

People's Linguistic Survey of India

Volume Twenty-Six, Part II

THE LANGUAGES OF SIKKIM

Chief Editor

G. N. DEVY

Editor

BALARAM PANDEY

bhasha



Orient BlackSwan

For permission to use copyright material, the publishers wish to thank Sahitya Akademi for the following:
Short story by Shiva Kumar Rai (in Nepali) from *Rachana Sanchayan*, 2012; Lepcha origin myth *Lepchas the Children of Mount Kanchanjunga*, and Lepcha folksong by Lyangsong Tamsang from *Lepcha Folklore and Folksongs*, 2008.

© Government of India, Copyright 2017

The responsibility for the correctness of internal details rests with the publisher.

The external boundaries of India agree with the Record/Master Copy certified by Survey of India.

The spellings of names in this map, have been taken from various sources.

THE LANGUAGES OF SIKKIM

ORIENT BLACKSWAN PRIVATE LIMITED

Registered Office

3-6-752 Himayatnagar, Hyderabad 500 029, Telangana, India

e-mail: centraloffice@orientblackswan.com

Other Offices

Bengaluru, Bhopal, Chennai,

Guwahati, Hyderabad, Jaipur, Kolkata,

Lucknow, Mumbai, New Delhi, Noida, Patna, Vijaywada

Volume Twenty-Six, Part II

© Bhasha Research and Publication Centre 2018

First published by Orient Blackswan 2018

ISBN 978-93-5287-253-4

Maps cartographed by

Sangam Books (India) (An imprint of The Agricultural Development Commercial Credit and Industrial Investment Company Private Limited)

Typeset by

Le Studio Graphique, Gurugram 122 001

in Times New Roman 10.5/12.6

Printed at

Glorious Printers

Delhi

Published by

3-6-752 Himayatnagar, Hyderabad 500 029 (Telangana), India

e-mail: info@orientblackswan.com

The People's Linguistic Survey of India is a project of Bhasha Research and Publication Centre, partly funded by Sir Jamsetji Tata Trust, Mumbai.

The publisher has used its best endeavours to ensure that the URLs for external websites referred to in this book are correct and active at the time of going to press. However, the publisher has no responsibility for the websites and can make no guarantee that a site will remain live or that the content is or will remain appropriate.



6



Lepcha

*Anira Phipon Lepcha, Balaram Pandey
and Abrona Lee Pandi Aden*

INTRODUCTION

Sikkim, a tiny Himalayan state, is known for its ethnic, linguistic and bio diversity. 'It is a land of pristine beauty with unique culture caused by the diffusion of Buddhism, Hinduism and Animistic ritual of different religious faiths. It is still relatively untouched by the burgeoning human development activities as is seen in the rest of India.' (Singh 2005, 13) Religious faith among the locals has been its mainstay. The rolling prayer wheels and fluttering prayer flags, the chanting of shamans and bells in the temples and churches symbolises it.

The Lepchas, the Bhutias and the Nepalese are counted as the three ethnic groups or the original inhabitants of the state. The Nepalese as a meta-group consists of a variety of ethnic groups. It is a '...generic category, which subsumes a large number of communities, a cluster of endogamous [sic] groups' (Singh 2002, xii). It has within it groups representing both the mongoloid and Khasa strain.

Sikkim at present has twenty-one different groups that include the business class of Marwaris and Biharis among others, from the plains. In Sikkim, both the Indo-European and Sino-Tibetan group of languages are spoken. There are altogether eleven regional languages recognised by the State Government of Sikkim. As per the Sikkim Official Language Act No.5 of 1977, Bhutia, Lepcha and Nepali were recognised as the state languages of Sikkim. In April 1981, Limbu was recognised as a state language vide the Sikkim Gazette No.6/ED/81. Likewise, as per the Government Gazette No.SLA/94-95/15/34 dated March 21, 1995, Newari, Rai, Gurung, Magar, Sherpa and Tamang and in October 15, 1996 vide Government Gazette No.5/LD/96, Sunuwar, were given their due status as state languages of Sikkim.

As per the socio-linguistic study, 'Lepcha is used for social communication only in those areas where Lepchas live in majority. Same is the case with Bhutia and Limbu languages. Apart from these languages, other indigenous languages are retained as a family code.' (Pandey 2010, 2)

The Lepchas with a population of 5762 constituted close to nineteen per cent of the population of Sikkim according to the first official census of 1891. They practiced animism and their language was Lepcha. The endo ethnonym of the Lepchas is *Mutanchi Rong Kup Rum Kup* or in short *Rong* which means 'the son of snowy peak' or 'the son of God'. The Lepcha word for language is Aring, hence they call their own language Rongaring or Rongring. The Lepcha or Rong language today is spoken in

Sikkim, in the Darjeeling district of West Bengal, in the Illam region in eastern Nepal and in the south-western parts of Bhutan. With the advent of the Tibetans in Sikkim in the eighteenth century, they were compelled to embrace Buddhism. Since the middle of the nineteenth century, a significant number of Lepchas have been converted to Christianity because of which they have distanced themselves from their old shamanistic rituals and beliefs (Subba 2008, 259). All the above factors have tremendously influenced the use of the Lepcha language.

