village council of elders, in the middle is the thoom shezum, which is a council of elders of cluster villages, and the top most level is the poom shezum who usually represents or speaks on behalf of the Lepcha community. With its meagre resources, the shezum has been involved in networking between villages and working for the development and promotion of Lepcha culture, language and tradition while settling disputes and creating liaisons with government officials. They have mainly worked at the grassroots village level where most of the Lepcha population resides, so the shezums have played an important role in establishing the collective strength of the community. In this context, Lepchas living in town areas have often been out of the Lepcha loop as they are not usually connected to the shezums and is not aware of the happenings of the community. But the last few years saw a resurgence of Lepchas making conscious attempts to be a part of the larger Lepcha community. With the shezums refusing to take political sides
because they considered themselves to be a social organization, the Lepchas felt a need to form a body to tackle political issues as numerous meetings were held between elders of the shezum, town-dwelling Lepchas employed by the government and many others who wanted to give a voice for the community. As impossible as it seemed because of the already existing religious divide, the combined effort gave birth to the Indigenous Lepchas Tribal Forum. They seemed eager to work for the community as they started drafting memorandums to be sent to various state and central government offices. The memorandums demanded constitutional guarantee for the social, political and economic status of the indigenous Lepchas. On December 2008, Lepchas even refused to join other minority communities to show support to the Gorkhaland movement. ‘The Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council (DGHC) experience has taught us that our interest is never taken care of. We did not even have a reserved seat in the council. We want constitutional guarantee to protect our interest in future dispensations’ (Telegraph 2013), the president of the forum was quoted in the Telegraph. The forum was consistent with their memorandum submissions but that was not enough. The Lepchas were tired of waiting to hear back from the respective governments and under the banner of Lepcha Rights Movement (LRM), and with active participation from both Christian and Buddhist youths, they began their protests of recognition that could also be seen as politics of identity. They were cautious in avoiding linkages with established political parties and were seen to be ‘agitating silently and peacefully making repeated representations to the centre highlighting their minority status and plight’ (Ghosh 2011). From walking barefoot in Siliguri with traditional gear to an indefinite dharna in
Kolkata, they were demanding justice for being ignored and forgotten by the state government as they chanted, ‘Lepcha Development Council Detey Hobey,’ roughly translated, as ‘We want Lepcha Development Council’. As the state government promised the Gorkhaland Territorial Administration (GTA) to the Nepali population, the Lepchas demanding their separate development council, submitted a 3-point Charter of Demands, which read;

a) A separate Lepcha Development Council/ Board for the protection of Language, Culture and Economic Development of Lepcha Community.

b) Recognition of Lepcha Language and its introduction in Formal Education System.

c) Reservation for People’s Representation in State Assembly and Parliament.

On 2 September 2011, the Chief Minister of West Bengal announced the setting up of Lepcha Development Council (LDC) for the development of the community. But it was only after a year and half on February 5, 2013 that the state cabinet cleared a proposal to set up a Lepcha development board under the backward classes welfare department of West Bengal. The news was received with much excitement among the Lepchas while the ruling GTA vehemently opposed the same. The GTA wanted the Lepcha board to function under them and not outside their purview. They even called for a 12-hour bandh in the hills to protest the government’s decision to set up a separate Lepcha Development Board on the same day the Lepchas planned their celebratory rally. In a counter move, Lepchas started a fast unto death, saying they would rather die than live in the hostile environment that has been created by the ruling party. ‘We are a
peace-loving people. We can’t comprehend why there is so much opposition to us. Since it appears we will not be able to live in peace, we have decided to sacrifice our lives,’ (Telegraph) president of the LRM was quoted in the paper. The fast lasted for 6 days with a total of 320 Lepchas who fasted unto death and about 3663 Lepchas on the relay hunger strike. On the sixth day the West Bengal minister of development visited the Lepchas, to end the hunger strike and gave the government’s assurance to the community’s demands. On the same day, the government passed a notification establishing a development board for the hill Lepcha community, as the Lepchas broke their fast. There was a rousing welcome to the ‘Mayel Lyang Lepcha Development Board’, headquartered in Kalimpong to work for the protection and promotion of the Lepcha language and historical and cultural landmarks of the community. In their very “Lepcha” characteristic, by emphasizing on peace and subtle agitations, the Lepchas managed to establish their own Mayel Lyang in Darjeeling hills. Non-Lepchas had reservations about the name since it would mean ‘the land of the Lepchas’, but the Lepcha leaders were quick to respond, ‘Mayel Lyang means the land of eternal paradise’. One can notice the language and the manner of this political journey for the Lepchas of Darjeeling hills to get where they are today. They had managed to create an a-political civil society by putting forth their political demands that was caught unaware by the political pundits of the hills.
President of the Rong Ong Prongzum addressing the crowd.

