

Dzongu as a Reserve Land: A Historical Study

A Dissertation Submitted

To

Sikkim University



**In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirement for the Degree of
Master of Philosophy**

**By
Karma Tenzing Lepcha**

**Department Of History
School of Social Science
Sikkim University**

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माइल, सामदुर, तादोंग - 737102
गटोक, सिक्किम, भारत
फोन-03592-251212, 251415, 251656
टेलीफैक्स - 251067
वेबसाइट - www.cus.ac.in



6th Mile, Samdur, Tadong-737102
Gangtok, Sikkim, India
Ph. 03592-251212, 251415, 251656
Telefax : 251067
Website : www.cus.ac.in

सिक्किम विश्वविद्यालय SIKKIM UNIVERSITY

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DECLARATION

I, Karma Tenzing Lepcha, hereby declare that the research work embodied in the dissertation titled “**Dzongu as a Reserve Land: A Historical Study**”, submitted to **Sikkim University** for the award of the 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.

Karma Tenzing Lepcha

Karma Tenzing Lepcha
Roll No: 19MPH004
Regd. No: 19/M.Phil/HIS/04
Department of History
School of Social Sciences

6 माइल, सामदुर, तादोंग - 737102
गंगटोक, सिक्किम, भारत
फोन-03592-251212, 251415, 251656
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CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the dissertation titled “**Dzongu as a Reserve Land: A Historical Study**” submitted to the **Sikkim University** for partial fulfilment of the requirement of the degree of **Master of Philosophy** in the Department of History, embodied the result of bonafide research work carried out by **Mr. Karma Tenzing Lepcha** under my guidance and supervision. No part of the dissertation has been submitted earlier to this or any other University for any Degree, Diploma, Association and Fellowship.

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

We recommend that the dissertation be placed before the examiner for evaluation.

Dr. Veenu Pant
Associate Professor
Department of History
School of Social Sciences

Dr. Veenu Pant
Head of the Department
Department of History
School of Social Sciences

Dr. Veenu Pant
Associate Professor & Head
Department of History
School of Social Sciences
SIKKIM UNIVERSITY
6th Mile Tadong-737102 Gangtok, Sikkim

6 माइल, सामदुर, तादोंग - 737102
गंगटोक, सिक्किम, भारत
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टेलीफैक्स - 251067
वेबसाइट - www.cus.ac.in



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Telefax : 251067
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“Dzongu as a Reserve Land: A Historical Study”

Submitted by Karma Tenzing Lepcha under the supervision of Dr. Venu Pant, Associate Professor, Department of History, School of Social Sciences, Sikkim University, Gangtok, 737102, India.

Karma Tenzing Lepcha
Signature of the Scholar

Venu Pant
Countersigned by Supervisor

Dr. Venu Pant
Associate Professor & Head
Department of History
School of Social Sciences
SIKKIM UNIVERSITY
6th Mile Tadong-737102 Gangtok, Sikkim

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Karma Tenzing Lepcha

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The Dzongu region lies in the northern part of Sikkim, it is surrounded by river *Teesta* which forms the south eastern boundary while on the northern side it is bounded by *Talung* river and on the western side there are a series of mountains including the *Khangchendzonga* who is also seen as a guardian deity of the people of Sikkim¹. The region of Dzongu also comes under the *Khangchendzonga* Biosphere Reserve, basically the whole of Dzongu was made as reserve land for the Lepcha people according to the notification 3069 issued by the royal Darbar in the year 1958 whereby none other than Lepchas of Dzongu could enter the region. If any outsider wished to visit Dzongu they were required to get permission from the higher authorities.² In this way the region of Dzongu was kept aloof from rest of the communities. It has been known that during the reign of Namgyal Dynasty many young Lepcha people from Dzongu were sent to *Chogyals* rule palace to offer their service in the palace. The condition of Dzongu during the *Chogyals* rule was not so good in terms of medical and education is concerned, and people there had to suffer a lot because of the lack of proper education and health facilities.³In, fact the whole of north Sikkim came under the purview of restricted land since the then Maharaja of Sikkim along with then political officer of Sikkim (Sir Charles Alfred Bell) thought

¹Sandhya Devi Thapa, Karma Loday Tamang, Bhuwan Chettri, Lepchas in Sikkim: Are they a vanishing tribe? Their struggle for the existence, *International Research Journal of Commerce Arts and Science*, Vol no 7, year 2016. P.98

²Binod Bhattarai, Socio-economic impact of hydropower projects in Dzongu region of north Sikkim, *Global Journal of Sociology*, volume no 5, issue 1, 2005, p.16

³Nani Gopal Mandal, An Essay on The Lepcha Community: The Autochthones of Sikkim and Darjeeling, *International Research Journal of Human Resources and Social Sciences*, vol no 5, issue 02, February 2018, Maharashtra, India, p. 62

that the people were backward and hence they thought it was mandatory to provide safeguard to these people against the outsiders.⁴

The word Dzongu means ‘nine districts, the Dzongu region is covered with different mountain peaks along with the slope valleys and dense forest.⁵ Since time immemorial the Lepcha people relied on the forest resources in order to survive, they also had deep understanding of plants and animals which were found in their region.⁶ Most of the Lepcha people also regard Dzongu region as being sacred land and compare it with having equally importance with that of the *Mayel Lyang* (a mythical land located somewhere at the base of Mount *Khangchendzonga*). There is also common belief among the Lepchas that after they die their soul will enter *Mayel Lyang*.⁷

TRADITIONAL SYSTEM OF GOVERNANCE IN DZONGU:

Unlike other parts of Sikkim, Dzongu region was run by a group which comprised of the elder members of the village, in most of the cases male member in the family was chosen and together as a body they used to administer the region, which came to known as *Chodu. Muktiar, Mandal*, followed by *Gyapun* and *Youmi* were entrusted with the authority to discuss any matter which aroused in Dzongu and took decision accordingly. It is to be noted that *Muktiar* came much later who was appointed on the advice given by the then Maharani of Sikkim. Prior to the establishment of *Muktiar*'s office, the *Chodu* comprised of *MandalGyapun* and *Youmi*. This body was also responsible for the collection of revenues, solve the problems of the people, and also were entrusted with the power to punish if some was found guilty. However, when

⁴Jigme N. Kazi, *SonsofSikkim*, Hill Media Publication, Gangtok, 2020, p 238

⁵K Pradhan Bharat and K Badola Hemant, Ethnomedicinal plant use by Lepcha tribe of Dzongu valley, bordering Khangchendzonga Biosphere Reserve, in North Sikkim, India, *Journal of Ethnobiology and Ethnomedicine*, Gangtok, 2008, p. 4.

⁶Anita Sharma, *The Lepchas of Dzongu Region in Sikkim*, INTACH, new Delhi, 2013, p.5

⁷ Kerry Little, Lepcha Narratives of Their Threatened Sacred Landscapes, *TransformingCulturesJournal*, Vol. 3, No 1, February 2008, p. 239

Sikkim was taken over by the Tibetan overlords, Sikkim was divided into various Dzongs meaning district and the new rulers appointed a *Kazi*, to take care of the administration in each dzongs. Likewise, Dzongu also came to be looked after by a *Kazi*.⁸

In the book *History of Sikkim*, written by the then Chogyal of Sikkim Thutob Namgyal and Yeshey Dolma it has been mentioned that Jongu was given to the *Tanag Dinkha* Rani of *TsudphudNamgyal* (the seventh Chogyal of Sikkim) instead of jewelries. The Rani is said to have entrusted the Jongu land to *Malling Nyerpa* a trustworthy person (*Karma Rabgay*) who used to work in the royal palace. With the demise of *TanagDinkha* rani the ownership of the land was given to *Monkyit Rani*. Likewise, after *MallingNyerpa*, the *Jongu* land was looked after by *Khangsa Dewan*. However, *Rinzin Namgyal* the grandson of *MallingNyerpa* got hold of the documents which proved that the duty to look after Jongu was given to his grandfather. With these documents he challenged the *khangsa Dewan* and the matter was presented in the political officer's court, eventually the decision was made in favor of *Rinzin Namgyal*. Later on, the maharani of *Lhading* laid stress on the issue of Jongu by claiming that Jongu was owned by the Maharanis, after holding an extensive debate and discussion the political officer and other officials of the state took a decision in Maharani's favor, giving the ownership of land to her.⁹

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The idea of making Dzongu as a Reserve land was initiated during the reign of Tashi Namgyal, the eleventh Chogyal of Sikkim by issuing a Royal Proclamation in the year

⁸Chumit Lepcha, *Traditional Governance and Politics of Rural Reform in Sikkim: A Study of Dzumsa System*, pp 55-56.

⁹Maharaja Thutob Namgyal and Maharani Yeshey Dolma, *History of Sikkim*, pp 135-136.

1958. According to some writer like Geoffrey Gorer it was made so because the then Maharaja wanted to keep the Lepchas away from being influenced by the outsiders. While others such as D T Tumlong states that the royal palace needed a faithful and loyal servant especially the Lepchas to work for them, the royal officials were afraid that if the Lepcha people mingles with rest of the communities, they would become smarter and the royal palace would loose hold over the faithful servants. So, what was the under lying motive behind making Dzongu as a reserve land? And how was it done? Would be some interesting questions to answer through this research work.

Dzongu being a reserve land for the Lepcha people has both positive and negative impacts upon its people. One good thing about the reservation was that because the people were completely isolated from other communities living in Sikkim, they somehow managed to preserve their culture, tradition and old customs. On the other hand, while in rest of the parts of Sikkim people could avail facilities provided by the government like for example education and health care, though Dzongu was made as a reserve land but people of Dzongu could not get those facilities, and were left in their own world. Though the homogeneous society existed in Dzongu because of which they were able to preserve their culture and tradition but at the same time it is also known that it went through certain changes that occurred due to the external influences, and to some extent there were internal causes as well which were responsible for the changes that occurred in Dzongu region.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Dr. A. Campbell in his book *On the Lepchas*, (1869) talks about the Lepcha people living in Sikkim and its adjoining regions. Campbell is of opinion that the Lepchas are divided into two families i.e., *Rong* and *Khumba*, who at some point of time were

separated and now has been combined thorough language, religion, customs and their physical characters. The *Rong* is seen in Sikkim and it is believed that the *Rongs* came much prior then that of *Khumbas*.

The writer further explains about the food habits where he says that the Lepcha's eat all kind of animal food including elephant, rhinoceros and monkey. They also eat vegetables, but these peoples cook in a careless manner. Campbell focuses on various aspects of the Lepchas like dresses, marriages, and languages. Though the author has provided information about various aspects of the Lepchas however, mentions about the reserve estate Dzongu is lacking in his work and the studies of the Lepchas, particularly of Sikkimese Lepcha is incomplete without highlighting the so-called pure-blooded Lepchas residing over the reserved estate.

The book, *The Himalayan Heritage* (1987) is been written by M.K Raha, which contain a chapter- The Lepchas of West Bengal A Socio- Economic and Cultural profile, where the author deals with the identity of the Lepcha communities. The book provides information about the Lepchas of West Bengal as well as the Lepchas of Sikkim. He had traced their economic aspect of day-to-day life. The author says "The economic condition of the Lepchas is not all satisfactory. Apart from low income the Lepchas are spendthrift in nature".