The rise to prominence, of groups like the Bhutias and Nepalese, has gradually marginalised the Lepchas in Sikkim. Because of social contact and network with other communities, the use of the Lepcha language has been limited to small pockets of Lepcha concentration. Marginalisation of the Lepcha population, in the fields of economy, power, religion, and culture, has contributed to the marginalisation of the language as well. Other factors like literacy and education, modernisation, urbanisation, globalisation, multilingualism and multiculturalism, population intermixture, rising popularity of English as the medium of instruction at educational institutions, rise of other dominant languages, rise of employment opportunities, socio-economic, psychological, and political reasons, development of science and technology, and rise of electronic media etc. have contributed to the weakening of the Lepcha language. The language which was once the lingua franca and official language of the whole region has significantly weakened, if not been pushed to the verge of extinction.

According to the 1921 Census all the Lepchas, numbering 9291, recorded Lepcha as their mother tongue (MT). It was found, in the 1931 Census, that there were 13206 Lepcha language speakers in Sikkim whereas the total Lepcha population was only at 13060. It was also found in the same census that out of 13206 Lepcha language speakers 10278 accepted Nepali as the subsidiary language, which means that 77.82 percent of the Lepcha speakers were bilingual. Regarding the language status of the Lepchas the Census Superintendent of Bengal wrote in 1931: 'For every three persons in Sikkim speaking Rong as mother tongue with no subsidiary language there are four who speak also some subsidiary language. In the whole of Bengal amongst persons speaking Tibeto-Himalayan languages there are only 11 speaking no subsidiary language to every 89 who are bilingual and in Sikkim the corresponding proportions are almost one to two' (Census 1931, 354). Hence, it can be said that the Lepcha, at least a majority of them, were bound to follow other dominant languages, which ultimately made them a minority language group.

It is perceived that a good number of Lepchas switched over to the Bhutia language because of its usage in the *darbar* (aristocratic assemblage) and the influence of the aristocracy, if not out of fear, and in a way, they were forced to adopt priesthood through monastic education, where the medium was Tibetan. Also, a minor group among the Lepcha by that time may have converted to Christianity. It is generally found that almost all the Christian Lepchas have switched over to Nepali or learn Nepali as their MT in the language acquisition process. In the Lepcha community, it is seen that the older generation is still inclined to their language, while the younger generation is more open to accepting other languages, usually Nepali and English, at the cost of Lepcha. Code mixing, code switching and code shifting is high among the youth, especially those who are school and college goers. This may be because of peer pressure and the influence of other dominant languages which are of prime importance in curriculum and institutional or social lingua franca. It is mentioned in the 1991 Census that there are only about 29854 Lepcha MT speakers in the country (Subba 2008, 251-52). Yet, if we focus on linguistic census from 1981-2001 we can find a decadal increase in Lepcha speakers. (27,814-39,342-50,629, that is a 41.45 and 28.69% increase in India and with reference to Sikkim it is 26,000-29,854-34,728, that is a 14.82 and 19.67% increase).

ORIGIN

According to Suniti Kumar Chatterji the Lepcha language is a branch of the Himalayan group of the Tibeto-Burman family (Singh 2001, 100). In his research on languages of the tribals of India, Chatterjee links the Lepchas with the Nagas (Thakur 1988, 26). Grierson is of the opinion that, it is a non-pronominalised language of the Tibeto-Burman family and has a Mandarian influence (1967). O'Malley sees its affiliation with the Tibeto-Himalayan Sub-Group of the Tibeto-Burman branch in the Tibeto-Chinese family (O'Malley 1927, 222). Fuchs feels that, the Lepcha language is the only language in the Tibeto-Chinese language group which has a pronominalised verbal formation (Fuchs 1982, 102-103).

Shafer, who studied Tibeto-Burman languages, mentions the connection of the Lepcha language with the Naga group of the Tibeto-Burman sub family (Singh 1990, 237). The language that most closely resembles Lepcha, according to Bodman (of Cornell University, USA), is the Adi (or Abor-Miri) language of Arunachal Pradesh, the next nearest being Rawang and Jingpaw (or Kachin) of northern Burma (now Myanmar), followed by the Chungli dialect of Ao Naga; he has listed several Lepcha and Adi words for comparison to support his opinion (Sprigg 2005, 80)

There are some philologists who have found the roots of Lepcha in the Austro-Asiatic family (Singh 1993, 90). However the majority of linguists have shown its relation with the Tibeto-Burman family.

The Lepchas believe that their language was developed independently. Accordingly to their tradition, it is the language of God, because after he made the first human couple, he spoke to them in this language (Rai et al 1998, 73). The Lepcha call themselves Rongkup, Rumkup or Rong and their country as Renjyong. The Lepcha language was once widely spoken in this region and had its great influence over other languages. Some of the words were so dear to Nepali speakers that they found a permanent place in Nepali vocabulary. A few examples of Lepcha infant speech now commonly used in Nepali language are:

<i>tatey.</i>	to walk
<i>mam-mam</i>	to eat
<i>bung-gee bung gee</i>	to fall down
<i>ngey ngey</i>	to sleep
<i>aaji ji aaji ji</i>	to prohibit

(Tamsang 1983)

In infant speech, all the speech sounds are re-duplicated.

According to Mainwaring, the Lepcha language is a monosyllabic one (though not altogether an isolating one), and is unquestionably far anterior to the Hebrew or Sanskrit, and is one of the oldest language extants (Mainwaring 1876, xx).