Check-up of the fasting Lepchas

**Rong Uparajya**

In Ilam, the people’s war had enlisted many young Lepcha boys into the Maoist army. Although the war ended and a multi-party system was established in Nepal, one young Lepcha ex-Maoist told me that he was glad of his Maoist experience as it had made him conscious of his Rong identity. Since then, the Communist Part of Nepal (Maoist) placed first in the Constituent Assembly election that was held in 2008, and two candidates from the Lepcha community of Ilam were also elected to become members of the parliament. Shakuntala Lepcha and Tikaram Subba -Lepcha had made a mark for the first time in the history of Nepal. Prior to this, Lepchas had not even been represented in district level politics. Most people saw the inclusion of Lepcha candidates as vote banks but the win had put Lepchas in the map of Nepal. Between the two, Tikaram was criticized for holding a dual ethnic identity of a Subba and a Lepcha. There...
was a time when Subba was the title of the tax collectors (often from the same community) who would maximize the taxes and abuse those who were unable to pay them. ‘Subbas for Lepchas are still synonymous with corruption and wickedness’ (Schwerzel et. al 2000: 13). They refused to be identified as Lepchas and basked in the glory of the Subba title, acting superior and higher than other Lepchas. But the election win confronted the Subba (Lepcha) with his dual identity as people started questioning whether he was a Lepcha or a Subba, which could also mean he belonged to the Limbu community. In Eastern Nepal, Limbus are demanding their separate state of Limbuwan meaning ‘land of the Limbus’. Living within the Limbu dominated areas are the Lepchas who are voicing their own demand for a Rong Uparajya which means the Lepcha sub-state. The demands have been put forth by the Rong Shezum Thee (Lepcha Association) of Ilam who have taken up the task for the development and upliftment of the community. In similar lines with the shezum of Kalimpong, Ilam Lepchas established the same in 1990 to preserve and maintain Lepcha culture. It has also become the voice of 3000 plus Lepchas of Ilam with social agendas in the long run. The shezum is also affiliated with the Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities (NEFIN) and the National Foundation for Development of Indigenous Nationalities (NFDIN) which defines ‘indigenous nationalities’ as a tribe or community mentioned in the schedule having its own mother language and traditional rites and customs, distinct cultural identity, distinct social structure and written or unwritten history’ (NFDIN Act 2058, BS 2002 Clause A Section 2). The NFDIN classified all Nepalese Indigenous Nationalities into five major categories in March 31, 2004. The five categories included
endangered, highly marginalized, marginalized, disadvantaged and advanced groups. Lepchas have been classified into the endangered group with the government’s provision of a monthly stipend for the overall development of the tribe. Known as *Samajik Surakcha Vatta* (social security stipend) the amount has been increased from Rs. 500 during my fieldwork to Rs. 1000 per individual in the family. There have been positive reports about the usage of the allowance with Lepcha farmers engaged in commercial vegetable farming and yielding profits for their betterment (Chapagain 2012). Though their population is miniscule, the Lepchas of Ilam are on their way to political recognition in Nepal. They do not have a large organization nor the means to network in the way fellow Lepchas have been able to do so but the political consciousness about their identity is slowly taking shape. Despite their scattered living conditions in 13 VDCs of Ilam, the kind of language used by Lepchas about their self-perception is no different than the Lepchas outside Ilam. ‘Simple, kind, loving, peaceful’ (Lepcha 2003: 5) were some adjectives used by an author of a small booklet about the Lepchas of Ilam. Comparatively, they are behind other communities in many spheres especially when it comes to education and employment but in their own pace and style, they have been able to garner support and solidarity for their survival. In 2010, one Sachin Lepcha from Ilam made it to the Top 16 of Nepal Television’s *Khoji Pratibhako*, a reality show which could be translated as ‘Talent Search’. Unfortunately, he did not win despite his talent, say the villagers, because the competition was based on sms voting system. And Lepchas were either too poor to own a mobile phone or have no
resources to send text messages to vote for their favourite singer, even though he was a Lepcha.