The Lepchas of Sikkim, particularly living in a reserve estate grows rice, wheat, millet, and varieties of fruits, vegetables and cardamom. The book highlights that the reserve estate i.e., Dzongu is located in the valley of high Himalayas and the Lepchas of this place faced problems of riding mules due to which they have to carry all baggage on their own back. The book even though stress small portion of the Dzongu

as being an agriculturally sound place but the book has not mentioned about their connection with rest of the Lepchas living in different parts of the region.

In the book '*Ecology Culture and Change*' (1989) which is written by Veena Bhasin, it basically deals with the two tribal communities of North Sikkim i.e. The Lepchas and the Bhutias, their socio-cultural aspects as well as the ecological condition. The author writes that the Lepchas were less civilized than the rest of the communities living in Sikkim. As far as Dzongu is concerned the writer holds the view that Dzongu was a very rich region in terms of natural resources. The people engaged themselves in hunting, fishing and also collected eatable items found in the forest. At the village level they acted as the chief, dealt with all the local issues. Geographically, Dzongu was separated from the other parts of Sikkim because of which Dzongu did not get the facilities given to other regions of Sikkim. It has also been mentioned that people of Dzongu also cultivated rice, buckwheat, millet, barley, maize, wheat and vegetables. However, this book fails to provide proper history of Dzongu.

In the book, *Lepcha My Vanishing Tribe* (2003) by A. R Foning has mentioned that the Lepcha reserve of Dzongu is located somewhere in the northern part of Sikkim surrounded by the high Himalayas, the rivers *Dikchyu*, *Talung* and *Rongnyu* and one had to walk through cane bridges to visit this place. According to the writer Lepcha people who were residing inside the reserve as well as those who lived outside the reserves had a similar mentality. The author where upon his arrival in Dzongu particularly *Lingthem*, noticed the people being engaged in celebration of Buddha Purnima. He also writes that *Lingthem* was virtually the head quarter of the Dzongu reserve.

In the case of the Lepchas, it was the British overlords who found out that people were living in a miserable condition and came up with the idea of reserve land in the first half of the 19th century when they gained control over the whole of Sikkim. The whole idea was to safeguard the culture and tradition of the Lepchas and also to prevent economic exploitation from outsiders. But this book has its own limitation since only a small part of Dzongu i.e., *Lingthem* has found its place in the book, while Dzongu comprised of many villages which has not been dealt with.

Geoffrey Gorer, in his book, *Himalayan Village: An Account of the Lepcha of Sikkim*, (2005) has mention about the Lepchas living at the southern and eastern slopes of Mount Kanchenjunga. According to the author, 1971 census shows that 25,780 Lepchas were residing in Sikkim as well as in Darjeeling. For the Lepchas Mayel Lyang (which is one of the inaccessible valleys of Kanchenjunga) is considered to be the place of origin of their ancestors. He is also of the opinion that this book on the Lepchas was the outcome of the initiative taken by the then Maharajah of Sikkim, who declared Dzongu as a Lepcha reserve and a law was made, according to the law only pure-blooded Lepchas could become the owners of the land. So Dzongu was entirely inhabited by the Lepcha people without any alien influences.

In the book title, *Khangchendzonga Sacred Summit*, (2007) written by Pema Wangchuk and Rita Zulica, the book talks about how and why Khangchendzonga is important to Sikkimese people and its role in shaping the cultural and religious aspects of the people residing in Sikkim. It has been mentioned in this book that Dzongu was a reserve land for the Lepchas because it is in this land that the oldest Lepcha settlers are to be found. Also, within Dzongu *Tinvong* village is considered as the oldest since time immemorial the Lepchas were settled here. Moreover, *Tingvong* village has been mentioned in the documents, dating back to mid-13th century.

However, very few details regarding Dzongu is found in this book, like for instance the writers had just given an overview idea of Dzongu as a reserve land.

Kelly Little wrote an article with a title "*Lepcha Hunters narratives of their hidden landscape*", (2007) which has been published in Bulletin of Tibetology. The writer's interest in Lepcha Hunting practice came up when he encountered two Lepcha hunters fondly playing with a small deer, which they rescued from the jungle. These two men had given up their hunting practice. The writer's main purpose behind visiting Dzongu was to collect Lepchas folktales and in the process, he collects many folktales relating to the period when hunting used to be one of the significant activities among Lepchas. The writer is of the view that the hunting activity has thrived in Dzongu compared to the other areas of Sikkim. Dzongu being disconnected from rest of the parts of Sikkim and also because of its rough terrain, it was not easily accessible, because of which the people could not enjoy the opportunities offered in other parts of Sikkim like education, infrastructure and health facilities. This could perhaps be the reason why hunting tradition was continued in Dzongu. The article basically deals with the hunting stories in Dzongu, reference has also been made of Dzongu as a reserved area and the impact which had it on the people but the articles has not dealt extensively the issue of Dzongu as a reserve area.

The book *Mayel Lyang and The Lepchas*, (2011) written by D.T. Tamlong (retd. IAS) wrote that Dzongu was private land where owner was the then Maharajah of Sikkim, later on it was declared as the 'Lepcha Reserve', probably the put a check on the entry of outsiders in Sikkim and to keep the Lepcha people away from the influence of the outsiders. But according to the author this might have been done so that the non-Lepchas could not influence the Lepchas. The royal authorities were afraid that if they get influence, they would loss hold over the sincerer and honest servants who were

made to work in palace. The author is also of the opinion that the place was named Dzongu because it looked like a prison, jail or a fort when viewed from afar, also the word Dzong in Bhutan means fort or jail. The whole of the Dzongu was looked after by one Kazi, the Mandal and Muktair used to collect rent from the people and were handed over to the Kazi. The author also holds the view that there was an absence of health and education facilities in the reserve area. The monastery was the only public infrastructure where the people from time to time gathered. Like many other works, this book too fails to trace the proper history of the Dzongu in particular.

The book *Lepchas: Past and Present* (2012) written by D.C. Roy, is basically a compilation of various selected articles published in many journals. It is divided into two different sections of articles; the first section throws some light on the historical aspects of the Lepcha people while the other section deals with the narration of socio-cultural and economic aspects of the contemporary Lepchas. According to the author the original name of Dzongu is FakramTakram (Fakram meaning a ladder and Takram means a standing tree, usually having a cut at various parts). The place is named so because of its shape which resembles with that of a ladder. According to another version Dzongu was named as Faokraam-Toakraam, Faok means thought or channel raam means a source, Tak means 'to nestle', raam again means a source. So, it means the source of Lepcha origin or life.

The Lepchas Culture and Religion of a Himalayan People (2012). Written by Halfdan Siiger as a part of the third Danish expedition to Central Asia which was sponsored by the Carlsberg Foundation, Halfdan Siiger conducted the Anthropological field work in Sikkim and Kalimpong. He worked on the Lepcha, culture and religion of a Himalayan people. The writer begins with highlighting some problems regarding lack of proper historical materials for reconstructing the history of the Lepcha people. He

also gives a brief account of the Chogyals of the Sikkim. According to the writer Jongu was to be inhabited only by the Lepchas. As per the order given by the then Chogyal of Sikkim the non Lepcha people were not supposed to enter the Jongu region. Among the villages in Jongu, Tingbung was much more conservative than others which could perhaps be the reason why most of the field work were carried on in this region. Furthermore, he wrote that the Lepchas of Jongu use to go to nearby bazaar to sell their products and brought back the necessary things for themselves. Since Jongu was also influenced by Lamaism, the Lepchas also managed to carry on their age-old tradition and customs. Therefore, hardly any conflict was seen between Lamas and Bongthings.

Encyclopaedia of India, Sikkim, (2012) written by S.S. Chib highlights different aspects of Sikkim, for instances, Sikkim's geographical position, ethnic communities, Drainage systems, Climatic conditions, floras, wild life etc., Chib also made a mention about the history of Sikkim where he had segregated its history into three phases- Ancient history, where he talks about the original inhabitant of Sikkim i.e., Lepchas and the Limbus. In Medieval history the author lay emphasis on coming of Khye Bumsa from Minyak dynasty of Tibet towards Sikkim and meeting to the Lepchas chief Thekong Tek and later making one of the clans of Khye Bumsa as a ruler of Sikkim. The author then shifts towards the Modern history, throwing light upon the coronation of the first Chogyal of Sikkim Puntsog Namgyal, leading to the beginning of Namgyal Dynasty.

The author further emphasized of the major communities of Sikkim i.e., the Lepchas, the Bhutias, and the Tsongs. According to the writer, the Lepchas were peaceful by nature, non-aggressive. Since the Lepchas were attacked by the invaders from Bhutan and Nepal, instead of confronting the invaders the Lepchas always gave way to the

aggressor, due to which the number of Lepchas started to decrease. Therefore, the then ruler of Sikkim, Sir Tashi Namgyal made a separate estate in Zongu out of his personal estate for the pure blooded Lepchas to save the Lepchas from ultimate extinction. But in this book, the author has only stressed a particular region behind declaring Dzongu as a reserve estate.

In the book *Lepchas and Their Heritage* (2013) written by Tapan Chattapadhyay he mentions that at the end of 19th century, the small hamlets which comprised Tinbong, Lingdong, Lingthem was to be inhabited by the Rongs as Dzongu located in North Sikkim. This area was later known as the Lepcha land the area consisted of 13 revenue blocks and according to 1982 survey figure the total population of the Lepchas in Dzongu were 4331. The areas lying within Dzongu region was not to be given to the non Lepchas. However, according to the writer the authorities did not took necessary initiatives to uplift the conditions of the Lepchas living in Dzongu. Their conditions remained same and did not improve even when Sikkim a part of India in 1975.

OBJECTIVES

- i) To analyze why and how Dzongu was made as a Reserve land.
- ii) To study the impact of demarcation of reserve land on the Lepcha's of Dzongu.
- iii) To analyze the changes that occurred in Dzongu.

METHODOLOGY

The method that will be used in the present research work will follow qualitative methods culling out primary sources on aspects of culture, polity and the life of the people in the Dzongu. It will also use descriptive methods as well.

Primary sources like Gazetteer, archival records, government records and secondary sources such as books, journals and articles will also be looked into to complete the research work.

CHAPTERIZATION

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION:

This chapter deals with the meaning of the word “Dzongu” along with its Geographical locations. It further highlights very briefly about the traditional system of Governance that was prevalent in Dzongu which is been followed by Literature Review, Statement of the Problem, Objectives, Methodology and Chapterization.

CHAPTER II

TO ANALYZE WHY AND HOW DZONGU WAS MADE A RESERVE LAND:

This chapter examines the importance of Dzongu region in Sikkim. It carefully analyzes the hypothesis made by various authors in their books and articles as to how and why Dzongu was declared as a reserve land.

CHAPTER III

IMPACT OF DEMARCATION OF RESERVE LAND ON THE LEPCHA’S OF DZONGU:

This chapter discusses both positive and negative impact on the Lepcha people of Dzongu after the land was demarcated as the reserve land. The social, cultural and economic impacts have been mainly highlighted in this chapter.

CHAPTER IV

AN ANALYSIS ON THE CHANGES THAT OCCURRED IN DZONGU:

This chapter analyzes the changes that occurred in Dzongu after it was declared as reserve land.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION:

The chapter will summarize the entire chapters.