GEOGRAPHICAL EXTENT

The Lepcha population is scattered in all four districts of Sikkim. The highest concentration of Lepchas can be found in the North district with a total of 14370 speakers, which is 37.47% in all. They are the largest community in the North district (Socio-Economic Census, 2006). Some of the areas with higher concentrations of Lepcha population are Dzongu, Mangon, and some areas of Kabi Tingda. The

second highest concentration of Lepcha population is in the West district, with 7.81%, making them the sixth largest group in the district (Census, 2006), with the majority settled in Rinchenpong, Daramdin, Dentam, Tashiding and other areas. They are the ninth largest group in the East and South districts with strengths of 4.89% and 5.12% respectively. In the East district, Rakdong-Tintek, Rumtek, Ranka, Lingdok, Assam Linzey (Pubyuik) are places where a significant Lepcha population resides, whereas Wok and Rateypani constituency and Lingee block in the South district also have a reasonable Lepcha population.

BILINGUALISM AND MULTILINGUALISM

The Lepchas of Sikkim fall under the linguistic minorities with tribal affiliation. It would be important to note that the incidence of bilingualism among the Scheduled or dominant language groups is generally low and Non-scheduled or minor language speakers are predominantly bilingual or multilingual. It is equally important to note that the speakers of the Scheduled languages do not generally acquire bilingualism in any tribal language. It is recognised that transitional bilingualism generally leads to language shift or loss. About half of the Scheduled Tribes in India have declared a non-tribal language as their MT (Dua 2008, 30–31).

Multilingualism is perhaps one of the major factors behind the loss of the Lepcha language. This beautiful and comprehensive language was once the language of the whole area of Darjeeling, Sikkim, until 1904, which all Tibetans, Bhutias, Nepalese, other Indian communities, Europeans and others acquired and spoke; in which business was carried out and justice in the English courts administered; in the character of which, decrees and document were written and recorded. This beautiful Lepcha language has gradually been completely set aside, and English, Hindi, Tibetan and Nepali languages have been made the chief languages (Tamsang 1998, 21). Under the circumstances, the Lepchas had no other option but to use these dominant dialects at the cost of their MT.

In Sikkim alone, more than two dozen languages are found, and three major local languages (other than Lepcha), namely, Nepali, Bhutia, and Limboo are spoken in the state by respective groups. Other than these, English (as the official language) and Hindi (being compulsory in the school curriculum) are spoken widely in urban areas, with Bengali gaining ground because of tourism. Such a linguistic situation has had negative implications for the Lepcha language.

The bilingualism in the Lepchas is relatively unstable and they have a tendency to switch over to other languages. It has been mentioned that some of the tribal communities show bilingualism in the tribal languages. As such, the Lepchas of Sikkim show bilingualism in the Bhutia language. As per the report of bilingualism and trilingualism speakers of minor languages in 1991, 58.57% of the Lepchas are bilingual and 19.69% are trilingual (Mallikarjun 2004). Today more than 85% of the Lepchas are either bilingual or trilingual.

RELIGION AND LANGUAGE

Religion plays an important role in the functioning of a language, and the influence of religion can be found in its maintenance and shift. Whenever the use of a language or a language variety is spreading, it may be assumed that religious beliefs and practices will in some way affect the rate and extent of the spread (Ferguson 1996, 63). In the context of Sikkim, Buddhism has helped, to a great extent, in the

spread of Tibetan and Bhutia languages. As a matter of fact, some Lepchas have switched over to Bhutia, and many have acquired Bhutia or Tibetan as a subsidiary language. Many of them study in monastic schools, because of which they are inclined towards Tibetan or Bhutia in some way. On the other hand, Hinduism and Christianity increased the boundary of Nepali among other language groups. It is seen in the census reports (1931 and after), that a significant number of Lepchas acquired bilingualism in Nepali. This may be, to some extent, because of the spread of Hinduism. Similarly, with the influence of Christianity, the Lepcha converts have totally lost their language. About thirty to thirty-five per cent of the Lepchas in Sikkim are Christians and they use Nepali in almost every situation.

POPULATION INTERMIXTURE AND LANGUAGE

The Lepchas are innocent in nature and amiable people. It is found that a few Lepchas who are educated and reside in urban areas have married/or marry women from other language groups. However, this may sometimes be because of a dearth of qualified girls in their own community. In some cases, in the absence of eligible bachelors, Lepcha girls marry boys from other language communities. Inter-community marriages are also found among rural and illiterate Lepchas, resulting in a kind of population intermixture. The children of such families do not acquire Lepcha as their MT, i.e., a child of a non-Lepcha father and a Lepcha mother or a non-Lepcha mother and a Lepcha father does not acquire Lepcha MT. If a Lepcha man marries a girl from another language group (Nepali, Bhutia or other) the child learns the mother's language as his MT, and if a Lepcha girl is married to a non-Lepcha man the child learns the father's language as his MT or first language. This may be because of the fact that the Lepchas are submissive by nature and there may be some inferiority complex in interactions with members of other dominant communities. Or, it is also possible that they think that it will be beneficial to acquire proficiency in the languages which are spoken by the numerically dominant communities. Conversion to Christianity has also brought about some kind of population intermixture which has contributed to the decline of the Lepcha language.