Religious to Ethnic Identity

"In the contemporary period, the severe contradictions between the teachings and practices of Christianity on one hand and Shamanism and Buddhism on the other are responsible for dividing the Lepcha community" (Arora 2006: 65).

The religious divide between Buddhist and Christian Lepchas is an overtly discussed topic. But what is not known is the fact that this was initially a Kalimpong phenomenon, which became a generalized conception and later built upon it to act the same. Sikkim saw the arrival of Buddhist missionaries before the Christian missionaries so Lepchas had already converted to Buddhism. Likewise, majority of the Lepchas of Sikkim lived in isolation in the Dzongu reserve where “outsiders” could not visit without permits so
they remained ‘as Buddhists and was not influenced by either Christianity or Hinduism’ (Gowloog Forthcoming). In Kalimpong, Lepchas were the willing converts to Christianity with the perks of modern education that exposed them to a whole different lifestyle. Equipped with education and knowledge of their culture, a handful of Christian Lepchas like Joseph Rongong, Sankyol Taso and G.T. Sitling worked for the preservation and promotion of Lepcha culture. But majority of them flaunted their newfound identity by imitating the British and ignoring the traditional culture. In the process, Christianity also lost Lepcha stalwarts like Sonam Tshering Tamsang, a Padmashree awardee, who says that he was initially baptized at the local Bom church. In due time, the gap started widening as Christian Lepchas got caught up with church activities and their Christian lifestyle. They stopped participating in the Lepcha activities leading to a clear separation from the Buddhist Lepchas. But these religious boundaries were socially constructed. It existed to ‘set limits that mark social groups off from each other and provided a template that separates distinct categories in the mind’ (Longkumer 2010: 121). But in recent days it is because of the ‘boundary-crossing behaviour’ (Bal 2000: 110) between the Christian Lepchas and Buddhist Lepchas that have omitted religion as an obstacle for their common purpose. The recent hunger strike protests is a good example of the change of language among the Lepcha leaders too. During the final speeches before the hunger strikers dispersed, president of the LRM said that the development council was a tiny achievement in the bigger sphere of things, as the biggest accomplishment for the Lepcha community was to have come together and be united for the Lepcha cause. Indeed, the solidarity of the community was an
overwhelming phenomenon, as the religious divide seemed non-existent. Both Buddhist and Christian Lepchas had shed their religious cloaks in this movement as there were speeches urging Lepchas to pray to their own gods for the development council. On one hand, the religious identities were being blurred while on the other they acknowledged the different religions followed by the Lepchas trying to balance the needs of the community. There is therefore an endless process of construction and reconstruction of the Lepcha identity as its religious identity seems to be taking the shape of a secular identity.

What's In a Name?

"When Lepcha parents bring their child for dedication and I hear a non-Lepcha name being pronounced, I give that child a Lepcha name instead." – a Lepcha pastor