CHAPTER II

TO ANALYZE WHY AND HOW DZONGU WAS MADE A RESERVE LAND

C.J. Morris writes in his book 'Living with Lepchas' that during the reign of *Puntsog Namgyal*, a person who goes by the name of *Lasso Kazi* expressed his desire to have the *Jongu* district which was a very productive region at that time. Somehow, he managed to convince the king and became the owner of the land by stating that the land which he desired to have was just a small and useless land. The raja did not have much idea about the lands, so he willingly gave it away. Now there was another person named *Yug Ting Tashey* who was a loyal minister and also the raja had great faith in him. *Yug Ting Tashey* was in need of a peculiar plants called *Sumdo* and *Vimpot* which could be found only in the higher mountainous zones. These plants were usually uncommon and if somebody finds it could turn a person into a rich man. So, he started on a journey to find the valuable plants.¹⁰ Upon his arrival at a place called *Toong Voong*, he enquired to the local people about the owner of the Land, the people responded by stating that its owner was *Lasso Kazi*. He fled every time when *Yug Ting Tashey* wanted to have a meeting with him, so in this way he somehow managed to escape from the latter. After returning from the journey *Yug Ting Tashey* reported to the Raja how he was fooled by *Lasso Kazi* who took possession of huge acres of land. The Raja then asked *Yug Ting Tashey* to retrieve the *Jongu* land, he along with many of his men decided to stay at place called *Rong Rong* hot spring. He sent some of his men across the river to fetch some plants, when the local people came to know about this, they reported to *Lasso Kazi* who was still the real owner of

¹⁰C. J. Morris, Living with Lepchas, William Heinemann ltd, Great Britain, 1938, p. 55.

the region for the people of *Jongu*. In order to drive away those people *Lasso Kazi* sent his men across the river, when people on the other side came to know about his plan they ran away, leaving *Yug Ting Tashey* behind. However, he alone defeated all the men sent by *Lasso kazi*. When this news reached *Lasso Kazi*, he was taken aback, he killed a young bull and sent it to *Yug Ting Tashey* and negotiated for a peaceful settlement. He admitted his mistake and asked for forgiveness to which *Yug Ting Tashey* willingly accepted. He was also asked to move out of *jongu* region . It is said that since then *jongu* became a privately owned land under the Raja of Sikkim. ¹¹

It has been mentioned in the archival records that the *Dzongu* region belonged to *Malling Kazi* under the *Patta* issued in the year 1892 by the predecessor of *Thutob Namgyal* (the tenth *Chogyal* of Sikkim. But in the year 1907 the *Maharani* of Sikkim argued that the *Garjong* land belonged to her since it was held by subsequent *Maharani's* of Sikkim as a dowry land.¹²So, in order to settle the dispute over *Garjong* land a council meeting was held on 27th March 1907. The members of the council came up with a solution to offer recently resumed monastic land be given to *Rinzing Kazi* in exchange of *Garjong* lands which *Maharani* laid claim over.

Rinzing Kazi stated that *Malling Kazi* (grandfather of *Rinzing Kazi*) received the land as a *jagir* from the then *Chogyal* of Sikkim since he dedicated his entire life by assisting the *Chogyal*. When he received the land, it was mostly a forest land covered with different varieties of plants and trees and most importantly the land was sparsely populated with a very few numbers of households. After the demise of *Malling Kazi* *Garjong* land was taken over by *Rinzing Kazi's* uncle *Khashey*. However, after the death of *Khashey Chiring Dorjee* took control over the *Garjong* Land, he was also a

¹¹C.J. Morris, Op.Cit, pp 56-57.

¹²Sikkim State Archive, Land Revenue 1890-1909, file no 3/1908, Reg. *Garjong* Land Settlement with Her Highness the *Maharani* and *Malling Kazi*, p.4

Nyerpa to H.H the Maharaja and a son in law of *Khangsa Dewan*, on the basis of this relationship the former became the next holder of Garjong land. It is said that during all these times Her Highness did not laid any claim over the said land. He further says that by the time he came to know about the *Garjong* lands being taken over by *Khangsa Dewan* it was already too late since he was among the one appointed in providing service to the Maharaja. When he explained the case to the then Maharaja and asked for a leave to fight a case against *Khangsa Dewan*, the former is said to have wished him luck and with a few encouraging words offered him a *khada* (ceremonial scarf) along with a sum of ten rupees¹³. When the case was discussed in the presence of Council members and the Maharaja, the decision was made in favor of Rinzing Kazi and the lands were given back him. Even after returning from *Kurseong* to Gangtok she did not laid any claim over the *Garjong* Lands. Time and again the Maharaja insisted Rinzing Kazi to return back to look after and maintain his patrimonial estate. Finally, he decided to take a retirement from government service and decided to return back in order manage his estate. In, fact he spent entire sixteen years of his life in improving the land by making it suitable for the cultivation of paddy as well as cardamom crops, constructing roads, bridges etc. Since, he put a lot effort and energy in *Garjong* Land he was not willing to part with it even he was offered the same size of land elsewhere with a larger number of *Rayats*.¹⁴ However, after having a prolong discussion on the disputed land it was decided by the His Highness Maharaja and the Council that:

¹³Sikkim State Archives, land revenue 1890-1909, file no 3/1908, Reg. Garjong Land Settlement with her highness, the Maharani and Malling Kazi, pp 11-12.

¹⁴Sikkim State Archives, land revenue 1890-1909, file no 3/1908, Reg. Garjong Land Settlement with her highness, the Maharani and Malling Kazi, p.13.

- 1) The Maharani was to be given the land west of river *Teesta*, known as Garjong land where she was exempted from paying land rents but had to pay excise and labor taxes.
- 2) In addition, she was also given the ownership of resumed from *Sangatchelling* and *Dubdi* monasteries for which she had to pay rents and taxes to the state.
- 3) On the other hand, Rinzing Kazi took control over the land lying east of river *Teesta*, from the *Rong-rong* chu to below *Chungthang*, for which he was also supposed to pay land rents and taxes to the state.
- 4) In exchange of *Garjong* land Rinzing Kazi was given the lands resumed from *Ketsoperi* and *Melli*, monasteries paying land rents and taxes to the state.
- 5) It was also decided that Rinzing Kazi could retain all the cardamom and rice fields planted by him but provided he had to pay rents to the Maharani. The Maharani had to give Rinzing Kazi assigned document to the effect that if labor was required by the latter to work in the field, she will allow her villagers to work on payment of usual wages of four annas for a man and three annas for women and two annas for a boy.
- 6) Lastly, it was decided that all the lands which were given over to the Maharani will be enjoyed by the future Maharanis as well.¹⁵

¹⁵ Sikkim State Archives, land revenue, 1890-1909, file no 3/1908, Reg. Garjong land settlement with her highness the Maharani and Malling Kazi, pp 29-30

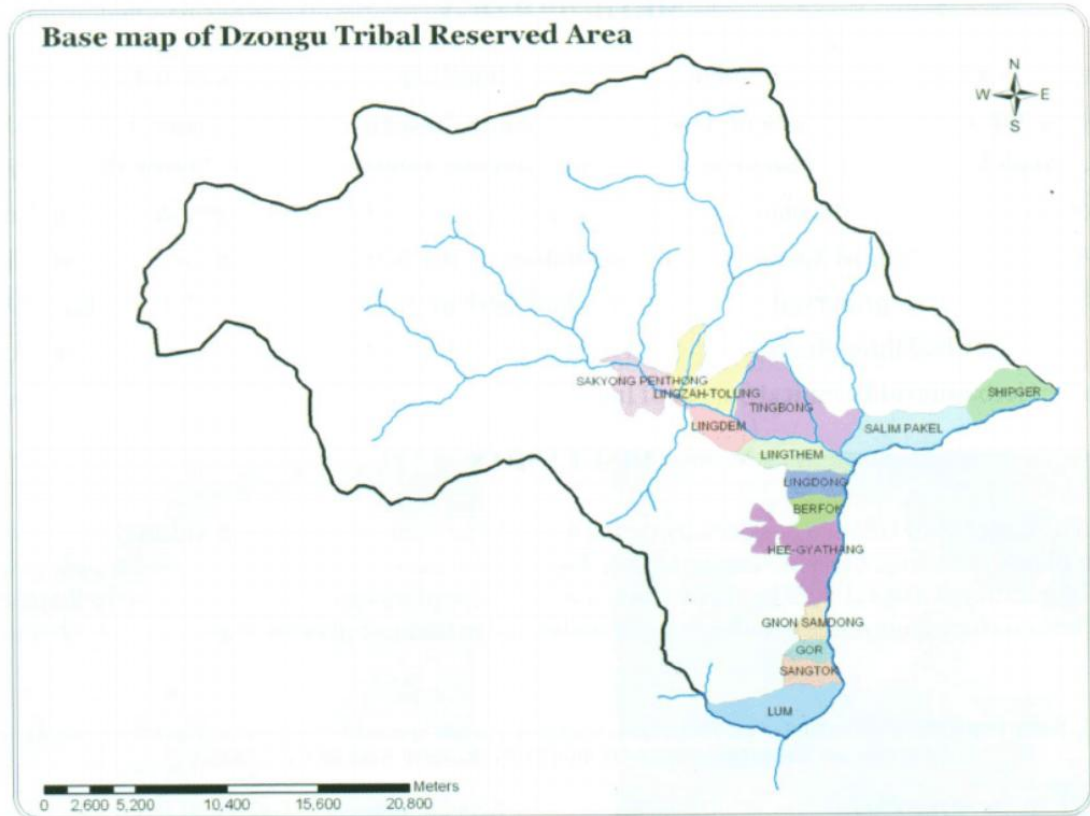


Fig.2.1 Map of Dzongu region

Source: K.C. Lepcha, S.R. Lepcha and A.P Das. Traditional Dye Extraction from Three Common Weeds of Sikkim By Lepchas of Dzongu Tribal Reserve Area (DTRA)

2.1 Theories put forward by different Writers and Research Scholars regarding why Dzongu was made as a Reserve Land

According to Nandini Bhattacharya, it is quite difficult to give a proper historical account of the Lepchas, since there are very few written sources which are not enough to write a complete history. Though many anthropologist and ethnographers had carried on a no of research with regard to the traditions, culture, and customs of the Lepchas. However, while going through such accounts one can easily find the distinction made between the so called civilized and uncivilized, the progressive and retrogressive. The establishment of colonial regime in Sikkim saw a drastic change in

the geographical area, while Sikkim shared its boundary with Tibet, Nepal and Bhutan which was strategically important for Colonial rulers. One of the main motives of colonial rulers was to establish a military base camp in the frontier areas. However, with the passage of time, the colonial rulers became aware that they could earn a lot of money through trade and commerce, in addition to the fact that Sikkim was also a major producer of timber, tea, rubber and tobacco. This factor played an important role in ushering a new wave of change in the region with rise in population.¹⁶

After gaining control over Sikkim the colonial rulers were in need of work force to establish their empire in the newly acquired region. Since the Lepchas did not provide their allegiance to the new rulers, they started to rely on the non-native people particularly from Nepal. So, gradually the colonial rulers and its helpers took over the lands and started the process of building colonial structures like for instance buildings which served as office, construction of roads and churches, the lands were given to the new settlers and was also used for the purpose of cultivation of agriculture as well as to produce cash crops like tea.¹⁷ Thus, gradually the Lepcha people lost control over the lands and moved to the far-off region. While the colonial rulers justified the move by stating that the former could not mingle with the highly civilized people. The lands which were left behind by the Lepchas were given away to the non-native people who assisted the colonial rulers. As a result, *Zongu* was made as a reserve land whereby only the Lepcha people were allowed to settle. This very move made by the colonial rulers was seen as a kind gesture towards them or in other words they became a savior for the so-called primitive tribe.¹⁸

¹⁶Nandini Bhattacharyya, *Culture, Heritage, And, Identity, The Lepcha and Mangar Communities of Sikkim and Darjeeling*, KW Publishers, New Delhi, 2015, pp 1-2.