Role of the Mother

The mother has a defining role in the language development of a child. Children learn language skills at home and the mother is his/her first teacher (Robinson 1974, 175). The linguistic development or the development of the MT is lacking among the Lepcha children, because most of the Lepcha women fall in the lower income bracket. Literacy rate among the Lepcha women is good, but the percentage of educated Lepcha women is numerically insignificant. High dropout rates and low levels of education are found among the Lepcha women. A mother who is nearly illiterate (or has bare minimum education) cannot teach the systematic language skills other than speaking to the child, as she herself lacks this skill. Because of this, the children who stay at home do not get the opportunity to develop language/communication skills. Studies reveal that lower working-class mothers or uneducated mothers are less likely to use language in discipline situations except in the form of direct commands. Their greater use of simple commands or non-verbal strategies leaves the child to work out for himself/herself, the connections between other events and the maternal intervention (Robinson 1974, 177). Hence it can be said, that due to backwardness on the part of Lepcha mothers, teaching of language/communication skills remains neglected in most cases.

GRAMMATICAL FEATURES

The Lepcha language is believed to be one of the most scientific languages. The Lepcha have a name for every living thing including plants, which are found in their country (Mac Donald 1943, 6-7). The system of naming has its own significance. While naming things, the Lepchas categorise them under different heads and start the names of a particular group with a particular letter. For example, all the names of wildlife start with the letter 's', such as *suchyak*-leopard, *sunā*-bear, *suko*-barking deer, *suhu*-monkey, *suyol*-fox, *suthong*-tiger. All river names begin with the letter 'r', for example *runyoo* 'Teesta', *Rungit* 'Rangit', *Rushi* 'Reshi', *Ruyot* 'Bakcha', *Rushyot* 'Dikchu', *Runpo* 'Rangpo'. Likewise, names of body parts start with the letter 'a' and atmosphere, climate and weather commence with 'sa'. The names of the rivers are the original Lepcha names, which change over to Nepali or other names. One of the interesting features of the Lepcha language is that no abusive, derogatory and vulgar words are found in it.

Tradition often give us clues to the origin of a tribe and their language. Among the Lepchas there is strong tradition of Bong-thing and Mun (Lepcha priest/priestess) who are the real custodians of language, traditions and history of the tribe. "These Bong-things and 'Mun' while communicating with the gods first invoke the spirits of the God of creation and their first parents and then the spirits of the local hills, dales and rivers etc. In wedding ceremonies, priests bless couples in the name of all rivers and mountains of the region. A religious register, i.e., a special variety, in a given speech community may even be in a very different language from the normal language of the community, (Ferguson 1996, 60). It is interesting here to mention the speech variety or lexical choices made by Bong-thing or Mun while performing religious ceremonies and rites. They use figurative or metaphorical speech which is called Tungbaor Ring. The speech and words in such rituals differ from ordinary speech. A few examples are:

Lepcha	Ceremonial word	English
<i>hik</i>	<i>lamboo lamsong</i>	fowl
<i>ung</i>	<i>nyoo vaon nyoo va</i>	water
<i>maan</i>	<i>sari</i>	meat
<i>vee</i>	<i>amo</i>	blood
<i>fo</i>	<i>sundyam suntyaol</i>	bird
<i>song</i>	<i>songsur-morsur</i>	incense

(Tamsang 1998, 18-19)

Another interesting feature of the Lepcha language is the non-existence of honorifics. This suggests that there was no distinction of caste, and social hierarchy of class or status in Lepcha society, which shows its primitiveness. Honorific uses were not found in Lepcha in its original form. However, they later borrowed honorific words and uses from the Tibetan language (Chemjong 1969). Foning, a prominent Lepcha scholar has also pointed out that 'Being a classless society and community originally, there did not arise any necessity for the use of honorific words and terms. But, with the advent of people of higher stage of civilisation and with the feudal system introduced among us, the sense of superior and inferior, high and low enveloped us also. Consequently, we also started seeing and feeling the desirability of having honorific terms and words in our language also. It may be noted that hundred percent of these honorific words and terms that we are using today come from the Tibetan language' (Foning 2003, 184).

Another feature of Lepcha is 'tungbor aring', a figurative or indirect language/speech. This speech is used in specific situations like hunting, fishing, and extracting wild honeybee, collecting edible foods

in jungle and in a long journey (Lepcha Ugen 2003, 45). Another aspect of Lepcha scripts, alphabets and letters is *Lathyoo* which is a cluster of two consonant sounds. There are altogether seven *Lathyoo* in Lepcha, namely *kla*, *pla*, *gla*, *phla*, *bla*, *hla*, *mla*. The Lepcha alphabets have nine diacritic marks which are called *telboo thaambyin* or *ming tyaot*, whereas there is a set of separate diacritic marks on symbols for *k*, *m*, *l*, *n*, *p*, *r*, *t*, *ng* called *kang* (Tamsang 2001, 12)