We laughed when the pastor relayed this incident. He said he even had a page with Lepcha names stuck to his Bible so that when crisis arises he can be the Christian bongthing and give the child a Lepcha name. But why was it so important to have a Lepcha name? There was a time when Lepchas especially Christian Lepchas were fond of naming their children with English names. Except for the eldest son, one family in Bom Busty boasts of Roland, Nancy, Dennis and Peggy as names of their children. If it were not for their last name, their name would be no indicator of their Lepcha identity. In that, a name is an important identity marker too. It is a word by which a person is known. A person’s name could be associated with the language, religion and location of
that individual as ‘religious, mythology, customs, beliefs, culture, folk-tales, etc. get reflected in the name of a community’ (Roy 2010: 14). In Lepcha society, the naming ceremony known as tungbaong faat is an almost forgotten tradition especially in Christian homes. These days, the name choices for a newborn baby is plentiful and it does not necessarily require a mun or a bongthing. There was a time when belief in the power of names was highly prevalent and a person believed to possess supernatural powers was called Aagen. But Lepchas also went through the phase when they got insecure about baby names and started using negative words like kuzyumit and kolok, literally translated as a dog or a mouse respectively. However, they also have a gender specific naming pattern, which makes it easier to name the child. Suffixes like mit and kit are often understood to mean ‘attraction’ and used accordingly. Likewise, the twelve months in the Lepcha calendar is considered female. So the two could be added to form a female name. e.g: mar is December and when mit is suffixed it becomes Marmit, a very popular female name among Lepchas. There are also some names that are used for both the sexes depending on the suffix used. e.g: Lee means house and it is used as Leeyam for a girl and Leeong for a boy. Yaom in Lepcha means something soft and delicate while ong means son appropriately used for the two sexes. The examples above were mostly of the first name, which is an important part of one’s name. While the last name could speak for the Lepcha identity, the first names in the case of Lepchas have proven otherwise. In Dzongu, most Lepchas have Buddhist names whereas Kalimpong boasts of not just Biblical but English and Nepali names while Ilam Lepchas carry both Hindu and Buddhist names. So, the three regions influenced by different religions and
cultures have given birth to non-Lepcha names posing a question to their identity today. However, the realization of one’s identity in a name has finally struck the right chords with the educated Lepchas who are giving the new generation their rightful Lepcha names. We can take example of the pastor’s dialogue earlier that chose to interfere in the renaming of the child to a Lepcha name. We therefore see name as an identity marker that is undergoing some changes to reaffirm the Lepcha identity.

*Lepcha Flag*

The Lepcha flag was born at a time when Buddhist Lepchas and the Christian Lepchas were not in friendly terms. A certain Sankyol Taso from Bom Busty is believed to have put the symbol of a dove that was to reflect unity amongst fellow brothers under one banner. The flag is known as *taarsyaok* in Lepcha language and has indeed been a uniting factor of not just the two religions but between Lepchas across different regions. The Lepcha flag was widely used during the Dzongu protests and the Development Council protests. As of late, Lepchas have been hoisting the flag on different occasions and singing the national anthem too. It has become a symbol of Lepcha identity and Lepchas have started identifying with it in various other occasions too. During the Gorkhaland movement, when the GJM demanded all houses to hoist the party flag, certain Lepcha villages/ houses put up the Lepcha flag in their homes instead. It was a way of displaying their loyalties to their ethnic backgrounds and refusing to compromise.
with the Gorkha movement. Hoisting of flags in a way can be as a ‘secular ritual’ (Barkataki-Ruscheweyh 2011:8) in the production of Lepcha identity.

Pano Gaeboo Achyuk

“If the Lepchas demand for Lepchaland, maybe they will get it.” A local taxi driver in Kalimpong could be heard making this remark when he saw the number of Lepchas walking around Kalimpong town in their traditional attires towards the mela ground. December 20th every year marks the birth anniversary of Pano Gaeboo Achyuk, popularly recognized as the last Lepcha King of Kalimpong. Known to be a brave warrior, he had defended his bastion and revolted against the invaders and oppressors of the 17th century. He was believed to be an excellent general who fought and sacrificed his life for the ‘Lepcha civilization’ as he saved the culture, language and religion from being wiped out by alien rulers. He is fondly remembered and this day is set aside to commemorate his contribution to Lepcha society. The day usually commences in the
morning with the *bongthing* offering prayers at Damsang Fort, 17 kilometres from Kalimpong town, which is attended by only a handful of people. The fort was built by *Gaeboo Achyok* himself who had also built several forts at strategic places around Kalimpong to defend the country from the opportunist enemies targeting from north-west and south-east. In safeguarding this area from enemy attack, he can even be dubbed as the King of the Kalimpong region and not just of the Lepchas. This annual celebration is a mark of respect to the brave warrior as the significance of *Gaeboo Achyok* is however beyond the last Lepcha king legends. In many ways, he was a hero—a personality that the Lepchas find solace and strength in. For a community seen to be passive and lagging behind, here was a person who defied those stereotypes and stood against his aggressors to give hope to his people. His historical feats not only speak of courage and bravery but have also become a symbol of hope and unity for the Lepchas today. It is the only occasion where Lepchas from all walks of life irrespective of their age, sex, religion and geography flock to the Kalimpong *mela* ground proudly attired in their traditional wear. Thereafter, a colourful rally takes place around Kalimpong town and ends in the *mela* ground where the festivities begin. The stage is usually decorated with a life size poster of *Gaeboo Achyuk* as different speeches, dances and songs are presented with much pomp and pageantry.
A little boy in *dumpra*  
Two girls in *gada*  
A young man in traditional gear  