¹⁸ Nandini Bhattacharya, Op.Cit, pp 7- 8.

According to D.C. Roy, it is a well-known fact that the Lepcha people had the unique system of naming everything in their own language. Likewise, *mayal lyang* is the name given to Sikkim by the Lepchas, it was spread over a vast area but however, because of constant war with its neighboring countries Sikkim lost major portion of its land along with the people living in it. During the 14th century when the Tibetans arrived in Sikkim headed by *Khye Bumsa* and after having met with the Lepcha chief *Thekong Thek* a covenant of blood brotherhood was signed between the two leaders. This event became a major landmark in the history of Sikkim, because the treaty brought the Lepcha people under the rule of Tibetans. The next blow came during the reign of third Chogyal of Sikkim i.e., Chagdor Namgyal, when Bhutan invaded and took control over the whole of Sikkim. Though later on with the intervention of Dalai Lama Bhutanese forces had to vacate Sikkim but they did not withdraw their forces from *Damsang* (present day Kalimpong). Hence, the Lepcha people got divided and simultaneously ruled by the two different rulers, the Tibetans and the Bhutanese.¹⁹

In the past the Tibetans rulers of Sikkim also had to face lot problems due to the constant assault from the side of Nepal and because of which most of the boundary dispute between the two-country remained unsettled. From the 1780, Sikkim witnessed a no of attack from Nepal and over the period of years they managed to occupy Terai region, but later on with the end of war between the Nepal and Britain (1816) the former area of Sikkim was given back to Sikkim. In the following year an arrangement of treaty was made between East India Company and kingdom of Sikkim which came to be known as the Treaty of Titalia according to which the former returned all the Sikkim's land annexed by the Nepalese. However, the East India Company wanted to have Darjeeling so as to convert the land into a place where the

¹⁹D. C. Roy, *Lepchas Past and Present*, N. L. Publishers, Siliguri, 2012, p. 33-34.

soldiers could come and get their treatment done. The proposal to cede Darjeeling was accepted by the Chogyal of Sikkim and through the Deed of Grant (1835) it became a part of East India Company, and eventually led to the separation of Lepcha people. By now they were ruled by the Tibetans, Gorkhas, Bhutanese and East India Company in their respective areas.

The kingdom of Bhutan and British colonial rulers never shared a friendly relation. In fact both Bhutan and British colonial fought a war (1864) in which the latter managed to take control over Bhutanese occupied Kalimpong along with the people residing in it. In the later phase when the British colonial rulers left India, all the lands which were under them particularly Darjeeling and Kalimpong were taken over by India and again the Lepchas were placed under new rulers. The next change took place when Sikkim merged with and became an integral part of India on 16th April 1975.²⁰ In the past due to constant war with its neighboring countries Sikkim lost considerable size of its territory to the invaders. At present most of the Lepchas live in Sikkim particularly Dzongu region, for them *Chu* meaning Peak, *Da* lake and likewise *Ljep* meaning gate are very important, every clan in Lepcha has a special relation with *Chu*, *Da* and *Ljep*. There is belief among them that all these places lie in Dzongu, also their first ancestor *Fodongthing* and *Nazongnyo* after being created came to live there. Therefore, Dzongu is seen as a *Mayel Lyang* for the Lepchas and perhaps because of all these reasons Chogyal must have made Dzongu as a reserve land.²¹

According to another writer Veena Bhasin, she is of the opinion that most of the Lepchas in Sikkim are found in North District particularly Dzongu region, where only Lepcha people were allowed to settle. In the distant past this region was a part of

²⁰D. C. Roy, Op.Cit, p.34, 35, 36.

²¹D. C. Roy, Op.Cit, p.38-39.

private estate belonging to the then queen of Sikkim. After the arrival of East India Company handful of Lepchas embrace Christianity on the other hand most of them had already been following Buddhism in Sikkim. Although they speak their own language and follow their own culture and tradition but at the same time they are also familiar with Nepali which is the common language spoken in Sikkim. She further states that in comparison to people living in other areas of Sikkim Lepcha people of Dzongu were lacking behind in terms of economic domain, so in order to prevent them from being exploited by outsiders Dzongu region was officially made as a reserve land.²² Much earlier even prior to the arrival of Tibetans, they were the only ones who lived in Sikkim. However, the advent of Tibetans brought a new wave of change in Sikkim, firstly a monarchical form of rule was set up, and secondly the indigenous people were made to follow Tibetan Buddhism. The new rulers took control over the lands which were mostly fertile and suitable for cultivation while forcing the Lepchas to look for another place to settle. In the later phase with the arrival of East India Company the numbers of Nepali people rapidly increased in Sikkim, they were engaged in construction of roads. Unlike Lepchas the Nepalese and Tibetans were much strengthful because of which the former got ignored and compelled to retire in remotest parts of Sikkim while some managed to live with the other two communities. Therefore, in order to safeguard the Lepchas, the then Maharaja of Sikkim (Chogyal Tashi Namgyal) made Dzongu a reserve land where by only Lepchas were given the right to settle and own property. Dzongu region in the past was not easily accessible owing to its rough terrain with a few numbers of households, and people mainly depended on products grown in jungles and later they took up cultivation. So, to provide a kind of protection to the social homogeneity of

²²Veena Bhasin, *Ecology Culture and Change: Tribals of Sikkim Himalaya*, M. C. Mittal, New Delhi, 1989, p. 81-82.

Lepcha community was undoubtedly one of the important objectives behind declaring Dzongu as a reserve land. Though it is cut off from other areas of Sikkim, the people could not remain aloof because they had to travel to nearby markets to sell their local products and buy necessary things.²³

According to another scholar Binod Bhattraï, most of the Lepcha people live northern part of Sikkim including the region of Dzongu. What happened was that the arrival of English in the erstwhile kingdom of Sikkim particularly in early eighteenth centuries brought about a massive change especially in the field of economy as well as rise of population, since they had opened up a tea estate in an around the surrounding areas of Darjeeling which later turned out to be a very lucrative business for them. So, in order to meet their labor force which was required for various purposes they started to invite people from different regions of India and parts of Nepal as well. These people who came in search of work gradually began to enter Dzongu region, (it is to be noted that at this juncture Dzongu was not declared as a reserve land) the Lepchas who were living there had a little amount of money in their hands. It was only after they started the cultivation of cardamom crops that they began to earn some extra money.²⁴

The growth of cardamom cultivation and the money which was earned through cardamom played a significant role since now they needed extra men to work in their field, gradually those who entered Dzongu in search of work began to work in cardamom fields.²⁵

According to D T Tumlong, who is a retired civil servant wrote a book with a title '*Mayel Lyang and The Lepchas*' in the year (2011) in which he put forward his view

²³Op.Cit, Veena Bhasin, pp 84-85.

²⁴Binod Bhattraï, Socio-economic impact of hydropower projects in Dzongu region of North Sikkim, *GlobalJournalofSociology*, volume no 05, issue 1, 2015, pp 19-20.

²⁵Ibid, p. 19

stating that Dzongu was a private land owned by the then Maharajah of Sikkim, later on it was declared as the 'Lepcha Reserve', probably to put a check on the entry of outsiders in that region and to keep the Lepcha people away from the influence of outsiders. But however, deep down he also argues that the underlying motive of royal authorities was something different. He argues that the royal authorities were afraid that if the Lepchas of Dzongu (who were usually regarded as a shy, timid and sincere people) gets along well with the outsiders, they would lose hold over those sincerer and honest servants who were made to work in the royal palace.²⁶

It has been mentioned in some Buddhist scriptures like *Neyig*, *Rigdzin Sogdrub*, *Lama Gongdue* about *Beyul Demajong* referring to Sikkim, further these Buddhist scriptures holds that in the remote past *Beyul Demajong* is said to have blessed by *Arya Avalokiteshwara*, *Tara Devi*, and other great beings. Even *Guru Padmasambhava* popularly known as *Guru Rinpoche*, *Khandro Yeshey Tsogyal*, *Shantarakshita* came to Sikkim probably in the second half of 8th Century, perhaps it was during this period *Guru Rinpoche* is said to have concealed several dharma treasures in a place where it was difficult for a normal human being to discover those treasures, which comprised of 118 important and five precious treasures. The *Tholung* monastery which is located in the northern part of Dzongu contains the most important dharma treasures including Buddhist scriptures, ritual objects used by none other than *Guru Rinpoche* and *Lhatsun Chenpo*. Apart from these as per the information found in *Nerig* text there are also many holy sites located in an around Dzongu region and because of this the Chogyal of Sikkim laid down many laws to safeguard them, no doubt one such law was the Royal Proclamation of August 30th 1956, according to which Dzongu

²⁶D T Tumlong, *Mayel Lyang & the Lepchas*, Mrs. Amina Tumlong, 2008, p. 180

region was made as a reserve land, law safeguarded under article 371 F, of the constitution of India.²⁷



Fig.2.2 The above seen picture is the old *Tholung* monastery which is located northern part of Dzongu region. Unlike other monasteries in Sikkim, the *Tholung* monastery occupies a unique place since it has a historical significance attached to it. It is said that during the nineteenth century when Sikkim was invaded by the Gorkha forces Lhatsun Chenpo brought all his belongings including texts and dresses used while performing some special ritual. Apart from these things the monastery also contains many sacred texts which was written by himself.

Source: Book, ‘Khangchendzonga Sacred Summit’ author Pema Wangchuk and Mita
Zulca.

²⁷Sikkim Bhutia Lepcha Apex Committee (SIBLAC)



Fig.2.3 A group of monks wearing clothes which are believed to be sacred and kept at Tholung Monastery by Lhatsun Chenpo with the help of few of his followers

Source: Book, Khangchendzonga Sacred Summit.



Fig. 2.4 Two monks adorned in dresses which was probably worn by Lhatsun Chenpo, one of the patron monks, who played an important role in establishing the Namgyal Dynasty in Sikkim.

Source: Book, Khangchendzonga Sacred Summit.



Fig.2.5 People of Dzongu and many others who came from different parts of Sikkim gathered around the monastery arena to witness the display of clothes and many other essential things of *Gyalwa Lhatsun Chenpo*. In the initial period not, many people knew about the importance of monastery but later on it was decided by the committee that after every three year the religious objects and other things would be displayed for the common people too.

Source: Book, Khangchendzonga Sacred Summit.