DEVELOPMENT OF LANGUAGE: WRITING AND PRINTING

History says that the Lepchas had a very rich literature; however it was destroyed by the later migrants. It is found that printing and publication work in Lepcha was first started by the missionaries. In 1841 a mission had been initiated in Darjeeling by William Start, in the hope of evangelising the Lepchas, Bhutia and Nepalese. He translated a few books in Lepchas with the help of Nieble. The earliest publication was a lithographed edition of St. Mathew's Gospel in 1845. The first book to be printed in Lepcha by using moving types, probably the oldest printed Lepcha book to have survived to the present day is *The Book of Genesis and part of Exodus in Lepcha*, published by the Baptist Mission Press, Calcutta (now Kolkata) in 1849, translated by Niebel. This book marks the beginning of an era in Lepcha book production. In the same year Nieble, with the help of W. Start, translated and published a second Gospel namely *St. John's Gospel*, and they printed a revised edition of *St Mathew* (Sprigg 2005, 53–54). Thereafter, two major books published were *The Grammar of Lepcha* (1876) by G. B. Mainwaring and *Dictionary of the Lepcha Language* (1898) by Grunwadel. In 1892, L. A. Waddell published an article on the names of places and rivers in Darjeeling district and Sikkim. In this article, Waddell gave a number of Lepcha place names together with semantic analyses. The article itself fills a gap in our knowledge (Halfdam 1967, 19) about the region and the Lepchas. However in Sikkim's context there is much less existing work. A few Lepcha sacred books are to be found in the Lepcha monasteries, and they are mostly translations from Tibetan. Noteworthy ones are *Tashi Sung*, *Guru Chho Wang*, *Sakun de-lok*, *EK-doshi Manlom* (Risley, 293).

SCRIPT

Historian G. P. Singh has said that the Kiratas in Sikkim including Lepcha and Limbu had an ancient script of their own which was modified later under Tibetan influence (Singh 1990, 238). According to Tamsong, Thikung men Salong, a minister of the earliest king Turve pa no (who reigned about AD 1400) had invented the present Lepcha alphabet. However, Risley's (1928) account highlights that Raja Chador Namgyal designed an alphabet for the use of his Lepcha subjects. He has given an account of the history which states that after the Bhutanese invasion, Raja Chador fled to Lhasa and remained there for several years, studying hard and learning from Lhasa Raja Miung, and gradually rose in scholastic eminence. It can therefore be assumed that this knowledge helped Raja to design the script. However, Dr. Sprigg has tried to reconcile these two earlier accounts about the origin of the Lepcha scripts by suggesting that the third Raja Chador Namgyal (1700–17) might have had a Lepcha assistant, and that this assistant might conceivably have been Thikung Men Salong. Sprigg believed that the Rajah might have had a strong desire to spread Buddhist beliefs among the Lepcha subjects, teaching them to write their own language and to translate Tibetan religious books into Lepcha. Hence, he may have chosen Men Salong who may have had competent knowledge in the Lepcha language (Sprigg 2005,

88). Proving his point, Sprigg further states that, Rajah Chador reigned from 1700–1717 and, if it is believed that Men Salong was a contemporary of Lhatsun Chenpo (1597–1654), he might have been alive during the lifetime of both Lhatsun Chenpo and Chador Namgyal. Hence, Maharaja Chador might have delegated responsibility for the script to Thekung Men Salong, who loyally gave the credit for his work to his royal master (Sprigg 2005, 87). The Lepcha language contains thirty-five consonants, eight vowels and twelve diacritic marks (Rai et al 1998, 73). According to the feedback received from Puspá Thomas Lepcha, a Lepcha language teacher in Sikkim Government College, Gangtok, the Lepcha language has twenty-eight consonants but some of the writers/researchers have clubbed seven conjunct consonants or have used a single letter to symbolise two consonants linked together, *la-thyu* (initial consonants followed by post consonantal glides-l) also known as consonants, thus taking the number to thirty-five. Similarly there are eight final consonants signs. Nyindo sign *-ang* is used when no vowel sign occurs for the final velar nasal.

DOMAINS OF USE

Since Sikkim became a part of India in 1975, the Lepchas in Sikkim also came to be identified as Scheduled Tribe, by a Presidential order in 1978 (Singh 2000, 61). The Sikkim Assembly passed on October 12, 1977, by voice vote, an official Bill seeking to declare Lepcha (along with Nepali and Bhutia) as a State language for official purpose (Roy 1980, 7). Today it is one of the eleven state languages. Lepcha is taught in schools, there is a Lepcha edition of the government newspaper, the *Sikkim Herald*, and Government Radio Stations broadcasts news bulletins and cultural programmes in Lepcha (Plaisier 2005, 8). However such efforts on the part of the Sikkim government have failed to arrest the erosion of Lepcha, both in spoken and written forms. The Lepcha language, one of the oldest and biggest assets of human civilisation, is on the verge of extinction. Despite its recognition as a state language of Sikkim, and inclusion in school and college curriculum in the state, the speakers are dwindling. The Lepchas in Sikkim could not make use of these protective measures because of growing pressure, conflict, and competition. Their marginalisation in all others fields of life had its effect on their language as well. The non-inclusion of Lepcha in privately run schools and lack of proper planning and policy on the part of government or the concerned department, is also a matter of concern. Religious factors, population intermixture and lack of literature are some of the reasons behind the loss of the Lepcha language. Nepali is the lingua franca of the state and English is an official language and medium of instruction in educational institutions. This has largely influenced the Lepcha language and psychology of the speakers, writers and the students, who could have played a key role in reproducing and enriching the language. The census of 1921 reflects that all the Lepchas (numbering 9291) had recorded Lepcha as their mother tongue. The 1931 Census recorded the number of Lepcha language speakers in Sikkim as 13206, which was more than that of the total Lepcha population (13060). This clearly proves the importance and dominance of the Lepcha language at that point in time. However, with the rise of other dominant languages, Lepcha lost its hold and soon became a minority language. With the reduction of the Lepcha population into a small minority, along with the growing heterogeneity of population, and with the dominance of exogenous factors, the Lepcha language has significantly lost its past glory and importance. To quote Mainwaring (1876) 'to allow the race and language to die out would indeed be most barbarous and inexpressively sad'. The only way is to arrest its further erosion, and to preserve and develop it is through conscious and collective effort.

