Ethnicity and Identity:
A Study of the Lepchas of Darjeeling Hills

A Dissertation Submitted

To

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In Partial Fulfilment of the Requirement for the

Degree of Master of Philosophy

By

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DECLARATION

I, **Edwin Rezon Aden**, hereby declare that the research work embodied in the dissertation titled **"Ethnicity and Identity: A Study of the Lepchas of Darjeeling Hills"**, submitted to Sikkim University for the award degree of Master of Philosophy, is my original work and it has not been submitted earlier to this or any other University for any degree.

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All the assistance and help received during the course of investigation have been duly acknowledge by him.

I recommend this dissertation to be placed before the examiners for evaluation.

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- Edwin Rezon Aden

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Dedicated to a Martyr: Ongay Tshering Aden

Introduction

The Lepchas are the indigenous inhabitants of Sikkim and Darjeeling Hills. They call themselves '*Mutanchi RongKup RumKup'* meaning 'mother's loved ones, children of the snowy peaks, and children of God' [1] and their country Mayel Lyang. Mayel Lyang extended from the Himalayas in the north to Titaliya in the south (now in north western Bangladesh). In the east it was said to begin from Gipmochi mountain, the trijunction of Sikkim, Bhutan and Tibet to the river Arun of Nepal in the west. This vast Lepcha kingdom was formerly known as *Nye Mayel Renjyong Lyang* literally meaning 'holy, hidden, eternal land of the gentlemen'. Today, the Lepchas in short call it Mayel Lyang. The Lepchas are nature lovers and worshippers or in other words they are animists (Tamsang, 2008: 2). However, Lepchas have converted to Christianity and Buddhism, while some are Hindus too.

With the establishment of the *Namgyal* dynasty in 1642 in present day Sikkim, the Lepchas came to be ruled by the powerful Tibetans (Mainwaring, 1876: xii). Now that the Tibetans were in command of the country, Mayel Lyang came to be known as Su-khim. [2]

Halfdan Sigger writes that the Tibetans collected all the Lepcha manuscripts and books containing the historical records, mythology, legends, laws, literature etc. of the Lepchas and burnt them. Lamaist monasteries were built on the hills from which they had scattered the ashes of the burnt books. Lepcha scribes were forced to translate Lamaist scriptures into Lepcha Language and also made to read and revere them as Holy Scriptures (Sigger, 1967: 29).

When the Tibetans first arrived in the 13th century, [3] a blood treaty between *'Thikoong Tek'* and *'Khye Bhumsa'* [4] was entered into at '*Ka-We-Long-Chaok',* [5] North Sikkim. It marked and sealed a friendship between the indigenous Lepchas and the immigrant Tibetans. Tamsang opines that it was the beginning of the end of the indigenous Lepchas of Mayel Lyang (Tamsang, 2008: 2).

C. de Beauvoir Stocks argues that '*Ka We Long Choak'* or the sacred alliance between the Tibetans and Lepchas had been formed chiefly because '*Khye Bhumsa'* had the prospect of converting the *Rong*-folk from their native religion to Buddhism.

Stocks also quotes a Lepcha as saying that "We *Rong*-folk have no ruler as the Maharaja in Gangtok is in reality a Tibetan" (Stocks, 1925:11-12).

The Lepchas faced another heavy blow when the relatives of *Ra-Thup* a Lepcha chief minister was assassinated by *Tsugphud Namgyal* in 1825, who suspected the former of conspiring with the Gurkhas to dethrone him. The chief minister however succeeded in escaping to Ilam, the eastern most district of Nepal with a number of followers (Mainwaring, 1876: xii). There is still a Lepcha settlement in Ilam today.

The first political connection of the British with Sikkim commenced in 1814. Prior to this the British had established communication with the king in Katmandu in 1767. It was important for the British to maintain peace in this region because of the mercantile and agricultural commerce that existed between present day Bengal and Nepal which extended through the latter to Tibet and China (Mainwaring, 1876: vii).

In 1827, Captain Lloyd and Mr. J.W. Grant were sent to Sikkim to settle the boundary disputes between Nepal and Sikkim. The East India Company considered Sikkim as special as it provided entry to Eastern Tibet and was deemed advantageous to be retained by a friendly power. Having been charmed by the country Captain Lloyd and his companion selected the site of Darjeeling as a most beautiful and convenient spot fit for a sanitarium. He strongly urged the Company the importance of securing it for the said purpose. Lloyd was instructed that preliminary discussion and proposal should be made to the Sikkim ruler for the cession of the hill of Darjeeling on the first favourable opportunity. The boundary disputes once again sprang up in the same year which led to a negotiation between the Sikkim ruler and the East India Company (Mainwaring, 1876: viii).

The Chogyal of Sikkim met Lloyd who was to present the proposal of cession of Darjeeling to the East India Company. The Chogyal made three demands. He wanted the boundary of Sikkim to be extended upto Tambar river in East Nepal, the arrest and surrender of the absconding tax collector Kunmo Pradhan and the Kazi Yuk Ladrup hiding in Nepal. He also demanded that Dabgram in Terai be ceded to Sikkim (Lama, 2008: 40).

The demands of the Chogyal were not met but Darjeeling was ceded to the Company. This cessation in the year 1835, 1 February is known as the "Deed of Grant". The

British now having total control over Darjeeling started the tea industry and with it a large number of labourers from present day Nepal, Bhutan and neighboring areas came to Darjeeling. The indigenous Lepchas were displaced and newcomers introduced their culture to Lepchas. Market based economy was pursued by the British which was again a blow to the indigenous economy. [6]

In 1920s the Nepalis in Darjeeling launched a movement for the recognition of Nepali language in primary schools. The Lepchas too followed suit but their voice was unheard by the British. The Nepali Text Book Committee in its report in 1929 gave the following arguments regarding the feasibility or otherwise of introducing Lepcha language as a vernacular:

1. As there are no Lepcha textbooks, there is no point in teaching a boy Lepcha language.
2. Unless the language is actually dying out, the majority of Lepcha boys will learn to speak it in their own homes.
3. The written language Lepcha is of no practical use in after life.
4. The Lepcha boy already has to study both Nepali and Hindi at some stage or other, why add to his difficulties by teaching him to read a third language in which there is practically no literature (Thakur,1998: 88).

Lepcha children were not to be taught in their own language simply because if they opted for higher education they would then have to read in a foreign language. Thus, Nepali language was made the medium of instruction for all (Thakur, 1998: 88).

Kalimpong was originally called ‘Kaalenpung’. It is derived from three Lepcha syllables; ‘Kaa’ in Lepcha means ours, ‘len’ means to assemble, and finally ‘pung’ means a hillock or knoll. It means hillock where the Lepchas assemble. Unable to pronounce the Lepcha name ‘Kaalenpung’ properly, the British anglicized it to Kalimpong (Tamsang, 2013: 3).

A. R. Foning argues that instead of the ‘len’ in the name ‘Kaalenpung’ it is ‘lem’, that is, ‘Kaalempung’, the meaning being ‘the ridge where we play’. He does agree that Kalimpong is the anglicized version (Foning, 1987: 274-279).

The second king of the Namgyal dynasty namely Tenzing Namgyal had married three wives: one from Tibet, second a daughter of a Limboo chieftain, and the third from Bhutan. The Bhutanese queen was the first to present the king with an offspring, a girl later name Pande Wangmo. A male heir named Chador was born to one of the other queens, the king died in 1699 when the boy Chador was barely fourteen years old. Pande Wangmo being elder to Chador claimed the throne but her claim was not supported by the ministers and courtiers. She sent word to her mother's country to bring a force to assassinate the boy king and take hold of the kingdom. The temporal ruler of Bhutan, Deb Naku Zyador sent a strong force into Sikkim and consequently took charge of the whole of Sikkim in 1700. However, the boy king had been taken away towards Tibet via Ilam, previously a part of the country and now the eastern most district of Nepal. Under the protection of Dalai Lama, Chador returned to Sikkim, word was sent to Deb Naku Zyador to withdraw his troops which he did rather reluctantly. Chador retrieved the whole of his kingdom except a big portion east of the river Rongnyu (Teesta), taken over by a powerful chieftain named A-chyuk. Chador could not persuade him; he was in no position to wage a war and had to give up this part of the kingdom. A-chyuk set up his fort at Dalim-Damsang (near present Sombaray in Kalimpong district, West Bengal) and several other lookouts in the region (Foning, 1987: 274-279).

A-chyuk is now remembered as the last king of the Lepchas. The Bhutanese assassinated him at Daling Fort in 1781 and took over the region (Tamsang, 2008: 3). The British took over the fort after overpowering the Bhutanese in 1864. The region was partly annexed to the then Darjeeling district and partly to the present day Jalpaiguri district (Foning, 1987: 280).

The Lepchas were ruled by the Tibetans (1642-1975), and partly by the Bhutanese in the Damsang region (1781-1864) and outnumbered by the Nepalis with the coming of the British. Their animistic faith gave way to Tibetan Lamaism (or Buddhism) and with the coming of the European missionaries the Lepchas were converted to Christianity.

The Lepchas being numerically small have been perceived as not having a noticeable political effect in the hills (Thakur, 1998: 131). However, with the increase in the number of educated Lepcha youths the Lepchas have become politically conscious

and the statement made by R.N. Thakur stands challengeable. The Lepcha's aspirations to lend continuity to their culture, language and identity can be traced back to the formation of the Lepcha association '*Mutanchi Rong Shezum'* back in 1925. The '*Lungten Chok Lee'* a 'Culture Centre' was also established in 1967 by A. R. Foning to revive the Lepcha language and culture. The Indigenous Lepcha Tribal Association was launched in 1990s and formally registered in 2004 (Arora and Jayaram, 2017: 90).

After India achieved independence and enacted its own constitution, the Article 350A warranted adequate facilities for instruction in the mother tongue at the primary stage of education in order to protect tribal languages and culture (Thakur, 1998:162). In Sikkim, Lepcha language is being taught right up to university level but in the Darjeeling hills it is not even taught at the primary level.

The marginalization of the Lepchas in terms of their language, culture and politics has disadvantaged them no doubt. However, in contemporary times one can consider how identity politics, particularly ethnic identity, in the context of the Lepcha community has influenced the Lepcha community and in many ways, worked to its advantage.

Statement of the Problem

The research proposes to analyse Lepcha identity as portrayed in colonial discourses. The role of the state of West Bengal and its relationship with the Lepcha population will also be studied. The dominant majority in the Darjeeling hills comprising of the Nepalis co-opted the Lepchas within the larger Gorkha identity. This was done through a process of a liberal interpretation of the Nepali identity said to be consisting of various ethnic groups. The Lepchas who did not openly resist the assimilation of the Lepchas within the Nepali/Gorkha community are now beginning to assert their distinctness. For instance, in 2008, the Lepchas, unlike other minority communities, did not support the movement for the demand for a separate state of Gorkhaland within the Indian Union which was to be carved out of the present state of West Bengal. Despite being in numerical minority, the Lepchas have started intervening effectively in the politics of Darjeeling hills. Their participation in the political life of the Darjeeling hills is significant. Ethnicity and identity issues have been major catalysts in the establishments of organisations like the Indigenous Lepcha Tribal Association (2004) and West Bengal Mayel Lyang Lepcha Development Board

(2013). These organisations were established with a view to protect, promote and give continuity to Lepcha language, culture and tradition. Such developments point towards the growing consciousness among the Lepchas about the dangers of their identity being lost and forgotten in the face of modernity and change. Besides these goals, the organizations were also formed as a response to the long felt need of the Lepchas to have a body to tackle political issues. The institution of West Bengal Mayel Lyang Lepcha Development Board was a huge milestone for the Lepcha community who were framed as a "quiet" and "shy" community by colonial discourses. New meeting grounds between the state and the citizens were created with the establishment of West Bengal Mayel Lyang Lepcha Development Board in 2013 which was soon followed by other communities who also rallied for their own development boards. These events led to a change in the dynamics of Lepcha identity as well as in the dynamics of hill politics. The research proposes to investigate how ethnicity and identity have an important role to play in the political outlook and participation of the Lepchas in the political life of Darjeeling Hills. Lepcha identity has taken new forms with the passage of time.

Review of Literature

A. Campbell (1869) in his article "On the Lepchas" gives a vivid description of the food habits and clothing of the Lepchas. He observes how the Lepchas instead of resisting oppression and bad governance would rather go and settle in some new place. Campbell opines that Lepchas were the most friendly and loyal among other tribes in Darjeeling and the plainsmen. A study of Lepcha words was also done by the author. The author also gives an account of the objects like the Lepcha hat, knife etc. which he had exhibited before the Ethnological Society of London in March 23, 1869. Despite the details about food and clothing the author does not discuss the shamanistic beliefs of the Lepchas. There are instances of patronisation as well in the write up.

A. R. Foning (1987) in his celebrated book *Lepcha My Vanishing Tribe* gives a detailed description of the Lepcha culture, language and tradition, their myths and belief system. The shamanistic practices and spirit worship have been well discussed. The author gives a historical background of the Lepchas and also shares his experience of how the Lepchas were exploited economically and politically by the

more advanced populations who came to occupy their home land Mayel Lyang. The changes brought about in the Lepcha culture and beliefs through Tibetan Buddhism and later through Christianity have been thoroughly described. The author's argument that the Lepchas are vanishing is quite debatable as they are still present in the Himalayan region including places like Sikkim, Darjeeling hills, Nepal and Bhutan. It is agreed that Lepcha culture has been diluted and Lepcha identity transformed along with the disintegration of their home land. Foning's opinion that all Lepchas should become Christians is very radical although he justifies it by saying that the cleverer Lepchas are getting integrated as Denjonpas, Bhutias and Nepalese.

Bernard S. Cohn (1996) in his book *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge* discusses how British colonial authorities appropriated knowledge about the Indians through learning the native languages such as Sanskrit, Persian, Arabic, and Hindi and used this knowledge to organize and legitimize colonial rule. An apparatus was produced by the British publications of grammars, dictionaries, treaties, class books and translations about and from the languages of India. Cohn argues that these texts began the establishment of a discursive formation defined as an epistemological space, created a discourse (Orientalism) and had the effect of converting Indian forms of knowledge into European objects. The colonizers not only conquered a physical geographical space but an epistemic space too. Cohn opines that ethnographic and census surveys created social categories by which India was ordered for administrative purposes it led to the objectification of social, cultural and linguistic differences among the peoples of India. The book highlights that exercise of power and accumulation of knowledge was part of a single project. The Hindu and Muslim laws were also studied and translated into English. Cohn argues that the British were actually searching for the "ancient Indian constitution" but ended up with something that they had so much wanted to avoid: English law as the law of India. The representational aspect of clothing has also been discussed at length. A cultural approach has been undertaken by Cohn to understand colonial rule.

David Scott (1995) in his article "Colonial Governmentality" says that the terrain of political struggle changed with the formation of the political rationality of the modern colonial state. Accommodation as well as resistance had to articulate itself in accordance with the altered situation. The structures and projects within the colonial

state that gave shape to the colonial enterprise did not have a single political rationality. There were different power configurations in commanding positions. He draws two distinctions in Foucault's conceptualization of the political rationality of government. The first is in the monarchical state and the second in the modern nation-state. Within the political rationality of sovereignty, individuals are subjects of and subject to the power and protection of the ruler. Law is deployed for the primary political end of commanding obedience. On the other hand, with a government it is rather about arranging things in such a way that through a certain number of means, certain ends may be achieved. The question is not of imposing laws on men but of disposing things: that is to say, of employing tactics and even using laws themselves as tactics. Discipline has to do with habituating the mind or body to a particular activity. Discipline is concerned with actively working upon the subjects, for instance, the intellectual discipline of the school or the bodily discipline of the workhouse. With government it is different, individuals are constrained to behave in a certain way. For example, the practice division of labor in economic, political and military life requires the individuals to behave according to their occupation. Even though they may not be willing, the constrained individuals in time become 'polished' 'disciplined' 'civilized' and 'pacific'. David Scott argues that the governance aspect is very important for the effects that it produces. Understanding the character of political rationality that constituted the project of colonial power at any given historical moment is very important. David Scott emphasizes an approach to colonialism in which Europe is historicized, in such a way as to uncover the differentials in the political rationalities through which its colonial projects were constructed.

Stuart Hall (1990) in his article "Cultural Identity and Diaspora" views identity as 'production' which is always in process and which is always formed within representation. Hall argues that through transformation and difference diaspora identities are producing and reproducing themselves. The Caribbean cinema is discussed as trying to construct the points of identification from different parts and histories of themselves, positionalities which in retrospect are called 'cultural identities'. Hall puts forward two different ways of looking at 'cultural identity'. He views identity as a collective 'one true self' which people with shared ancestry hold in common which suggests that it is stable and unchanging. Hall's second view of cultural identity recognizes that there are points of similarity as well as critical points

of deep and significant difference that constitute 'what we really are' and since history has intervened 'what we have become'. Hall opines that cultural identities go through changes and is subject to the continuous 'play' of history, culture and power. Politics of identity and politics of position is always there according to Hall.

Stephen Spencer (2006) in his book *Race and Ethnicity: Culture Identity and Representation* analyses the complex representations, identities and relationships differentiated by 'ethnicity' or 'race', various examples from around the world has been examined. The book builds on the view point that ethnicity is a matter of shared meanings and at the same time the book also stresses the contingent nature of race and ethnicity. Race and ethnicity are inextricably linked to colonial domination which gave legitimacy or legitimated forms of discrimination and disadvantage. Theories of race and ethnicity have been well discussed and interpreted. The imprints of racism that colonialism left behind are well highlighted. The author opines that identity formation comes about through the construction of 'Otherness'. The difference and similarity context are fundamental for confirming one's identity. The author is certain that identification of 'others' will continue to shift and reflect the political and social trends of the time. The book however does not discuss the linkages between ethnicity and nation and nationalism.

Myron Weiner (2007) in his article "Minority Identities" states that in India it is only the religious groups who regard themselves as minorities. The author opines that it is useful to think of four types of minorities in India: linguistic, religious, caste and tribe. The author points that status of minority is a matter of self-ascription and objective definition. Hindus form the majority but in an actual sense it is the Muslims because the Hindus are a vast congeries of sub caste. Weiner lists that the minorities want a homeland, a linguistic recognition, reservations and security. The ethnic division in the Indian society facilitates ethnic consciousness to prevail over class consciousness though individuals are members of both class and ethnic group. Weiner opines that Indians have two views on the impact of politics on ethnic group conflict, first being 'politics worsens group relations' and the other 'politics is the way to reduce group conflict'. Mismanagement of ethnic assertion by the state government, he argues, will lead to increase in the power of the central government. If the state governments do not equip themselves well to deal with these ethnic assertions and

conflicts and the centre provokes opposition through its action, the growth of violent conflicts will lead to use of greater coercion or armed forces. These insights are very helpful to understand the dynamics of politics in India.

Dipankar Gupta (2007) in his article "Ethnicity and Politics" states that the acceptance of cultural and linguistic differences is the enduring basis on which politics in India is played out, it is not superficial assent or submission. He counters Benedict Anderson with the notion that if nation states are imagined communities, the only way to justify to this conceptualization is if one were not to impose formats along which such imaginings must necessarily take place. Gupta argues that the historical depth of post-colonial countries should not be considered as limited to the colonial experience. The author discusses the interaction of the centre and other national parties with the linguistic movements, the nativist movements and regional movements. The linguistic movements were based on primordial identity with language being the main factor. After the formation of linguistic states, the protagonists of the nativist movements (sons of the soil) claimed that the gift of the tongue was not enough, it had to be supported by meaningful economic opportunities. The national parties with the fear of losing political bases did not align with nativist groups as they were targeting other linguistic groups in territories where the natives formed the majority. The regional movements were primarily based on economic demands specific to regions. It was more secular in character, language and nativism per se were not the condensing factors. Lastly the author argues that minoritizing or ethnicizing politics is a tool which the centre is utilizing increasingly because if the economic demands are considered it would destabilize the class coalition in which it survives.

Mona Chettri's (2014) "Interpreting Democracy: Ethnic Politics and Democracy in the Eastern Himalaya" interrogates the relationship between democracy and ethnic identity politics in Sikkim, Darjeeling and east Nepal. The author highlights the way socio-economic grievances are transformed into ethnic grievances in order to facilitate political mobilization and deeper engagement with the state. The author opines that change and transformation of the political system has not matched the rate of societal transformation due to which it has enabled ethnic identity to persist and prevail as a political resource even within a democratic framework. The fusion of ethnicity and democracy has helped to establish democracy as a political culture by making it

inclusive, accessible and relevant to people. She utilizes Pierre Bourdieu's concept of 'habitus' which refers to groups' disposition or internalized norms, understandings and patterns of behavior which are clearly different from one another to examine how the inequalities and anxieties that existed in the societies prior to the superimposition of the modern state has continued and has been internalized by all sections of the society be it Nepal, Sikkim or Darjeeling. Chettri extends the concept of 'habitus' to 'macro habitus' which is made up of a group's position in the world economic system, international regimes and their position within the nation. She argues that micro habitus leads to creation of different sets of stimuli and responses which ultimately leads to variation in the practice of democracy across the region. With this in mind she states that the political identity of a Nepali from east Nepal is not transferable to a Nepali living in Darjeeling. Likewise, the idea of Gorkha, will not have the same political resonance amongst the Nepalese of Sikkim and the Nepalese of Nepal. Despite a detailed study the author does not mention the Lepchas who have always been there in the Himalayan region.

The problems attached to the term 'ethnicity' in the Indian context have been discussed by James Manor (1996) in his article "Ethnicity and Politics in India". He borrows the mode of analysis of Paul R. Brass who identifies potential 'ethnic' groups as social groups who share language, territory, religion, color, diet or dress. The author agrees with Brass that 'ethnic identity' is a variable rather than a 'fixed' given disposition. Manor classifies five types of ethnic identities: (i) identities grounded in religion (ii) identities grounded in language (iii) Tribal identities among 'Adivasis' (iv) Tribal identities among the people in Himalayan or remote north eastern areas and (v) Dravidian and Aryan identities. The central argument is that the heterogeneous character of the Indian society and the tendency of the people to shift their preoccupation from one identity to another frequently and with fluidity undermines the potency of ethnicity. Manor also argues that the accommodationist approach (sharing power and resources) of leaders like Nehru and Narsimarao with regard to ethnic groups and caste and class groups has made democracy well established in India and prevented the management of the problem of ethnic consciousness from becoming too intense and destructive to national unity. Although the central argument is quite convincing, ethnicity is still potent in political bargaining and mobilization.

Bimol Akoijam (2007) in his article "Towards a Wholesome Holistic self: On Silence, Identity and Coloniality of the Postcolonial" gives wonderful insights on identity, silence and the colonial trappings of post-colonial societies. Though stories are not the primary modes of constructing and communicating about the world within and without he opines that they are important. Awareness about one's history is important to have a wholesome holistic self along with the presence of non-alienated individuals who can share and connect with other fellow beings. He says that silence reveals the presence of an oppressive condition that undermines freedom and creativity of the people. Silence also depicts the absence of virtue, courage and ability of a people to survive as a collectivity. He discusses Erik Erikson's notion of identity crisis; which is an inability to clearly define as self or lack of a 'sense of continuity' or 'not knowing where one is going', failing to come to terms with different aspects of one's self. He argues that socio-political and historical contexts are mandatory to meaningfully understand the text of identity. He defines colonial modernity as a specific set of ideas, practices and institutions born of an unholy marriage between European modernity and colonialism. He states that while certain forms of pre-colonial distinction between groups of people were rendered, consolidated and reified, earlier forms of relation and shared spaces were restored in terms of new distinct and separate categories. The categories made in the colonial state has been translated by the post-colonial Indian state in the 1950s in terms of 'Scheduled Tribes', 'Scheduled Castes' 'General' and later 'Other backward Classes'. These are the ghosts of colonial modernity.

Ethnicity and Identity: A Theoretical Framework

The point of departure for understanding the nature of ethnicity is the idea of a distinct culture. 'Culture refers to a unique historical group experience; a system where such experiences are encoded into a set of symbolic patterns'. A distinct culture is a manifestation of a group's distinct historical experience. The emphasis on culture as the point of departure for understanding of the nature of ethnicity is intended to mean that persons who include themselves in an ethnicity would have a relation to a group who either now or at some point in the past has shared a unique culture (Isajiw 1992: 5).

This draws attention to Weber who says that an ethnic group is 'those human groups that entertain a subjective belief in their common descent because of similarities of physical type or customs or both, or because of memories of colonization and migration: this belief must be important for the propagation of group formation; conversely, it does not matter whether or not an objective blood relationship exists' (Weber 1997:18-19).

Weber further states that an 'ethnic membership being a presumed identity differs from the kinship group which is a group with concrete social action. Ethnic membership does not constitute a group; it only facilitates group formation of any kind, particularly in the political sphere. On the other hand, it is primarily the political community no matter how artificially organized that inspires the belief in common ethnicity' (Weber 1997: 19).

The formation of Lepcha organisations like the West Bengal Mayel Lyang Lepcha Development Board in West Bengal and the Sikkim Indigenous Lepcha Tribal Association suggests that ethnic membership has indeed facilitated such types of organisations. The Lepchas do have a subjective belief of common descent and moreover they were ruled by the Tibetans as well as colonised by the British.

'Ethnicity has come to be regarded as a mode of action and of representation: it refers to a decision people make to depict themselves or others symbolically as the bearers of a certain cultural identity' says Anthony Cohen (as cited in Rex and Guibernau, 1991: 4).

Wsevolod W. Isajiw defines ethnic identity as 'a manner in which persons on account of their ethnic origin, locate themselves psychologically in relation to one or more social systems and in which they perceive others as locating them in relation to those systems' (Isajiw, 1992: 8).