CHAPTER III

IMPACT OF RESERVE LAND ON THE LEPCHA PEOPLE OF DZONGU

According to sources available there are both positive and negative impacts which have resulted by demarcating Dzongu as a reserve land solely for the Lepcha people. The products of the jungle and land had been important aspect of the economy for the people of Dzongu since their economic life revolve around it. Since, time immemorial the Lepchas depended on hunting along with collecting foods from the forest but gradually as time passed, they began to practice cultivation of crops.²⁸ When we delve into the economic life in Dzongu during the olden day's barter system was prevalent in Dzongu. If a person had an extra amount of anything, he or she used to give away it to someone in need but never sold. During the season of sowing crops usually a pair of bull was needed to plough a field, and since it was not possible for every house to own a pair of bull those having used to send their bull and in return the one who lends received a small portion of grain.²⁹ They exchanged all the eatable things with each other that were grown in their fields.³⁰ In olden days the Lepchas of Dzongu used to collect dye from the jungles, took to *Lachen*, and exchange it for salt and wool. Out of these two products a sizeable amount of salt was again taken to Darjeeling to be exchange with cotton, which was an important product used by the Lepcha women to make clothes.

Prior to the arrival of money lenders, Lepchas of Dzongu followed *Ingzong*, the main purpose of *Ingzong* was that suppose if a person from Dzongu went to Lachen or

²⁸K.S. Singh, *People of India SIKKIM*, Naveen Kishore Seagull Books, Calcutta, 1993, p. 98

²⁹John Morris, *Living with the Lepchas*, William Heinemann Ltd, London, 1938, p. 279

³⁰Prem Singh Thapa, *Enchanting world of the Lepchas*, publisher, new Delhi, 2008, p. 33

Darjeeling in order to exchange their local products with something else it was not possible for him or her to return back within a day. They were supposed to stay for a day or more, so usually it was *Ingzong* who provided them with food and shelter. In order to establish the bond of *Ingzong*, both people had to drink from same cup and had to offer *khada* to each other. The arrival of *Kanyas* in *Mangan* was initially seen as a boon for the local people since they did not have to travel a huge distance to meet their needs but later on it turned out to be opposite when most of them owe debt to these *Kanyas*.³¹

Owing to lack of proper education facilities they had to face lot of problems especially when they came across or dealt with the shop keepers who owned small shops at *Mangan*. Most of the petty shops in *Mangan* belonged to the section of people who came from India they were also regarded as *Kanya*, by the local people. Apart from selling necessary goods these shop keepers also engaged in lending money to the local people. Formerly they used to run their petty shops at *Singtam* but years later some of them came to *Mangan* and settled there. They were also given the legal privilege to fix the price of cardamom by the then ruler of Sikkim.³²

For the people of Dzongu, *Mangan* became the most convenient place to purchase clothes for themselves instead of travelling just to procure plants from which they could make threads and turn into usable clothes and also with the passage of time people began to purchase grains which were available in the market. So gradually unknowingly the local people were trapped into debt. Since the Lepchas were illiterate could not understand the calculation,³³ They were not in a position to grasp fully what was written in a piece of paper which was given to them in a form of debt

³¹John Morris, Op.Cit, pp 280-281

³²Geoffrey Gorer, *Himalayan Village an account of the Lepchas of Sikkim*, Pilgrims Publishing, new Delhi, 2005, p. 113

³³ ibid, p. 113

receipt. However, the Lepchas were aware that the sum of money which had to be paid to the *Kanyas* was much higher but they had no other option.

As compared to the Lepcha people *Kanyas* were in advantageous side as they also had legally rights to fix cardamom rates. During the season of cardamom most of the cases *Kanyas* used to send his people to collect cardamom from those houses who had taken credit from his shop and those who refused to give their cardamom received threats of being taken to the court. In some cases, the issue was when people went to sell their cardamom instead of cash they were given utensils or other usable stuff.

While in other cases if people came to purchase some eatable or usable goods the *Kanyas* refused to take cash and instead forced people to take credits against their will. The interest they charged for taking credits from them were exceeding high. For instance, if people took goods or one maund rice worth up to ten rupees they were supposed to pay in return equally one maund cardamom whose rate was much higher than that of rice.³⁴ It can be said that because the people were not educated so they were easily cheated by the *Kanyas*.³⁵

According to Namgyal Lepcha who lives in *Passingdang* area, said that the Cardamom Cultivation started declining from around 2002 onwards but before that huge quantity of cardamom was produced in Dzongu region, the workers were mainly Nepalese people to whom the Lepcha people used to lease out their land. After the harvesting was done some amount of cardamom was given to the workers and the rest was kept by the owner who used to go and sell it in the Mangan bazaar. But later on, the *Kanyas* suggested that he would send his collies to collect cardamom from the people and therefore there was no need for them to carry the load and come to

³⁴Geoffrey Gorer, Op.Cit, p.114

³⁵Katrina Kniss, Escaping the Concrete Jungle an Exploration of Eco-Tourism Development in Dzongu, North Sikkim, *Independent Study Project (ISP)*, 2016, p. 14

Mangan. Instead of cash the *Kanyas* used to send food grains, millet and other necessary things and while returning the coolies used to take a sack of cardamom along with him. Since the Lepcha people were not well qualified to deal with the *Kanyas* they always had to face the loss as they did not receive any receipt showing the whole cost of cardamom.³⁶



Fig. 3.1 Photograph of interview with Namgyal Lepcha, resident of Passingdang area which fall within the Dzongu region.

Source: Private Collection

We can also get some glimpses of health issues faced by the people from the works of Halfdan Siiger who nearly spent more than three months in *Tingvong* area and wrote a book on the Lepchas. In, fact the author was not so happy with problems faced by the local people due to lack of medical facilities. He mentions in his work of the incident where he tries his best to help women heal who happens to be very sick for a long time, he even sends a letter to a doctor seeking for suggestions to help her regain her

³⁶Namgyal Lepcha, Age 59, Occupation, retired government servant.

health and when he fails after trying so many times, he makes an arrangement to shift her to *Mangan*. The author writes since there was no medical emergency facility available so he took the help of four people including her husband who carried the women in turn in their back till they reached *Mangan*.³⁷

There is absolutely no doubt that people of Dzongu had to face a lot of problems so in order to advocate their issues C. J. Morris writes a letter to the then Maharaja of Sikkim stating that a lot of problems would be solved if the Maharaja could send a good Doctor and provide a basic education to them.³⁸

When we talk about development in any particular country, state, district or area road remains one of the key players but in case of Dzongu the then rulers of Sikkim failed to provide people of Dzongu with good roads that is why most of the parts of Dzongu remained aloof and if they wished to visit the nearby town, they had to cover a long distance by foot. Roads which were already constructed in Dzongu had to undergo reparation process. Though people travelled by foot but during rainy months it posed much challenge and became problematic for them. The process of reparation of roads began only from the year 1983 onwards. Distantly located villages like *Sakyong Pentong* and *Leek* etc. were some of the areas in Dzongu where people could not avail the facilities of roads. This shows how situation of Dzongu was different from other parts of Sikkim, where people had to undertake a tiring walk just to get to a nearby road. In fact, it is said that people of *Pentong* used to go to *Mangan* only one time in a year.³⁹

³⁷Heleen Plaiser, *Bulletin of Tibetology*, In Awe of So Many Mung, Gangtok, 2007, pp 18-19

³⁸C.J. Morris, *opcit*, p.286

³⁹Anita Sharma, *The Lepchas of Dzongu region in Sikkim*, INTACH, New Delhi, 2013, p. 151

Somnath Guha who happens to be a freelance writer wrote that the area consisted of six thousand inhabitants and among these nearly four thousand five hundred literally belonged to the category of BPL (Below Poverty Line), with a few jobs, to add to their misery the production of cardamom was also gradually receding in Dzongu. From the above given factors, we can understand that the situation in Dzongu was more or less not so good especially as far as health education and road is concerned⁴⁰

Also, I would like to draw attention on the impacts of Hydro Power Projects in Dzongu, according to Lepcha legend Sikkim was known as *Mayel Lyang*, where Lepcha people dwell upon. With the passage of time a new wave of change occurred with the arrival of Tibetans in the 17th century and it did not stop here since after Tibetans, the British came solely for the purpose of establishing trade links with the former but later on played crucial role in shaping Sikkim. After the Englishmen it was the Nepalese who came and were initially employed in tea plantations in Darjeeling.⁴¹ Moreover, if compared the rough terrain of Dzongu and northern part of Sikkim as a whole with the other parts of Sikkim, using the modern parameters of what development consists of it does look backward requiring extra attention. So, in the name of development numerous hydro power projects were implemented by the state government in coalition with private firms. Initially it was thought that with the implementation of Hydro Power Projects in Sikkim and Dzongu in particular would solve the problem of rising unemployment and in fact the government did proclaim that the local people would get jobs but it seems like people failed to comprehend the underlying motives behind this. Though people got jobs but on account of the completion of the projects they would be kicked out and had to find other jobs

⁴⁰Somnath Guha, *Garuda & Winged Horses*, Srishti Publishers and Distributors, New Delhi, 2001, pp 125-126

⁴¹ Kachyo Lepcha, *Teesta Hydro Power Projects: A Historical Analysis of the Protest Movement in North Sikkim (1964-2011)*, Unpublished Phd. Thesis, p. 99

somewhere else.⁴² It is also seen that the Teesta Hydro power Project Company in league with the then government of Sikkim took full benefit of the simple and innocent people of Sikkim in general and Dzongu in particular. Through the Land Acquisition Act of 1894, they forcefully took away the land and people reluctantly had to give up their land in addition to the fact that the company also did not take much interest in studying environmental hazard which would eventually cause devastating impacts like landslip causing great threat to the places where people are concentrated in huge numbers and at the same time posing innumerable challenges to the local people.⁴³ Like for instance *Teesta* for the Lepcha people is more than just a river since it finds its place in most of the Lepcha folklores and at the same time it is revered and worshipped by them. The legend holds that at one point of time both *Teesta* and *Rangit* decided to flow down towards plain, it is said that *Rangit* arrived first at point where they were supposed to meet this however enraged *Teesta* who then in the state of anger flooded water throughout *Mayel Lyang*. So, in order to escape from the deluge, the Lepcha people ascended towards mount *Tendong* hill and prayed after which the water subsided. This story has so much to tell us as far as environmental issues are concerned and has left such a lasting impression in the minds of Lepcha people that it has now become almost impossible to continue their life without the presence of *Tendong* Hill, including Mount Kongchendzonga, *Teesta* and *Rangit* River. There is no doubt that introduction of hydro power projects has led to great amount of destruction of environment which is worshipped by the people.⁴⁴

The Lepcha people felt uneasy about the implementation of hydro power projects in Dzongu region which would also draw huge number of workers and at the same time

⁴² Kachyo Lepcha, Op.Cit, pp. 100-101

⁴³ Kachyo Lepcha, Op.Cit, pp. 103-104

⁴⁴ Lepchas in Sikkim: are they Vanishing Tribe? Their struggle for existence, Sandhya Devi Thapa, Karma Loday Tamang, Bhuwan Chettri, *CASIRJ*, vol. no 7 issue 11, year 2016, p.100

were also of the opinion that the then government by taking such initiative were being disregarding of old law and order of Sikkim. The implementation of hydro power projects would mean that people would lose their ancestral land in order to make situation worst most of the lands in Dzongu were not suitable for cultivation and since people there relied on land, they were sure that if it gets implemented, they would face a lot of trouble. The said project also posed a great threat to their culture and tradition.⁴⁵