Educational Set Up and the Lepcha Language

The language is included in the school curriculum up to the twelfth standard, and since 1977 the textbook unit of the Education Department, Government of Sikkim, has been preparing textbooks for schools (Subba 2008, 258–59). The language is taught in more than 200 schools (Rai et al 1998, 73), and two government colleges in Sikkim.

The relationship between language, literature and education is complex, dynamic and mutually constitutive. It is difficult to say to what extent formal schooling in the mother tongue as well as a second language has contributed to language shift, and to what extent tribal language speakers are under pressure to shift to the major dominant language of the region due to socio-economic compulsions. The three-language formula is not only representative of this situation, but is also meant to provide a substantive support to the cultivation of trilingualism (Dua 2008, 31). In such a scenario it is possible for the tribal language minorities like the Lepchas to bypass the state language or even the MT and opt for only bilingual patterns consisting of Hindi, the national language, and English, as the English medium education, says Dua (2008), seems to offer all the socioeconomic advantages as well as social mobility at regional, national and international levels. The Lepchas of Sikkim have started ignoring their mother tongue. English as the medium of instruction, even in schools where only Lepcha students study (say in Dzongu), has totally changed their approach toward their MT. It is known that 18.49% (within community) of Lepcha households send their children to private English medium schools, where the Lepcha language is not included in the school curriculum. Hence, a significant number of Lepcha children are inhibited from gaining knowledge of their MT. It is quite interesting to note that some Lepchas are found to be working as Bhutia or Tibetan language teachers. Lepcha has also been introduced at the college level since 2000, but a lack of standard literature is a stumbling block in imparting education at this level. Further, the number of Lepcha students attending Lepcha classes is usually very low.

Table 6.1 shows the number of Lepcha students (LS) attending Lepcha language classes (LC) in three government colleges in Sikkim.

TABLE 6: Students attending Lepcha language class

College	Year	Total LS	LS Attending LC
Sikkim Govt. College, Gangtok	2006–07	84	60 (71.42%)
	2007–08	87	52 (59.77%) (A sharp decrease can be seen)
Namchi Govt. College	2007–08	78	23 (29.48%) {alarming}
Rhenock Govt. College	2007–08	10	Lepcha language not introduced, majority belong to other dominant LG

(Source: Office of the Principal of the respective colleges.)

However, sources reveal that lack of relevant literature is not the main reasons for lower numbers of students attending Lepcha class, but the non-recognition of the language as an elective subject is the real issue. Till June 2008 the Lepcha language along with Bhutia and Limboo were taught as Modern Indian Languages having weightage of 50 marks only. Since the subject does not carry weightage students hesitated to choose it. In 2008, the Lepcha language was recognised as one of the Elective subjects, and Honours was started in the same in 2012 following which the number of students attending Lepcha

class has markedly increased (Information received from Lepcha language teacher, Sikkim Government College, Gangtok).

LITERATURE

Origin Myth

The Lepchas are nature worshippers and worship Mount Kanchenjunga as their guardian deity. The Lepcha tradition and myth says that 'in the beginning, the first and the foremost primogenitors of the Lepchas, Fodongthing and Nuzangnyoo were created by God from the pure virgin snows of Kanchenjunga' (Tamsang 1998, 1), The Lepchas believe that God created Fadongthing (meaning 'most powerful'), the first Lepcha male, and 'Nuzangnyoo' (meaning 'ever fortunate'), the first female, from the pure and virgin snows of Mt Kanchanjunga's pinnacle, as is narrated in the Lepcha mythology as given in the following text.

Fadongthing and Nuzangnyoo were considered brother and sister because they were created by the God Itboo-Deboo, with his own hands. When they were growing up, God commanded and said to them, 'My children, you two are brother and sister, therefore, you two should hold on to the excellence of morals', and warned them both of impending disaster, untold misery and misfortune if they crossed the limits. God then sent Fodongthing to live at the top of Tungseng Nareng Chu and Nuzangnyoo was sent next to Naho-Nathar Da, a lake, at the base of the mountain. They were thus separated from each other.

Nuzangnyoo grew into a beautiful woman. She longed to see and meet Fadongthing. Although she remembered well the God's command and warning not to meet Fadongthing, she was unable to control and resist the temptation, so one day she built a golden ladder and climbed up to Tungseng Nareng Chu and met Fadongthing secretly and became very friendly with him, against the will of God. The Lepcha meaning of Tungseng Nareng Chu is 'unfortunate mountain peak' because both Fadongthing and Nuzangnyoo disobeyed the God's command and committed a sin on top of this mountain. In anger, God summoned them both and said, 'You have committed a sin. I cannot allow you two to live in this sacred mountain any longer. As a punishment, both of you now must live at the foothills of Mt Kanchanjunga as humans and suffer'. Fadongthing and Nuzangnyoo were sent down to the foothills of Mt Kanchanjunga as husband and wife. They had several children and these children, in the course of time, spread over the foothills of Mount Kanchenjunga. Fadongthing and Nuzangnyoo are thus called *poomthing*, meaning the first ancestors of the Lepcha race, by the Lepchas. (The Lepcha myth about their origin- Lepchas, the Children of Mount Kanchanjunga, Legend compiled by Lyangsong Tamsang, Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi, 2008 p. 3-4)

