

Social and Political Tensions In North Bengal

(Since 1947)

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The Socio- Economic Tensions of the Lepchas in Post Colonial Darjeeling District with special reference to Kalimpong

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Introduction :-

The Lepchas are the indigenous tribe of Sikkim and Darjeeling Hills. About the early history of Sikkim writes Risley-'A few doubtful glimpses reach us through the thick mist of Lepcha tradition. The Lepchas claim to be the autochthons of Sikkim proper'. The Lepchas call themselves Rongpa or Raongkup Rum Kup. The name Lepcha is anglicized form of Lapchey, and the Nepalese adopted it from the British. But this story seems incorrect because etymologically the word Lapchey is from Bhutia word, La-chu. La means hills and chu means river, ~~hence it means~~ people living between hills and rivers. The Lepchas regard themselves as ancient people. They developed their ancient civilization in Mayel Lyang, meaning the land of hidden paradise. After the Tibetan usurpation of the throne of Sikkim, the records of Lepcha mythology, laws and literature were burnt. Since the time of the Lepcha kings, the Lepchas as began to reside in Darjeeling and Sikkim, however, the river Teesta and Rangpo divided them into two groups namely the Tasangmu (Eastern) and the Renjongmu (Western).

In this paper, the main proposition is that the Lepchas had been exploited by people coming from outside i.e. from Tibet, Nepal and Bhutan. The British Government too did not favour them for they were not good tax payers. In post colonial scenario under the government of West Bengal, the condition of the Lepchas has not improved any way, for which there may be some emotional outburst in the future.

The Lepcha's Socio-Economic Scenario in Post Colonial Era :-

The Indian Independence in August 1947 brought about significant political changes. In the state of West Bengal Lepchas remained insignificant (population wise). Even in their own homeland Darjeeling, they had already become minority due to the British policy. After independence Kolkata or Delhi became the administrative head quarters for the Lepchas of Kalimpong. In such a scenario the Lepchas could neither create political influence nor could stand affront in socio-economic sphere. Despite the formation of 'Lepcha Association' in Kalimpong as early as 1925, to bring about awareness among Lepchas, the then handful of conscious folk could do nothing for their tribe whose language culture etc. had taken downward trend. It is a pity to state that their demand for introduction of language at school level in Darjeeling District of West Bengal since 1925 has till date gone to deaf ears. It is felt that Lepcha, one of the oldest and richest of languages has been denied its due place in West Bengal. The Lepchas have no right to be educated in their own language even at school level, whereas the situation in Sikkim is altogether different.

The prominent Lepcha Scholar and General Secretary of the "Indigenous Lepcha Tribal Association" (I.L.T.A.), Lyangsong Tamsang writes – 'The Lepcha language definitely qualifies and deserves its due place under the heading of safeguards for linguistic minorities of the Indian constitution, but unfortunately, in spite of our repeated

request and appeals for the last 52 years or so, the Lepchas of the Darjeeling district have been denied their basic human rights to education in their mother tongue by the government of West Bengal'. The major hurdles in the maintenance of Lepcha language is illiteracy. 'An illiterate Lepcha may be well conversant in Lepcha Language but illiteracy hamstrings the constructive efforts towards preserving and nourishing the language. In fact the number of Lepcha speakers is another very disheartening feature. In the district of Darjeeling, only 33.49% is categorized as speakers of Lepcha language. But my recent interview with Lyangsong Tamsang throws some lights on recent development in this regard. I was told that the I.L.T.A. has extended a great help for the Lepcha people by introducing 30 to 40 night schools where the students are taught four language skills i.e. to listen, speak, read and write which helps to preserve and flourish their ethnicity, culture and language.

As far as schooling and education is concerned the figure of Kalimpong seems quite satisfactory as compared to Darjeeling and Kurseong sub-division. The summary of data of Lepcha student male and female studying in the primary and secondary schools for the session 2005 to 2006 in the Darjeeling Hills is as follows:-

Primary Education :-

PLACE	MALE	FEMALE	TOTAL
KALIMPONG	1631	1451	3152
DARJEELING	173	188	361
KURSEONG	196	228	424
TOTAL	2000	1867	3937

Secondary Education : -

PLACE	MALE	FEMALE	TOTAL
KALIMPONG	1104	1061	2165
DARJEELING	210	242	452
KURSEONG	179	191	370
TOTAL	1493	1494	2987

TABLE 'A' Source: King Gaeboo Achyok, 2005, a Lepcha bilingual magazine p.19

Although these above figures seem satisfactory, one cannot deny the fact that there lie a huge number of drop-outs among Lepchas. The 1991 census shows that out of 26920 populations of Lepchas in Darjeeling district 24098 resides in rural areas and only 2822 reside in urban areas. L.Tamsang said, '99% of the Lepchas live in remote villages. 76% of women and 50% of men are illiterate. Drop out rate is almost 90%. The want of roads, electricity, schools, basic health care centers and other factors like lack of motivation and poverty etc. are responsible for illiteracy. Education is almost nil in the villages'; (interview on 23.11.2006, Kalimpong). Apart from education, there are some other serious social problems too. According to 1991 census report the Lepcha population table of Darjeeling District is as follows :-