Identity politics as a concept is widely used in contemporary social science. It represents the process of a group's alliances, distinction, recognition and the mobilization to gain certain 'advantages' in the society. Identity politics can be defined as the process of action through which a group of people organize themselves into a formalized identity group and mobilize to gain socio-economic and political advantages. In contemporary times the sense or essence of identity has become a

fundamental part of all social and political work. Identity politics refers to politics driven by demands and concerns rooted in identities - religious, ethnic, linguistic, national, gender, etc. (Pingle and Varney 2006: 355).

There is heterogeneity in the uses of 'identity' but even then, the usage of identity can be categorised into two. The first being the hard or strong conception of identity which 'highlight fundamental or strong antithesis between positions or abiding sameness' and the other being weak or soft conceptions of identity: 'stances that expressly reject notions of basic sameness'. The common sense meaning of the term is preserved by the strong conceptions of identity, the emphasis is on sameness over time and across persons. This goes well with the way the term is used in most forms of identity politics (Frederick and Brubaker 2000:11).

'Identity is our understanding of who we are and who other people are, and, reciprocally, other people's understanding of themselves and of others (including us)'. It is very much effective and applicable in real life situations; combining relationships of similarity and difference which is arrived at through identification. [7] However, Richard Jenkins argues that identity is not a static phenomenon and is something that is always in the making: 'Identity can only be understood as a process of 'being' or 'becoming'. One's identity- one's identities, indeed, for who we are is always multi-dimensional, singular and plural and is never a final or settled matter' (Jenkins 2008: 17-18).

Lepcha identity is also always in the process of being and becoming, given the changes this community has undergone with the passage of time.

The British in the eighteenth century created social categories through the census, ethnographic and cartographical exercises through which India was ordered for administrative purposes. The British assumption was that the census reflected the basic sociological facts of India, which it did but the enumerative modality objectified social, cultural and linguistic differences among the peoples of India (Cohn, 1928: 8).

These techniques are a part of systematically dividing the population so that the government can have a desired control over them and that the ends it wants may also be achieved. The collective formed by the institutions, procedure, analyses and reflections, the calculations and tactics that allow the exercise of specific although

complex form of power by the state machinery is what Michel Foucault refers to as 'governmentality' (Burchell et al, 1991:102).

Caste, language, religion, region and tribe are the major differences through which the population have been marked in Indian State. Though the tribe was added during the colonial period it does not mean that the groups so identified did not have a distinct identity of their own (Xaxa, 2014: 1). Bimol Akoijam also argues that a distinction between plains and hills was also administratively reified with the people from the hills being labelled as 'savages', 'wild tribes' of the colonial 'North Eastern Frontier' being rooted in the idea of the non-Europeans as pre-modern 'people without history'. This colonial mapping of people and land was reproduced by independent India in the form of 'exotic tribes' of the 'North East' and officially patronized as the 'scheduled tribes' (Akoijam, 2016:121).

Following the report of U.N. Dhebar Commission (1960) the Lepchas were also recognised as scheduled tribe in West Bengal in 1961 (Thakur,1998: 157).

The Lepchas have been described as "timid, peaceful and no brawler" (Hooker 1855: 188) having "a mild, quiet and indolent disposition" (White 2000: 7). Lepchas seem to be have been well liked by the British administrators, anthropologists and scholars alike. They were found to be "amiable, obliging, frank, humorous and polite" (Morris 1938: 35). However, these descriptions seem to be quite patronizing and stereotypical.

Linda M. Alcoff argues that the narratives that are produced by colonization involve a covering over of the truth, while the contestation of colonial power involves recovering or disclosing truths (as cited in Medina, 2004: 94). Prem K. Poddar and T. B. Subba also contend that there is the existence of what they term as 'home grown orientalism'; Indian scholars are caught up in the tyranny of the Orientalist discourse in which they were educated. They are Orientals in that they have been 'othered' in the discourse of the West about India; they are Orientalists in that they study and 'other' their objects of study-the subordinate (in this case, Himalayan) Orientals (Poddar and Subba, 1991: 1).

As politics is a competitive enterprise, it makes use of the existing social structures. The politicization of primordial structures is central to electoral politics in India and

the scheduled tribes is no exception, the constitutional safeguards for the scheduled tribes also acts as a catalyst for political mobilization (Kothari, 2012: 247).

The contemporary political scenario in North Bengal and the Eastern Himalayan region where ethnic identities have been mobilized hints at the persistent character of 'ethnie'. [8] The Lepcha identity being one is the emphasis of the proposed study. One major cultural attribute that has been accentuated is their language followed by their unique religion, history, traditions and customs.

Rationale and Scope of the Study

The effective intervention of the Lepchas in the politics of Darjeeling hills in recent years has sparked a change in the political dynamics. The Lepcha community which was generally seen as passive on the political front now has a substantial presence largely due to the establishment of organisations like West Bengal Mayel Lyang Lepcha Development Board. Identity and ethnicity have been crucial factors for the recent developments in the Lepcha community. The Lepchas who are the original inhabitants of Sikkim and Darjeeling Hills have an important place in the historical narrative of the region. The dearth of substantial research in regard to Lepcha identity politics in relation to the politics in Darjeeling hills at large is what this dissertation attempts to address.

This research will be limited to study of the Lepcha community in Kalimpong district and how it has contributed to the political life of the Darjeeling Hills. The study will also analyse how the Lepchas have been portrayed within the colonial discourses. West Bengal's role as the state and its relationship with the Lepchas will be discussed and analysed. Lepcha identity in the context of electoral and democratic politics in the Darjeeling hills will also be studied.

Objectives

1. To examine the historical construction of Lepcha identity through official narratives and colonial discourse.
2. To examine the role and relationship between state and the Lepchas in Kalimpong District.

3. To examine Lepcha identity politics in the context of electoral and democratic politics in the proposed study area.

Research Questions

1. How has the colonial discourse on the Lepchas shaped their identity?
2. How do state apparatuses create identities and what kind of relationship is there between the Lepchas and the state?
3. How has Lepcha identity been deployed in electoral and democratic politics?

Research Methodology

The study is both qualitative and quantitative. Primary sources like district gazetteers, newspaper reports have been used in the study. For the empirical part, other primary sources of data like face to face interviews with members of the Lepcha community have been conducted. As the study is community specific, purposive sampling is used. A sample of 50 respondents have been collected to comprehend and study how the Lepchas identify themselves, the level of consciousness regarding their culture, history, their political outlooks and how they see the state. The field work has been conducted in Kalimpong district covering the areas namely, Gitdabling, Pochok, Kamzer, Lolay, Relli, Reyong, Bom Busty and the town itself. These areas are well populated by the Lepchas particularly Bom Busty, Reyong, Gitabling and Pochok. The sample size includes Lepchas form urban areas as well as rural areas so that it is representative of the overall Lepcha population. The qualitative data which was collected has been analysed using discourse analysis and for the statistical data statistical tool in the form of MS Excel has been used to visualise the basics of the collected data. The research is descriptive as well as analytical.

Chapters

Chapter I Introduction

This chapter comprises of the introduction, review of literature, statement of the problem, a brief theoretical framework, rationale and scope of the study, objectives, research questions, research methodology and the chapters.

Chapter II Ethnicity and Identity: A Theoretical Framework

This chapter comprises of theories of ethnicity and identity and elaborates the theoretical framework which has been applied to study the Lepcha community. Politics of identity has also been discussed.

Chapter III Colonial Discourse and the Construction of Lepcha Identity

This chapter discusses the various markers of Lepcha identity. It discusses how Lepcha identity has been constructed in the historical narratives and how Lepcha identity has been portrayed by the colonial discourses. The question of whether Lepchas as portrayed by the colonial discourses are effective in practice or not has been discussed. The chapter also discusses how the Lepcha identity has changed and evolved with the passage of time in independent India.

Chapter IV Lepchas and Identity Politics in the Darjeeling Hills

This chapter deals with the issues of ethnicity and identity and how it has been deployed by different communities for the attainment of specific goals and agendas and particularly by the Lepchas. The impact of different cultural development boards in the political and social life of the Darjeeling hills will also be highlighted. Lepcha identity in the context of electoral and democratic politics has been discussed thoroughly. The role and relationship of the state of West Bengal with the Lepchas has also been highlighted. The data collected from the field work has been analysed and interpreted in the chapter.

Chapter V Conclusion

This chapter contains a brief summary and conclusion. The chapter also contains the major findings of the study and scope for further research.

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[1]Pema Wangchuk and Mita Zulca (2007). *Kanchendzonga Sacred Summit*. Gangtok: Little Kingdom p.31

[2]The second Chogyal, Tenzing Namgyal had three wives, one from Bhutan, one from Tibet and the third was the daughter of Yong Yang Hang, a Limboo Chief of the Arun Valley. This Limboo princess came to Sikkim with seven companions who were taken as wives by the highest Kazis and ministers of Sikkim. The Limboo girls settled into their new home. So, the land came to be known as 'Su-Khim', later anglicized to Sikkim. 'Su-Khim' in the Limboo language means 'new home' (Lama, 2008:2).

[3]Pema Wangchuk and Mita Zulca (2007). *Kanchendzonga Sacred Summit*. Gangtok: Little Kingdom p.54

[4]The eldest son of Guru Tashe who got the title 'Khye Bhumsa' as he alone could move the pillars that was used while constructing the Sakya monastery in South West Tibet (Kotturan, 1989:22).

Khye Bhumsa had entered Mayel Lyang seeking the blessings of 'Thikoong Tek and Nyekoong Ngal,' the divine Lepcha high priest and priestess respectively for a son. Generous and vey kind, they blessed Khye Bhumsa with three sons (Tamsang, 2008:2).

[5]Ka-We-Long-Chaok' in Lepcha means 'our blood treaty stones monuments' (ibid, p.2).

[6]Denis Lepcha, in *Thikoong General G. B. Mainwaring, The Champion of Lepchas and The Recovery of Lepcha Language, Literature and Culture*. Mayel Lyang Lepcha Development Board, Kalimpong. p.24

[7]"Identification refers to the systematic establishment and signification between individuals, between collectivities and between individuals and collectivities, of relationships of similarity and difference" (Jenkins, 2008:18).

[8]"A social group whose members share a sense of common origins, claim a common and distinct history and destiny possess one or more distinctive characteristics and fuel a sense of collective uniqueness and solidarity" (Smith, 1981: 84).

Chapter II

Ethnicity and Identity: A Theoretical Framework

The use of the term 'ethnicity' in academics and in popular use is fairly modern. It was coined by D. Riesman in 1953.[1] After the colonies in Asia and Africa achieved independence it led to the term 'ethnicity' being very crucial in the social sciences in 1960s. Paul Spoonley has suggested that the term ethnicity was used by sociologists and others to acknowledge 'the positive feelings of belonging to a cultural group'. Negative aspects of ethnicity came to the fore after the fall of communist regimes. The notion of 'ethnic cleansing' in Yugoslavia tainted the idea of ethnicity with political disrepute. The shared positive feelings of a group seemed to imply hatred, hostility and genocide towards other groups or out groups. The immigrants in Northern Europe and North America who migrated from post-colonial societies and dependent economies were seen to be creating a political problem, a cultural problem and an identity problem. This gave a further push to the usage of the term ethnicity (as cited in Guibernau and Rex, 1997: 1).

The term 'ethnicity' is derived from the Greek word *ethnos*. The word *ethnos* was often used to describe people whose location and conduct was in some way outside 'the sphere of Greek social normality'. It was used to describe other peripheral people, often barbarous. However, the meaning of *ethnos* was inverted, in Modern Greek *ethnos* refers to the Greek themselves as people and as a nation. The Greeks constituted the most prominent religious other under the Ottoman Empire and hence the change took place (Fortier, 1994: 2).

Ethnicity as a concept is of western origin and has been variously used to describe very divergent situations and address specific concerns in different parts of the world. In America it was used in in order to explain a social order dominated by the issue of immigration. W. Llyod Warner and Leo Srole in their volume of the Yankee City study titled *The Social Systems of American Ethnic Groups* (1945) define ethnic as 'any individual who considers himself, or is considered to be a member of a group with foreign culture and participates in the activities of the group' (as cited in Sabharwal, 2006: 6).

Status, mobility and the assimilation of ethnic groups into wider American society were the main issues in ethnic studies as defined by Warner and Srole. The validity of

America's conception of itself as the 'great melting pot' was examined keeping these issues in mind. Their main concern was that the interests of the immigrant groups constituting America would be different from that of the American society which would lead to a weakening of the American nation. Thus, Americanisation that is assimilation and acculturation according to Nathan Glazer and Daniel Patrick Moynihan became defining concerns of work on American society (as cited in Sabharwal, 2006: 7).

W. Llyod Warner and Leo Srole considered ethnic groups as subordinate to the host society that is the White Anglo-Saxon Protestants whom they did not classify as ethnic believing them to constitute the original Americans. The subordinate groups in American society were divided into ethnic, racial and ethno-racial groups by Warner and Srole. Their rationale was that ethnic groups had 'a divergent set of cultural traits which are evaluated by the host society as inferior' (as cited in Sabharwal, 2006: 8). As for racial groups, biological differences and traits were evaluated to be inferior and for ethno-racial groups they differed on both counts. Cultural traits alone were not considered problematic as these traits could be lost with time, altered or unlearned. On the other hand, physical traits were permanent and groups that differed on this count would continue to occupy a low position in the status hierarchy of America. Warner and Srole presented a conceptual scheme to assimilate these groups into the American society by changing the method of evaluation within the host society. However, the melting pot dream of American society never materialized and the same can be said for the belief that industrialisation would lead to the disappearance of ethnic identities. Most nations are multi-ethnic and cultural pluralism is the norm. Americans Nathan Glazer and Daniel Patrick Moynihan in their celebrated book *Beyond the Melting Pot-A Study of Ethnic Groups in New York* (1963) say that ethnic groups are 'forms of social life that are capable of renewing and transforming themselves', that is these groups do not and will not disappear (as cited in Sabharwal, 2006: 8).

Ethnic groups came to be regarded as a 'major element in society' rather than exotic, marginal or minority groups. The focus of American ethnicity switched from assimilation to dealing with multi-culturalism. Ethnic groups were now viewed as interest groups. The Soviet theorists were also disappointed in their search for a new historical community to find that even after the abolition of classes in a socialist

society ethnic groups persisted in the form of resilient nationalities. The unity of different nations in the U.S.S.R was to be in the image of Russian majority, the dominant Russians were regarded as an ethnic group just missing out in an overt sense the American concept of host society. Sabharwal says that there was no doubt as to which direction the unity was expected to progress. Ethnic assimilation was regarded as the main problem by both Americans and Soviet approaches. Though the Soviets too conceived a melting pot dream in somewhat different terms both Americans and Soviets did not believe that what would emerge from the assimilation would be something unpredictable and new: a hybrid. This was primarily because their views of assimilation did not allow it even though the metaphor of 'melting pot' was used by them. The dominant or host society became the model along which the assimilation would take shape and both the societies held this belief but were mistaken (Sabharwal, 2006: 9).

It is true that there is no one standard definition of ethnic groups in social sciences. Nevertheless, attempts have been made to arrange definitions of ethnic groups into a single analytical framework to make them comprehensible. The common classification of ethnic group definitions is based on

i. Those that use objective criteria—the distinctive cultural features which marks out one group from another.
ii. Those that use subjective criteria—the emphasis is given on the self-consciousness of members of ethnic groups, regarding it as given. The ethnic identity is considered as a core element of a person's personality, something that cannot be taken away.
iii. Those that identify ethnic groups in relation to behavior.

This classification emerges out of the approaches followed by works dealing with the concept of 'ethnicity'. Paul Brass states 'ethnicity is to ethnic category what class consciousness is to class'. It amounts to saying that where there are ethnic groups there will automatically be ethnicity or that the presence of ethnicity is a given. It is ethnicity that is regarded as important in the mobilization of ethnic identities and is seen as responsible for 'the tendency by many people in many countries and in many circumstances to insist on the significance of their group distinctiveness and on (new)

rights that derive from this identity' (Glazer and Moynihan 1975: 3) as cited in (Sabharwal, 2006: 13).

Ethnicity is a sense of ethnic identity and George de Vos defines ethnicity as comprising of the subjective and symbolic use by a group of people of any aspect of culture so as to mark themselves as different from other groups.[2] Paul Brass opines that those ethnic groups which use cultural symbols in this manner is a subjectively self-conscious community and that this community draws a basis for inclusion and exclusion or, in other words, it establishes certain criteria for it. Common descent, birth and sense of kinship become important for ethnic group members at this point. Rules of endogamy and exogamy are adopted explicitly or in a tacit manner for group exclusion and inclusion. In addition to self-consciousness, ethnicity or ethnic identity also constitutes a claim to status and recognition in two ways; either as a superior group or as an equal to other groups. Ethnicity is the consciousness of an ethnic category similar to what class consciousness is to class (Brass, 1991: 10).

This study proposes a working definition of ethnicity as 'a sense of belonging to a particular ethnic group on the basis of historical narratives, physical attributes, common descent, shared culture and its aspects like language, religion, food habits, dress and customs which generates a certain kind of distinct identity and this distinct identity is used as a measuring rod to differentiate a certain ethnic group from other groups'. However, it is not necessary that all the criteria must be met in full. For instance, a person may not speak the language or may not follow the same religion as that of the group or eat the same kind of food or wear the same kind of dress. In addition to that he or she may maintain the customary practice of remembering the ancestors although in a different manner than that of the group. The point is, a degree of sameness on the part of the individual though minimal but acknowledged and agreed upon by the members of the ethnic group is what matters.

It would be worthwhile to highlight the approaches that have been and are used in theories of ethnicity. Primordialists or primordial accounts drawing their inspiration from Edward Shils' work *Primordial Personal Sacred and Civil Ties* (1957) position ethnic group belonging as pre-social and pre-cultural as natural. Clifford Geertz held the view that primordial attachment was the most significant problem which the new states faced, the states that came into being after the World War II or when they

achieved independence from the colonial rulers. The states like India, Burma and Indonesia having diverse ethnic groups according to Geertz were each bound up in their own community and own communal identity and as such there was no place for an overarching state. Group attachment was primordial, meaning it was based on the 'givens' of social existence including blood and kin connections, religion, language, region and custom. The primordialists believe that ethnicity is a natural attachment and not an identity that is in any way chosen from a whole range of identities. Primordialism in its extreme suggests that cultures are fixed and unchanging (Spencer, 2004: 19; Hawkins, Huppatz and Matthews, 2016:18; Sabharwal, 2006:13).

The other position is that of the circumstantialists: this approach emphasises the voluntary nature of ethnicity and defines it as an identity founded on social acceptance and subjective identification of internal and external conditions. In David Levinson's view 'ethnicity is defined by circumstances and constructed to achieve specific goals especially in situations of ethnic competition' (as cited in Sabharwal, 2006:13). The instrumentalist view which is closely connected with the former view argues that there are some intentional or conscious strategies behind the foregrounding of ethnic identity. In other words, the instrumentalist view regards ethnic identity as a tool that can be employed strategically to attain individual or collective goals. The rational choice strand of this approach suggests that ethnicity depends largely on the vision of those who lead the ethnics and may not necessarily include the cultural givens (Spencer, 2004: 100; Sabharwal, 2006: 14).

Excluding Max Weber, sociologists have not directly operated with the term ethnic, anthropology has always been the site of refuge in order to explain the power of culutural difference both historically and geographically. Frederik Barth's seminal work *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* (1969) particularly has been the guiding light. Traditionally cultural difference was explained and understood from the inside out, culture was perceived as stable, pervasive and exact. The characteristics of a group was the defining factor which made them distinct and unique (lifestyle, common language, descent, religion, history, physical traits etc.). Frederik Barth changed this perception of explaining cultural difference from inside out. Barth defined and explained ethnicity from the outside in: 'it is not the 'possession' of cultural characteristics that makes social groups distinct but rather it is the social interaction with other groups that makes that difference possible, visible and socially meaningful'

(Malesevic, 2004: 3). Frederik Barth says 'the critical focus of investigation from this point of view becomes the ethnic boundary that defines the group, not the cultural stuff that it encloses' (Barth 1969: 15). In other words, the difference is created, developed and maintained only through interaction with others

Taking cue from Barth, Lepchaness in this case becomes culturally and politically meaningful only through the encounter with Nepaliness, Bhutianess or Bengaliness.

Thus, after Frederik Barth the emphasis in the study of ethnic difference shifted from the study of its contents to the study of cultural boundaries and social interaction. The primary point is that ethnic boundaries are explained as a product of social interaction, ethnic collectivities are not created by cultural difference per se. Fredrick Barth argues there is a systematic set of rules that are at play in inter-ethnic social encounters. There are not only criteria and signals for identification when ethnic groups come into contact but there exists a structuring of interaction that facilitates the continuity of cultural differences. The interaction within an organised social life in any particular social situation is prescribed. Barth further says that if the prescriptions are agreed upon by the people their understanding about codes and values need not go beyond that which is pertinent to the social situations in which they interact. Such prescriptions that govern situations of contact and structure interaction in stable inter-ethnic relations are presupposing. It also holds true that along with prescriptions there follow proscriptions on social situations that prohibits inter-ethnic interactions in certain sectors. This insulates parts of the culture from confrontation and modification (Barth, 1969: 14).

The categorization of 'us' and 'them' is a product of social contact; it is only through interaction with others that culture and social groups emerge. Ethnic boundaries are regarded by Barth as psychological boundaries established by mutual perceptions. [3] Hence, ethnicity cannot be confined to minority groups only (Malesevic, 2004: 3).

Sinisa Malesevic opines that 'despite its obvious diversity, ethnicity is a politicized culture,' and that sociologists become interested only when the cultural difference is mobilized for political purposes when the narratives of common descent are (re)created by social actors through the process of social action to respond to a changing environment. Though social contact is a precondition of ethnic group difference mere contact is not enough to generate a sociologically meaningful sense of

group membership. Mobilization of cultural differences framed as ethnic differences is vital to be sociologically relevant; Sinisa Malesevic draws this insight from Max Weber (Malesevic, 2004: 4).

Modernisation theorists believed that with industrialisation, urbanisation and individualism ethnic ties would simply disappear but on the contrary ethnic ties and ethnicity have been recalcitrant. Sinisa Malesevic says that modernisation has accelerated ethnic group action; rather than vanishing, ethnicity has proliferated with modernity. This is primarily because complex and ever-increasing division of labour and fierce struggle for scarce resources make modernity an ideal arena for the articulation of individual and group political demands as cultural demands. Rather than constraining ethnic bonds, it gets intensified as politics is often orchestrated under the canopy of ethnicity (Malesevic, 2004: 5).

The dreams and expectations of liberals and rationalists like the dissolution of ethnicity, transcendence of nationalism and internationalisation of culture in every country have not been fulfilled. The cosmopolitan hopes have also been met with disappointment although the world has become more unified and its states more interdependent in the latter part of the twentieth century. The cosmopolitan ideals and rationalist expectations are on a low, ethnic ties and national loyalties have become stronger and taken deeper roots than ever. Anthony D. Smith is of the opinion that these expectations and hopes of the liberals were delusions as they were based on a systematic underestimation of one of the fundamental trends of the 18th and 19th centuries. He calls this trend the 'ethnic revival' tracing its development through analyzing its social and cultural roots which is of worldwide importance (Smith, 1981:1).

The problem of the term 'ethnicity' becomes much larger once it acquires legislative and institutional underpinnings through formulations like 'ethnic minority' or 'ethnic group'. The concept after having been institutionalised and bureaucratized tends to impose upon individuals that they legally belong to an 'ethnic minority' or to one 'ethnic group'. At times it also takes the form of oppression by caging individuals into involuntary associations. The institutionalization and bureaucratization of the concept of ethnicity is also the strongest possible source of reification of group and individual relations. In this process the differences in cultures get arrested and codified even

though cultural differences by its nature are changeable and flexible and social change is prevented as a result. The central argument that Sinisa Malesevic presents is that popular and legislative understandings of ethnicity are severely erroneous. The root of this error is an unsociological view of cultural difference as something immobile and definite (Malesevic, 2004: 2).

Social categories were created through census, ethnographic and cartographical exercises by the British during the eighteenth century. These exercises were instrumental in the process of ordering India for administrative purposes. It had been assumed by the British that the census was the reflection of the basic sociological facts of India, which it did. The result was that the enumerative modality objectified social, cultural and linguistic differences among the peoples of India (Cohn, 1928: 8).

Governments in order to have a desired control and to achieve ends that it wants employ techniques (like census) that are a part of systematically dividing the population. The collective formed by the institutions, procedure, analyses and reflections, the calculations and tactics that allow the exercise of specific although complex form of power by the state machinery is what Michel Foucault refers to as 'governmentality' (Burchell et al, 1991:102).

Dipesh Chakrabarty writes that the institution of modern state introduced by the British in India used techniques of government which had close ties with techniques of measurement. The modern problems of ethnicity in India does not have the luxury of being isolated from the modern means of government and communication. Techniques like censuses that were used by the British were preserved by the nationalists even after colonial rule. The British had not come to India looking for pure knowledge, all the studies and reports that were produced by them was for the cause and process of governing India. Dipesh Chakrabarty says that this alliance between government and measurement is something that he considers belonging to the 'deep structure of imagination invested in modern political orders'. If numbers were not known it was unviable to carry out bureaucratic or instrumental rationality. The caste categories had been fundamentally changed by the British, before the British intervention strong systemic rules guiding caste identities were not present. However, the British reified the caste categories through censuses. The effect that it

had on ethnic identities was that people came to fit the categories that the colonial rulers had designed for them. Groups were often seen to make efforts to change their place in the caste categorisation by claiming that they belonged to another social class. (Chakrabarty, 1995: 3373-3380).