Folk Song

A Lepcha song about Choorum

The Kanchenjunga mountain is revered as the womb of their (Lepcha) origin and their rituals are interwoven with stories emanating from the mountain. As such, the mountain always occupies a centre stage in their culture. Once a year, the Lepchas perform the Choorum ceremony for Kanchenjunga, Choorum meaning 'the god of the Himalayas'. Apart from their story of creation, the song mentioned below also reflects their reverence to this auspicious peak.

nam al aprya vom
hā aey!
zaor sakdam lung ming tāam arey kā,
iyeng nung da sonyi rey kā,
pey sanaom sonyi rey kā,
namput nam nun lao joom,
ryoo wong sā sonyi an sonap gum.
hā aey!
chu Kingtsoom rey aom ngān jong,
gee chu kurvaong shyo kā partam doo ngān jong,
pey rey gee punsān nām āpin sā,
tim rey ryoo yum bā yong sm sa.ding mo.

Translation

The Lepcha New Year Song
 In this crystal clear world,
 On this auspicious day,
 On the eve of old and new years' gathering,
 Today is a happy day and happy night.
 Like the ever bright and beautiful Mt Kanchanjunga,
 Like the brightly coloured hills and dales,
 At the base of the Himalayas,
 It is an auspicious sign of a prosperous future,
 We pray and welcome the Lepcha New Year.

(Lyangsong Tamsang 2008, 72–73)

VOCABULARY

Kinship Terms

The following kinship terms are found and used in Lepcha. The suffix *Eyu* and *Dee* are added with *Tu* to denote girl and boy respectively.

Lepcha	English
<i>theikung/azyo</i>	grandfather
<i>nikung</i>	grandmother
<i>abo</i>	father
<i>amu</i>	mother
<i>botim</i> – (pronounced as batim)	father's older brother
<i>mutim</i> – (pronounced as matim)	mother's older sister/father's older brother's wife
<i>aku</i>	father's younger brother
<i>ajyong</i>	mother's older/younger brother
<i>bo-nyu-tim</i>	father's older sister
<i>bo-nyu-chyum</i>	father's younger sister

Lepcha

mu-nyu-tim
afet-abo
afet-amo
myok
nyom
anum
anom
aazong
phaming
musungmu
tu-deekup
tu-eyukup
kup

English

mother's older sister
 father-in-law
 mother-in-law
 son-in-law-
 daughter-in-law
 older brother
 older sister
 older brother's wife/older sister's husband
 younger brother
 younger sister
 son
 daughter
 children

Measurement of Time

In Lepcha, the following names (seven) represent different shades of day and night.

Lepcha

songfum
tuloh
nymphet
sola
namun
sonap
nabphet

English

dawn
 morning (*toh* also means morning)
 afternoon
 dusk
 dark evening
 night
 midnight

Days of the Week

Names of the days in Lepcha language are interesting as they are based on elements of nature. The names of the seven days are:

Lepcha

faat-suyak
mee-suyak
sukmut - suyak
ung - suyak
lung - suyak
kung - suyak
punzeng - suyak

English

Monday (*faat* means soil and *suyak* means day)
 Tuesday (*mee* - fire)
 Wednesday (*sukmut* - air)
 Thursday (*ung* - water)
 Friday (*lung* - rock)
 Saturday (*kung* - tree)
 Sunday (*punzeng* - metal)

Although the Lepchas regard mount Kanchenjunga as the womb of their genesis yet we come across only one word for snow, namely, *sohong*. *sotap* in Lepcha means hailstone.

The Lepchas refer to their country, the present day Sikkim and Darjeeling as *Mayel Lyang* and present day Sikkim as *Renjyong*.

Names of Months

Lepcha	English
<i>kurnit</i>	January
<i>kursong</i>	February
<i>thon</i>	March
<i>sum</i>	April
<i>numthum</i>	May
<i>glun</i>	June
<i>numkum</i>	July
<i>purvim</i>	August
<i>glu</i>	September
<i>eit</i>	October
<i>ra</i>	November
<i>mar</i>	December

Names of Seasons

In Lepcha language, *so* means water/weather or climate.

Lepcha	English
<i>somyang</i>	summer
<i>sosa</i>	winter
<i>socheap</i>	rainy
<i>sojor</i>	autumn

Colour Terms

Lepcha	English
<i>aaheer</i>	red
<i>aafhing</i>	blue
<i>aanok</i>	black
<i>aadum</i>	white
<i>paeyor</i>	yellow
<i>kungfongla</i>	green (<i>kung</i> means tree)
<i>kurgukla</i>	grey
<i>ringhrim</i>	brown
<i>zyertshum</i>	golden
<i>purtak</i>	refers to a combination of different colours

“Pink and orange color, which are common in other languages are not found in Lepcha.”
 (Source: Sonam Rinchen Lepcha, Lepcha scholar from Dzongu, the Lepcha Reserve in North Sikkim, interviewed on 4th Dec. 2012.)