Apart from the Lepchas it is quite evident that there were Nepalese who were also living in Dzongu. There was one incident which took place in Dzongu after it was formally made as a reserve land. After conducting a thorough enquiry, it became clear that a person named Atang Lepcha who hailed from *Lingdong* went against the proclamation of 1958 whereby Dzongu was declared as a reserve land and the outsiders were not allowed to live there. Since, there were some Nepalese family (they were kept by Rinzing Lepcha and others) who were already living along with the Lepchas, now had to leave Dzongu according to the notification. Atang Lepcha refused to comply with the new notification and in fact he said that those Nepali families had been helping them in cultivating their lands and also have learned many things from the former. So, like any other citizens of Sikkim the Nepalese too have the right to live in any part of Sikkim, therefore they should be allowed to live in Dzongu. Though he raised a voice against the notification but the authority took no notice of it instead he had to face a penalty for going against the government. So, what we get to know from this incident is besides the Lepchas the Nepalese too had to

⁴⁵ Nani Gopal Mandal, Op.Cit, pp 64-65

face one of the major impacts of the above notification since they had to evacuate the place and had to settle somewhere else.⁴⁶

However, there is no doubt that there were some positive impacts which have resulted by making Dzongu as a reserve land. Since, the area is inhabited mostly by the Lepchas there is no doubt that they were able to retain their culture and tradition in its original form with a very little influence. But before we deal about these impacts it is necessary to understand how intricately the Lepchas are connected with the nature. According to H.H Risley the Lepchas are the people who has the ability to understand the ways of animals and birds. They also have a set of names for all plants, animals, rivers, mountains, etc. in their own language.⁴⁷ In, fact Dzongu serves as a place where most of the Lepcha folklores can be collected, these folklores form an important part of their culture and tradition. Most of the folklores have a direct connection with different animals, peaks, rivers, birds etc.⁴⁸

At a village called *Nung*, (located in Dzongu) holds a special position since it is here that the most important ritual began known as *Chyu Rum Faat*, the ritual also received patronage from the then rulers of Sikkim. The one who conducted this ritual was given the title of *Khangchendzonga Bongthing*. The origin of this ritual begins with a story of creation, according to the legends it is said that when *Itbu Moo* created *Kongchen*, (meaning elder brother) he felt unhappy and lonesome so, she again created *Payel Bu* in order to accompany *Kongchen*, while the latter has always been used by the former to unleash wrath upon the people if he is dissatisfied.

⁴⁶ Jangu Area Case, file no, 2 (III) 1059, pp 1, 4

⁴⁷ H H Risley, *Gazetteer of Sikkim*, B.R. Publishing Corporation, Delhi, 2005, p. i

⁴⁸ Tapan Chattopadhyay, *Lepchas and their Heritage*, B.R. Publishing Corporation, new Delhi, 1990, p.1

The story then talks about a sister and her six brothers who one day went out to hunt for many days. After several days they came back and informed their sister that now they will be leaving her for forever since they had to provide service to *Kongchen*, saying these few words they left and she promised that if she gets married and bore a child, she would ask her child to offer prayers to both *Kongchen* and the brothers. Later on, she forgets to fulfill her promise because of which *Kongchen*, sends *Payel Bu* who alters *Tholung* river by raising its water level. When people came to know about it, they hurriedly made arrangements for the child to offer prayers to *Kongchen* after which the water automatically reduced. After this incident the generation of the son had been annually offering prayers to the *Kongchen*.⁴⁹ What we understand from this folklore is that the ritual which was performed by the Bongthing, had a great significance since it involved invocation of *Kongchen*, so that people of *Mayel Lyang* be protected from natural disasters and also sought assistance against the external aggressors.⁵⁰

There is ample evidence to prove that the Lepcha people both in the past and present widely used forest products to sustain their life. One important among those were bamboo plant which was mainly used by them to construct their houses, hunting weapons, musical instruments to construct bridges and in fact numerous other tools were made simply from bamboo and cane.⁵¹ Perhaps, the most important thing which they made was the hat worn by the Lepcha people known as *Sumok Thyak thuk* and it is more interesting to know that the making of this hat is limited to Dzongu region only. The traditional hat has different layers, the top part is referred to as

⁴⁹Pema Wangchuk and Mita Zulca, *Khangchendzonga Sacred Summit*, Rachna books and publication, Gangtok, 2007, p.44

⁵⁰Pema Wangchuk and Mita Zulca, *opcit*, p.50

⁵¹SR Lepcha, R Gurung, ML Arrawatia, Traditional Lepcha Craft Sumok Thyakthuk (Lepcha Hat) & its conservation in Dzongu Tribal Reserved Area (DTRA) Sikkim, India, *IndianJournalofTraditionalKnowledge*, vol. no 11 (3), July 2012. P. 537.

Sungdyongsong, which means spider's web. It is called so probably because it resembles spider's web and also of the popular belief among the Lepchas that it drives away malevolent forces. The hat is further divided into eight parts.

The next part below the top is *Amik* (an eye) that is of wasp (nepali term is *putka*). Generally, it is believed that it makes honey containing rich amount of medicine. The next part is known as *Sumok Tsum*, which translates as shape of armor, having a triangle form. They believe that this shape carries a good omen and helps them fight against evil forces. The base part resembles with that of an orchid mostly found in the mountainous area in Lepcha it is called *Sumok Rip*. Like the outer part of the hat the inner part too has unique styles filled with various outlines. At the top of the hat a piece of wood is attached having the appearance of both moon and sun, it firmly holds the tail of *Nubong Ong Foo*, (believed to be the messenger of season) which indicates showering of blessing from *Itbu moo*. The Dzongu region serves as a place where this traditional hat has its root and also a place where this art of weaving is practiced and preserved.⁵²

⁵²Op.Cit, S R Lepcha, R Gurung, ML Arrawatia, pp 538-540

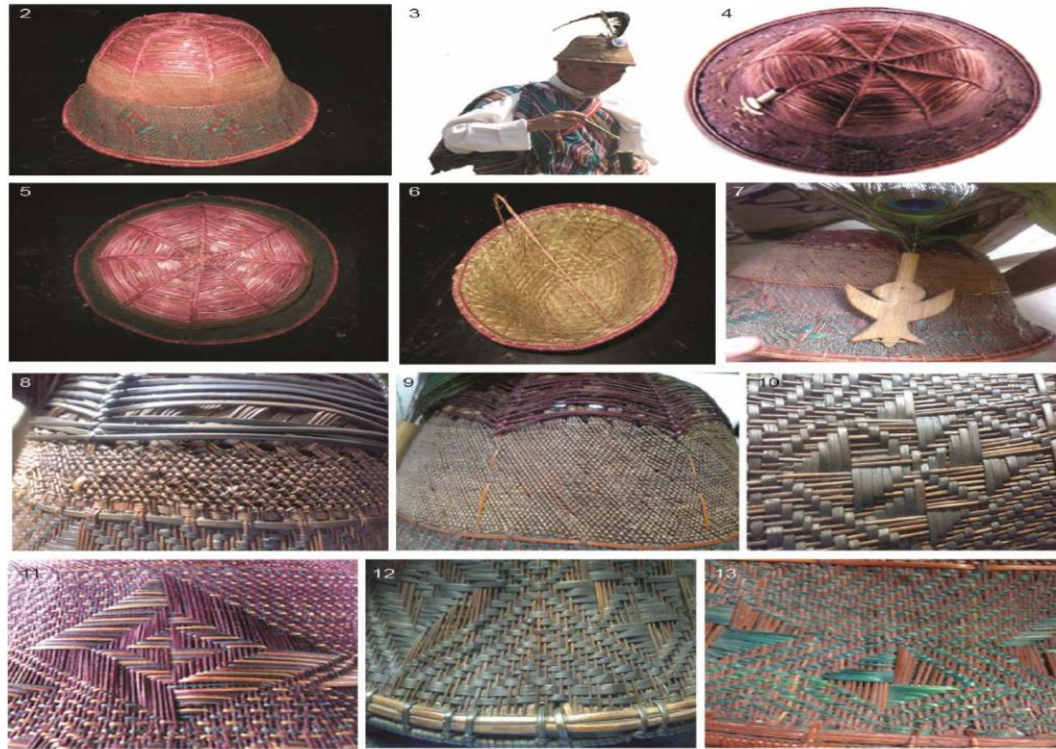


Fig. 3.2 Picture of different parts of traditional hat worn by the Lepcha people

In the remote past Lepchas in Dzongu had their own system of governance but after Sikkim merged with India the mode of governance changed where by the Panchayat institution began to operate. However, it is interesting to note that the tribal mode of governance did not wither away in fact it continued to function along with the new system particularly the institution of *Gyapun* and *Youmi* which is well recognized by the people of Dzongu. *Gyapun*, an individual was given this post which usually lasts for at least around three consecutive years, after which another person used to be appointed for the post. His duty was to go to every house and pass on the important messages like informing people to appear whenever there was work which was to be done collectively by the public. In addition, he also played the role of negotiator amid public and *Mandal* also if there is likely to occur any conflicts he has to intervene and settle it. By looking at the function of *Gyapun* one can assume that it is more of doing

a social work perhaps this is why their works are appreciated and well recognized by the community.⁵³

On the other hand, *Youmi* are basically a group of senior citizen men usually considered as sagacious and possesses vast knowledge about the culture, tradition and customs of the Lepcha tribe. Back in the olden days during the reign of Namgyal dynasty these bunch of men used to help *Mandals*, to govern their respective areas. Before holding the post of *Youmi*, he or she was supposed to have served the post of *Gyapun* complete three years term and then only was eligible to become *Youmi*. The other functions of *Youmi* were suppose if a *Mandal* dies leaving no one to take his place it was the responsibility of the former to take over the place of latter until the appointment of new *Mandal*. Even today *Youmi* plays a significant role in the present system of governance i.e., *Panchayat* system.⁵⁴

⁵³Op.Cit, Anita Sharma, p. 24

⁵⁴Op.Cit, Anita Sharma, p.25

CHAPTER IV

AN ANALYSIS OF CHANGES THAT OCCURED IN DZONGU

It is quite difficult to trace the exact history of the Lepchas from a strict historical point of view since the ancestors did not leave anything in a written form. But nonetheless there are enough folk stories which suggest that these people had in the distant past organized themselves in tribal groups.⁵⁵ Also it seems quite evident that the Lepcha people in different phases of time came in touch with various communities like the Tibetans, who eventually ruled over them, followed by the Bhutanese, and Nepalese people. Due to the frequent contacts with these groups the Lepcha society, culture and tradition also simultaneously got transformed. The arrival of the Tibetans marked the beginning of a new era for them since they gradually took over Sikkim and the Lepchas became citizen of the former. In most of the places people had to adopt new religion introduced by the Tibetans i.e., Buddhism.⁵⁶ Prior to the arrival of Tibetans in Sikkim, the Lepcha people of Dzongu used to follow only Mun religion where all the rituals and prayers associated with nature were conducted by Bongthing.⁵⁷ There is no doubt that the Lepchas do consider themselves as Buddhist but simultaneously, they also perform a range of traditional beliefs and practices concerned with the nature. The interesting fact as to how these dual systems are in harmony with each other is because of the fact that many features of Lepcha religion were blended with form of Buddhism which is prevalent in Sikkim, like for instance

⁵⁵George kotturan, *The Himalayan Gateway, history and culture of Sikkim*, Sterling publishers, New Delhi, 1983, p.19