Partha Chatterjee writes that 'population' inhabits the domain of state policy. He says that population as a concept is entirely descriptive and empirical. Population as a concept does not have the normative burden like the concept of citizen has; population can comply with statistical techniques like sample surveys and censuses. In contrast to the concept of citizen which has ethical meanings attached to it in terms of participating in the sovereignty of the state, population as a concept is free of it. This allows the concept of population to be available for government functionaries who in turn employ a set of instruments that can be rationally manipulated for reaching large sections of the inhabitants of a country as the targets of their "policies" be it economic policy, administrative policy or law. It may be done even for political mobilization. Partha Chatterjee quotes Michel Foucault who says that a prominent characteristic of the contemporary regime of power is a certain "governmentalization of the state". The legitimacy of the regime is secured by claims to provide for the well-being or in other words welfare of the population rather than by the participation of the citizens in the matters of the state (Chatterjee, 2004: 34).

Now coming back to ethnicity, Thomas Hylland Eriksen says that 'ethnicity' is an aspect of social relationship between persons who consider themselves as essentially distinctive from members of other groups of whom they are aware and with whom they enter into relationships' (Eriksen, 2010 :16). Kevin Yelvington argues that 'ethnicity is a social identity characterized by fictive kinship' (Yelvington, 1991: 168). Social relationship has an ethnic element when cultural differences steadily make a difference in interaction between members of groups. Ethnicity encompasses gain in interaction as well as loss. It also refers to aspects of meaning in the creation of identity. Therefore, in this way ethnicity has a political, organizational and meaningful symbolic aspect too. The myth of common origin and ideologies encouraging endogamy more often than not, is nevertheless of highly varying practical importance. Ethnicity exists between groups and not within groups, it is relational and also situational (Eriksen, 2010:17: 69).

It is important to remember that group identities must always be defined in relation to what they are not, in relation to non-members of the group. When ethnic identity is perceived to be under threat by ethnic groups it becomes crucially important. As ethnicity is an aspect of relationship, the importance of boundaries that are created can be said to be conditional on the pressure exerted on them. Expressions of ethnic identity can be regarded as symbolic tools in political struggles. Eriksen opines that 'the social importance of ethnic identities is greatest when the two conditions (mentioned above) are fulfilled simultaneously in enacted ethnic ideologies' (Eriksen, 2010: 93).

Ethnic groups that make up a plural society are regarded as (and regard themselves as) highly distinctive in other matters apart from being compelled to participate in uniform political and economic systems. The term 'plural society' usually denotes colonially created states with culturally heterogeneous populations (Furnivall, 1948; M.G. Smith, 1965) as cited in (Eriksen, 2010:17). Secessionism in plural societies is usually not an option and ethnicity tends to be articulated as group competition. [4] Indonesia, Kenya, India are examples of plural societies.

Coming to the study area, Darjeeling hills is part of West Bengal which in turn is a state in India. The Bengalis form the dominant ethnic majority in West Bengal as a whole but in the Darjeeling hills (Darjeeling, Kurseong and Kalimpong) which is located at the northern fringe of West Bengal it is the Nepalis (Gorkhas) who form the dominant ethnic majority. The demand for a separate state Gorkhaland within the Indian union but separated from West Bengal is a case in point.

Anthony D. Smith says that 'in modern times, even the smallest ethnic communities have adopted an aggressive, if not always expansionist, posture'. Neither accommodationist approach of the state nor submissive isolation have been able to satisfy them. Enthused and boosted by an ideology which insists on cultural solidarity and autonomy, the ethnic groups have 'sought to ensure that their political demands are met by the state within which historical accident has incorporated them; or, failing that, to break away and set up their own state' (Smith, 1981:15).

Though the Gorkhaland (ethno-linguistic) movement has not sought to break away from the Indian Union it has produced a response from the Lepchas in recent years. The Lepchas form the ethnic minority (there are other minority groups too) in the

Darjeeling hills and they have now found a considerable political voice through the institution West Bengal Mayel Lyang Lepcha Development Board. It is the ethnic identity of Lepchas that is being foregrounded in the political struggle. The issue of Gorkhaland movement, its political repercussions and the establishment of the West Bengal Mayel Lyang Lepcha Development Board will be discussed later in the subsequent chapters.

Susana B.C. Devalle says that factors that have often given political movements a source of solidarity and a basis for mobilization at one moment of their development are cultural, ethnic, linguistic and religious. Based on this context countering the primordial position, she says that in the social formations of the 'Third World' ethnicity serves as a dependent variable rather than as a product of vaguely defined 'primordial sentiments'. She differentiates two salient features of ethnicity by 'looking at the ways in which it has been articulated in the ideological discourses of antagonistic classes and of the state and the realities of uneven development' in the following way. Firstly, ethnicity can serve as an element of support for the hegemony of the dominant classes and of the state. The tribal construct in India and its ideological uses fall into this category. Secondly, ethnicity can also be a counter hegemonic force in cases where ethnic ascription and economic and political subordination correlate. In many multi-ethnic societies, languages of indigenous inhabitants and ethnic minorities are marginalised or their existence denied but at the same time the language of those in power is imposed as the official one. In 1963 G.S. Ghurye an Indian anthropologist recommended the eradication of Adivasi languages (Devalle, 1992: 16).

In the 1920s, the Nepali Text Book Committee in Darjeeling had argued against the feasibility of introducing Lepcha language in primary schools and as a result the demand of the Lepchas was not met while Nepali language became the medium of instruction for all (Thakur, 1988: 88). The reason towards this attitude towards lies in the potential language carries in maintaining people's identity and for practical purposes. Language is a field where collective identity and perception of reality are constantly reformulated; it is a people's particular code, a difficult terrain to conquer by those external to it. [5] In a modernising society language has an important place in education, it is not just a matter of sentiment. [6]

The revitalization of the fundamental elements of a specific socio-cultural style in the political practice of the subaltern sectors gives ethnic based movements a potential beyond mere political tactics and strategy. Susane B.C. Devalle suggests that as ethnic identity and consciousness plays a considerable role in everyday life, 'at the level of historical processes, it is important to clarify under what conditions cultural differences are stressed and become one of the bases for political action'. The role of ethnic consciousness in impairing or favouring the formation of class consciousness as well as the process of formation of an ethnic consciousness itself has to be taken into account at the political level. The patterns of domination translated into 'inter-ethnic' relations and ways in which ethnic and class differences are structured is also to be disclosed at the level of the wider social system (Devalle, 1992: 18).

Devalle cautions us stating that the different faces of ethnicity have to be discerned. Theoretical constructs are created by social scientists to comprehend and catalogue phenomena and social groups. These constructs contribute to the ideological discourses of the ruling classes to justify and implement policies and practices. These theoretical constructs have to be distinguished from the ethnicity that is actually lived, 'as a dynamic process with a specific present, entailing a particular mode of social experience' (Devalle, 1992:18).

The expansion of Europe, colonialism and colonial governmentality itself structured ethnic differences in the non-Western world. The processes of state formation, the exploitation of people and natural resources were all backed by scientific arguments to justify legitimating ideologies that were formulated to maintain unequal socio-economic relations and political domination. These ideologies were phrased in racial and ethnic terms. The scientific texts acquired the power of actual realities itself rather than a mode of knowing realities. Significant part of the realities of the societies that came under the dominance of Europe was reconstructed intellectually and in relation to administrative practices too. This was made possible through the constructs of 'tribe' and 'race' as a social category (Hall, 1992: 277; Devalle, 1992: 26).

In India it was the categories of 'tribe', 'caste' and 'religion' that were used by the colonizers to reconstruct part of the realities. In this process 'racial', 'ethnic' and 'tribal' stereotype were forged; the dynamism and complexities, social organization, culture, history and civilizational aspects of the societies that were catalogued as such

were completely ignored. The taxonomies were accorded the power of truth (Devalle, 1992: 27).

Colonial knowledge was 'far more powerful than the colonial state' (Dirks, 2001: 51). The extensive colonial documentation projects of the British depicted their mental uneasiness or anxiety that rule was always dependent on knowledge. Their rule was performed simultaneously through gathering and applying the collected knowledge. The idea of caste became fundamental to colonial knowledge and rule only after the 'Great Rebellion of 1857'. [7] A year later in 1858 India was put under direct rule of the Crown. Caste gained importance in the struggle to know and to rule India. The colonial ethnographers in India initially were not known to directly address the political implications of the so-called scientific texts but Herbert Risley in his *The People of India* (1909) confronted the question of (Indian) nationalism. He had assessed the role that caste might play in the future of India's political development. He quotes the words of Sir Henry Cotton with the latter's approval, 'the problem of the future is not to destroy caste, but to modify it, to preserve its supernatural basis' (Dirks, 2001: 123).

Nicholas Dirks states that colonialism in India set out to 'reconstitute caste as a necessary complement to social order and government authority and to formulate it as a new kind of civil society for the colonial state'. The unstable political situation or the crisis of state security and the threat of direct challenge to state sovereignty led to the creation of an anthropological idea that 'caste could be seen as the colonised form of civil society'. This in turn would carry out the dual function of substituting and explaining away the problem of political sovereignty'. Politics and epistemology were molded together through ethnography which became the primary colonial modality of representation. Anthropology became the fundamental body of ideas and presuppositions which set the bounds of what could be accepted as true knowledge; it became an 'administrative episteme' (Dirks, 2001:51:123:221).

In terms of missionary activities caste was an impediment to conversion but with the 'tribal' groups the absence of caste gave the missionaries a lot of positivity. The ethnographers were very much attracted and their interests evoked by the tribal groups as they were seen as being most primitive. The animal sacrifice of the 'Todas' which occupied a centre stage in their own ritual calendar grabbed the attention of the

British. The ‘Todas’ later occupied a pride of place in the anthropological canon of India (Dirks, 2001:175).

Initial usages of the term ‘tribe’ or ‘tribal groups’ by the ethnographers is loaded with uncertainty, particularly in the early phase of British writings. [8] But the knowledge that caste was absent from tribal groups as in the case of ‘Todas’ suggests that a rudimentary criteria of distinction was established by the year 1849. [9]

Virginius Xaxa says that the term ‘tribe’ was used keeping in mind a sense of common ancestry, it was also used interchangeably with caste in the British writings of the 18th century. The term ‘tribe’ was not used even in the report of the first all India census of 1881. Instead the term ‘forest tribe’ as a subheading under the broader category of agriculture and pastoral castes was used. A serious attempt to make a distinction or define tribe is visible in the later censuses of 1901 and 1911 under the supervision of Herbert Risley and E.A. Gait respectively. In the table of caste and others, ‘so called animists’ was added. In 1921 census under the supervision of J. T. Marten, the heading ‘animism’ was replaced by ‘tribal religion’. The differentiation of tribe from caste was carried on by J. H. Hutton in terms of religion rather than by the attributes of caste (Xaxa, 2014:14).

It was G.S.. Ghurye who argued that the scheduled tribes designated as animists in the censuses could be best described as ‘backward Hindu’, given the difficulties in differentiating the religion of the tribes from the lower rungs of Hindu society. The term ‘tribe’ still lacks consensus today. Virginius Xaxa argues that a certain kind of perception has been created through discourses on tribes of India and that these discourses are misleading. These discourses seem to suggest that within a tribe there is an absence of exploiting classes or that religion is all pervasive, that the tribes have a shallow history etc. (Xaxa, 2014: 15).

The arbitrarily defined peculiarities of a ‘tribe’ had a considerable impact. Generally, tribe was defined as a society characterised by territoriality, a subsistence economy and as politically autonomous. The end result of this kind of perception was that the tribes were seen as an idealized type of societies. They were seen as divorced from the historical processes that affected them most prominently. The derogatory image of the tribes accorded with the usage of terms like ‘primitive’, ‘simple’, ‘backward’, and

'underdeveloped' can be said to be the consequences of a mistaken anthropological perception (Devalle, 1992: 30).

Andre Beteille states that the only common thing the tribes seems to have is that 'they all stand more or less outside the Hindu civilization'. He goes on to say that since tribal identification has political and administrative considerations critical efforts have not been made to examine it (as cited in Xaxa, 2014: 16). Prior to Indian independence tribes were seen as people living in isolation. However, after Independence efforts have been made to assimilate the tribes into societies that are said to represent civilization. This is one of the dominant modes through which the transformation of tribal societies has been conceived. Acculturation of tribes into the Hindu fold has been termed as Hinduisation and Sanskritisation but attention must be paid to the fact that the tribes have not moved into the processes like Hinduisation or Sanskritisation on the basis of groups as a whole. Even if the tribes move into a new pattern of life like Christianity, Hinduism or Islam it is only a section of a tribe. The empirical reality is quite complex. When numerically weaker tribes in a particular village are assimilated into the Hindu fold, it is generally assumed that assimilation happens in other villages as well. Though Hinduisation may be operational one cannot say that it will lead to abandonment of tribal identity. By the same token, sections of tribe may follow or adopt Christianity without disposing of their tribal identity. Xaxa says that the process of Hinduisation though necessary is not sufficient to integrate the tribes into the Hindu fold. He says that tribes must be drawn into the social organization of caste but he also says that this is not the empirical reality. Where tribes have been integrated into the Hindu caste organisation it is only through adopting or being drawn into the structure of the regional linguistic structure. Xaxa argues that if cultural transformation occurs in a tribal society the general trend is to negate the existence of a tribal society. But the irony is that when cultural change takes place in a dominant mainstream society like the Bengali society no one denies the existence and identity of Bengali society though it has also been affected by westernisation and modernisation just like tribal societies have. Xaxa says that tribes have to be studied in their own right rather than making a comparison with caste attributes or with mainstream societies for tribes are also societies in themselves (Xaxa, 2014:16:17).

Identity Politics and Politics of Identity

When the question of identity comes into play it would be worthwhile to look into some theoretical aspects of identity and identity politics. Charles Taylor writes that for comprehending identity politics of groups and individuals the need or the urge of individuals and groups to find one's authenticity and the demand for dignity is very crucial. In the Indian context, the traditional discourse of honor has been challenged by dignity because of modernity. Human life has undergone a transformation due to modernity and dignity has been given precedence over traditional hierarchies. The idea of birth-based superiority stands challenged, the formerly dominated groups and individuals have already started to embrace the idea of equal dignity. Modernity has also brought about the aspect of recognition which is again very important in terms of identity. Dialogical contact with others has gained strength as it helps to answer questions like 'where are we coming from' and 'who are we'. In this vein there is also the problem of misrecognition and refusal of recognition is seen as a form of oppression. Two notions of worth have been brought about by modernity: culturally inherited conceptions of groups as better or worse and the rise in equality or the challenge to the social hierarchies. Identity politics is equated with the demand for recognition which in its core carries the politics of equal dignity and politics of difference (or authenticity). Traditional ideas are revived, simultaneously fighting for group traditions. However the interesting thing that can be noticed is that the language that is used is of dignity and equal respect which in turn is modern (Pingle and Varney, 2006: 357-359).

The term 'identity' is ambiguous, and its usages have been made in varying contexts and purposes. David Buckingham writes that 'the fundamental paradox of identity is inherent in the term itself'. Identity comes from a Latin word *idem* meaning 'the same', but the term denotes both similarity and difference. Identity is something that everyone possesses, it is what distinguishes an individual from another. At the same time, identity also implies a relationship with a broader collective or social group, illustrated by examples like national identity and cultural identity (Buckingham, 2008:1).

Individual identity is partly shared with other people too. In this context identity is more about identification with others whom the individual assumes are similar to him

or her at least in some significant ways. Individuals on the basis of cultural, social and biological characteristics seek multiple identifications with others. It is also sought on the basis of shared values, personal interests and histories. There is a struggle between being oneself and finding one's true self. An individual is a product of his or her unique personal biography. However, who he or she is or who he/she thinks he/she is varies according to who that particular individual is with and the social situations in which an individual find himself or herself in. The motivation that an individual receives at a particular moment is also an important factor. Stereotyping is often involved in the formation of identity as it allows people to distinguish easily between self and other and moreover it allows to define themselves and their groups in positive ways. The process of stereotyping and identification operates at both the individual and social levels. Though social identity theory implicitly deals with questions of social power they only take center stage in what is often termed 'identity politics'. The questions relating to identity are tied up with the questions of social status. The ones who hold power in a society may recognise the different claims to positive identities made by different groups in varying degrees of legitimacy. Buckingham states that 'identity politics refers primarily to activist social movements that have explicitly sought to challenge this process: they have struggled to resist oppressive accounts of their identities constructed by others who hold power over them and claimed the right to self-determination' (Buckingham, 2008: 7). Identity politics is immediately related with issues of race, gender, sexuality and disability. However, the term 'identity politics' is also often used in relation to forms of indigenous nationalism, forms of fundamentalism to cite few examples. The demands for the recognition of aspects of identity that have been withheld, denied, marginalised or stigmatized is directly addressed in identity politics. This demand or call is a claim of identity not inspite of difference but because of it. Kwame Anthony Appiah argues that recognition is not all that matters, as our aims are shaped by our identities and our aims in turn help fix our interests therefore people can have real identity interests as well. [10] Identity politics is strongly about transformation at the level of the group rather than merely on the individual level. Group identification and solidarity make up the major theme of identity politics. Representation issues, questions like who has the right to represent or to speak and for whom are pertinent. However, one must be aware that the fundamental problem of identity politics is that of essentialism that is the tendency to generalise about members of a particular group and assimilate them

into a singular identity. Essentialism runs the risk of making identity as static. Essentialism does not acknowledge that people have multiple dimensions to their identities. Resistance is the logical outcome if people are forced to select one identity that overrides all the others. The right in terms of the political spectrum critiques identity politics as a kind of special pleading while the left says that it is a deviation from the dynamics of class struggle. The fundamental paradox of identity itself is what haunts identity politics. Stressing on the shared aspects of identity leads to playing down the aspects that are different. On the other hand, when identities are defined in opposition to another it becomes problematic to claim authenticity. Asserting differences carries the risk of reinforcing binaries for example asserting what is uniquely feminine may lead to strengthening the binary opposition of male and female which one is actually seeking to challenge and change. But again, to do the opposite or uphold fluidity in gender or support ethnic hybridity also carries the risk of diluting and dissolving the very identities on which political claims can be made.

One of the unavoidable consequences involved in identity politics is that it runs the risk of fixing identities. When a particular identity is embraced in the political arena it fixes that identity in both political and legal terms. Identity politics is more about rights being granted to particular groups in a liberal polity. It demands that the identity of the members of the group be definitive and clear; there is no room for ambiguity and contingency as they do not translate into political and legal milieu. There also arises a problem from the necessary connection between identity and difference. Power is always present when differences are highlighted, societies, government and institutions create and enforce differences. June Jordan states that, 'there is difference and there is power. And who holds power decides the meaning of difference' (cited in Hekman, 1999: 11). Identity politics not only embraces but reifies the differences created and enforced by the society.

Jonathan Hill and Thomas Wilson say that identity politics is a 'discourse and action within public arenas of political and civil society'. They further say that 'culture is used to subvert, support, protect and attack' and that identity to be understood has to take some recourse to comparisons of institutions, practices and ideologies of national states and governments political parties, NGOs as well as international and supranational organisations like European Union and United Nations. There is the

need for wider theorizing. Having said this Hill and Wilson differentiate 'politics of identity' from 'identity politics'. They do acknowledge that politics of identity does overlap with the kind of identity politics mentioned above. They opine that politics of identity refer more to issues of personal and group power. This exists within and across all social and political institutions and collectivities; here often people choose and sometimes are forced based on their shared or divergent identities to interact with each other. Politics of identity are often best 'recognised in domains of the private, the subaltern, the subversive where culture maybe be the best way to means to express one's los or triumph'. The major difference these scholars put forward is that identity politics is dependent on institutions and how economic and political power is applied within and across accepted administrative boundaries. They agree that identity politics and politics of identity does not exist in isolation from one another and that power relations exist in both (Hill and Wilson, 2010: 2).

Hill and Wilson refer to identity politics as 'top down' processes wherein collective identities are sought to be molded by different political, economic and social entities. The collective identities based on race, language, ethnicity, place is molded into 'naturalised' and relatively fixed frames for comprehending political action and the body politic. Categories like primordial, or its counterpart modern are fetishized, nationalized, commoditized, exoticised and folklorised and so on. On the other hand, they refer to politics of identity as a more 'bottom up' process wherein the structures of power and wealth that hinder and constrain the social lives of local people are challenged and contested by the local people themselves through negotiating culture and identity. The formal structural and public politics practiced by parties, governments and corporate institutions in the political arenas of cities, regions and states is referred to as 'identity politics'. While '"politics of identity" refers more to values and political practices that are based on subscription or ascription to various and often overlapping social and political identities' (Hill and Wilson, 2010: 2-3).

Taking cue from Kwame Anthony Appiah, ascription and identification are very important in understanding identity and identity politics or politics of identity. When someone is identified as such and such or when an identity is ascribed, predictions about their behaviour can be made on that basis. Similarly, one's treatment also varies accordingly, for instance if A identifies another A, he or she would most probably show kindness and on the contrary if A identifies B it is most probable that A would

treat B unkindly. The point that Appiah makes is that politics finds room in these real situations, the politicians mobilize this sort of feeling all the time and in turn the people also try to use the government to enforce their likes and dislikes (Appiah, 2006: 3).

Identification in terms of how one identifies self and how others identify someone are situational and contextual. There are two distinct modes of identification, relational mode and categorical mode. Relational mode of identification refers to how one identifies oneself or another person by one's position in a relational web illustrated by examples like teacher-student relations, friendship etc. Categorical mode refers to how one identifies oneself or another person by membership in a group or class of persons sharing some categorical attribute such as language, gender, race and ethnicity. Craig Calhoun argues that though relational modes of identification remain important it is categorical identification that has assumed prominence in modern settings (Brubaker and Frederick, 2000: 15).

A dialectical interplay can be found between self-identification and external identification (identification and categorisation of oneself by others). There is a particular type of key 'external identifier that has no counterpart in the domain of self-identification: the formalised, objectified, codified systems of categorisation developed by powerful authoritative institutions'. The modern state is one of the strongest agents of categorization and identification. Brubaker and Frederick following Max Weber's sociology of state and its culturalist extensions quote Pierre Bourdieu: 'the state monopolizes, or seeks to monopolize, not only legitimate physical force but also legitimate symbolic force'. The state tries to monopolize the power to name, to categorize, to identify, to dictate what is what and who is who. Identification has been dealt by some scholars quite literally in the form of definitive markers that have been attached to individuals through passports, fingerprints and signature. The state amasses these identifying documents in its repositories. There are other scholars who focus on the modern state's action and policies that categorise and identify people in relation to religion, gender, literacy, property ownership, sanity, ethnicity and criminality. The censuses are used to carry out the sorting of people in relation to these categories and institutions. Foucauldians say that 'these individualising and aggregation modes of identification and classification are at the core of what defines "governmentality" in a modern state'. Since the state possesses

the symbolic and material resources to impose categories and classificatory schemes, the state is a powerful 'identifier'. However, the state cannot create identities in the strong sense. The doctors, judges, bureaucrats, teachers must work along the modes of social counting and accounting as well as the classificatory schemes put forward by the state to which the non-state actors must also refer. Charles Tilly argues that the state is not the only 'identifier' that matters. He says that the crucial organisational work which categorisation does exists in all types of social settings, say schools, families, social movements and bureaucracies of all kinds. Charles Tilly says that the state does not have monopoly over the production and diffusion of identification and categories. The identities and categories produced by the state may be contested. The literature on social movements both old and new testify to the fact that official identifications are challenged as leaders propose alternative ones (Brubaker and Frederick, 2000:16).

Having discussed these theoretical aspects of ethnicity and identity, the study will also discuss the construction of Lepcha identity and how this identity has evolved with the passage of time in the next chapter. The contingent aspect of ethnicity should be kept in mind and that identity is always present when we talk about individuals and groups. Identity politics is pursued not only for gaining material, social and political advantages but for having psychological satisfaction too. Identity, be it for an individual or a group always desires to be recognised, respected and acknowledged.

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[6] Gopa Sabharwal (2006). *Ethnicity and Class: Social Divisions in an Indian City.* New Delhi: Oxford University Press. p.xv

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Chapter III

Colonial Discourse and the Construction of Lepcha Identity

"The native must realise that colonialism never gives anything away for nothing"

- Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*

Identity has been a crucial subject of debate in social theory for a long time. The new identities that are on the rise have shaken the foundations and stability that the old identities provided in the social world. The modern individual as a unified subject is fragmented, and fragmenting, as it were. Modern societies are going through transformation as a distinctive type of structural change is occurring. This structural change is the fragmentation of the cultural landscapes of class, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, race and nationality which hitherto provided a firm locus of identity for people as social individuals. As a consequence, there is a loss of a stable 'sense of self' at times referred to as the dislocation or decentering of the subject. In other words, there is a 'crisis of identity' constituted by 'decentering individuals both from their place in the social and cultural world, and from themselves' (Hall, 1992: 274-275).

Modern colonialism was also one such encounter that transformed various societies and communities in terms of their social and economic structures and cultural landscapes. Modern colonialism, through a Marxist perspective, was established alongside capitalism in Western Europe while earlier colonialisms like that of the Roman Empire or Mongols under Ghengis Khan were pre-capitalist (Loomba, 2005: 9).

Colonialism in its narrow sense means the taking over of land and economy by force and in the case of European colonialism, it is the restructuring of non-capitalist economies so as to fuel European capitalism. Though Marxism provided a strong critique of colonialism as capitalism it was necessary that it be revised. Writers like Frantz Fanon opined that the division between the haves and have-nots in the colonial context was more to do with race rather than just economy. He writes:

> When you examine at close quarters the colonial context, it is evident that what parcels out the world is to begin with the fact of belonging to or not belonging to a given race, a given species. In the colonies the economic sub-

> structure is also a superstructure. The cause is the consequence; you are rich because you are white, you are white because you are rich. (Fanon, 1963: 30-31)

Colonialism involved the direct encounter or contact between those who had left their mother country to establish settlements in a new country and the ones whom they came into contact with when landing upon a foreign land, the natives. It involved a body of people who settle in a new locality, forming a community subject to or connected with their parent state.