President of ILTA making his speech  
Children in line before the dance  

Tug-of-war between the opposite sexes  
Young archers in mela ground
Somewhere in the ground traditional sports like tug-of war, archery, and shot-put is played. At one corner, tea is served and Lepcha calendars, new books and magazines are sold too. A little further towards the gate, the youths serve food to whoever joins the feast. Often times villagers from far away places come walking or by jeeps and they can not be sent back without food. So youths from different villages take turns every year to take up this responsibility. 

_Ci_ is also sold to those who want to drink. It is like a tiny _mela_ in itself as they sit and eat together with people from various Lepcha villages. It has been a deliberate attempt to bring together Lepchas from all walks of life under the name of _Gaebbo Achyok_ and this day can be seen as the annual Lepcha festival, which is constantly changing its features in the production of Lepcha identity. Every year, the celebrations open after the _bongthing_ invokes the gods and the mountains. In 2012, a catholic priest was also asked to pray to represent the Christian community. This inclusion shows the effort being made to include the Christian community who often feels that most Lepcha events are dominated by the _bongthing_’s prayers and often refrain from participating in it. But as mentioned earlier, the programmes are evolving as talks are on the process to perhaps do away with the awkward prayers to make it more inclusive for people of different faiths. Likewise, the promotion posters of 2012 saw the addition of a mythical place made real. _Gaebbo Achyok_ was made the last king of _Mayel Lyang_ and not just of Kalimpong.
Some Lepchas in Sikkim did not even know who Gaeboo Achyok was, and geographically, it could be out of their concern. But when a familiar place to Lepchas like Mayel Lyang is included it becomes a community affair blurring the geographical boundaries as villagers from my fieldwork in Dzongu also came to Kalimpong every year for Gaeboo Achyok celebrations. With the recent recognition of the Mayel Lyang Development Board, Gaeboo Achyok has indeed become the last king of Mayel Lyang as this inclusion can be seen as a brilliant integration into that imagined state.

Cleavage to Convergence

'The Lepcha community acting together can achieve a desired aim which they will not be able to achieve if individual Lepcha acts alone. All the Lepchas, irrespective of their different backgrounds, must unite and agree with each other and work extremely hard
on the conservation, maintenance and development of their rich and ancient Lepcha language, literature, traditions and culture. This will enable their survival as the one and only true original indigenous Lepcha tribes of eastern Himalayas with dignity’ (Tamsang 2012: 3).

Known to get the crowd on its feet during his speeches with the passion for his community, Lyangsong Tamsang’s voice on the first issue of the Lepcha bulletin Kaatlut is no different. Encouraging young Lepcha journalists who have taken the initiative to start this bi-lingual bulletin, the president’s message was an articulation of what is being heard across Lepcha circles today. Intense efforts are being made on the part of both Buddhist and Christian Lepchas to come jointly for the creation of a pan-Lepcha identity. In that, education, blogs and faceook will be further examined as they have become agents of convergence in the production of Lepcha identity.

**Education**

‘The relative closedness and openness between the Buddhist and Christian Lepchas is apparently based on their religious differences. But it is probably the education which is the actual factor behind this difference in their personalities’ (Subba 1985: 67).