⁵⁶Nani Gopal Mandal, Op.Cit, pp 58-59

⁵⁷Purkayastha Subrata, Hydro Power Development and the Lepchas: A case study of the Dzongu in Sikkim, India, *International Research Journal of Social Sciences*, vol. 2(8), August (2013), p.21

Khangchendzonga is more than just a mountain, for the Lepchas it is their source of origin and both revered and respected by them. The Tibetan rulers later proclaimed Khangchendzonga as the both guard and protector of the erstwhile kingdom of Sikkim. The Lepcha people of Dzongu, did embraced Buddhism and also made it a point to perform all the rituals associated with it but somehow gradually there seems to be a doubt among some people that some of the old traditions of the Lepcha religion were being affected by the former to such an extent that they are now on the verge of disappearance. For example, though the decline of Mun and Bongthing is a slow process which is one of the important aspects that has taken place due to the influence of Buddhism.⁵⁸ Among the Lepcha circle Mun and Bongthing plays an important role, their main duty consists of averting undesirable forces caused by the evil forces, offering prayers and conducting rituals.⁵⁹ The Mun also acts as mediator between the Lepcha people and their god or rather to be more specific *Rum*⁶⁰. It has been pointed out that the major differences between the Mun/Bongthing and Buddhist monks lies in the way how they perceive life after death. The former believes that if a person dies his or her soul is taken to *Rum Lyang* under the guidance of Mun/Bongthing, while on the other hand according to Buddhist view the soul takes rebirth right after the forty-nine days. In the past both Mun/Bongthing and Buddhist Monks used to perform death rituals they also used to follow old way of burying the death body of Mun/Bongthing, but with the passage of time a lot of change could be seen like the traditional burial system is no longer followed, there also seems to be a little part left for the Mun/Bongthing during such occasions. The Lepcha ritual specialist says is that after their death the body should not be cremated but rather has

⁵⁸Nani Gopal Mandal, Op.Cit, p. 59

⁵⁹N.S. Bist, T.S. Bankoti, *Encyclopedic Ethnography of the Himalayan Tribes*, Global Vision Publishing House, Delhi, 2004, p. 879.

⁶⁰C. De Beavour Stocks, *Folklore and Customs of the Lepchas of Sikkim*, Asian Educational Services, New Delhi, 2001, p. 338.

to be buried, by doing so the soul returns back and take possession in one of his family members or a clan to which he belongs.⁶¹



Fig. 4.1 Lepcha Bongthing performing ritual in the honor of mother Earth

Source: Private Collection

Most of the population concentrated in North Sikkim follows Buddhism but lately Christianity has gradually made inroads with their main center as Mangan town and moving towards remote areas. Though some of the areas in Dzongu have been induced to Christianity. Generally, the important cause behind people embracing Christianity can be related to financial issue like for example, if any person dies belonging to Buddhist faith the family has to bear a lot of financial burden to conduct rituals and ceremonies for the dead person. Likewise, it is same when it comes to wedding occasion, apart from these causes the other can be the stories⁶² revolving around the Lepcha community which are similar to that of the Christians. The

⁶¹ Jenny Bentley, Op.Cit, pp 63-64

⁶²ibid, p.64

missionaries use it to communicate and establish a connection with the fellow Lepchas especially in rural areas. However, there is a huge difference between Lepcha Buddhist and Lepcha Christian. The difference lies in the fact that the latter do not get involved or participate in traditional rituals and ceremonies performed *Bongthing* since Christianity does not allow so. While on the other hand the former is free to participate during such occasions.⁶³

The establishment of English colonial rulers in Sikkim, brought about a great change in the lives of Lepcha people since the former introduced new laws related to forest thereby putting restrictions on the forest areas, debarring them from using the forest resources. So gradually they began harvesting of rice, maize, millet Barley etc., to sustain themselves. Lepchas of Dzongu were completely unaware about the system of employing a worker and paying some amount to him or her. Before what they used to do was the whole family collectively worked in the fields, but later with the arrival of people from other regions they began to employ them. The Lepchas divided the land into two i.e., *ZooNyaot* meaning land which is mostly covered with water which was used for the purpose growing paddy, and other type of land was called *MongNyaot* meaning land which is mostly devoid of water on it, usually millets are grown on it. Later they also started cultivation of cardamom and ginger through which they could earn some amount of cash⁶⁴ it is quite evident that a great deal of change occurred in the lives of people particularly with the decline of cardamom crops. What used to happen was the Lepcha people used to give away their portion of land usually used for the purpose of cultivation of cardamom crops to the Nepali workers. However, gradually most of these workers deserted the land on account of diminishing proportion of cardamom due to which the land owners also could not discharge

⁶³Jenny Bentley, Op.Cit, p.65

⁶⁴Nani Gopal Mandal, Op.Cit, p.60

money to them. This indicates the fact that on the economic grounds the Lepchas had to rely on the Nepali workers, since most of the houses owns a job in various government sectors, in spite of these challenges they help each other in the cultivation works.⁶⁵ According to the first census report in Sikkim which came out in the year 1891, the Lepcha population comprised of 18.92%. The altogether population of Sikkim was 30,458, and from these 5762 people belonged to Lepcha community.⁶⁶

The merger of Sikkim within the Indian union brought about a great transformation some of which are seen in the education sector like education was given much importance since the newly formed government needed man power to run the state smoothly and that could be done only with the help of a good number of educated people. Though the process was slow but however there is no doubt that there has been growth of literate people in Sikkim. it is estimated that in 1971 only 17.74% were literate and by 2001 it has risen to 69.68%. When studying about how Lepcha people has to say about the importance of education it has been found out that some Lepchas of Dzongu believe that it is very crucial to have educate their children in order to sustain and make life much better. While on the other hand some have the notion that it may have some negative effects as well.⁶⁷ Mostly children attend schools which are located in the surrounding areas of Dzongu but some parents send their children to study in *Gangtok* as well. Some people think that after completing their studies some would get to work in different government offices and would be of some use to village folks. While others fear that many won't come back to their native place since there are no jobs for them in the rural areas. They are also worried about the kids who grow up in hostels since these kids do not get expose to rural life styles and

⁶⁵Jenny Bentley, Op.Cit, pp 69-70

⁶⁶Sunita Kharel, Jigme Wangchuk Bhutia, *Gazetteer of Sikkim*, Home Department Government of Sikkim, Gangtok, 2013, p. 116

⁶⁷Ibid, p.70

in the process, they seem to know nothing about the significance of tradition, customs and culture of the Lepcha community.⁶⁸ Apart from these there were other changes that were unfolding in the rural areas of Dzongu, the younger generation seem to care less about cultural and traditional ethos for example unlike the older generation they seem to express doubt about the existence of *mung* malevolent spirits who are in some cases considered to be the main cause for sickness. In addition, most of the young generation prefers to spend time doing some other works instead of hearing folktales from the old people.⁶⁹

In the distant past the Lepcha people of Dzongu engaged in hunting activities particularly the men, according to Ongdu Lepcha it was a very difficult task to hunt since he has to look for a prey which could even last a week or more and sometimes, he reluctantly has to return back to home without the prey. His training began at a very early age in most of the cases the older people would teach the younger ones about hunting. Also, the instruments which the hunter used in the past used to be quite different as compared to the later period where by guns became much popular. In the olden days bows and arrows used to be the main weapon which was used for the purpose of hunting in Dzongu. In some cases, a group of hunters divided themselves in two halves, while one group was assigned the task to chase the prey in the direction of next group who waited for the arrival of prey.⁷⁰ According to two hunters namely Tashi Tshering and Gora they are no more engaged in such activities since they are both believed to have received message from the *Pong Rum* probably hunting god asking them to abandon it.⁷¹ Along with the hunting they also had to give up the ritual

⁶⁸Jenny Bentley, Op.Cit, p.71

⁶⁹Jenny Bentley, Op.Cit, p.72

⁷⁰Kerry Little, LEPCHA HUNTERS NARRATIVES OF THEIR HIDDEN LANDSCAPES, *Bulletin of Tibetology*, Gangtok, 2006, p. 85

⁷¹Kerry Little, Op.Cit, p. 87

associated with it, it is said that ritual performance is a crucial part as after the ritual is over the hunter gets a kind of indication regarding the timing and place where he is supposed to hunt. Usually, the indication for hunting is given in a dream and the other day the hunter gathers all his necessary things and goes to find the particular location along with the dogs. After the prey is hunted, he is again supposed to conduct a ritual which usually involves offering to the deity.⁷²

Gradually, the traditional way of life in Dzongu swiftly got transformed where they no longer had to depend only on hunting for survival since then the Lepcha people adopted another method of cultivating grains and terrace farming, later on cardamom crops was also introduced through which they could earn some money. Perhaps the other agents behind the change are linked to the impact of Buddhist teachings which emphasizes on non-violence, the establishment of schools was also one of the main factors for bringing about change in the way of life of the people since they began to send their children to school and they no longer had to focus on hunting activities. After the merger the people were also bounded by certain laws particularly related to forest, for example according to Wildlife Protection Act of 1972 some species of animals could not be hunt down putting restriction on the activities of people. Similarly, Sikkim Forest Conservation Act passed in the year 1980, according to this act people were made to seek consent from forest department and then go along if the concerned authority permits.⁷³

Some areas of Dzongu region like *Lingdem* and *Lingthem*, where majority of the population rely on agricultural products along with the cultivation of commercial crops like cardamom, ginger followed by orange. However, due to the rising effect of

⁷²Kerry Little, Op.Cit, p.88

⁷³Ibid, p.87

some ailment and various other issues related to climate there has been a fall of cardamom crops since 1980-2010. But on the other hand, according to some local people there has been a little rise of cardamom since 2011 onwards which was due to growing of cardamom crops in the lands where other crops were grown like paddy. The reason behind this change could be related to market value of cardamom and ginger is much higher than other crops. In addition, the other factor for this change is the rise of different types ailments and the presence of large no of pest organisms in the land. The other ways adopted by the people to earn some money is through management and taking care of farm animals like cattle, pigs, hens etc. It is also learned that the people rely on forest especially for procuring foods for animals. However, since Dzongu region has many natural beauties which includes snowcapped mountains, the landscape of the region, diverse flora and fauna etc., has caught the attention of many foreign and domestic tourists. This has provided them with another opportunity of earning some money.⁷⁴

According to Namgyal Lepcha (who is the permanent resident of Dzongu and also plays an active role in the preservation of Culture and tradition) whatever the then Chogyal of Sikkim did for the Sikkimese people in general and Dzongu in particular by making laws in favor of these people turned out to be useful in the long run however he also adds that though Dzongu was made as a reserve and restricted land and protected under the rule of Namgyal Dynasty but it did not enjoy the fruit of development like for an instance during the Chogyal's rule the roads were not so good, like wise health care and education too was not up to the mark, no proper management of drinking water and power supply. The merger of Sikkim with the

⁷⁴ Jhony Lepcha, Sheila Sinha, Kailash S.Gaira, Hemant K. Badola, Assessing Socioeconomic Status of the Indigenous Lepcha Community: A case study from Dzongu in Khangchendzonga Landscape, India, *Journal of Agroecology and Natural Rource Management*, volume 4, issue 2, April-June 2017. P. 286

union of India in the year 1975, turned out to be a turning point for the people of Dzongu as gradually things began to change with the improvement of health care, schools were established.