However, this view of colonialism does not hint at the fact that the process of 'forming a community' might be unfair and that the 'new locality' may not be so new. Though colonialism was not an identical process in different parts of the world yet it did have one thing in common: it knit together or rather interlocked the new comers and the natives in the most complex and traumatic relationships in human history. Ania Loomba writes that the process of 'forming a new community' implies that the one that was already there was to be re-formed. This included various practices including trade, plunder, negotiation, warfare, genocide, enslavement. In addition, such practices generated and were shaped by a variety of writings, both public and private records, letters, trade documents, government papers. The writings also included fiction as well as scientific literature (Loomba, 2005: 8).

Discourses authored by colonial administrators and personnel hold a lot of power as they not only define colonial subjects but also re-define colonial subjects in ways that are conducive to colonial rule. One gains power over what one knows about, and so to familiarize oneself with natives, or to re-invent them in terms that are easily comprehensible becomes a surefire way of securing this power over colonial subjects. Fanon incisively puts forward this formation of the colonial subject endowed with a certain meaning through the colonial discourse of the white man: "And so it is not I who make a meaning for myself, but it is the meaning that was already there, pre-existing, waiting for me" (Fanon, 2008: 102).

The term 'discourse' has many meanings like process or succession of time, events, actions, the faculty of reasoning, a narrative, tale or an account. The prevailing sense of the term today is 'a spoken or written treatment of a subject in which it is treated or handled at length'. **(**Loomba, 2005:37). Michel Foucault defines discourse as

'systems of thoughts composed of ideas, attitudes, and courses of action, beliefs and practices that systematically construct the subjects and the worlds of which they speak'. Language is used in particular ways in the domain of 'discourse'. This domain is based on human practices, actions and institutions. Discursive practices make it difficult for individuals to think outside them. Discursive practices are also exercised in power and control (Loomba, 2005:38).

Edward Said, taking cue from Michel Foucault's notion of discourse, offered a new critique of colonialist thought and has elaborated it in his book *Orientalism* which is considered to be a foundational text for an area of inquiry, that is 'colonial discourse'. Edward Said's *Orientalism* is informed by Foucauldian insight that knowledge is not innocent but deeply interlinked with the operations of power.

When the British consolidated its rule in India, they did not just conquer geographical territory. Bernard Cohn argues that British authorities in India came to construct a knowledge of the peoples they governed that served their own needs and purposes. For instance, Cohn writes that census surveys, ethnographic inquiries and other state sponsored projects were used as techniques for representing and reifying Indian castes, religions, laws, languages and rituals. The East or the Orient was seen as a vast museum and the British saw themselves as curators. The British had the objective of making themselves familiar with these unfamiliar subjects so they classified and codified the Indian subjects. This system was influenced by Europe's intellectual heritage, its ideas and concepts of rationality, evolution, hierarchy, race, progress class, modernity, civility, so on and so forth. As a result, the British appropriated indigenous practices and beliefs within the 'discursive formation' of the West; Indian forms of knowledge were reshaped into European objects (Kennedy, 1991: 57).

Edward Said argues that the purpose of the British in taking up such an endeavor was to have power and authority over the Orient (Said,1979: 3). In the case of India too, this exercise would facilitate the orientalists to impose their will over the colonised.

In the case of India, hill stations are one of the most distinctive environments formed under the British rule. Initially hill stations in the early nineteenth century were centers of recuperation and recreation but soon the hill stations acquired reputations as exclusive enclaves of British life. The hill stations became places of retreat, where the Europeans would come to get away from the scorching heat of the plains, disease,

congestion and most importantly, cultural estrangement. The indigenous inhabitants of these hill stations were portrayed as the 'noble guardians of Edenic sanctuaries' and this representation went perfectly well with the distinct purpose of establishing these centers. These hill stations were fashioned by the British along similar lines of their highland retreats. Shimla, Darjeeling, and Ootacamund were the most prominent. Their locations formed a triangular juxtaposition on the subcontinent which gave them importance as political as well as social centers. The social, political and symbolic importance of these places or hill stations to the British gave them 'the crucial context within which their indigenous inhabitants were described, defined, confined, reduced and ultimately recast' (Kennedy, 1991: 57- 59).

The Lepchas [1] of Darjeeling were described by the British as "honest", "happy", "gentle", "candid" people. Joseph Dalton Hooker found the Lepchas to be 'amiable and obliging, frank, humorous, and polite'. Lepchas were described as being very cheerful, as being happy with what they had with little or no anxiety. It goes without saying that Hooker was writing his journals for European readers. He compares the Himalayas with the Swiss Alps and though the Himalayas are greater in height and in extent than the Alps he says that the Alps are far more beautiful (Hooker, 1854: 123).

Hooker goes on to say that Lepchas were nothing like their preconceived notions associated with the figure of a mountaineer. Much to his surprise Lepchas were 'timid, peaceful and no brawler'. He found the Lepchas very feminine in 'the cast of countenance' having a 'mild, frank and even engaging expression'. Despite having seen instances of courage of the Lepchas during the war with the Gorkhas, Hooker is of the opinion that these moments of bravery were rather forced because the Lepchas didn't have any other option. Hooker opines that if a Lepcha was to encounter a foe he would most likely run, proving to be a 'veritable coward'. Hooker also writes that the Lepchas had learned to overcharge and use extortion in their dealings just like the people residing in the plains but on the part of the Lepchas, it was clumsily done (Hooker, 1854: 127-30).

Joseph Dalton Hooker in his journals has classified and categorised the people of the Himalayas with an oriental gaze. His writings reinforce the fact that knowledge about the orient was indeed dear to the colonisers and that it played a vital role in the growth and sustenance of the Raj.

W. W. Hunter also reiterates Hooker's observations, arguing Lepchas were a frank race, free and naturally open hearted as well as free handed. He writes about Lepchas as being 'fond of change' and favouring outdoor life. However, W.W. Hunter writes that Lepchas were not keen on improvement even when 'brought into contact with civilization'. He mentions that the Lepchas of Darjeeling were slowly being driven out due to increase in regular cultivation and because of the Forest Department's policy to conserve forests (Hunter,1876: 47). Hunter's comment on the Lepchas again indicates how Europeans considered the inhabitants of the lands east of Europe as having no civilization of their own.

W.A. Waddell in his book *Among the Himalayas* says that one could not have a more interesting companion than a Lepcha. He designates the Lepcha man as the 'true son of the forest' and as a 'born naturalist' who also is seen to be a 'keen sportsman'. He finds a Lepcha who is accompanying him in the forests of Darjeeling to be very resourceful and self-reliant when faced with the physical dangers of the forest. He commends the way a Lepcha imitated the sound of an owl to poke fun at tiny plumed birds similar to the humming birds in America. He also mentions that a Lepcha knew about habits of beasts, birds and creeping things, and the properties of every plant. On seeing an orchid, a Lepcha would ask him whether he would like to get them and how a Lepcha would 'fearlessly fetch them' climbing tress by cutting notches here and there for footholds. Waddell writes that it was these gestures that won one's confidence. He contrasts the company of a Lepcha with an Indian who does not know or care about flowers in any way (Waddell, 1900:77-79).

Waddell says that the Lepcha represented the state of the primitive man who used to keep up or subsist by hunting, fishing and gathering wild fruits and digging roots. He tells his readers that the proper name of the tribe is 'Rong' and that the Europeans called them Lepchas just as the Nepalis did. Waddell is of the opinion that the Lepchas are a vanishing race, rapidly disappearing because of waves of immigrants from more civilized tribes. He writes that before the Tibetans entered the country about 250 years ago and took control over the land the Lepchas were the sole inhabitants. A Lepcha was distinctive in terms of dress, speech, physique, features, customs and manners and character. He opines that it was due to the environment or the physical space that the Lepchas lived in. In other words, his solitary life in the forests had made him 'timid' and 'shy' of strangers, the harshness of the forces of

nature had made the Lepchas worshippers of malignant devils and also made them very superstitious. Waddell says that the Lepchas' close accompaniment with nature had made them naturalists, indolent and easy-going. These conditions in Waddell's opinion had made the Lepchas some sort of a philosopher. He argues it was these conditions that made a Lepcha hold dear his/her liberty and dislike restraint. The Lepcha did not like service and this also withheld him from joining forces with his fellow-tribesmen against a common foe. Generations of Tibetan oppression was said to have crushed the unwarlike spirit of the Lepchas. Moreover, the mild Mongolian features: parted hair down the middle, scanty beard and moustache gave Lepcha men a somewhat "effeminate" look. The honest eyes of the Lepcha reinforced his image as the 'simple contended child of the forest' who had hearty laughs at the 'comic side of things' (Waddell, 1900:91-94).

Florence Donaldson also writes Lepchas are the original inhabitants of Sikkim and that they are 'a most interesting race'. She too, like other writers, portrays the Lepchas as 'gentle' and 'peace-loving' people conquered repeatedly by hill tribes surrounding them. She gives General G. B. Mainwaring the credit for saving the 'rich and beautiful' language of the Lepchas from probable extinction. She says that the Tibetans had almost entirely destroyed Lepcha literature. The customs of the Lepchas were seen as dying out and their traditions rapidly being forgotten. She laments how the once free and independent Lepchas had become the poorest people in the mountainous country of Sikkim and it was from the Lepchas that the 'coolie class' was being drawn (Donaldson, 1900: 40).

For Percy Brown too, the Lepcha was essentially a 'child of nature' a 'creature of forest' a 'jungle-man' who was fond of birds and flowers and beasts. Like other writers he also says that the Lepchas had a mild and retiring disposition and were 'extremely superstitious'. The actions of the Lepchas were to a large extent influenced by signs and omens. He believed that there can be no one more entertaining than a Lepcha while taking a tour in Sikkim. He says that the Lepchas had profound knowledge of jungle-lore. He observes that the Lepchas are under severe threat of dying out because of the introduction of cultivation and clearing of forests. To add to the plight of the Lepchas, they were being outnumbered and driven out by the Nepali and other materialistic Himalayan tribes. He writes that, out of the 60,000 population in Sikkim only 8,000 were Lepchas (Brown and Townend, 1944: 4-5).

John Morris in his *Living with the Lepchas* writes that in Sikkim the Lepchas, whom he had heard were the original inhabitants, were 'rapidly dying out'. He describes the Lepchas as shy and retiring people. He had found the Lepchas 'very charming' and 'cheerful'. He says that on a personal level he would feel sorry to see the Lepchas disappear (Morris,1938: 8: 275). However, towards the end of his book he writes that his departure from Sikkim was a 'return into civilization'.

Geoffrey Gorer writes that European travelers in the accounts of their journeys to Sikkim and Tibet show great unanimity in referring to Lepchas as 'fairies' or 'elves' or 'woodland folk'. He says that it varies according to the personal fantasy and self-consciousness of the writers. As for other Europeans who have a lengthier stay and prolonged contact with the Lepchas, they have considered the chief qualities of Lepchas to be their 'mildness' and 'truthfulness' with emphasis (Gorer, 2005: 249).

The Earl of Ronaldshay was of the opinion that the Lepchas were like gnomes that one would find in enchanted forests. Their clothes were likened to that of a woodland elf (Morris, 1938: 38). When John Morris asked J.A. Graham to give an opinion on the Lepchas vis-a-vis other communities J.A. Graham opined that he personally liked the Lepchas. He goes on to talk about his Lepcha servant Changzhi and says his distinct characteristics were 'honesty and truthfulness'. Changzhi had been working for Graham for 25 years and there was not one instance of theft or that of lying. Even when he would disobey Graham, he says that Changzhi disobeyed him in certain cases as he thought that delaying something or not doing something was in the interest of Mr. Graham. He says that exceptions are open for consideration as some Lepchas might not be as sincere and trustworthy as Changzhi was. If a European failed to trust a Lepcha it was generally because of the Lepchas being drunk. The other characteristic of the Lepchas was their generosity and charitable nature. Lepchas depended on the forests for roots and fruits as their agricultural implements were primitive. These roots and fruits were procured by the labour of their hands. Lepchas were interdependent as they lived an isolated life so this motivated or 'encouraged the gospel of sharing, the Lepchas shared everything'. A group by the name of 'Young Men's Society' had been initiated by Graham Homes. This group aimed to develop social awareness among the Lepcha youths. Discussions on societal issues were held in its meetings. This group was not a very strictly formal kind of society but was more like a casual gathering where Lepchas would come and share their views with each

other on different issues. In one of the meetings the topic was debt and its causes among the Lepchas. One among the gathered was of the view that the cause was their stomachs. This man said that in olden days, before the framing of the forest rules which in his view was against the Lepchas, their fathers used to bring food from the forests. But now that the times had changed, they had to buy food. When their friends were in need of food they could not refuse to share and as a consequence the food stocks got depleted before the new harvests. What followed was that the Lepchas had to take the food supplies from the *mahajan's* [2] shop at high rates of interest. The Lepchas, before they could realise it, had already become slaves for life as they could not pay off their debts. What the Lepchas did was that they sold their lands to the more 'thrifty Nepalis at a ridiculously low price'. Government rules against Lepchas selling land to other communities were not in place. Graham also mentions that after their contact with the Nepalis, the Lepchas had learned quite a lot about tilling lands. Another difference that Graham points out between the Lepchas and the Nepalis is that Lepchas were generally more carefree and easier going. In another meeting of the 'Young Men's Society' one simple instance was discussed: the reason why Lepchas were poor was that the size of their cooking utensil used while travelling was much bigger than that of the Nepalis who used to carry a smaller vessel sufficient for one individual. Another cause for the poverty of the Lepchas was their superstitions. Livestock had to be sacrificed to cure illness or in order to ward off evil spirits. Even if they did not have the animals, they would make a pledge to sacrifice it when they were in a position to do so (Morris, 1938:38-41).

A.C. Campbell in his article "On the Tribes around Darjeeling" clearly believes that the British Government and the Ethnological Society of London had other interests with regard to Asiatic tribes; interests other than just studying the size of their skulls, or comparing their languages, for the objective of systematic classification. He is of the opinion that it was necessary for the British government to acquire knowledge of the tribes along with their 'idiosyncrasies' as the British rule expanded. Campbell is certain that without the proper knowledge of the tribes, administrative functions could not be performed at an optimum level. Without this, the power to protect life and property in peace and prosperity would be severely limited. He considers that the role of the Ethnological Society of London is of great value, or in his own words

‘instrumental in disseminating’ information related to tribes to the Government (Campbell, 1869a:145).

In another article of A.C. Campbell titled “On the Lepchas” which can be read in conjunction with his article “On the Tribes around Darjeeling” he has given a detailed account of the Limboos. Campbell at the outset says that he studied the Limboos in order to help facilitate better governance and make things easier for the British officials involved thereof. Important matters and considerations which would affect a British officer’s dealings and communication with the ‘wild tribes’ during the officer’s stay were to be taken care of and Campbell sought to do just that by studying the Limboos and the Lepchas (Campbell,1869b: 143).

Campbell gives credit to W. W. Hunter, an official of the Bengal Civil Service for his works, *The Annals of Rural Bengal* and *A Comparative Dictionary of Non-Aryan Languages.* Campbell is of the opinion that these works would be of great help and use for British officials, traders, missionaries and others living among these tribes. He says that the study of the ‘wild tribes’ in all their tempers and peculiarities would always be rewarded with success. Especially, to the ‘civilised man’ who gives himself to the interests of his ‘savage fellow creatures’. He says that he himself undertook the task of studying the tribes in and around the District of Darjeeling where he was stationed for twenty-two years and that the foundation of his successful tenure was made by studying the ‘wild tribes’ (Campbell, 1869b:143-144).

Campbell believed that the Lepchas were the most interesting and pleasing of the tribes in and around Darjeeling. Lepchas were the first to join the British upon their arrival in Darjeeling. The Europeans liked the Lepchas and continued to do the same and Lepchas on their part were the ones who were the most ‘disposed to mix freely with the Europeans’. The Lepchas did not have any recorded history, nor any documentation of events that they were a part of even though they had their own language script. Campbell says that the Lepchas were ‘really amiable’ and their temperament distinctively ‘cheerful’. Lepchas were seen to be possessing an amount of ‘intelligence’ and ‘rational curiosity’ which was lacking amongst Bhootias, Limboos, Murmis and Gurungs. These distinctions led to the Lepchas finding favour with the Europeans. The plain dwelling natives were considered to be ‘uninquiring’ when compared with the Lepchas. Campbell goes on to write that Lepchas were very

‘honest’ and that there were no instances of theft among them. At times a quick loss of temper was seen to be followed by reconciliation and forgiveness. Lepchas were observed to have shown great unanimity for ordinary social activities like eating, drinking and talking but in cases of putting up a resistance to oppression or uniting for carrying out trade and industry they lacked the confidence. Lepchas would rather flee bad government (Campbell,1869b:145-150).

Lepchas are described as ‘ready enough’ to lodge complaints against one another before the magistrate for assault and offences. However, Campbell writes that they preferred to submit to arbitration and settle disputes with mutual concessions. He also mentions G.B. Mainwaring who had been promoted to the rank of Major. Under the auspices of ‘Asiatic Society of Calcutta’ G.B. Mainwaring had been working to compile a Lepcha dictionary. Mainwaring’s work was being funded by the Bengal Government. Campbell is of the opinion that this work would be of great value and help for the British to get ‘thoroughly acquainted’ with the concerned tribe. His first contact with the Lepchas was at the frontiers of Nepal and Sikkim, more specifically at ‘Oontoo’. He mentions that the Lepchas had fled Sikkim due to the assassination of their leader who held the position of the prime minister in the court of the Sikkimese Raja. The succeeding leader of Lepchas had with a large following fled towards ‘Oontoo’ causing havoc as they travelled through Sikkim, plundering and destroying adversaries of the former leader. ‘Oontoo’ was an impenetrable mountain tract; nevertheless, the Lepchas were pursued by the Sikkimese Raja. The Nepalese gave Lepchas sanctuary declaring ‘Oontoo’ as an integral part of Nepalese territory. Campbell was commissioned along with Colonel Lloyd to investigate and report the matter as all disputes regarding land and territory between the Sikkimese and the Nepalese were to be handled by the British as an implication of a treaty made between the British, Sikkimese and Nepalese. The final decision on these issues rested with the British (Campbell,1869b: 150-151:153).

Article III of the treaty of ‘Titaliya (1817)’ stated that the Sikkimese Raja will ‘refer to the arbitration of the British Government any dispute or question that may arise between his subjects and those of Nepal or any other neighbouring state and to abide by the decision of the British Government’ (Moktan, 2004: 4).

Mainwaring writes that the coming of the Europeans was the first real blow that the Lepchas received. He says that A. C. Campbell succeeded in persuading every foreign tribe and people to come and settle in Darjeeling after he was appointed as the Superintendent of the Darjeeling District. Lepchas who did not have a system of paper currency were introduced to the system of paying ground rent. The 'open warm-hearted spirits', 'free sons of the forest', 'lords of the soil', 'hearty yeoman of the land', were reduced to coolies. The Lepchas who were seen as having an 'overflowing generous character' had now become the 'slave of slaves' and 'servants of servants'. He writes that the Lepcha language was the official language under Colonel Lloyd but it was soon replaced by Hindoostani. Tibetans and Bhutanese had been given patronage by the British. Advisors and councilors in the administrative setup were chosen from these communities. Lepchas on the other hand were considered to be 'unfashionable' (Mainwaring, 1876: xii-xiv).

Mainwaring wonders why Campbell had appointed a Lepcha interpreter for himself in Darjeeling. He wonders how a Lepcha who could not read and write could be an interpreter. Mainwaring had asked Campbell to preserve the language of the Lepchas as well as the people but to his utter dissatisfaction Campbell's reply was cold and harsh. Campbell had told Mainwaring that the language and the people could both be damned as long as he gained money. Campbell had further issued an enactment stating that the forest lands of Darjeeling were to be conferred on all who might apply for it. The terms of this enactment were that the person who applied for it did not need to pay rent for the initial five years and after the completion of the five years, only a nominal fee was to be paid as rent. This 'inviting' deal had attracted people from all the neighboring areas to Darjeeling (Mainwaring, 1876: xviii).

Mainwaring says that Darjeeling was the 'Garden of Eden' blessed with transcendent loveliness and it had to have been most diligently preserved, protected from the 'desecrating hand of man'. He praises the language of the Lepchas as an *Ursprache.* [3] The 'natural innocence and purity' and the 'sway' of the Lepchas should have been upheld. He clearly states that the main purpose of writing a grammar of the Lepchas was obviously to preserve the language which would in turn ameliorate the Lepchas (Mainwaring, 1876: xvii-xxi).

The accounts of different colonial personnel discussed are both positive and negative in terms of the representation of the native Lepchas. While Mainwaring seems to be all for the Lepchas, as a lexicographer he is not exempt from being a facilitator of colonial control and power. These discourses display what Foucault calls "systems of dispersion" (Foucault, 1972: 37) between statements that make up a "discursive formation" (Foucault, 1972: 38). So colonial discourse in the context of the Lepchas is an amalgam of both seemingly favourable and biased statements.

Orientalist discourse presents itself as a form of knowledge which is "superior" and at the same time different from the knowledge that the people concerned have of themselves. Ronald Inden has identified two schools of Indian orientalism or Indology: both posited India as Europe's opposite, but one emphasized the positivist, empiricist, materialist concerns relevant to matters of power, while the other gave stress to romantic, spiritualist, and idealist considerations that had a distinct thrust of their own (Inden, 1986: 410-411).

The latter mode of representation was operational in the British knowledge of the indigenous inhabitants of the hill stations like Darjeeling, Shimla, Ootacamund (Kennedy, 1991: 58).

A.R. Foning in his book *Lepcha My Vanishing Tribe* at times sounds like the other British administrators and subscribes to the same formulaic discourse of Lepchas being shy and timid (Foning, 1987: 163). His comparison of Lepcha oral stories with Biblical events points towards his inclination to look for cultural parallels in a setting that would be more comprehensible to the British. He compares the Great Flood/ Deluge in the Lepcha folkore with the Great Flood in the Bible, commonly known as the story of Noah's Ark among the Christians. Further Foning also draws analogies between Mount Ararat and Mount Tendong, the hill where Lepchas took refuge from the great flood. For Noah, it was Mount Ararat where his ark finally found land. The Tower of Babel is also discussed by Foning and he says that the Lepcha analogy is '*Tallong Fityok Tungrong'*. The Garden of Eden in the Bible becomes Mayel Lyang 'hidden paradise' in Lepcha. He does not just draw parallels with Biblical events but also brings in Greek mythology. Mount Olympus is compared to Mount Kanchenjunga. In other words, Mount Kanchenjunga is to Lepchas what Mount Olympus was to the Greeks (Foning, 1987: 114-121).

One cannot wonder whether Foning too had internalised the gaze of the orientalist scholars or administrators with eyes which looked at everything forming a binary: West versus East, civilised versus savage, superior versus inferior. The ironical part is Foning himself mentions that beside the imitation of the Tibetan way of life, the Lepchas were now being swept by other trends too. These trends were 'the cheap imitation of Western culture' (Foning, 1987: 302). This involved wearing European clothes, celebrating birthdays with birthday cakes, quartets and band groups akin to the Beatles playing at European styled weddings with brides having flashy veils and coronet boots. Foning writes that it had become rather difficult to put aside this display of supposed sophistication and superior culture. In A.R. Foning's own words 'we have become and have converted ourselves into sort of quasi-Europeans' (Foning,1987: 303).

However, one must concede that Foning's account is indeed invaluable. It was his book with its very thoughtful title "My Vanishing Tribe" that heralded the awakening of the now resurgent Lepchas. It is his book that still holds the first position among mandatory books to be read in Lepcha studies. The year of publication (1987) was also such that it coincided with Gorkhaland movement at its height under Subhas Ghising.

T.B. Subba and Prem Poddar have suggested that there is a trend which can be referred to as 'home grown orientalism' (Poddar and Subba, 1991:78). The received dominant discourse of the West is assimilated without really challenging it. This discourse continues to carry forward its hegemony in imposing the same values and weaknesses on their objects of inquiry which are thereby rendered marginal. The same kind of mindset which the Orientalist had can be seen in works of writers like R.N. Thakur, A.K. Das and Veena Bhasin. Thakur in his *Himalayan Lepchas* at the very outset says that 'a knowledge of the races, tribes, and culture is a pre-requisite for an efficient administrative system and strategy of development'. [4] Thakur is critiqued by T. B. Subba and Prem K. Poddar for not distancing himself from the State as a scholar. Thakur's objectivity as a scholar has been questioned. T.B. Subba and Prem Poddar say that 'the project of orientalising the Orient is repeated over and over in the orchestrated activity of tribal ethnography on the Himalayas'. T.B. Subba and Prem Poddar have highlighted other instances of home-grown orientalism in R. N. Thakur's book. They argue how Thakur describes Lepchas in a manner similar to

that of the colonial writers. They state that culture or cultural traits that differ with the ethnographer's is not considered to be rational or meaningful just as in the case of the colonial ethnographers (Poddar and Subba, 1991: 79).