A little more than two decades has passed since the above sentences were written and the situation has changed. Education has actually paved way for dialogue and action between the Buddhist and Christian Lepchas. There was a time when the Christian Lepchas had an easier access to education because of the missionaries but with the development of the education system, Buddhist Lepchas are on equal footing today.
They have both been educated, exposed and eager about the role of education in reinforcing their traditional values. One example can be taken of Miss Keepu Lepcha, a teacher and retired government servant who started keeping poor Lepcha children at the house she inherited, giving them education. The humble initiative and the assistance of generous donors helped her establish a school where 400 children study today. But at Miss Keepu’s home, also known as “Lepcha Cottage” a little more than hundred children stay where only Lepcha and English are spoken. Her goal was to foster education and create awareness about Lepcha community. While working in the education department she saw the plight of the Lepchas from early on and decided to do something for her community. She is an educated Buddhist Lepcha whose name was also proposed for the Nobel Peace Prize in 2005. She also featured in an Indian news channel episode “Real Heroes: Ordinary People Extraordinary Lives in 2012”. It was reported, ‘education is the biggest gift that Miss Keepu has given to her community’ (Northeast Today 2012).

While parents want their children to know about their traditional culture, they are also keen on giving the best education to their children, which often means sending them away from the village, or even to a different state for further studies. There is fear of losing one’s culture in the plethora of cultures they get exposed to, but it is often those places where the cultural consciousness begins. One prominent Lepcha youth leader of Kalimpong often tells his story of searching for his roots when he was in Kolkata for further studies. Having attended a missionary school all his life, he did not speak the language nor did he hear of the Lepcha oral traditions while growing up. So he
was ashamed of not knowing anything about his culture when away from home and made a vow to educate himself about his traditional heritage. He read books on Lepchas. He started speaking, reading and writing the language. There was zeal in his quest as he said, "it is already in us, we just need to make the effort to speak." Today, he has become the poster child of a Lepcha who grew up in a non-Lepcha environment but with enough passion and enthusiasm, he managed to master his mother tongue. He can also be heard giving speeches in Lepcha at different Lepcha events. He is credited for the birth of the Lepcha Association of Kolkata, which has become a support group for Lepchas away from the hills. With a growing number of students and young professionals in Kolkata, this initiative was a positive step in uniting Lepchas of different regions under the same umbrella. It was important for the Lepcha youth to identify with an organization when away from home and the Kolkata shezum has been able to provide that. It is interesting to note that among Lepchas, it is not the student organizations unlike other tribes of Northeast India but the shezum that has acted as a cultural space for them when away from home. In their modest ways, their annual activities include naambun celebrations and are known to look after each during sickness and troubled times. Likewise, the Delhi shezum exists with their own share of minuscule events for Lepchas in the capital city. But it is in the above two examples of Miss Keepu and the youth leader, that we see education and educated Lepchas become champions of Lepcha culture and identity. They have become promoters of tradition and a fight for the betterment of the tribe. The religious divide of the yesteryears have slowly disappeared as the community has instead ‘strengthened the spirit of nationalism’
(Kanjamala 2009: 121). It has made them aware of their culture and encouraged them to engage in activities that can sustain their identity. Education is no more an exclusive domain for the Christian Lepchas as 'conscientization through education' (Mawrie 2009: 133) is extensively taking shape in India today.

But in Nepal, education still has a long way to go. "The main reason for the backwardness of the Lapcha is education," writes Jahar Singh Rai in his M.A. thesis, and it only proved to be true while conducting the household census in Jilbong. Most Lepchas would respond sadharan (basic) for the level of education while the wives would giggle and say they could write their names. But the overall picture of the status of education was disheartening. Although they would have started school, there was a high level of school dropouts between fifth and seventh grades. Those who attended secondary school did not always make it to tenth grade and towards their School Leaving Certificate (SLC), a nationwide examination mandatory for students completing tenth grade. In Jilbong, there were two students who had appeared for SLC but failed and only one student who was in Kathmandu pursuing his twelfth grade. There were no college graduates and post-graduate students from the village. In a report submitted to the NEFIN, there were 17 SLC pass, 4 graduates and 2 post-graduate Lepcha students from the whole of Ilam (Roy 2004). The lack of emphasis on education is a matter of concern among the Lepchas of Jilbong. There was one Shree Sharda Primary School near the village but one has to walk to the next village to attend secondary school. And if one were to attend college, he/she would have to walk uphill to Harkatey and take a bus/van to reach Fikkal. In such instances it was easier to stay at home and help around
the house and in the fields. The parents too would appreciate an extra help and did not seem to make the effort to encourage their child to go to school, as it tends to get expensive to send a child to school. Another reason is the students' failure to be promoted to a higher grade. Lepcha children have to attend schools where the mode of instruction and examination is not in their first language and they are at a disadvantage when they have to compete with students whose first language is Nepali. It is perhaps in their lack of educated Lepcha individuals that they are not confident to pronounce their Lepcha identities as in the case of Sikkim and Kalimpong.