Also, after the Lepchas embraced Buddhism, a steady change was seen among the people especially the parents who began to turn their attention towards the preservation and continuation of Buddhist religion gradually sent their sons to become monks rather than sending them to schools. In, fact the informer himself had witnessed and recalls the childhood days where after coming from school it was made mandatory to learn Tibetan language. Talking about the recent changes he adds that though there are many young monks who are pursuing their higher studies in other Buddhist institutes but it seems that there is a kind of gap between the old monks who presides over the local rituals which involves the use of both shamanism Buddhist practices, but however the young generation monks does not seem to have adequate knowledge and deemed fit to conduct local rituals. This perhaps can be considered as the change which resulted from Buddhism since the young monks does not want to mingle Buddhism with the local shamanistic practices.⁷⁵

Talking about the role of Mun/Bongthing who presides over many important rituals associated with the Lepcha community is gradually declining not only because of the external influence but internal. Like, for instance whenever a new child is born in a Lepcha family immediately after three days the head of the family used to summon Bongthing to conduct a ritual for the new child called *tung bong faat*. However, due to the influence of modern way of celebration with birth cakes, the Bongthing is no longer being employed to perform the ritual. Only few people are following this tradition while majority are no longer concerned about it. This is also seen as one of

⁷⁵Namgyal Lepcha, Age 59, Occupation retired government servant.

the major changes taking place in Dzongu region. He also mentions that in the past decades, if a person died in the family, the rest of family members had to carry a huge amount of financial burden to perform his last rites, which he says is also one of the main reasons for people's conversion into Christianity. So, with the aim of reducing the financial burden the alcohol and meat is no longer being used in most of the villages of Dzongu during such occasions.⁷⁶



Fig. 4.2 Photograph of interview with the informer Namgyal Lepcha who narrates about the changes that has taken place in Dzongu region.

Source: Private Collection

⁷⁶Namgyal Lepcha, Op.Cit.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

It is quite difficult to trace the exact history of Dzongu since there are few written sources left by the ancestors. However, the Lepcha people of Dzongu do have their own way of recalling the past through oral sources in the form of folklores and folktales which are mostly narrated by the Bongthing and some others including senior citizens of the village. There are many stories which throws light on how the Lepcha people came into being while others tell us about the history of places and how certain events that became an integral part of the culture and tradition of the Lepcha people. In all this the Bongthing plays an important role since he is considered as a store house of knowledge by the Lepcha community knowing the ways to communicate with the nature and it is through the Bongthing that most of the information about the Lepcha community had been passed down from one generation to the next generation. Though many researchers have already been done on different aspects of Dzongu region and among those one being the issue of Teesta Hydro Power Project movement led by the Lepcha people which is perhaps known all over India. However, this work attempts to study and understand the other lesser-known aspects of Dzongu region by shedding light on the history of Dzongu by relying on oral narrative and archival records along with various theories proposed by different writers and research scholars as to why Dzongu was proclaimed as a Reserve land, it also tries to throw some light on the impact of reserve land on the people of Dzongu, and lastly this work also explains the changes that has been taking place in Dzongu region which is gradually sweeping away the tradition and culture of the Lepchas of Dzongu. Dzongu region is located in the north Sikkim, the word Dzongu means ninth

district. The region of Dzongu is covered with various chains of mountain, dense forest where many valuable plants capable of curing different ailments are available. The Lepchas of Dzongu also have unique skill of understanding and knowing the ways of nature, they also consider Dzongu as one of the sacred lands in Sikkim. According to the Royal Proclamation of 1958 Dzongu is a place where only Lepcha people had the sole right to live and own the land, apart from the Lepchas no other community was allowed to settle in Dzongu. Even the Lepchas who were living in other parts of Sikkim were supposed to get permission from higher authorities to enter Dzongu. During the rule of Namgyal Dynasty, the Lepchas of Dzongu also had their own traditional system of governance which was known as *Chodu*, and the main members were *Mandal*, *Gyapun* and *Youmi*. In the past Dzongu had been one of the private lands belonging to Chogyal of Sikkim. In the later period particularly during the rule of Chogyal *Tsudphud Namgyal*, he is said to have given the Dzongu region to his wife *Tanag Dinkha* instead of jewelries which was a common form of custom prevalent during those days. However, there is also an interesting story that tells us about how Dzongu became a privately owned land under the Chogyal of Sikkim. Later, on during Sir Tashi Namgyal's tenure as the ruler of Sikkim before it became an integral part of India, Dzongu was made as a Reserve land for the Lepcha people who were already living there with the aim of safeguarding the people and their culture and tradition from the outsiders who were gradually making inroads in the area. The region of Dzongu is also known for a rich biodiversity along with the region being mostly inhabited by the Lepcha people which are some of the important features that has drawn the attention of a good number of researchers, anthropologist, writers and travelers who has lived with the people and studied the region and wrote about the culture customs and tradition of the people living in Dzongu which is

available to us in the form of books, journals and article etc. So, while referring to these works it indicates that during the rule of Chogyal dynasty there was a person called Lasso Kazi who cleverly managed to acquired Dzongu region from the then Chogyal by saying the land which he wanted to have was a small and useless land. But fortunately, there was another person whose name was Yug Ting Tashey who also happened to be the loyal minister of Chogyal came to know about the importance of Dzongu region which used to be productive land and reported to the Chogyal who then sent him to retrieve the land from Lasso Kazi. So, at the end Yug Ting Tashey successfully managed to take control over Dzongu region by defeating Lasso Kazi. It is said that from that period onwards Dzongu became the private land of the Chogyal. According to the sources available there is not only one reason which is providing protection to the Lepchas of Dzongu against the outsiders but in fact there are wide range of reasons put forward by various writers and research scholars as to why Dzongu was made as reserve land. The prominent writers who have contributed and put forward their arguments regarding the idea of Reserve land are Nandini Bhattacharya, followed by D. C. Roy, Veena Bhasin, Binod Bhattraai, D. T. Tumlong and a local organization called Sikkim Bhutia Lepcha Apex Committee. These arguments suggest us that there are much deeper underlying motives behind making Dzongu as a Reserve land.

During the reign of Namgyal Dynasty we got to know that barter system was prevalent in Dzongu where if people had anything extra, they used to give it to someone in need but never sold. However, the coming of *Kanyas* at Mangan had a drastic impact upon the local people because now the people no longer had to travel far off to buy the necessary items, but as time passed most of the people began to owe debt to these *Kanyas*. Since, Mangan was the nearest market for the people of Dzongu

so whenever they came to sold their cardamom, they were badly cheated by the *Kanyas*. Like for instance the people were forced to take credit from them and during the season of cardamom the *Kanyas* took away their cardamom. Regarding the health issue there was no medical emergency available for the people of Dzongu, in most of the cases whenever there was any person with serious cases, they had to be shifted to either Mangan or Gangtok for treatment. It is quite true that the Lepcha people of Dzongu were facing a lot of challenges during the rule of Namgyal Dynasty due to the unavailability of basic medical and education facilities. There is no doubt that the making of Dzongu as a Reserve land, for the Lepcha people did in fact helped people to preserve their culture, tradition and their unique identity in the long run but on the other hand perhaps the then Chogyal might have taken a little care as far as the education and medical issues were concerned, a lot of problems faced by the people would have been resolved if more stress were laid on them. If people are educated it becomes easier for them to preserve their culture and tradition by writing down and preserving it for the future reference. Likewise, better medical facilities would prolong the life of people which would again indirectly allow them to preserve their culture and tradition. Also due to the bad condition of roads in Dzongu people had to face a lot of challenges, during the rainy season it became much vulnerable for them to travel. Some areas in Dzongu like *Sakyong*, *Pentong* and *Leekwere* some places which could not avail the transportation facilities. In fact, it is said that people of *Pentong* used to go to Mangan ones in a year due to the bad condition of roads. Alongside the Lepchas, there were also a group of Nepalese who were living in Dzongu however when the Royal proclamation of 1958 was introduced these Nepalese had to leave Dzongu and had to settle somewhere. Though a person named Atang Lepcha raised voice against the Chogyal stating that like the Lepchas, the

Nepalese to are a citizen of Sikkim and had equally right to settle anywhere in Sikkim but all his effort went in vain since he alone could not do anything.

The Hydro Power Project too had a huge impact in the lives of people in general and the region of Dzongu in particular. What people presumed was that the implementation of Hydro Power Projects would resolve the problem of unemployment but it did not do so. The Company's policy was such that after the completion of projects the people would be removed from the job. There is no doubt that the Hydro Power Project Company in alliance with the then government of Sikkim took full advantage of the people, through the Land Acquisition Act of 1894 the people had to reluctantly give up their land. There is also no doubt that the Company did caused a huge damaged to the natural environment that were worshipped by the Lepchas of Dzongu. However, some of the positive impacts that have resulted by demarcating Dzongu as a reserve land were that the people were able to preserve and retain their culture and tradition in its original form like for instance Dzongu had always been the central place where one can visit and collect folklores which plays an important part in the Lepcha circle. It is through these folklores that one can go back to the past and trace the history of Lepcha people. In addition to the fact that the Lepcha people of Dzongu since time immemorial had been relying on bamboo crafts and the tradition of making different crafts out of bamboo is still well preserved and transmitted from the older to the younger generation. The best example is the traditional Lepcha hat having different layers with its own meaning.

Though the Royal Proclamation of 1958 was issued in the interest of Lepcha people of Dzongu with the primary aim of safeguarding the Lepcha people and their culture and tradition however in due course of time we could see a lot of changes that occurred in Dzongu due to external as well as internal factors. Like for example due

to the influence of Buddhism most of the age-old rituals performed by the Lepcha people had gone through a lot of changes. The classical example is the burial system which used to be followed by the Lepchas in the distant past where if any person dies, the dead body used to be buried facing towards the Mount Khangchendzonga along with a small bamboo cylinder with a straw kept upside down to mark that the person is no more alive. However, because of the influence of Buddhism this traditional burial system is no longer performed by the Lepchas, instead the dead bodies are cremated. The process of cremation had a huge effect on the Bongthings since they believe that if their dead body is cremated, they would not be able to return back in the world to perform their role as a Bongthing. Likewise, some other major changes taking place in Dzongu region were the Lepcha people embracing Christianity, which can be related to the financial issues faced by the people. It has also been found out that as compared to the Christian Lepchas the Buddhist Lepchas plays a greater role in the preservation of culture and tradition of the Lepcha community since the former is not allowed to take part in the rituals and other important occasions while the latter is free to do so. The establishment of English rule in Sikkim also brought about a change in lives of Lepcha people since they introduced new laws related to forest because of which the Lepchas could no longer use forest resources like before. The merger of Sikkim within the Indian Union saw a gradual change in the education sector, it is estimated that in the year 1971 only 17.74% could read and write in Sikkim but by 2001 the percentage of literate people had rose to almost 69.68%. However, the Lepchas of Dzongu have a unique way of judging the importance of education. Some believe that education is necessary to make life better, while others have the opinion that due to the influence of modern education the educated youth seem to express

doubt about the existence of spirits both malevolent and benevolent in the Lepcha circle.

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INTERVIEW

1. Name: Namgyal Lepcha, Male, Age: 59, Occupation: Retired Government Servant, Place: Passingdang, Dzongu, North Sikkim, Time: 12 Noon.