Subba and Poddar also identify A. K. Das to be following the same oriental gaze of Campbell, Hooker and Mainwaring to mention a few who have written about Lepchas. The services of Lepchas were sought by them as 'servants', 'porters', 'plant collectors' and as 'companions' and 'subjects'. Subba and Poddar write that Lepchas were rewarded with epithets like 'amiable' and 'cheerful'. They reiterate Said's argument that an author's involvement as a human subject in his own circumstances in the production of knowledge cannot be ignored. The Orientalists viewed the orient as Europeans and Americans first and as individuals second. In a similar fashion Das also looks upon the Lepchas of West Bengal through the eyes of a Calcuttan first and as an anthropologist second. This is evident when Das writes "lanes and bye-lanes are hardly visible in the Lepcha villages"; "No planned drainage system has developed in the villages but the hilly tract does not pose any drainage problem". 'Jhoras', 'Simsarmul' and 'Manes' have been translated by him as 'waterfalls', 'water-logged areas' and 'Memorial Pillars' respectively. If Das had not been looking upon the 'Lepchas of West Bengal' from the view point of one belonging to the Bengali community who form the ruling class, he would not look for lanes and bye lanes nor for proper drainage irrespective of whether the hills were inhabited by Lepchas or not. He would not have translated streams as waterfalls, marshy lands as water logged areas nor Buddhist temples as memorial pillars. The orientalist dogma that the 'Other' cannot represent themselves, they must be represented runs deep in these writings as well as in the writings of Veena Bhasin. Subba and Poddar mention that since this has occurred 'at the level of episteme and the mindset' it is not just anthropology as discipline which has been deriving representational strategies from the Orientalists. Historians, sociologists, and geographers have not proved themselves to be any different when compared with anthropologists in terms of their episteme and mindset (Poddar and Subba, 1991:79-83).

The attitude of racial superiority induced the British to define the Lepchas as racially inferior and 'primitive' justifying their domination. This superior stance and the catchphrase 'white's man burden' was also used to justify policies of the British that took over the Lepcha lands and forest. The perception that Lepchas had to be civilized

led to the conversion of Lepchas to Christianity. Lepchas were also held back in terms of access to administration. The British stigmatised the Lepchas declaring they were only fit for jobs of servants and for other menial jobs. The identity constructed by the hegemonic rule became a strong factor for the marginalisation of the Lepchas. Lepchas did not enjoy political freedom or economic rights (Das, 2010: 228).

Dennis Lepcha writes that Lepchas were under the hegemony of not just the British but the Tibetans, Bhutanese, Nepalese and the Bengalis too (Lepcha, 2019: 126). The Tibetan Chogyal Phuntsog Namgyal had used a hyphenated term '*Lho-Mon-Tsong Sum'* to avert the consolidation of separate identity of the various communities who were not in favour of the political domination of the Tibetans. *Lho* stands for Bhutanese, *Mon* for Lepchas, while *Tsong* denotes Limboos.

In the 1930s Ne-Bu-La movement was launched by the Nepalis. Ne- representing the Nepalis, Bu- representing the Bhutias and La- representing the Lepchas or rather 'Lapche'. Tapan K. Das writes that this movement was launched to serve the interests of the 'Nepalese'. In 1980s another similar kind of configuration was put forward by Subash Ghising, i.e. 'Lepcha, Bhutia, Nepali, all are Gorkhali'. These racial and ethnic configurations were instruments to serve the interests of particular ethnic groups, more specifically for the British Crown, Tibetans and the Nepalis. These identity configurations and identification of Lepchas tend to hide the actual quarrel over resources and land among these communities (Das, 2010: 229).

As numbers play an important role in governance, census takes an important place in this regard. Lepchas were found to be very weak demographically by various census reports. The demands of a minor population like the Lepchas were easily supressed. However, Dennis Lepcha argues that the census reports are erroneous and not reliable, that it does not reflect the actual Lepcha population. He claims that census officials in charge of the survey do not go to far off places where many Lepchas are residing (Lepcha, 2019: 104).

For the collection of revenue, the British altered the land-holding pattern. Lands were graded and demarcated. Land rents were higher for *panikhet* (wet land) and lower for *sukhakhet* (dry land). The traditional shifting cultivation of the Lepchas could not be carried on as a result. Poll tax for male members and cattle were also collected by the British. The lands being demarcated as 'reserve forests', 'grazing lands', 'tea

plantations', 'cinchona plantations' and 'mission compound' severely restricted the Lepchas their right of land use (Das, 2010: 231).

As the demography of the hills underwent changes due to immigration from neighbouring areas, the attention of British administrators as well as religious leaders had been diverted to other communities. Many Nepalis were converted by the missionaries. As the number of Nepali converts grew, church services that used to be conducted in Lepcha were now conducted in Nepali. Tapan K. Das opines that "colonial indulgence to the Nepalese had a politically motivated design" (Das, 2010: 240). He says that the British were always aware of the fact that Lepchas are the natives of the land. Specially after the Mutiny of 1857, the British opted for policies to secure loyalties of new groups to consolidate their foothold in India. It was the British who gave the nod to the Nepalis to acquire lands. The Nepalis had been characterised as the people of martial race. The British political agents were satisfied to have a large number of people faithful towards them. The British were never confident about the loyalty of the Lepchas even though many Lepchas had been converted to Christianity. Tapan K. Das writes that the British assumption was "only the native Lepchas could be the freedom-seekers against the British rule not the foreigners like Nepalese". He also says that attempts were also made to counterpoise Nepalese and the Lepchas to complete the task of building a colony. The labelling of Gorkhas/ Nepalis as a 'martial race' and Lepchas as 'primitive' and 'timid' was all part of the colonial policy to consolidate the British Raj in India and more particularly the Darjeeling hills (Das, 2010: 241).

Conclusion:

Colonial discourses on Lepcha identity all seem to present Lepchas as a docile, shy, accommodating people. Sometimes, these accounts come off as patronising, often having the effect of infantilising and undermining the Lepchas as a peace-loving people who would rather suffer in silence than confront their adversaries. However, it cannot be denied that these discourses are very useful in understanding the Lepchas and their dynamics with the British administrators. The Lepchas were looked upon by colonial personnel from a position of authority who felt they had to speak for the Lepchas. The Lepchas thus found themselves shut out from avenues of self-representation, unable to speak for themselves. Moreover, analyzing these discourses

help in identifying generalisations and loose assumptions in regard to Lepcha identity as being motivated by administrative and other interests, rather than sheer goodwill. Lepchas in contemporary times have dismantled certain generalizing identity categories that mark them as shy, quiet, passive and so on. While the West Bengal Mayel Lyang Lepcha Development Board (WBMLLDB) has been able to secure many benefits for the Lepcha community from the government of West Bengal, one cannot deny the fact that showing special favour to this community has been helpful for the ruling dispensation. The official discourse considered the demand for a separate state of Gorkhaland apparently threatening 'peace and stability' in West Bengal, while the agitators had the strong conviction that their recognition was a rightful demand. The Government showing concern for the Lepchas as distinct from the greater Gorkha populace has often become a source of concern in the Darjeeling Hills. There have been instances where Lepchas have dissented against the ruling party's (GJMM) diktats during the Gorkhaland movement of 2013 with Bimal Gurung leading the masses in the Darjeeling Hills. The GJMM (Gorkha Jan Mukti Morcha) had called for an indefinite strike from 3rd of August 2013 with the demand of Gorkhaland as its prime agenda. Even though the hills witnessed a political lockdown, Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee took a very shrewd step by deciding to go to Kalimpong. Soon after her arrival at Bagdogra airport not only did she urge the GJMM leaders to withdraw the bandh (general strike) but also urged them to start the developmental activities through Gorkhaland Territorial Administration (GTA). Mamata Banerjee had made a promise two years back to the Lepchas that a development board would be set up for the same. The formation of Mayel Lyang Lepcha Development Board was notified in a gazette few months prior to the visit when the friendship between Trinamool Congress and Gorkha Jan Mukti Morcha had hit a low in January because of several issues related to GTA (The Economic Times 2013).

Lepchas in thousands had already been waiting for the Chief Minister's arrival at Kalimpong. However, a section of the community under the banner of All India Lepcha Association, opposed the CM's visit and started a relay hunger strike protesting against the state's "Divide and Rule" policy. GJMM on the other hand had given the call for *Ghar Bhitra Janta* (public inside home) in the hills on 2nd and 3rd of September 2013 in addition to the indefinite strike. Lepchas poured out onto the

streets of Kalimpong despite Bimal Gurung's orders against the same. GJJM had to face two major setbacks. Kolkata high court had admitted a Public Interest Litigation challenging the indefinite strike and *Ghar Bhitra Janta*, the two techniques of the movement under GJJM, were appealed to be considered as illegal. In Delhi, the union Home Minister stated that there would be no tripartite talks unless the strike was withdrawn (*The Economic Times* 2013). These turns of events took the wind off the sails of GJJM. The indefinite strike was called off on September 10th 2013.

There has also been a lot of antagonism between the Lepcha community and other communities who have alleged that Lepchas are against the Gorkhaland movement and issue. All this no doubt has given a lot of leverage to the ruling party to capitalise on these differences as it keeps on deferring the dreams of many Gorkhaland aspirants. Lepchas have been participating in all the *bandhs* (strikes) and *aandolans* (agitations) and also suffering along with every other community every time the Hills have been rocked by brutal state repression. However, the question whether the Lepchas are participating willingly or unwillingly will be clarified in the next chapter. The Lepchas have only been trying to do away with the age-old shackles of identity politics, formulated by the colonial discourse and later by the State, one that has tried to pacify them in more ways than one. By taking the Lepcha community under its wings, as it were, the State has not merely done a simple favour to the community respecting its attachment to and value for the land. Ironically, one sees a continuation of the infantilisation and the patronising attitude attached to the colonial discourse in the State's approach with the Lepcha community. The State sometimes poses as a higher authority validating the autochthonous claims of the Lepchas, humoring them, keeping them perpetually obliged to the State. It is interesting how the Lepchas, on their part, have named the Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee "Kinchum Darmit", a goddess of good fortune, as a gesture of gratitude and acknowledgement.

The Lepcha community has come a long way in asserting its identity and history as being intimately linked to the land, and has even managed to garner some amount of State patronage. This patronage, of course, has its own downside. However, they still have a long way to go in order to negotiate identity politics in the Hills where ethnicity and identity have a crucial role to play in shaping the present and the future. The Lepcha community has no doubt been living with disadvantages due to their demographic minority. To be specific, according to the 2011 census, the Lepcha

population in West Bengal stands at 33,962 (Thirty-three thousand nine hundred sixty-two). Another consequence of being a demographic minority is the depletion of their animistic practices and the diminishing numbers of Lepcha language speakers, among others.

Against all odds, the community still shows signs of perseverance and hope, pursuing their relationship with their land with a determination that is commendable. The Indigenous Lepcha Tribal Association and the West Bengal Mayel Lyang Lepcha Development Board together are working for shaping the present Lepcha youths as well as the coming generations to build them up with a holistic knowledge of their culture and identity. The gap between the Lepcha Buddhists and the Lepcha Christians is gradually being bridged especially because of the of West Bengal Mayel Lyang Lepcha Development Board. The housing scheme that the Mayel Lyang Lepcha Development Board oversees has been one strong point of unifying the Lepchas. The resurgent Lepchas finally seem to have realised that "colonialism never gives anything away for nothing".

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[1] The word 'Lapche' was given by the Nepalis meaning vile speakers. It is a derogatory term. The word Lepcha is the anglicised version (Lepcha, 2019:30). Scholars like Tshering (1971) and Foning (1987) opine that the term is the corrupt version of a Lepcha word 'lap-chyo,' which means an elevated place for resting the load of firewood or fodder (Gowloog, 2013:19).

[2] The term *Mahajan* refers to traders and business men.

[3]

Any hypothetical extinct and unrecorded language reconstructed from groups of related recorded langu ages.

For example, Germanic is an *Ursprache* reconstructed by comparison of English, Dutch, German, the S candinavian languages, and Gothic; IndoEuropean is an *Ursprache* reconstructed by comparison of the Germanic group, Latin, Sanskrit, etc.

Collins English Dictionary – Complete and Unabridged, 12th Edition 2014: Harper Collins Publishers.

[4] Thakur, R.N. (1988). *Himalayan Lepchas*. New Delhi: Archives Publishers. p1.

Chapter IV

Lepchas and Identity Politics in the Darjeeling Hills

This chapter has for its focus issues related to Lepcha ethnicity and identity as it is being played out in contemporary times. The chapter seeks to explore how the issues of ethnicity and identity have been deployed by the Lepcha community for the attainment of specific political goals. Organisations like the Indigenous Lepcha Tribal Association (ILTA) and West Bengal Mayel Lyang Lepcha Development Board (WBMLLDB) and their role in articulating and spearheading the activities of the Lepcha community will be discussed in detail. This chapter will also discuss the issue of identity in the context of electoral and democratic politics. The role and relationship of the state of West Bengal with the Lepchas will form a crucial part of the discussion. The Lepcha community is one of the first communities in the Darjeeling hills to have a development board sanctioned by the State government. It goes without saying that this has placed them in a relationship which is not inside the comfort zone with other communities who have followed suit and rallied for similar development boards for themselves as well. The Gorkhaland movement and the demand for a separate state for Gorkhas have also influenced the Lepcha community to re-assess their selfhood and identity vis-à-vis the greater Gorkha identity.

Lepchas under the colonial state lost resources like land. The plantation economy was not able to ensure economic wellbeing for the Lepchas. Lepchas did not have any rights to safeguard their political interests. As Lepchas were also considered "effeminate" they were deemed unfit to hold any public office. The Lepchas had no part in the affairs of the colonial state as Lepchas were denied access to both political and religious hierarchy. Cultural markers of the Lepchas were also distorted by the colonial rule. The official status of the Lepcha language was lost. A language shift occurred with the state recognising Nepali Language as the medium of instruction and communication in the hills. The native religion of the Lepchas was also severely put under threat almost to the point of extinction. Conversions to Christianity led to a split between Lepcha Buddhists and Lepcha Christians. This religious division weakened the Lepcha community in both political and economic fronts (Das, 2010: 246).

The role of the post-colonial state continues to be as catastrophic as colonial rule for the Lepchas. The partisan attitude of the state is manifested as the Lepchas were

included as well as excluded from the list of primitive tribes without any fundamental changes in their economic status. The state and its efforts with regard to development of infrastructure so as to improve the economy are not conducive to Lepchas. With the absence of class consciousness among the Lepchas, ethnic identity was buttressed for survival (Das, 2010: 247).

The Lepchas have generally been a close-knit community and have tried to resolve communal issues and disputes in an orderly manner, as evidenced by the *shezums* or councils that were instituted as early as 1925. The *shezum* or the 'council system' as a social body sought to look after issues related to the community. This *shezum* worked on a three-tier system of governance, comprising of the village council of elders at the base, elders of villages in the middle, and the council at the topmost level (Lepcha, 2013: 196).

The Lepcha Association or *Rong Mutanchi Shezum* was established in the year 1925. It was rejuvenated from the year 1972. It was established with an aim to spread consciousness about the Lepcha language, script and traditions. The association also wanted to get Lepcha language recognized as the official language of Darjeeling and to have the All India Radio, Kurseong, to broadcast programmes in the Lepcha language too. The members of the Shezum are said to have gone around villages requesting Lepchas to declare Lepcha, and not Nepali, as their mother tongue during the 1971 census. This was one significant effort the Shezum members had put in towards the realisation of their objectives (Gowloog, 2013: 20).

The Lepcha association later came to be called as Indigenous Lepcha Tribal Association (ILTA) from 8th March 2004. It is affiliated with Akhil Bharatiya Adivasi Vikash Parishad, a national level tribal organisation. ILTA has its registered office in Lower Bom Busty, Kalimpong. The Association in terms of its structural organisation is made up of three parts; they are *Kyong Shezum, Thoom Shezum and Poom Shezum* representing and operating at the village level, village cluster/block level, and district level respectively. The three tiers of the organisation are linked together both in terms of functions and structural organisation. Executive members of all the three tiers are democratically elected from the Lepcha community (Molommu, 2015: 17).

ILTA's primary objective is to work for the overall wellbeing of the Lepchas be it by preserving Lepcha culture or safeguarding the basic rights as citizens of India. ILTA

aims to provide financial support to Lepchas who are below the poverty line. The preservation of Lepcha language has been one of the top priorities of ILTA. ILTA aims to promote Lepcha language and literature by publishing Lepcha periodicals, journals and books to promote Lepcha culture. Lepcha language was the 'Official Language' of the Darjeeling hills until 1911. There has been continuous effort by ILTA since the 1920s to introduce Lepcha language in schools and colleges of Darjeeling hills. [1] Even when top officials and the Government was approached by the Lepchas nothing seemed to work out in favour of the Lepchas. However, ILTA came up with an alternative of setting up Lepcha night schools in various Lepcha dominated villages. To encourage the preservation and use of Lepcha Language ILTA has been conferring an award to the best Lepcha night school since 1996. This award goes by the name 'Lepcha Language and Literary Award'. This award is also given to individuals who have made significant contributions towards the development of Lepcha language and literature. The award includes a citation and a cash prize of sixteen thousand rupees. The most eminent news magazine of the Lepchas is 'Aachuley' which is published by WBMLLDB, Kalimpong quarterly. Among others, the annual 'King *Gaeboo Aachyok* Birth Anniversary News Magazine' is also an equally celebrated one (Molommu, 2015:17).

The ILTA has been reviving Lepcha traditions and customs, various cultural programmes and rituals are being publicly celebrated. Celebrations like the birth anniversary of King Gaeboo Aachyok, Aathing Sando Tshering Tamsang Traditional Lepcha Archery Contest, Renyoo Azem Rebecca Namchu songs and dance competition have been the pertinent ones. The Lepcha museum located at Lower Bom Busty in Kalimpong is also being looked after by ILTA. The museum has many artefacts of historical importance. Kitchen utensils that are no longer in use are also displayed in the museum. Musical instruments also make a part of the items in the museum. Booklets for rituals death and marriages published by ILTA are also being widely used while performing the rituals. Shera Pandi Molommu opines that this museum showcases the 'dexterity and ingenuity of the early Lepchas' (Molommu, 2015:18).

The ILTA has also been working tirelessly to revive the old religious practices like Bonism and Munism. Lepcha shamans are called *Bongthings* (male) and *Muns* (female). As a result of Tibetan rule and British Raj, the number of *Bongthings* and

Muns declined drastically. It has been employing the few older *Bongthings* and *Muns* to train and encourage apprentices. Various old religious festivals have been given due attention by ILTA. *Tendong Lho Rum Faat* is celebrated on 26th August in Kalimpong annually. This event symbolises paying homage to Mount Tendong. Mount Tendong is located and Namchi, the administrative capital of South District, Sikkim. In Lepcha folklore it is said that there was once a great flood that submerged all the land except Mount Tendong which is where the Lepchas took refuge. It is interesting to note that since 1997 the Government of Sikkim has declared August 8th as a state public holiday on the occasion of *Tendong Lho Rum Faat*. Other festivals that are given much importance include *Chu Lho Rum Faat* and *Muk Zik Ding Rum Faat*. In Lepcha *chu* means the Himalayan peaks that has pure white snow and Rum means God. In Lepcha religious belief it is held that when a Lepcha dies the spirit returns to the respective *chu* from where it came to the earthly world. It is believed that every clan has its own *chu*. In addition to this each clan also has its own sacred lake. *Chu Lho Rum Faat* is celebrated annually in October before the winter sets in. As for *Muk Zik Ding Rum,* this festival is an offering to mother nature. *Muk* in Lepcha stands for greenery. It is celebrated in the month of February (Molommu, 2015:18).

In terms of protecting the land of the Lepchas, ILTA at times has even bought Lepcha lands to ensure that its ownership remains with the Lepchas. The British officials had formulated a land settlement law around 1835. This law prohibited transfer of Lepcha and Bhutia land to other communities or outsiders. However, this law could not check the transfer or selling of Lepcha land. ILTA has been spreading awareness about the importance of land and assisting the Lepchas to secure proper documents. ILTA in a way showed that its role and influence was not confined to the Darjeeling hills only when it took a stand for the Lepchas of Sikkim. ILTA stood in solidarity with the Lepchas of Dzongu (Sikkim) and the members of ACT (Affected Citizens of Teesta) against the construction of dams. These dams were a part of a mega hydroelectric project of the Indian Government. A rally was organised on 14th April 2008 which originated in Kalimpong and ended at Dzongu, the holy land of the Lepchas. Many young Lepchas were at the forefront of the movement against the construction of dams. Members of ILTA even held a ‘sit in’ at Jantar Mantar, Delhi. The ILTA was criticised heavily by a faction of Sikkimese Lepchas who were in favour of the dams.

Despite the criticisms and hardships, four out of the proposed six hydro projects were scrapped (Molommu, 2015:18).

This *Shezum* (ILTA/ Lepcha Association) had been working with its own limited resources for the preservation and proliferation of Lepcha culture and heritage. The *Shezums* worked largely at the village level and were not very keen on political development. The need for proactive intervention in the larger political discourse of the hills led to the institution of the Indigenous Tribal Forum that sought to secure constitutional guarantees for the indigenous Lepchas. The constitution of the Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council (DGHC) in 1988, as an aftermath of Subash Ghising's demand for a separate state of Gorkhaland led to disillusionment amongst the Lepchas who felt they had no adequate representation in this new scheme of devolution of power. The fact that the Lepchas did not have a reserved seat in the Council furthered their suspicions of under-representation and urged them to press on for securing their community interests. Lepcha youths, both Buddhist and Christians alike, associated with the Lepcha Rights Movement started staging peaceful protests and demanding for a 'Lepcha Development Council' (Lepcha, 2013: 198). The Council put forward the following demands:

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 (Lepcha, 2013: 198).

The role of ILTA has been crucial in the formation of the Lepcha Development Board. The Lepchas had been pleading and expressing their plight to the West Bengal Government. Memoranda, letters, meetings with top officials, all these avenues had been explored by the Lepchas. The movement received a fillip when six Lepcha youths were rejected in the army recruitment because they could not produce a "Gorkha" or a "Sikkimese" certificate. This particular instance hurt the sentiments of the Lepchas, it was a rather painful reminder that Lepchas who are the original inhabitants of the region where facing a crisis of identity and a threat to their rights as citizens of India. This led to the initiation of Lepcha Rights Movement under the

leadership of ILTA. When petitions and *dharnas* in the subdivisions of Darjeeling hills met with no response, the protests were staged at Siliguri. Even then Lepcha voices seemed to catch no one's attention. The Lepchas had to return empty handed after September 2010. The Lepchas were not ready to give up. They started their indefinite *dharna* at Raja Subodh Mullick Square, Kolkata, on 16th August 2011. The dharna was not as effective as it was hoped to be. As days went by it started to lose steam, but it received yet another push and a new lease of life when Mahasweta Devi, an eminent social activist and writer, supported the Lepcha cause. Her voice was like the missing ingredient in the Lepcha's movement. The NGOs based in Kolkata in unison with the Lepchas took out a huge rally. It was supported by many intellectuals so that the genuine demands of the tribe could be addressed. This resulted in the Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee's announcement that a 'Lepcha Development Council' would be formed. Accordingly, the State cabinet on 5th February 2013 passed the resolution that 'Mayel Lyang Lepcha Development Board' would be set up which would have the responsibility for the socio-economic development of the Lepchas (Molommu, 2015: 18).

The Lepcha Development Board was formalised and its proposal approved in the state cabinet in 2013. While the Lepchas were excited and enthused at this development, the Gorkhaland Territorial Administration (GTA) that replaced the Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Autonomous Council was not pleased at all. The GTA called for a *bandh* to oppose the government's move. The Lepchas, on their part, organised hunger strikes to express their concerns over the welfare and security of the community.

After the formation of the West Bengal Mayel Lyang Lepcha Development Board (WBMLLDB), the Lepcha community has gained a lot of visibility in the public sphere and identity politics in the Darjeeling hills have been affected in more ways than one. Many communities in the hills have since then appealed to the State government for similar development boards. The Tamang Development Board was instituted in 2014, the Bhutia Development Board in 2015, among others. The Gorkha Jan Mukti Morcha (GJMM) alleged that the setting up of various boards was a "divide and rule" ploy by the Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee in order to weaken their Gorkhaland demand (The Telegraph 2016). In a bid to counter Mamata Banerjee's overtures, GTA announced their decision to form development boards for 19 different

communities to strengthen unity in the hills. The Lepchas thus found themselves caught in the eye of a political storm.

Colonial discourses surrounding the Lepchas that had firmly taken root, suggesting they are a "peace-loving" and "innocent lot", started to be overturned. The Lepchas and their demand for a development board made them stand out as a rather disagreeable community that threatened the demand for Gorkhaland. Discourse as a means of creating and disseminating "knowledge" that serves those in power is evident in the case of the discourse of Lepcha identity in the Darjeeling hills from the time of colonial intervention, as discussed in the previous chapter. While Lepchas were defined as a simple and peace-loving people, the praise lavished on them also limited them. The Foucauldian notion of discourse as more than a mere means of communication but a rather complex phenomenon that seeks to cater to power relations is clear in the case of the Lepchas. Spivak's postulation of the silenced subaltern who had been shunned from the possibility of self-representation is also useful in the context of the Lepcha case. In fact, scholars like Vibha Arora and Denis Lepcha have argued that the Lepchas have been rendered subaltern in their homeland because of different waves of political power that have swept over the Eastern Himalayas (Arora, 2017: 85-88, Lepcha, 2019:15). The subaltern Lepchas have over time been able to counter these generalising discourses that render them timid and shy and effect a change in their status quo as far as the visibility and voice of the community is concerned. Certain "organic intellectuals" (Arora, 2017: 90) like Lyangsong Tamsang, Sonam Tshering Lepcha and P.T. Lepcha have been identified as being instrumental in effecting this change. Moreover, discourses that termed the Lepchas as "shy, peace-loving people and happy to be close to nature" have been in a way claimed by the Lepchas themselves to justify the need for a distinct space for their security and development. The very discourses that were used to limit Lepchas have now begun to empower them, in a manner of speaking.