**Blogs**

Some of the educated, internet savvy Lepchas have taken into online journals called blogs to share their knowledge, experience and wisdom on Lepcha related issues. While blogs have transitioned from simple to sophisticated, the blog updates also vary depending on the mood of the blogger. There are some who only post once or twice while there are others who have dedicated their blogs solely for Lepcha information. Of the many blogs on the internet talking about Lepchas, I shall refer to three blogs that are most frequently visited by internet browsers to give a sense of the kind of narratives being constructed to affirm the Lepcha identity.

Lepcha Aachulay Magazine [aachulay.blogspot.in] is the first result to pop up when you google “Lepcha blog”. Aachuley in Lepcha means ‘hail the mountains’ and it is the most common phrase used among Lepchas. The blog is owned by Azuk
Tamsangmoo Lepcha and hosts the most extensive information about Lepchas on the internet. It was initially started to put articles from the Lepcha Aachulay magazine on the web as he titled the blog in the magazine's name. But he has outdone himself with the kind of information that is available there. From photographs to videos from various events, Lepcha language lessons to downloadable Lepcha font, news articles to scholarly write-ups, the blog is impressive in its ability to cover various sphere of Lepcha culture and history.

Secondly, 'The call of the rungnyu ung -- A (Lepcha) rongkup's soul' [zorbongthing.blogspot.in] is another blog with photographs and interesting analysis on present day news related to Lepchas. Writing under the pseudo name of Zor Bongthing, this person is opinionated and does not shy from expressing what he has to say.
usually gives a "modern" Lepcha angle to various issues perplexing the community and does not hesitate to challenge the traditional ways either. His is a voice that resonates with the urban-based Lepcha youth. "Go Rong Aring Mayen" (I do not know the Lepcha language) is one of his popular posts, which talks about the first thing he learned in Lepcha was to say he did not know the Lepcha language. He argues that this was 'the one dreaded sentence that destroyed the essence of being a Lepcha'. An interesting mixture of Lepcha history, philosophy and current trends, the blog draws not only Lepcha visitors but non-Lepchas who are keen to hear his side of the story.

Finally, Ani Sikkim Runcha (And Sikkim Cries) [weepingsikkim.blogspot.com] is the blog that garnered world wide attention during the dam protests in Dzongu. It was able to make a political impact during that time giving online voice to the activists. It had articles on the struggle, opinions for and against the dams while updating the calendar of how many days it had been since the protests. It was started by non-Lepcha youths on the first day of the hunger strike to 'keep a cybertrack of their protest' (Wangchuk 2007: 42). They received a lot of pressure from the government to close it down and at one time they even shut it but the support was too overwhelming to ignore, as it still posts updates about the situation of not just dams in Dzongu but their solidarity to similar kinds of struggle elsewhere in the world.

Statue of Unity as the masthead of weepingsikkim.blogspot.in

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Facebook and fashion

Even if you don't have a computer at home, many young people have access to facebook today. With easy access to internet on cell phones, Lepchas have also been found to be active users of facebook. We the Indigenous group “LEPCHAS-RUMKURONGKUP” is the facebook page for Lepchas on the world wide web. There are about 745 members and was started sometime in 2011. The page has been used for Lepcha related events and news taking place around the region. It was used to politically mobilize Lepchas of Kolkata during the dharna conducted by the Lepcha Rights Movement. But today, it has become a platform to share new year greetings to news announcements. It has also been a place for Lepchas not raised in Lepcha speaking environment to ask basic questions like “What is the meaning of aa-chu-ley?” promoting the mother tongue while facilitating book releases and updates on youth seminars encouraging young people to be involved in community affairs. One recent facebook success has been the organizing of Himalayan Ethnic Lepcha Fashion Event (HELFE). At first facebook users started discussing about a Lepcha fashion show, then they met in person and coordinated with Sikkim and Kalimpong Lepchas to jointly organize this grand event that showcased Lepcha designers and models in their own improvisations of the traditional Lepcha attires. They started their own facebook page and the aim of the event was disclosed in their facebook page,

‘It's not just a fashion show as our motive behind organizing this show is to keep our tradition recognized by every individual of the world. This is just a small initiative
towards our community to keep our self away from being called VANISHING TRIBE....