Directions

In Lepcha *su-tshuk* means sun and the name of the four directions are according to the position of Sun. The direction from which the sun rises (east) is called *tshuk-la* (*tshuk* – Sun, *la* – comē/rise). Likewise, *tshuk-kyer* (set) means west, *tshuk-gyom* (right side of the sun) is north and *tshuk-veem* (left side of the sun) denotes the south.

In Lepcha the three words denoting highlands, midlands and lowlands are *sungo* (highland), *abar* (midland), *dang* (lowland). Likewise *taba* means above and *chyoba* denotes below.

Terms Related to Space

Lepcha	English
<i>sukdumlungming</i>	earth
<i>talyang</i>	sky (<i>taba</i> -above, <i>hyang</i> -place)
<i>rumtyang</i>	heaven (<i>rum</i> -God, <i>hyang</i> -place)
<i>chyu</i>	hill
<i>hlo</i>	mountain

REFERENCES

- Annamalai, E. 1989. 'The Language Factor in Indian Linguistics, Papers in Indian Linguistics'. International Journal of the Sociology of Language.
- Bandhu, Churamani. 1972. *Karnali Lok Sanskriti - Bhasa Khanda*. Kathmandu: Nepal Rajkiya Prajnaya Pratisthan.
- Census of India - 1911, 1921, 1931, 1941, 1951, 1961, 1981, 1991, 2001.
- Chemjong, Imansing. 1969. *Lepcha-Nepali-English Dictionary*. Kathmandu: Nepal Rajkiya Prajnaya Prathishthan.
- Chib, Sukhdev S. 1977. *The Beautiful India, Sikkim*. New Delhi: Light and Life Publishers.
- Crystal, David. 1997. *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language*. UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Das, Amal Kumar. 1978. *The Lepchas of West Bengal*. Calcutta.
- Dua, Hans, R. 2008. *Ecology of Multilingualism*. Mysore: Yashoda Publication.
- Ferguson, Charles. A. 1996. *Sociolinguistic Perspectives*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Fishman, Joshua, A. 1972. *Reading in the Sociology of Language*. The Hague: Mouton & Co. N.V. Publishers.
- Foning, A. R. 2003. *Lepcha my Vanishing Tribe*. Kalimpong: Chyu-Pandi Farm.
- Fuchs, Stephen. 1982. *The Aboriginal Tribes of India*. Macmillan India.
- Grierson, G. A. 1967. *Linguistic Survey of India Vol-III Part-I*. Delhi: Motilall Banarasidas.
- Gulia, Kuldip Singh. 2005. *Human Ecology of Sikkim*. New Delhi: Kalpaz Publication.
- Hale, Austin. 1987. *Research on Tibeto-Burman Language*. Berlin: Mouton Publishers.
- Halfdan, Siiger. 1967. *Lepchas; Culture and Religion of a Himalayan People*. Copenhagen: National Museum of Denmark.
- Holmes, Janet. 1992. *An Introduction to Sociolinguistics*. New York: Longman Publishing.
- Hudson, R. A. 1999. *Socio Linguistics*. UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Koul, Maharaja K. 1986. *Sociolinguistic Study of Kashmiri*. Patiala: Indian Institute of Language Studies.
- Mainwaring, G. B. 1876. *A Grammar of the Lepcha Language*. New Delhi: Manjusri Publishing House.
- Mallikarjun, B. 2004. Indian Multilingualism, Language Policy, and the Digital Divide in *Languages in India Vol-4*.
- Pandey, Bala R. *Sikkima Lepcha Bhasa*. In G S Nepal ed. *Abhijnana*, Journal Deptt. of Nepali, University of North Bengal 2010, Vol 1(1).

- Plaisier, Heleen. 2005. A Brief introduction to Lepcha Orthography & Literature. Bulletin of Tibetology, 41(1). Sikkim.
- Rai et al. 1998. *Sikkim: Perspective for Planning and Development*. Sikkim: Sikkim Science Society.
- Risley, H. H. 1928. *The Gazetteer of Sikkim*.
- Robbinson, W. P. 1974. *Language & Social Behaviour*. Middlesex: Penguin Books.
- Singh, Chaudhary Randhir. 2000. *Sikkim and Himalaya*. Sikkim: Prena Industrial (P) Ltd.
- Singh, G. P. 1990. *Prachin Bharatma Kiratharu*. Sikkim: Nirman Prakashan, Namchi.
- Singh, K. S. et al. 1993. *People of India, Sikkim*, Vol-xxxix, Anthropological Survey of India. Calcutta: Seagull Books.
- Sprigg, R. K. 2005. *Shedding some light on the History, Language and Literature of the Lepchas*. Kalingpong: ILTA.
- State Socio-Economic Census 2006, Department of Economics Statistics Monitoring and Evaluation. Govt. of Sikkim.
- Steger, Manfred B. 2003. *Globalization- A Very Short Introduction*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Subba, J. R. 2008. *History, Culture & Customs of Sikkim*. New Delhi: Gyan Publishing House.
- Tamsang, K. P. 1998. *The Unknown and Untold Reality about the Lepchas*. Kalimpong: Mani Printing Press.
- Tamsang, Lyangsong ed. 2008. *Lepcha Folklore and Folksongs*. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi.
- Thakur, R. N. 1983. *Himalayan Lepchas*. New Delhi: Achieve Publishers.