The colonial discourse of vanishing tribe put forward by writers like G. B. Mainwaring has now been overturned. This trope was later used by A. R. Foning in his influential book *Lepcha My Vanishing Tribe* (1987). Ironically, many Lepchas came forward and opined that Lepchas were not vanishing. Nonetheless, it was an eyeopener to the Lepchas in general. It rejuvenated the Lepcha community and urged them to work towards the preservation of their cultural heritage. Lyangsong Tamsang,

the Chairman of WBMLLDB, and one of the most prominent Lepcha figures in the Darjeeling hills declared, "People are saying that Lepchas are vanishing but I want to prove them wrong." [2]

During the course of the Gorkhaland movement (2008) the GJMM chief Bimal Gurung issued certain diktats which were insensitive towards the Lepcha community. People in the Darjeeling hills were instructed to don the traditional Nepali dress as a means of putting forward a common Nepali identity against the perceived cultural hegemony of the Bengali culture. However, this caused a lot of discomfort amongst the Lepchas who began to wonder why their own traditional dress attire and their identity were completely overlooked. This incident served as another wake up call for the Lepchas who felt that their identity and cultural heritage was threatened in the face of the larger demand for Gorkhaland. By 2011 the Lepcha Association frustrated at the lack of political representation called for all Lepchas to abstain from voting in the assembly elections of West Bengal (New Internationalist, 2011).

Mangal Singh Lepcha a respondent said "We were told to abstain from voting in the assembly elections of 2011 by the leaders (Lepcha Association) so we did not vote in that elections but I am not sure whether all the Lepchas did the same." [Author's translation]

The Government of West Bengal vide Notification no.1099-SE(EE)107-147/2010 dt.13/Nov/2013 had introduced Lepcha medium section in forty-six (46) Government primary schools in the Darjeeling hills for Lepcha Children (Lepcha, 2019:97). However, this order has not been put into effect in hills under the GTA. Due to differences in opinion between the State Government and the GTA, the Lepcha para teachers have been stuck in the middle ground in this power struggle. This particular case still has not been resolved but the Lepcha Development Board and ILTA have been supporting the para teachers financially. This has served as another huge deterrent for the Lepcha Community that could not trust GTA leaders to fulfil the aspirations of the Lepchas.

In the course of the field survey one respondent Jongmit Lepcha voiced her reservations against such a discouraging attitude towards the GTA I:

> "Forty-six Lepcha para-teachers had been appointed by the state government in different schools in the Darjeeling and Kalimpong. It was sanctioned by the

> Govt. but the GTA I did not allow us to join the allotted schools, so WBMLLDB redirected us to continue teaching in the night schools at the *Kyong* (village). Lepcha language has been side-lined because most of the schools do not have Lepcha language as a subject, all the students have to study in Nepali, English or Hindi." [Author's translation]

These developments and the GTA's highhandedness have no doubt put off the Lepchas who have started to question the very notion of democratic politics in the hills. Many of the respondents were of the opinion that even if Gorkhaland would materialise, it would not guarantee the interests of the Lepchas in any substantial way.

Andrew Lepcha, a respondent said:

> "Gorkhaland will not be able to fulfil Lepcha aspirations, first of all I am not a Gorkha. We *Rongs* (Lepchas) have our own identity, our own language, culture and tradition our own customs, why should we go and look for our identity, it is already with us. More importantly we have our own land, our own board." [Author's translation]

N. Lepcha also reiterated this bitterness against the local administration:

> "Yes, we have been marginalised politically and socially to a large extent. The coming of other communities also led to our language being side-lined. Take DGAHC (Darjeeling Gorkha Autonomous Hill Council) for example, Lepchas had no representation in it and it is the same story for other administrative set ups that followed. Though West Bengal Govt. now has given some help but still the Lepchas are at the margins. The Central Govt have given us the status of Scheduled tribes." [Author's translation]

A respondent who wished not to be named said:

> "The feeling that we are different from the Gorkhas is always there, that we are the sons of the soil, that we are the indigenous people. The names of the places are also a testimony that this is our land whether it be countryside or urban areas. Deep down there is a question that Lepchas have that is; what would happen to us if Gorkhaland is materialised?" [Author's translation]

Another respondent who wished to maintain anonymity said:

> "During the Gorkhaland agitation Lepchas were intimidated, this intimidation itself is domination." [Author's translation]

There is no denying the fact that the development board of the Lepchas has benefitted them in many ways. However, the mushrooming of the various development boards after the institution of the WBMLLDB has left the Lepchas with a bad taste in the mouth. As succinctly put forward by one of the respondents, the board is no longer enough for the security and wellbeing of the community.

M.S. Foning stated:

> "To tell you very nicely Mamata Didi has done a wonderful thing. This was during the agitation for Gorkhaland. Me and my Lepcha friends felt that so many people are demanding Scheduled Tribe status. We demanded that since we are the indigenous tribe, we must get a special status. As of now there are, I think eleven Nepali groups, demanding Scheduled Tribe status. This is why we wanted special status. So Mamata Didi gave this institution in a form of a development board. And this did help us a lot but again it was diluted because everyone got a development board. So, this was like a big joke. But we must have special status."

Therefore, there is a general concern regarding the future of the community amongst the Lepchas who seem to be happy for the development board but are also critical of the same. The mushrooming of development boards and the attendant complexities have now taken the form of a cat and mouse game between the West Bengal Government and the GTA playing upon issues of ethnicity and identity in the hills.

It is only natural for the Lepchas to question this general categorisation of sorts whereby the development boards have rendered the Lepchas as just another constituent ethnic group that together forms the Gorkha community.

Respondents have thus argued that nothing short of a special status would do justice to the Lepcha community which is so intricately tied with the history and heritage of the land. Most of the urban educated Lepchas therefore feel that they have been short-changed by the West Bengal Govt as well as GTA. On the other hand, there are those in the villages and also in the urban areas who are very happy with the development projects specifically the *Rong Lee* (Housing Scheme) and have showered generous

accolades on the Chief Minister. However, it remains to be seen how the community is going to navigate political cross currents in the hills that are determined by both the State and Central Government and the GTA.

The initiation of a self-help group among the Lepcha Women by WBMLLDB has been a success story. The self-help group is known as *Deptong*, its meaning in Lepcha language is 'together' or to be 'united'. It primarily carries out the function of a co-operative financial society. Lepcha women deposit some amount of money and the money that is deposited is circulated among the members in turns. The *Deptong* meetings are held right from the *Kyong Shezum* to all the way up to the *Poom Shezum* or in other words form the village level to the district level. The ILTA also has a youth wing.

One thing is for sure, the Lepchas have shattered some of the typical stereotypical identity categories and started to articulate their reservations and their fears in the public sphere. Since identity is fluid and not static Lepcha identity in the context of ethnic and identity politics is always in the making. Lepchas are being and becoming as they try to negotiate with the power relations, politics and life in general while trying to secure a strong foothold in their homeland.

The field work was conducted in Kalimpong district covering the areas namely, Gitdabling, Pochok, Kamzer, Lolay, Relli, Reyong, Bom Busty and the town itself. Kalimpong was a strategic location for the British missionaries and even for training native catechists.[3] Neighbouring territories of Nepal, Sikkim and Bhutan were closed lands where foreigners and European missionaries were not allowed to enter. Therefore, the hills were a contact zone "where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today" (Pratt, 1991: 34). Kalimpong was made a separate district on 14th February 2017; it was formerly a sub-division of Darjeeling district. Kalimpong as a district comprises of Kalimpong municipality and three community developmental blocks namely, Kalimpong I, Kalimpong II and Gorubathan. The town falls under the municipality while Bom Busty is a part of Kalimpong I. Relli, Lolay, Kamzer, Reyong, Gitabling and Pochok fall under Kalimpong II. The areas that fall under Kalimpong II are rural areas. The population of these areas mainly rely on agriculture.

There are of course people who have government jobs or work in private institutions and those who run businesses of their own. These areas have lately been attracting tourists with homestays and hotels that offer a pleasant get-away in the hills. Bom Busty is about three kilometres away from the town. Bom Busty is divided into lower, middle and upper Bom Busty. Bom Busty was one of the first places in Kalimpong to have Lepcha Christian converts. The oldest Church of Kalimpong namely the Bom-Self Supporting Church is located there. It is seven years older than the landmark McFarlane Memorial Church which was inaugurated on November 1, 1891. Many of the residents of Bom Busty are government employees. Some rely on agriculture too while some have opted to venture in the tourism industry by building resorts and homestays.

A sample size of fifty respondents is taken from the field. Personal interviews were conducted to collect data. As the study is community specific, purposive sampling is used. The samples are taken from urban and rural areas alike, across a varied socio-economic spectrum. These areas are well populated by Lepchas, particularly places like Bom Busty, Reyong, Pochok Kamzer and Gitabling. Out of the total fifty respondents, ten are teachers, eight among them are school teachers while two are teaching in a college and a university. Ten respondents are farmers while seven are businessmen. Eight respondents are government employees and another five are retired government employees. Two respondents work in NGOs, while two others work in private companies. Three respondents are college students and one is a university scholar. One sole respondent was unemployed while another sole respondent was a *Bongthing* (Lepcha Shaman). Few of the respondents hold Grade A government services and one respondent is a very successful businessman. Overall the respondents belong to the middle class and lower middle-class category while few of them are very poor.

Lepcha Voices from the Field: Statistical Data, Analysis and Interpretation

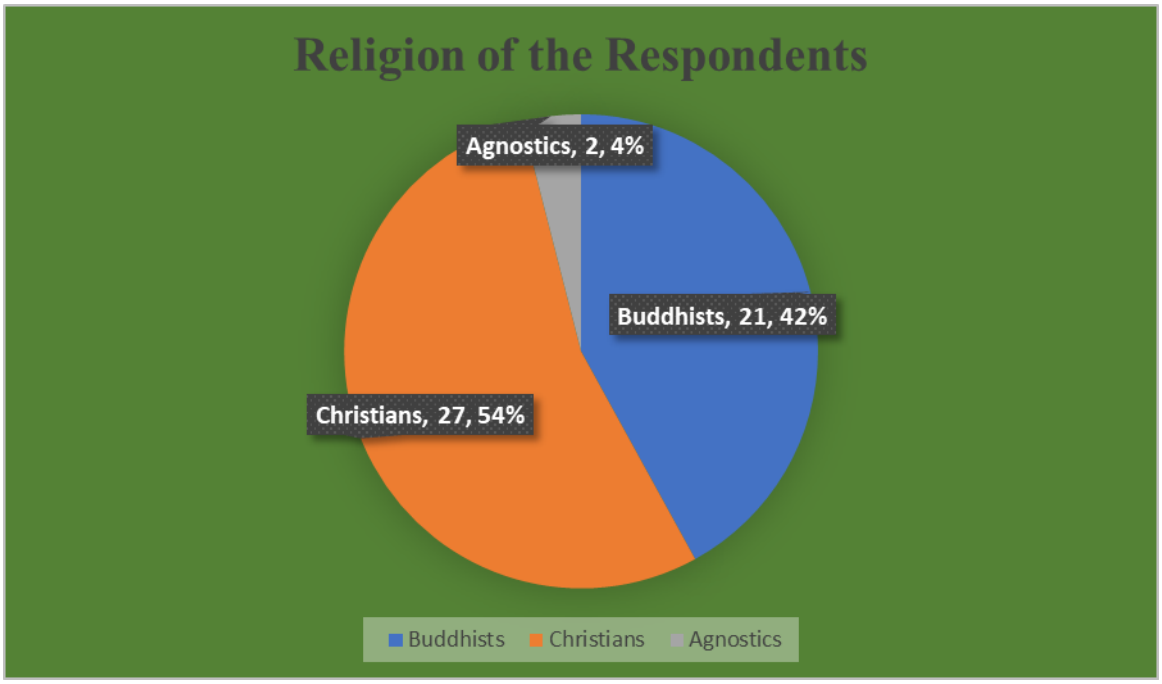

Figure 1.1 Religion of the Respondents, Field Survey

Out of the total fifty respondents twenty-seven respondents are Christians, while twenty-one respondents were Buddhists and two were agnostics.

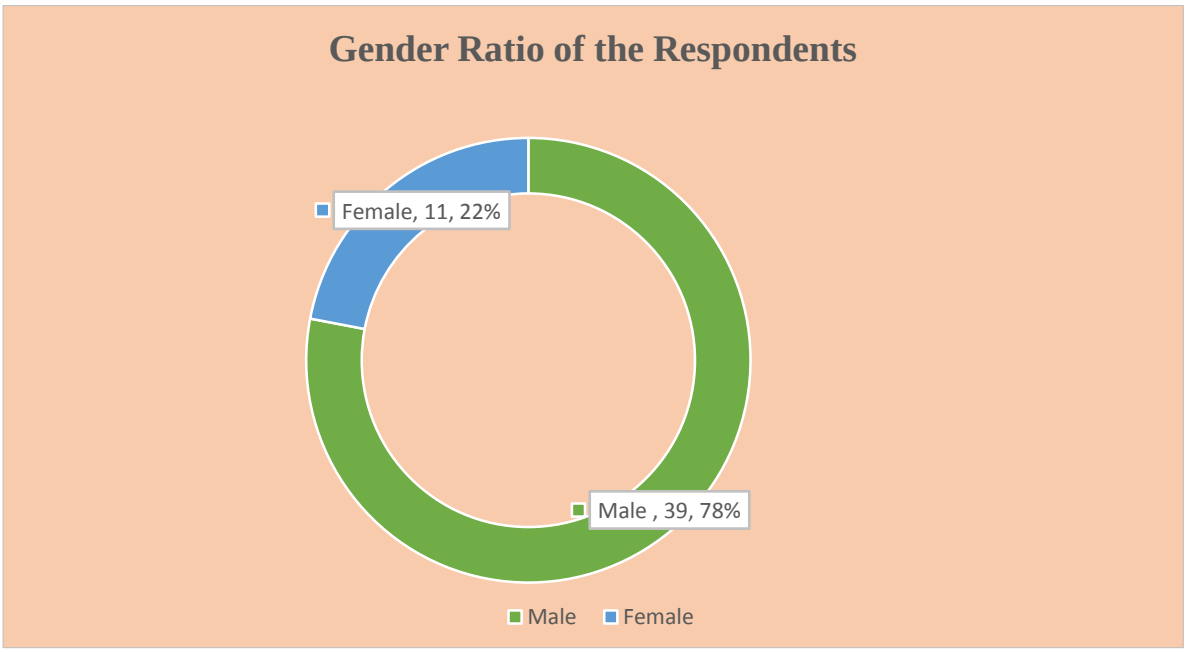

Figure 1.2 Gender Ratio of the Respondents, Field Survey

Out of the total fifty respondents, thirty-nine respondents are male while eleven are female.

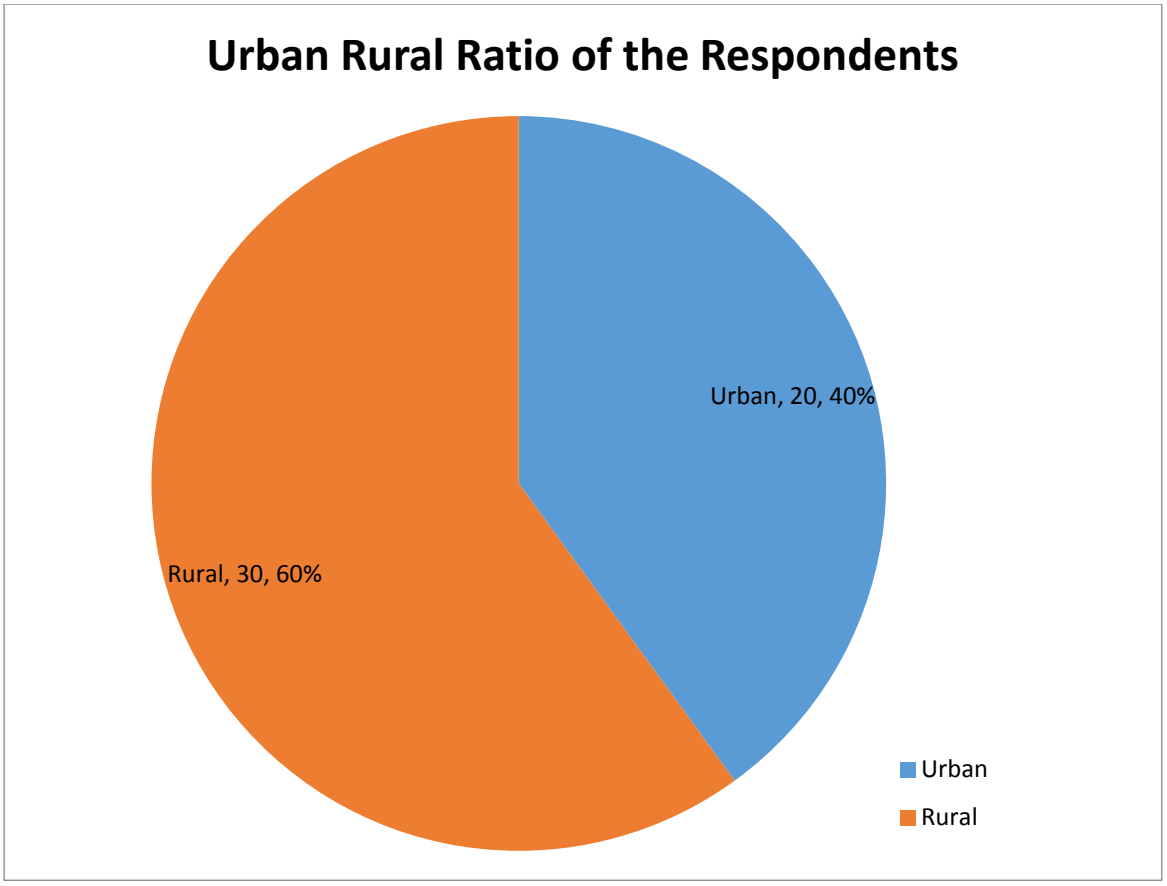

Figure 1.3 Urban-Rural Ratio of the Respondents, Field Survey

Out the total fifty respondents, twenty respondents are from urban areas and thirty are from rural areas.

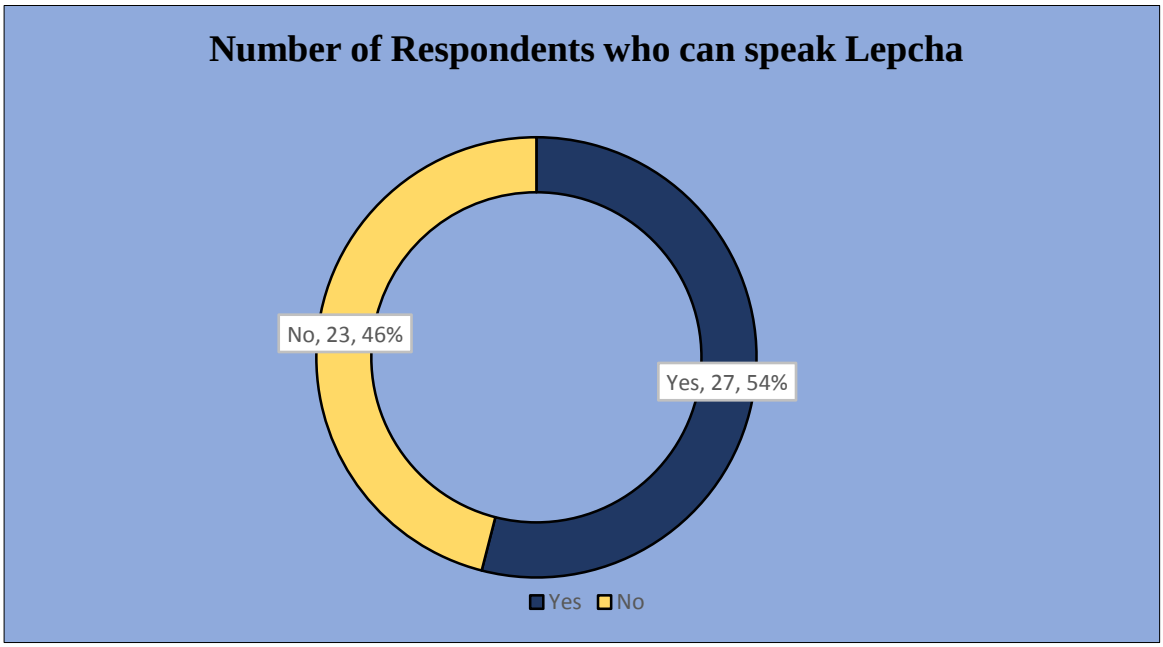

Figure 1.4a Number of respondents who can speak Lepcha, Field Survey

Out of the total fifty respondents, twenty-three respondents replied that they cannot speak in Lepcha, while twenty-seven respondents said they can speak in Lepcha. The ones who said that they could speak in Lepcha were mostly rural dwellers.

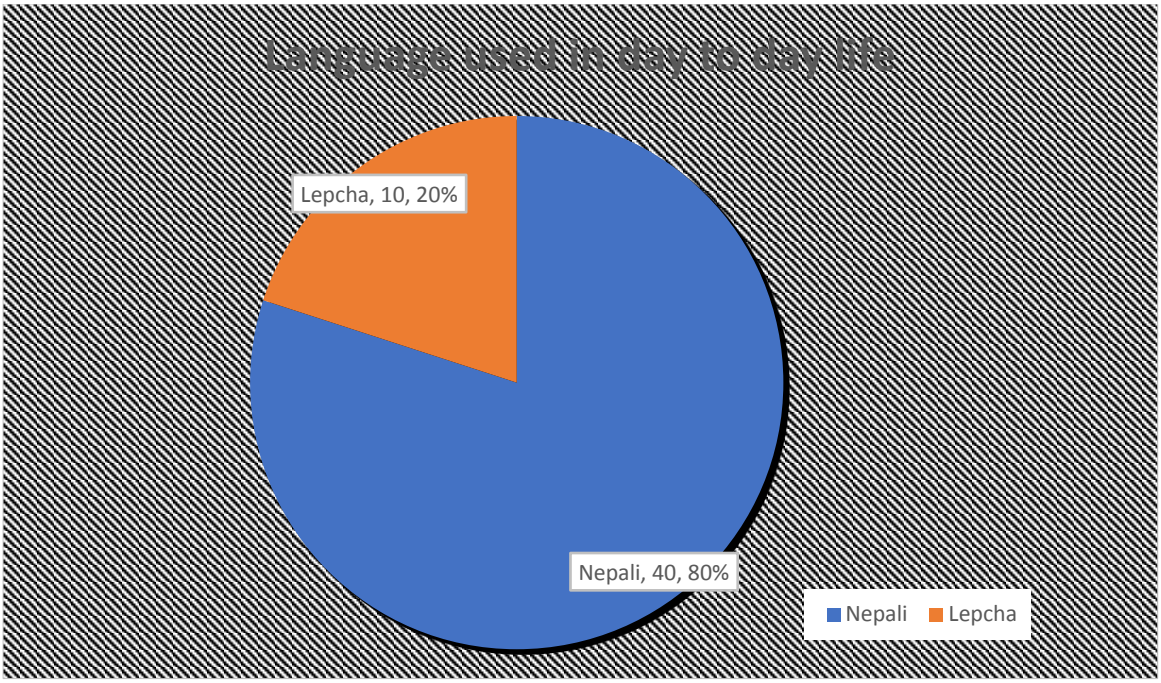

Figure 1.4b Language used in day to day life, Field Survey

Forty respondents out of the total fifty respondents replied that they speak in Nepali in their day to day life. They use Hindi and English too if necessary and sixteen among them said that if there is someone who can speak in Lepcha they use Lepcha language to converse. While ten respondents said that they speak only in Lepcha, and that they speak in Nepali only if someone that they are conversing with does not know Lepcha. The reason for Nepali language being spoken extensively was found to be caused by the fact that Nepalis form the majority in the Darjeeling hills. The respondents were of the opinion that since Nepali is the link language understood by all they too have to speak in Nepali. The respondents also said schooling is also done in Nepali. Marriages were the bride was a non-Lepcha was also said to be one of the causes for Nepali to be extensively used. The respondents held the view that a mother plays an important role in the upbringing of a child or children. When the mother herself does not know Lepcha it would be nearly impossible for the children to speak or learn Lepcha. Some respondents also said that it is also because fathers or husbands who are Lepchas did not give much attention to the fact that Lepcha Language should be spoken by the children. Some respondents said that it is natural for the language of the

majority to be spoken extensively while a few said that Nepali is a 'predator language' which is preventing other languages to flourish. A handful respondents also mentioned that Lepcha language was the official language of the Darjeeling hills till 1911.

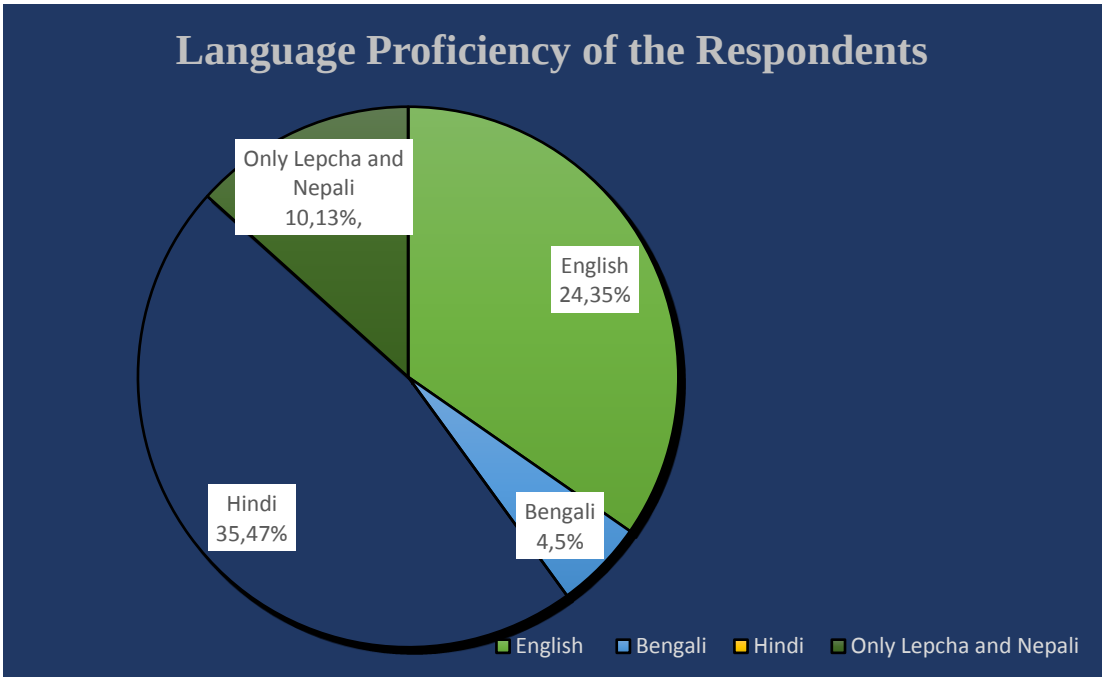

Figure 1.5 Language proficiency of the Respondents, Field Survey

Out of the total fifty respondents, thirty-five respondents can speak in Hindi and for English it is twenty-four. Four respondents said they can speak in Bengali. There are ten respondents who can only speak in Lepcha and Nepali. These ten respondents said that they can only speak colloquial Nepali.