Indeed, there has been interest in using this form of social networking to develop more awareness and facilitate cultural consciousness but ‘facebook is an awkward social space’ (Postill 2012). Plus there are not enough Lepcha facebook users to gather momentum as it did with the Egyptian revolution and occupy movements across the world. Having said that, a facebook revolution for the Lepcha community might not be a long time in making as the ideas are already floating around. Unfortunately, there were only 3 likes on Rinzing Dorjee Lepcha’s status of, “a revolution is needed to save our identity.. wat say?”

_Rinzing Dorjee Lepcha_

_a revolution is needed to save our identity.....wat say?_

Like · Comment · Follow Post · March 22, 2012 at 1:53am

 объя 3 people like this.

Conclusion

When Dawa and Tenzing Lepcha sat on an indefinite hunger strike from June 20, 2007 to protest the proposed dams in Dzongu, they had no idea how big an impact they would make in changing the course of Lepcha history. In their silent, non-violent way, the fasting duo proved to the world that they were not the complacent Lepchas the world
knew about. They were willing to remain bone dry in order to safeguard their “holy land”. They were persistent with their demands and were constantly exchanging ideas with the Kalimpong Lepchas participating in a ‘feedback loop’ (2009: 116) that gave rise to new concepts. At one time a Sikkim politician was even heard saying, “What are the Dzongu Lepchas doing with the aatankbadi (terrorist) Lepchas?” referring to the Kalimpong Lepchas. Perhaps also because Dzongu Lepchas have always been thought to be the “backward” people still isolated in the “reserve” area. The politician tried to draw a regional boundary between Dzongu Lepchas and Kalimpong Lepchas but it was too late. The docile Lepchas of the yesteryears had been educated. At one time, education and its perks had formed the Christian Lepchas vs. Buddhist Lepchas divide, but today education had taught them to put aside their religion-based identities and work together for the betterment of the tribe. Today, Lepcha youths are connecting through social network sites, across religious and regional boundaries to work together and assert their ethnic distinctiveness. Earlier times, Sikkim Lepchas would organize an event and expect Kalimpong and Ilam Lepchas to attend, but today they have planned events like HELFE together also increasing the ‘visibility’ (Barkataki-Ruscheweyh 2011:1) of the tribe. However, the youths have also realized that to maintain their distinct identity, the responsibility lies in their own hands. The goal however is not just the preservation, promotion and production of Lepcha culture but who should ‘control the pace, the direction and the process of change’ (Guneratne 2007: 104). Lepcha youth leaders have led by example in many cases and made the youngsters realize that speaking the language and wearing the dress alone does not make them Lepcha. It is
about how they use the language and what they do with the dress that gives them a sense of belongingness. The Lepcha fashion show is a good example of the awareness about one’s ethnicity despite wanting to be modern. The educated Lepchas are also vocal about their displeasure in being labelled as the “vanishing” tribe. It is interesting that the first time Lepchas were believed to be vanishing was two centuries ago when Mainwaring wrote, ‘the once happy people are fast dying out’ (Mainwaring 1876: xix). Time has proven that Lepchas are denouncing their vanishing status and ‘flourishing’ instead. They have realized that the ‘loss of religion, culture, custom, language, literature can be regained and preserved only by the Lepchas themselves’ (Roy 2009: 27). Fostering solidarity across regions and religions, the modern secular Lepcha youths are indeed the key players in the emergence of a cultural revival taking place for the trajectory of their ethnic identity. They have worked in the traditional framework of the shezum system bypassing student movements, which is non-existent among Lepcha students in various institutions across the country. Their political struggles often in the form of protest politics are downplayed as social struggles refusing to be politically motivated and practicing solidarity with the various struggles across the borders. In their own unassuming ways, they are becoming culturally and politically visible ‘maximizing their opportunities and minimizing perceived threats’ (Deka 2011) as they articulate a broader definition of Lepcha culture and identity in the maintenance and reproduction of a pan-Lepcha identity.