Total Tribal Population	Total Lepcha Population	Rural Lepchas	Urban Lepchas	Male Lepchas
179153	26920	24098	2822	14309

Table B:

As shown in the table, the male ratio is higher than that of female. This results in Lepcha men getting married with girls from other ethnic groups which ultimately hampers in the maintenance of language, culture etc. In certain cases Lepcha women are found more educated than their male counterparts; therefore, in absence of eligible educated bachelors in their community, they are open to marry with grooms of other ethnic groups leading to some kind of population intermixture. For sustenance of any community, marital status plays a determining role. Celibacy or late marriage is a permanent feature of the Lepcha community. It is confirmed again by the 1991 census that as good as 7727 Lepchas of both sexes, in the age groups of 15-44 years remained unmarried. The number of the divorced and widows are in the rise. Both social and economic factors are responsible for such development.

The Economic condition of the Lepchas of Kalimpong is pitiable. As shown in the table B above, the majority of Lepchas live in rural areas and that also in remote and steep terrains. Because of the low fertility of the soil and traditional mode of cultivation majority are below poverty line. Indira Awasty in her account of Pedong i.e. one of the blocks in Kalimpong sub-division has reflected the following points:

a. The main activity of house hold consists of the working on the land Women and children chiefly and men also, expend an enormous amount of time and energy in fetching water from sources 3 to 5 k.ms. distant. (p. 106)

b. A particular situation exists, where though nearly all Lepchas have land and quite substantial areas, but this is the poorest segment of society. Because of their antiquated methods of farming. (p. 109)

c. The highest rate of unemployment is among the educated youths. There is no scope for employment or deployment of educated men and women in Pedong except in farming, which is already stretched to its utmost. (p.113)

- d. The health facilities are distressingly inadequate. (p.114)
- e. Regarding assistance by Government in the development of agriculture though there may be plans on paper, but no proper irrigation projects have been executed. (P.115-116).
- f. Even if the government is willing to do something but because of dispassionate bureaucrats the pace is very slow. (p 119).
- g. Political parties do whip up awareness, but not with a view to improving the lot of the people but only to canvas for votes. The only truly social welfare agency operating in the area is the church. (p.104).

Here, what I sincerely feel that these above sentences speak everything and they do not need further explanation. Today, when we look at Pedong, only a few things have changed, rather in some areas, things are worsened.

Apart from all these there are other factors like 'engagement in profitable business or occupation etc where Lepchas lacking behind'. Besides the data on industrial classification of Lepchas over the year 1961, 1971, 1981 is not encouraging. ' The percentage of Lepcha workers for the state of West Bengal (the situation is more or less the same for the Lepchas in Darjeeling district) has decreased from 51.59% to 48.69% and 42.23% over the decades respectively. The Lepchas thus are becoming workless and the trend is more among the females in both rural and urban areas.

The bulk of the Lepcha population lives in the rural areas which naturally undermines the potential of the whole community. 'In this age of inequality and cut throat competition, the Lepchas, therefore, cannot be regarded as a rich pool of human resource'.

Another distress among the Lepchas in Kalimpong is the problem of land alienation. The Lepcha leaders and scholars in this region believe that 'The govt. of West Bengal is urgently required to amend existing land Transfer Act in respect of Indigenous tribes of West Bengal'. So, the Lepchas are conscious and concerned about the right to their ancestral land. With the passing of the Tribal Right Bill by the

Lok Sabha on 15th December, 2006, to protect the rights of tribal communities to own the land they live in and to some of the forest resources they depend on, might have relieved the Lepchas too. T.B. Subba writes – 'In the geographically contiguous areas of Darjeeling and Sikkim, there has recently been a mushrooming of organizations which seek to preserve and develop their indigenous culture, language and religion'. The Lepchas of Kalimpong as such are among such groups. There are as many as 110 Lepcha association (including village associations) in Darjeeling, functioning at various levels under the umbrella of ILTA (estd 1925). These organizations say Tamsang are always active in mobilizing people for their rights as well as duties. The Lepchas who are known to have originally inhabited this region most of the land here once belonged to this community, over the last many years or so, this community has been reduced to an insignificant minority. Hence the sense of insecurity among the Lepchas leads to the quest for identity.

The Lepchas of Kalimpong feel that there are many factors like the influx of alien religions namely Lamaism, Christianity, Hinduism etc. has led to the deterioration of their socio-religious identity. Besides all these, the frequent social and political tension in the hills of Darjeeling has also created a sense of insecurity and marginalization among the Lepchas of these areas. The majority of Lepchas do not regard themselves as Gurkhas because they have different attitude, civilization, history and way of life. Broadly speaking at this very point of time the Lepchas of Darjeeling Hills have three genuine demands.

- (A.) Introduction of Lepcha language at school and College level.
- (B.) Primitive Tribal Group Status.
- (C) Reservation of seats in D.G.H.C.

Which if not addressed may further frustrate this tribe as a result of which they may get emotionally alienated.

There is frustration and a great sense of insecurity and discontentment among the Lepchas of Kalimpong because of economic

and social marginalization, which is evident in the writings of almost all the Lepcha scholars and literary figures like K.P.Tamsang, Fonning, Lyangsong Tamsang, Peter J.Karthak etc.

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