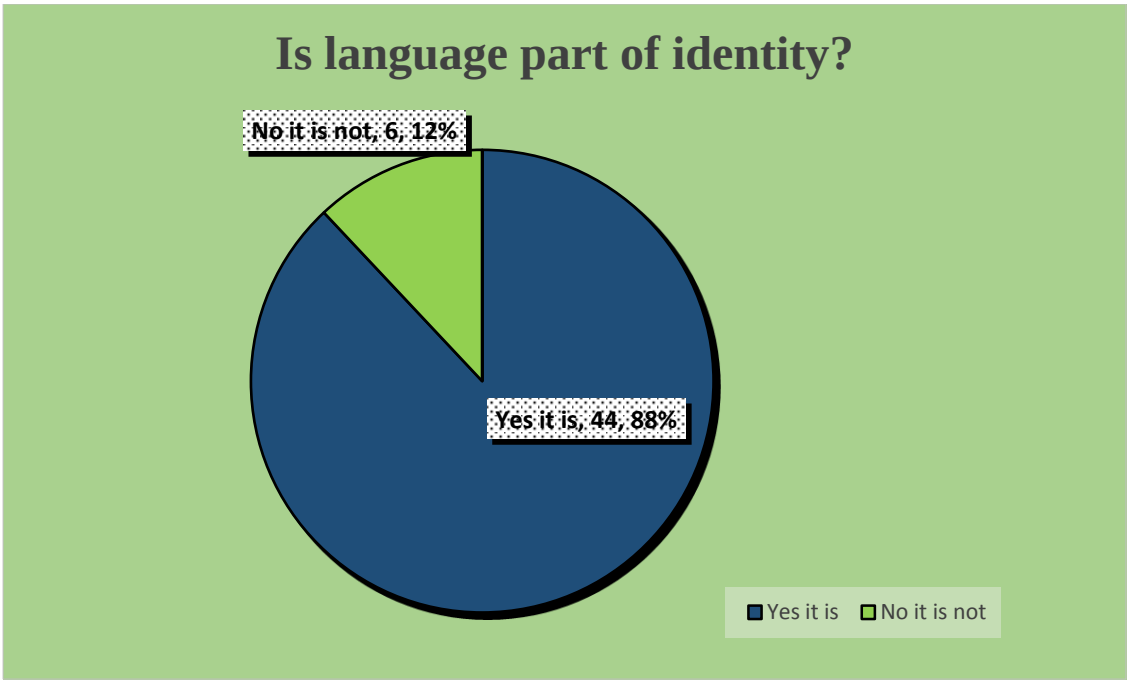

Figure 1.6 Responses to the question 'Is language part of identity?' Field Survey

44 respondents out of 50 replied that language is part of identity. While 6 were of the opinion that language is just a medium of communication.

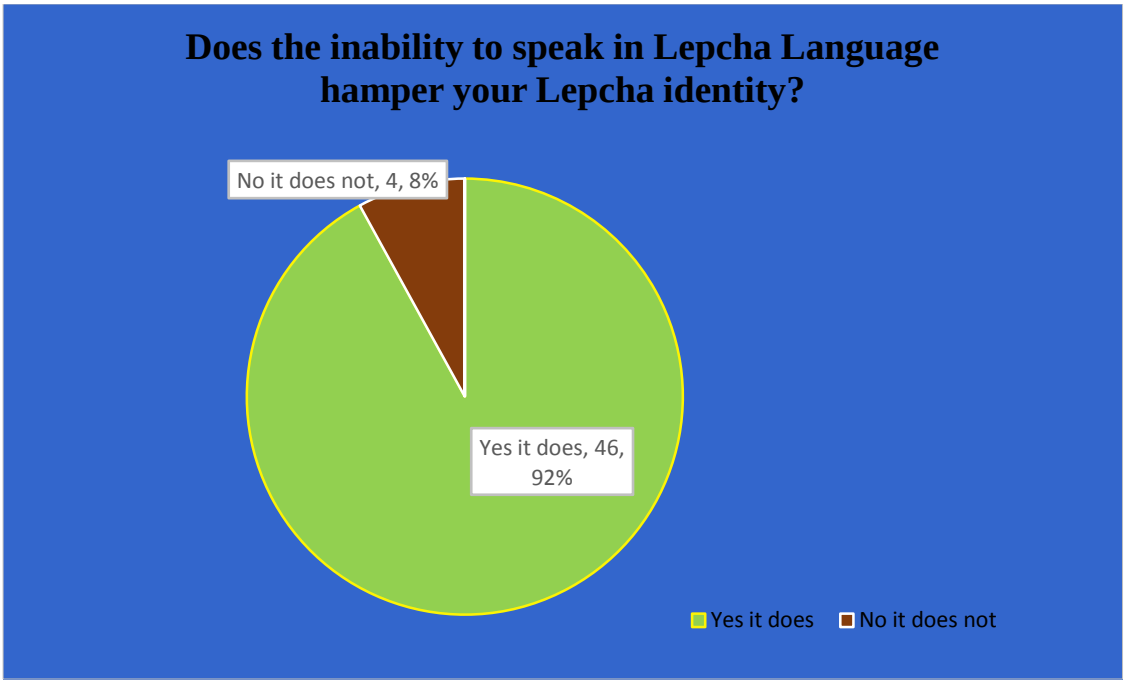

Figure 1.7 Responses to the question 'Does the inability to speak in Lepcha Language hamper your Lepcha identity?' Field Survey

Forty-six respondents out of the total fifty replied in the affirmative stating the inability to speak in Lepcha does hamper Lepcha identity. Four were of the opinion that it does not hamper Lepcha identity.

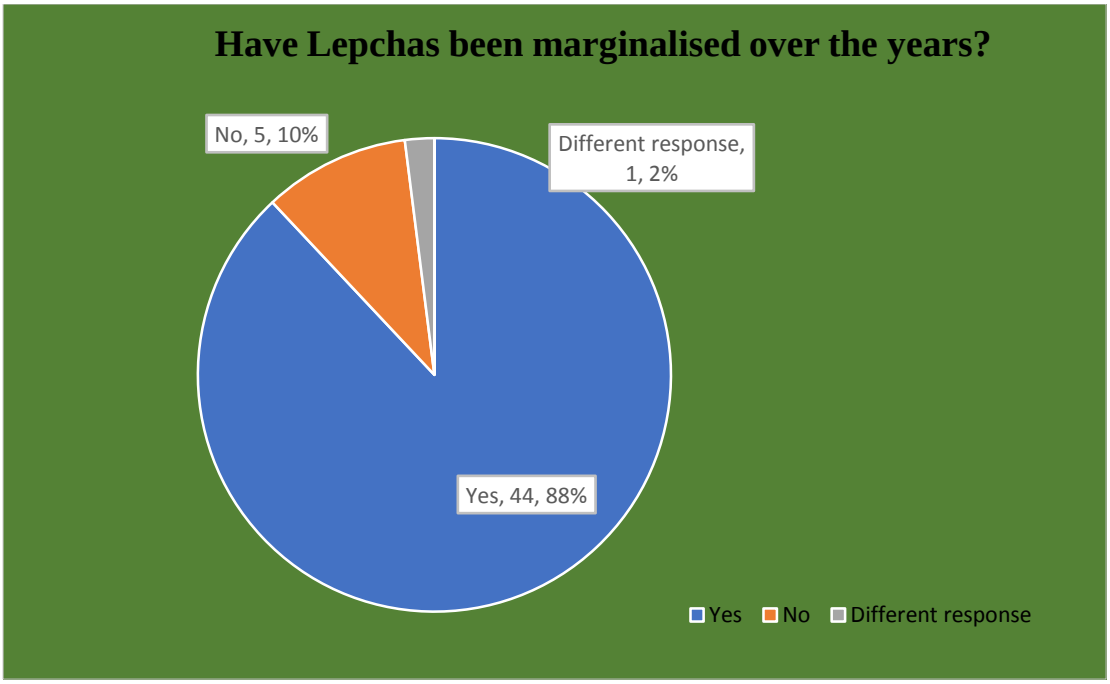

Figure 1.8 Responses to the question 'Have Lepchas been marginalised?'
Field Survey

Out of the total fifty respondents, forty-four respondents replied, 'Yes' Lepchas have been marginalised, while four respondents said 'No'. One respondent wanted to use the word side-lined instead of marginalised. Two respondents who said Yes also held the opinion that Lepchas felt or still feel marginalised because they have developed a narrow and exclusive self-perception, that Lepchas are different and that they have a unique identity. The two respondents said that while it is true that Lepchas have a different culture and identity and that it needs to be preserved, it does not mean that Lepchas should always maintain aloofness or make the differences between Lepchas and other communities so strict and hard. The two respondents said that Lepchas are being labelled as 'communal' due to this. "This perception of the Lepchas and the 'communal' label that has been developed is the main reason for Lepchas being isolated", the respondents said. A sole respondent who said 'Yes' to the question said that Lepchas have become 'communal' because of the conditions and historical context. The respondent also said that Lepchas don't really have an alternative.

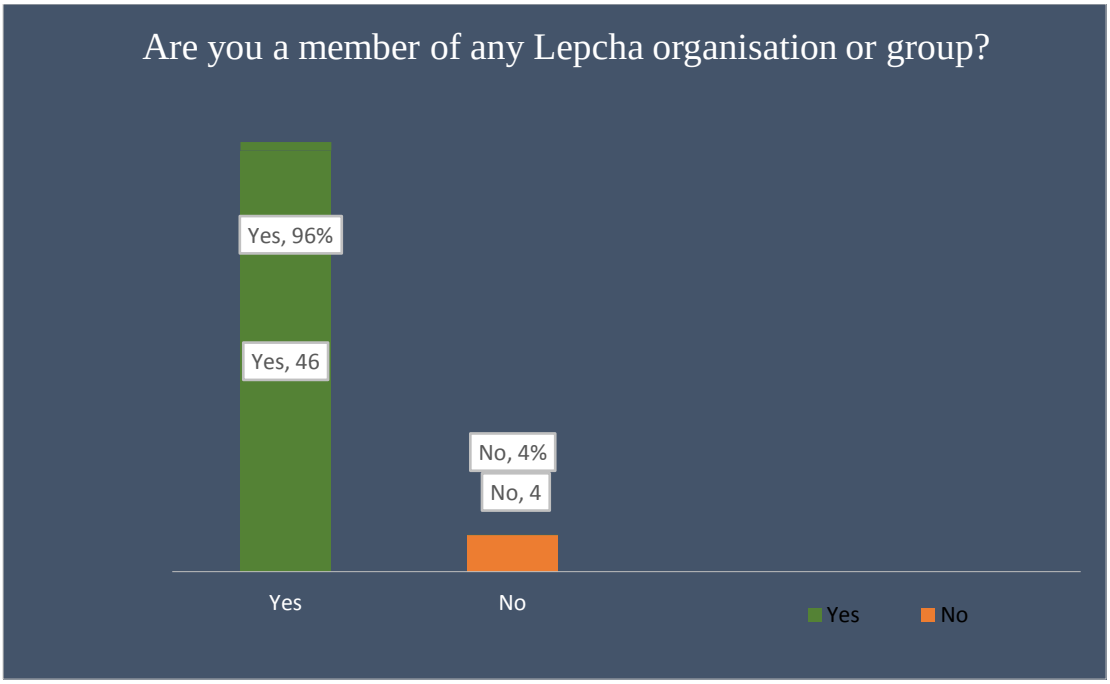

Figure 1.9 Responses to the question 'Are you a member of any Lepcha organisation or group?' Field Survey

Out of the total fifty, forty-two respondents are members of the Lepcha Association or *Shezum* while eight respondents do not have membership in any of the Lepcha groups or associations. However, out of the forty-two respondents, only twenty-six respondents said that they are regular attendants in meetings called by their local *shezum* or *Kyong Shezum* (village level)/ *Thoom Shezum* (Village Cluster level). The remaining sixteen respondents are nominal members. Among the nominal members thirteen are from urban areas and three from rural areas.

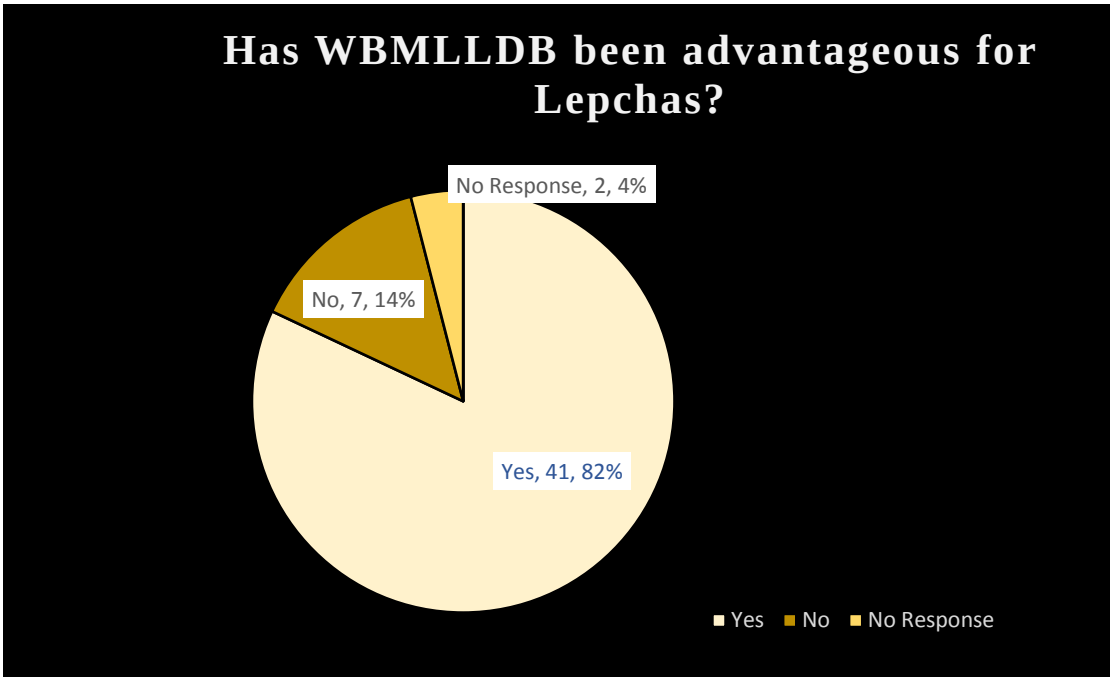

Figure 1.10 Responses to the question 'Has WBMLLDB been beneficial for the Lepchas? Field Survey

Out of the total fifty respondents, forty-one respondents replied that WBMLLDB has been beneficial for the Lepchas. Whiles seven did not agree that it has been beneficial, three among those who said 'No' are of the opinion that the Board is an obstruction in the way of achieving a Lepcha Development Council and that the Board is just a ploy for delaying the establishment of a Lepcha Development Council. Two respondents refused to comment. However, among the respondents who said 'Yes' eight of them said that Lepchas had no other option but to concede to the formation of a Lepcha Development Board even though a Development Council was what the Lepchas had demanded.

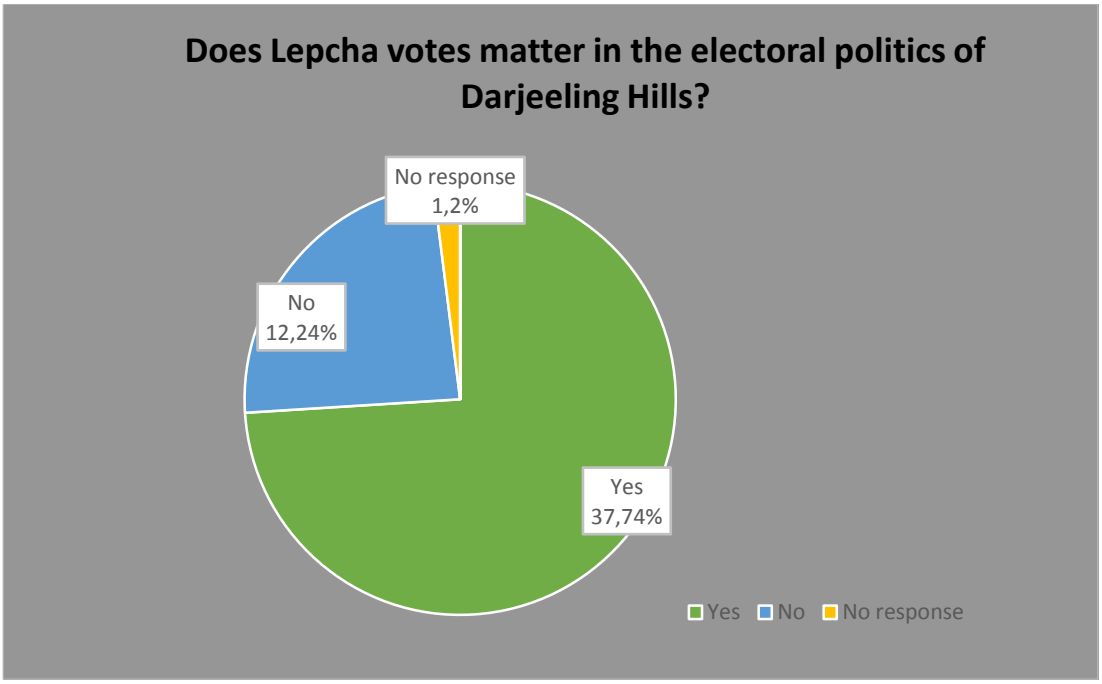

Figure 1.11 Responses to the question 'Does Lepcha votes matter in the electoral politics of Darjeeling Hills' Field Survey.

Out of the total fifty respondents, thirty-seven respondents replied in the affirmative. They felt that Lepcha votes indeed matter in the electoral politics of Darjeeling hills. However, they all had a common line which was that it will matter 'only if the Lepchas voted strategically'. The twenty-two respondents who said 'Yes' are not very sure about parliamentary elections but their conviction grew when it came to assembly elections and it could be noticed that the respondents were much more confident about Kalimpong MLA elections. Twelve respondents do not agree that Lepcha vote matter in the electoral politics of Darjeeling hills. One respondent did not reply to the question.

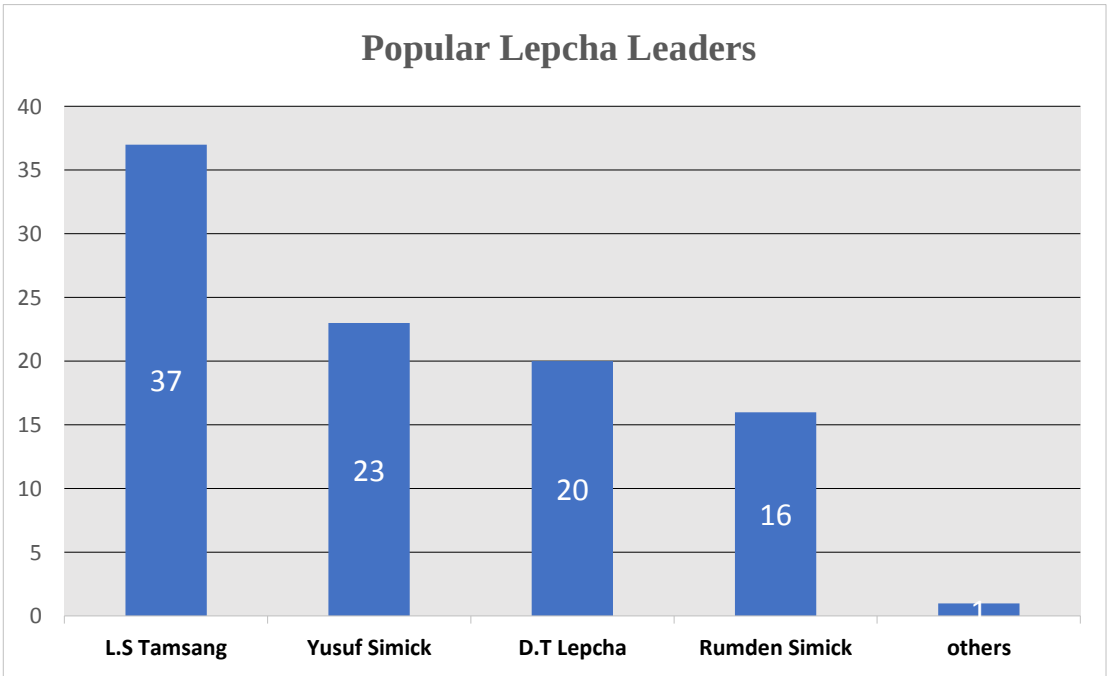

Figure 1.12 Responses to the question 'Are you aware of any Lepcha political leader/figure in the Darjeeling Hills?'

Out of the total fifty respondents, L.S. Tamsang was mentioned by thirty-seven. Likewise, Yusuf Simick was mentioned by twenty-three respondents, followed by D. T. Lepcha who was mentioned by twenty respondents. Rumden Simick was mentioned by sixteen respondents. Other Lepcha leaders were mentioned just once by different respondents they are, K. P. Tamsang, A.R. Foning, S.D. Karthak, S.P. Lepcha, Gaulan Lepcha, G.O.C. Phipon, Solon Karthak and Ruden Lepcha. Some respondents had their prejudices with regard to the leaders. One respondent particularly is very pessimistic about Lepcha leaders. The respondent opined that the none of the leaders are visionary. The respondent also mentioned that it is because of the lack of good, balanced, all-round leadership qualities that the Lepcha community is struggling. Few respondents said that, Lepcha leaders should have a liberal approach to politics rather than using the ethnic card.

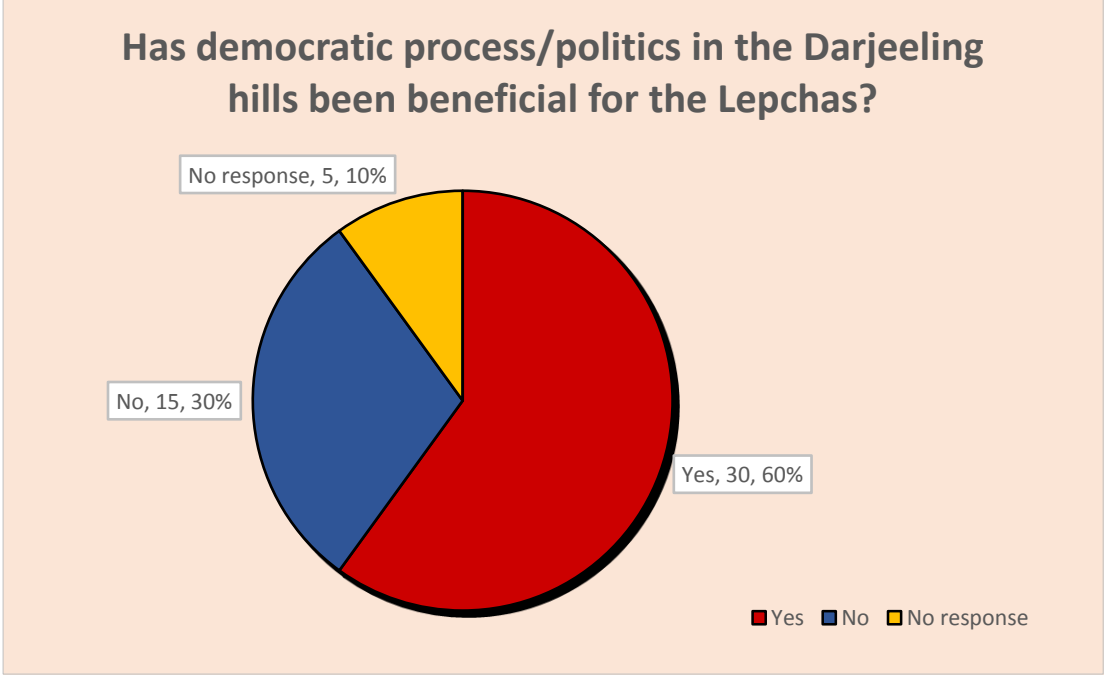

Figure 1.13 Responses to the question 'Has democratic process/politics in the Darjeeling Hills been beneficial for the Lepchas?' Field Survey

Out of the total fifty respondents, thirty respondents are of the opinion that democratic politics and process in the Darjeeling hills has been beneficial for the Lepchas. However, their responses were followed by phrases like '50/50', 'Its alright, at least things are happening', 'politics divides people', 'not really', 'to some extent'. Fifteen respondents replied that it has not been beneficial for the Lepchas, they were of the opinion that 'democracy is majority rule so no chance for Lepchas who are in minority', 'Simple people like us don't benefit much, the cleverer ones benefit the most'. Five respondents did not give any reply.

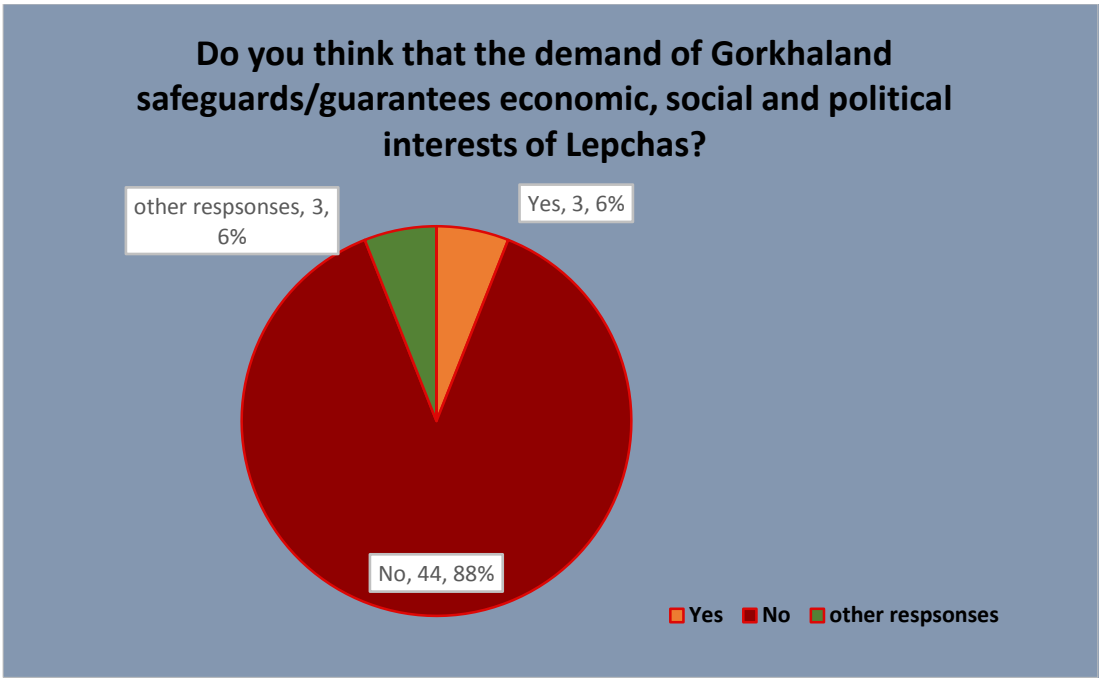

Figure 1.14 Responses to the question 'Do you think that the demand of Gorkhaland safeguards/guarantees economic, social and political interests of Lepchas?' Field Survey

Out of the total fifty respondents, three respondents said that the demand of Gorkhaland does safeguard the interests of the Lepcha people. Forty-four respondents replied in the negative. Most of the respondents who said 'No' are uncomfortable with the nomenclature 'Gorkhaland'. While three respondents were little reticent and cagey. For instance, "it depends on the terms and conditions of Gorkhaland", "if it's a good bargain on the Lepchas' side then maybe', 'I am not very enthusiastic about politics, for us it does not make a difference.'

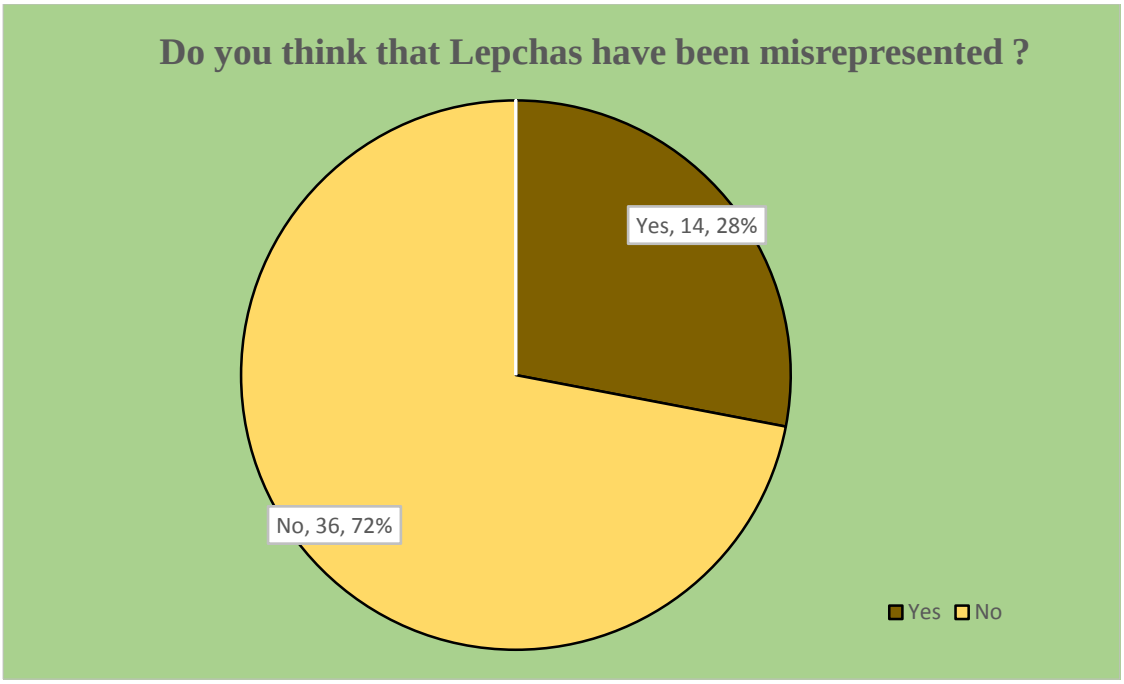

Figure 1.15 Responses to the question 'Do you think that Lepchas have been misrepresented?' Field Survey

Fourteen respondents out of the total fifty are of the opinion that the Lepchas have been misrepresented while thirty-six respondents did not agree that there has been a misrepresentation of Lepchas in their general identity. However, all the respondents did agree that the Lepchas have changed in comparison to the yester years.

As is evidenced by the data presented above the Lepcha community seems to be coming of its own in terms of understanding the role of colonial and post-colonial discourses perpetrated by the state at different points of time. One sees a growing political consciousness amongst Lepchas both in urban and rural areas. They have also rejected certain standard identity labels stereotypes associated with their "coarse unintelligible language, coarse ways, and simple mindedness". It is more than evident that the Lepchas are coming up with new modes of self-representation via different platforms: through social media, academia, local politics and business ventures to name a few. The community understands the need and importance of creating a political space for the Lepchas. There is definitely a feeling of regret among those who cannot speak *Rong-Ring* or Lepcha Language. The respondents wishing to remain unnamed for certain responses and some for the entire interview hint at the fear that the Lepchas have or the dominance of other communities. Few of the respondents had a very liberal approach to politics with views like ethnic identity

should not be foregrounded. On the other hand, there were respondents who said that Lepchas don't really a have a choice but to use ethnicity as a resource for political mobilisation. Some respondents were hardliners who even suggested to the researcher that exogamous marriage must be avoided. The WBMLLDB is the in good books of almost every respondent. Some of them even said that the houses that they got has been of great help. Few of the respondents were sceptical about the functioning of WBMLLDB. One of the most interesting responses that the researcher finds is the response given by Kingchoom Lepcha "The people who wrote or started prescribing certain characteristic traits about the Lepchas did so without any concrete proof, it is for sure that they must have observed the lifestyles and manners of the Lepchas. However, the problem is that the Lepchas did not understand English or for that matter, Nepali. So, when Lepchas in the first place could not comprehend English or Nepali language, how could Lepchas formulate a fitting response to the questions that may have been asked. As a consequence, the interpretation of the Lepchas were given as 'shy', 'simple-minded' and 'naïve' but I personally feel that Lepchas are actually quite smart and intelligible, the main cause for misinterpretation was the language barrier" [Author's translation]. One common statement that almost every respondent made even though there was no direct question about it was that they are all proud to be Lepchas. Identity is thus a common premise that binds Lepchas together, lending them a voice that resounds with the promise of a better tomorrow.

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[1] Thakur, R.N (1988). *Himalayan Lepchas*. p.88

[2] Saving the Last of the Lepchas. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nh4i_ZtgyN0

[3] Lepcha, Charisma. K (2017). The Scottish Mission in Kalimpong and the Changing Dynamics of Lepcha Society (pp.71-92). In Markus Viehbeck (ed), *Transcultural Encounters in the Himalayan Borderlands Kalimpong as a "Contact Zone."* Heidelberg: Heidelberg University Press.

Conclusion

Identity as a category of enquiry vis-à-vis the Lepcha community of the Darjeeling hills has received a noticeable amount of attention. The present study has made an attempt to examine the formation of Lepcha identity through the colonial discourse and official narratives. It also tried to examine the role and relationship between state and the Lepchas in Kalimpong District. Lepcha identity politics in the context of electoral and democratic politics has also been examined.

Lepchas before being colonised by the British had been left with no other choice but to accept the Tibetan rule. The Tibetans had destroyed Lepcha religious texts and burnt many documents of historical importance. Their animistic beliefs gave way to Tibetan Lamaism. The Tibetan rule has caused division among the Lepchas: the well to do Lepchas who were co-opted by the Tibetans defended the Tibetan rule whereas the poor Lepchas were the worst sufferers under the foreign domination. A policy of cultural supremacy was adopted by the Tibetans to consolidate their rule. Many Lepchas started imitating the Tibetans and consequently Lepcha culture was altered in a significant way. Culture is an important marker of one's identity. And Lepcha identity underwent serious changes because of Tibetan rule. The Tibetan rulers averted major rebellions as they used religion to support their establishment of a dynasty. Religious sanctions that were used to legitimise the Tibetan rule kept the Lepchas pacified. However, the Lepchas of present day Kalimpong district, West Bengal, put up a resistance under the leadership of Gaeboo Achyuk who is now remembered as the last Lepcha King. This took place in the initial years of the 1700s when there was a contestation in the Namgyal dynasty as to who would ascend the throne. The Kalimpong region could not be regained by the Tibetan rulers of Sikkim. It was the Bhutanese who had assassinated Gaeboo Achyuk rather treacherously and taken hold of Kalimpong in 1781.

During the initial decades of the 19th century, the East India Company established political connections with Sikkim. The Company had already established communications with Nepal prior to Sikkim. The boundary disputes between Sikkim and Nepal provided an opportunity for the Company to arbitrate between them. The Company found Darjeeling to be conducive for a sanitorium. The Chogyal had put up some demands to be fulfilled in lieu of Darjeeling. Though Darjeeling was ceded to

the Company in 1835 the demands of the Chogyal were never met. Darjeeling was ceded to British through the 'Deed of Grant'. Now that the Company was in control of Darjeeling new developments like the tea industry came around. The 'Great Rebellion of 1857' had brought about a change in the power structure of the British. The Crown was now the ruler of the Indian colony. The British now grew wary about the native populace in different places of the Indian colony. What followed was the British sought a policy to maintain communities faithful and loyal to the British cause. The Lepchas now started being outnumbered by Nepalis who came to work in the tea plantations with hopes of living a better life in the hills. Forest policies adopted by the British led to displacement of the Lepchas. With trade and business growing the Lepchas who were unable to cope with the new mode of economy incurred huge debts from *Mahajans.* Many Lepchas being unable to pay off their debts had to sell their land at low rates.

Kalimpong was again taken over by the British in 1864 after the Anglo-Bhutan war. The British merged it with Darjeeling district for administrative purposes. By 1930s the language shift had been complete with Nepali being recognised as the medium of instruction and communication for all. Lepcha language was stigmatised as being uncivilized. With the coming of the European missionaries the Lepchas were converted to Christianity. Darjeeling as a district was a "partially excluded area" under section 92 of the Government of India Act 1935. It followed that Acts of the Provincial or Central Legislature would be applicable in the manner which the Governor saw fit. The Governor had the power to modify or make exceptions to any Act. The Lepchas were marginalised as a result of Tibetan rule, Bhutanese rule and British colonialism.

Modernisation theorists had assumed that with industrialisation, urbanisation and individualism ethnic ties would simply disappear but on the contrary ethnic ties and ethnicity have been recalcitrant. A sense of ethnic identity comprising of subjective and symbolic use by a group of people or any aspect of culture so as to mark themselves as different from other groups is what ethnicity is. "It is the consciousness of an ethnic group similar to what class consciousness is to class" (Brass, 1991: 10).

Historical narratives, common descent, physical attributes, shared cultural aspects, language, religion, food habits, customs and attire that manifest a distinct identity

create a sense of belonging to a particular ethnic group. It is this distinct identity which is used as a measuring rod to differentiate one ethnic group from another. The interesting thing about ethnicity is that all criterial elements need not be fulfilled. Individuals may not follow the same religion or speak the language of the group. The attires that the individuals wear or the food habits that one has may not match with the group. Customs may be practiced in a different manner too. The important thing is a degree of sameness on the part of the individuals, even if it is minimal but acknowledged and agreed upon by members of the ethnic group.

It is social interaction among people and groups having different cultural traits that makes difference possible. The categorisation of 'us' and 'them' is a result of contact and interaction between people possessing different cultures. There are prescriptions and proscriptions as to what one can do or cannot do in the process of inter-ethnic interactions (Barth, 1969 :14).

The intervention of official discourse as far as the concept of ethnicity is concerned is also the strongest possible source of reification of group and individual relations. In this process the differences in cultures get arrested and codified even though cultural differences by its nature are changeable and flexible.

During the colonial era anthropology acquired the status of "administrative episteme" (Dirks, 2001: 221). Anthropology became the fundamental body of ideas and presuppositions that set the bounds of what could be accepted as true knowledge. Through census, ethnographic and cartographic exercises social categories were created by the British during the eighteenth century. To achieve the end of systematic classification and ordering of India for administrative purposes these exercises were instrumental. The result was that the enumerative modality objectified social, cultural and linguistic differences among the peoples of India. If numbers were not known it would not be possible to carry out bureaucratic or instrumental rationality.

The categories of 'tribe', 'caste' and 'religion' were used by the colonizers in India to reconstruct existing realities to a large extent. What followed was that 'racial', 'ethnic' and 'tribal' stereotypes were forged; the dynamism and complexities, social organization, culture, history and civilizational aspects were completely ignored in the case of societies that were catalogued as such. The taxonomies were accorded the

power of truth. Hence, the usage of derogatory of terms like ‘primitive’, ‘simple’, ‘backward’, and ‘underdeveloped’ came into being.

In present times ethnicity has come to serve as an element of support for the hegemony of the dominant classes and of the state. The tribal construct in India and its ideological uses fall under this category. Ethnicity can also be a counter hegemonic force in cases where ethnic ascription and economic and political subordination are co-related (Devalle, 1992:16).

The question of identity occupies a place of importance in modern times. Identity politics is equated with the demand for recognition which in its core carries the politics of equal dignity and politics of difference (or authenticity). There are instances where traditions are invented to adapt to the changed conditions. At the same time continuity with the past is maintained. ‘Traditions’ which appear or claim to be old are often recent in origin. Invented traditions often have the purpose of establishing or symbolizing social cohesion of groups both real or artificial (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983:1-9).

Traditional ideas are revived, with people fighting for group traditions. Identity politics directly addresses demands for recognition of aspects of identity that have been withheld and denied or marginalized and stigmatized. This demand or call is a claim to identity not inspite of difference but because of the very presence of the identity. Recognition is not all that matters, as our aims are shaped by our identities and our aims in turn help fix our interests. Therefore people can have real identity interests as well. Identity politics is strongly about transformation at the level of the group rather than merely at the individual level. Group identification and solidarity make up the major theme of identity politics. Representation issues, questions like Who has the right to represent or to speak and for Whom are pertinent. However, one must be aware that the fundamental problem of identity politics is that of essentialism, that is the tendency to generalise about members of a particular group and assimilate them into a singular identity.

The inherent paradox of identity itself is what haunts identity politics. Laying too much emphasis on the shared aspects of identity leads to playing down the aspects that are different. On the other hand, when identities are defined in opposition to one another it becomes problematic to claim authenticity. Asserting differences carries the

risk of reinforcing binaries. For example, asserting what is uniquely feminine may lead to strengthening the binary opposition of male and female which one is actually seeking to challenge and change. But again, to do the opposite or uphold fluidity in gender or support ethnic hybridity also carries the risk of diluting and dissolving the very identities on which political claims can be made. Identity politics not only embraces but reifies the differences created and enforced by the society.

"Honest", "happy", "gentle", "candid", "amiable", "obliging", "frank", "humorous", "polite" are some of the descriptive words that have been used by the colonial discourses with regard to the Lepchas. However, Lepchas were also described as "wild tribes", "gross feeder", "savages", "primitive". So colonial discourse in the context of the Lepchas is an amalgam of both seemingly favorable and biased statements. Orientalist discourse presents itself as a form of knowledge which is "superior" and at the same time different from the knowledge that the people concerned have of themselves. No doubt the colonisers left the former colonies like India but the institutions that they established, the knowledge that they produced and circulated still remain.

The ideas and perceptions that the colonisers and their discourses created was carried on by some of the natives. Indian scholars caught up in the tyranny of the Orientalist discourse in which they were educated have produced "home grown orientalism" (Poddar and Subba, 1991: 1).

The colonisers labelled the Lepchas as docile people to limit chances of rebellion. The colonisers always held the knowledge that Lepchas were the indigenous people of the Darjeeling hills and Sikkim. If there was any community that would lead the charge for freedom it was the Lepchas. The colonisers gave labels to other communities too in accordance with what suited the British cause. For example, the Gorkhas were praised as a 'martial race' as being "the bravest of the brave". This had its own reasons: the British needed loyal and faithful people for the British cause and moreover, they needed an army and a large working force both of which the Nepalis/Gorkhas provided. The colonial rulers also tried to set these communities against each other. However, over the centuries the Lepchas have been assimilated into the Nepali fold to a large extent. The greater demographic strength of the Nepalis is one strong cause for this assimilation.

In recent years it is the ILTA that has been leading the Lepchas in movements and democratic processes that is required in a democratic polity. It can be argued that the formation of WBMLLDB was also due to the efforts of ILTA at large. The need for Lepchas to have a political voice was finally found in the institution of the WBMLLDB. Kalimpong as a Vidhan Sabha constituency did have Gaulan Lepcha as a Member of the Legislative Assembly for fifteen consecutive years (1996-2011). But Gaulan Lepcha had won the elections as a candidate of Gorkha National Liberation Front (GNLF). The GNLF perhaps wanted to appease the Lepchas and give out the message that it was an inclusive political party. But the Lepchas have never really witnessed Gaulan Lepcha working as a staunch Lepcha leader sacrificing much for the Lepchas.

When the Lepchas got the nod for the formation of a Lepcha Development Board, it heralded a major turn of events in the political scenario. However, this development also gave the idea that Lepchas were against the demand of Gorkhaland. Nonetheless, the Lepchas despite being termed as 'communal' found dignity in the institution of WBMLLDB. The Lepchas did realise that accepting the Board would portray them as being against the Gorkhaland movement. However, they didn't really have a choice. Not accepting the Lepcha Development Board at a time when the Gorkhaland movement under the leadership of Bimal Gurung was at its prime would definitely have ruled out any further development prospects in terms of state aid and in terms of securing a political space for themselves in hill politics. The formation of the Lepcha Development Board affected other communities and had a positive effect for them in the long run too. Communities like Tamang and Bhutia also demanded for development boards and succeeded in the same. In a way it encouraged communities to be more concerned about their indigeneity and to pursue politics rooted in ethnic identities.

Major Findings of the Study

Colonial discourse of identity has largely affected the Lepchas. While most Lepchas say that they are simple-minded and shy people, there are those who have started to refute such general identity categories. Factors like the language gap between Lepchas and other communities, way of life, belief systems have been observed as being

responsible for these generalisations. Lepcha youths, especially, are re-inventing Lepcha identity vis-à-vis colonial discourse.

Most Lepchas feel that the development projects of the State have benefitted them but they expressed concerns stating that in the long run the development board alone may not be sufficient to cater to their needs. At the moment the Lepchas are pacified mainly by the fact that the WBMLLDB has been a symbol of Lepcha presence in the political scenario of the Darjeeling hills. However, there are some Lepchas who hold that this board is a mere distraction or obstruction to achieving a Lepcha Development Council. But then again, the Lepchas are seeking Statutory recognition for the WBMLLDB. Most Lepchas thus view the State as a benefactor, while some have their reservations.

Ironically, the patronising attitude of the colonial discourse seems to be apparent even in the State's dealings or relationship with the Lepcha community. The State assumes a stance of authority providing validation to the autochthonous claims of the Lepchas in a bid to pacify and also control the community.

In terms of electoral politics, ideally speaking every vote matters. But practically speaking, Lepcha votes don't make much of a difference in the electoral processes of the Darjeeling hills. They are too few in number to make a huge difference through exercising their voting rights. The Lepchas abstained from voting in the 2011 assembly elections but it did not make much of a difference. Again in 2019, Lepchas were instructed to vote for a particular party by the leaders. There was a difference of preference among the leaders themselves. The results were devastating for Jan Andolan Party and Trinamool Congress, and consequently devastating for the Lepchas who supported these political parties in the recent assembly elections.

The claims of the Lepchas that Census surveys and reports do not reflect the actual demographic strength of the community is justified to some extent. But if the Lepchas are really much more than the official figure of 2011 (West Bengal) census i.e. 33,962 (Thirty-three thousand nine hundred sixty-two) say 1,00,000 (one lakh) as the leaders claim then the electoral results would have definitely been different.

The relatively smaller population of the Lepchas is a major disadvantage as it adds to the depletion of their animistic practices and diminishing numbers of Lepcha language speakers, among others.

Additional Findings

The Lepchas have two sets of headgears one made out of bamboo straws and the other made of silky cloth. The latter one has its origin in China. The field narrative goes like this: "A Chinese emperor had invited all the sovereign heads of different kingdoms for a meeting to give them recognition. The Tibetan ruler of Sikkim was also among the invitees. However, the presence of a Tibetan ruler from Tibet and one from Sikkim made for an awkward situation. The presence of two Tibetan rulers was bound to create problems. The Chogyal of Sikkim had taken along with him a Lepcha minister to get over this awkward situation. He ordered the Lepcha minister to present himself as the king of Sikkim. So, as a symbol of recognition, the Chinese emperor handed over the headgear to the Lepcha minister. This is the story of how Lepchas came to have two headgears. The Tibetans know this but they simply don't want to acknowledge that Lepchas were the rightful rulers. The Tibetans envy our headgear; they say that it actually belonged to them. Later with opening up of trade with Chinese, the headgear was worn by many Lepchas." [Author's translation]

The Lepchas had been handed a proposal by the British when they were leaving India after the Quit India movement. The proposal was that if the Lepchas were able to prove their majority the British would make necessary arrangements for the grant of a separate state for the Lepchas. The Lepchas knowing that they did not have a majority asked members of other communities to present themselves as Lepchas. The Tamang community was approached but one Maila Baje said that the Lepchas should leave immediately when they had gone to meet him and try to woo the Tamangs in Darjeeling. Many people from the Tamang community as well as other communities had also changed their titles to Lepcha with an eye for a separate state. Despite it all we could not come up with a majority. To quote a respondent, N. Lepcha: "We Rongs were considered to be lower castes even though we were and are a tribe. But maybe they have now realised that there are many facilities in the form of state aid to tribals. Later they also demanded tribal status and got it too. It would have been extremely good if Maila Baje had kept his caste reservations aside." [Author's translation]

Nonetheless the intention of the British is not beyond suspicion. They always knew that the Lepchas would be unable to come up with a majority so why give them false

hope? Or was it just another pretentious act of the British to show they were actually concerned about the natives?

Limitations of the Study and Scope for further Research

The study had for its focus the Lepchas of Kalimpong district; the Lepchas of Darjeeling, Sikkim and Nepal have not been discussed directly in the study. It would be interesting to study the political dynamics and the role of ethnicity and identity concerning Lepchas in these areas. It would indeed be very interesting to study how Lepchas in metropolitan cities adjust to identity and ethnicity issues. Further research could also try and explore how Lepchas living in foreign countries adapt and how they relate to people there and to Lepchas back home at Kalimpong, Sikkim, Darjeeling or Nepal. Lepcha diaspora studies would be a good way forward to open up further possibilities for research pertaining to the Lepcha community.

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Appendix

Interview Schedule

Name:

Occupation:

Place of Residence:

Religious Belief/Any Other:

1. What language do you speak every day?
2. Do you speak any other language? Does the language you speak define who you are? Is language part of your identity? Does the inability to speak in Lepcha Language hamper your Lepcha identity?
3. Why have Lepchas stopped speaking Lepcha Language and are using Nepali Language as a medium of communication?
4. How are Lepchas identified?
5. How have the Lepchas been marginalised?
6. Are you a member of any Lepcha organisations or groups?
7. What do you think the State/Central Governments are doing for the Lepchas?
8. What do you think about MLLDB? Has it been advantageous or disadvantageous to the development of the Lepchas?
9. Do Lepchas actively participate in Local and Regional politics?
10. Does Lepcha vote matter in the electoral politics of Darjeeling Hills?
11. Does Lepcha opinion as a community matter in regional politics?
12. Are you aware of any Lepcha political leader/figure in the Darjeeling Hills? How much have they contributed to the upliftment of the Lepcha society?
13. Who is the Chairman of MLLDB? Can you describe the structure and functions of ILTA?
14. Which newspaper(s), news channel(s) do you follow or read? In other words what is the medium through which you get information about what is happening in the region or India as a whole?
15. Has democratic process/politics in the Darjeeling Hills been beneficial for the Lepchas?

16. Do you think that the demand for Gorkhaland safeguards/guarantees economic, social and political interests of Lepchas?
17. What do you think needs to be done by the State/Centre Governments for the upliftment and development of Lepchas? What do the Lepchas themselves need to do for their development and upliftment?
18. Do you think that Lepchas have been misrepresented? What is your overall opinion about the identity of Lepchas?