

# **The Lepchas in Darjeeling and the Demand for a Separate Development Board**

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## **ABSTRACT**

*The Lepchas are the original inhabitants of Sikkim. The process of development imposed by the colonial rulers had reduced the tribe to a state of subordination. After the formation of Gorkha Territorial Administration (GTA) in 2011, the Lepchas in Darjeeling also demanded a separate Lepcha Development Board for the protection of their language, culture and economic development. This paper seeks to address the brief historical background of the Lepchas, demands of the Lepcha community, strategies of the Lepchas on the issue of Gorkhaland, factors for the formation of the Lepcha Development Board, recent political developments in Darjeeling, aims and objectives of this Lepcha Development Board and composition of the Lepcha Development Board.*

**Keywords:** Lepchas, Marginalized Community, Identity Crisis, Demands, Lepcha Development Board.

## **1.1. Introduction**

The Lepchas are the original inhabitants of the Eastern Himalayas and most of the Lepchas are mainly concentrated in the Darjeeling District of West Bengal and in the North district of Sikkim. The Lepchas called their land as ‘Mayel Lyang’ which means the ‘Land of Hidden Paradise’ or ‘Delightful Region or Abode’. Their land was spread over a vast area in the Eastern Himalayan region where they used to move and lived as free sons of the soil. The various census report of India suggested that the total Lepcha population in West Bengal in general and Darjeeling sub-division in particular is very low, as a result they became a marginalized community which are virtually unnoticed<sup>1</sup> (De, 2011). According to 1951, 1991

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<sup>1</sup> De Dipak (2011), According to Census of Darjeeling district, in the year 1872 – there was 3,952 Lepchas; in the year 1901 – 9,972 Lepchas; in the year 1931 – 12,101 Lepchas; in the year 1941 - 12,468 Lepchas, in the year 1951 – 13,168 Lepchas; in the year 1981 – 22,749 Lepchas; in the year 1991 – 26,920 Lepchas; in the year 2001 - 31,210 Lepchas in Darjeeling district. Lepcha population increased during the period 1872 to 2001 from 3,952 to 31,210 in Darjeeling district. According to Census, in the year 1961 there was –15,309 Lepchas; in the

and 2001 Census of India the total population of the Lepchas in Darjeeling district was 13,168, 26,920 and 31,210 respectively (Pradhan, p. 341, 2012). Because of this slow growth rate this community becomes a marginalized section in the Darjeeling hills (Pradhan, pp.341-342).<sup>2</sup> The Lepcha religion is known as Mun- Boongthimism and they are very religious minded. From cradle to grave they call Boongthing and Mun, priest and priestess; to perform their rituals and beliefs. As per 1981 census 57.11 per cent of the Lepchas of West Bengal are Buddhists while 35.70 per cent are Christians and the rest are Hindus. The loss of Lepcha religion in their own homeland and conversion into alien religious faith is a matter of great concern for the Lepchas (Roy, 2010).<sup>3</sup>

This paper seeks to address the brief historical background of the Lepchas, demands of the Lepcha community, strategies of the Lepchas on the issue of Gorkhaland, factors for the formation of the Lepcha Development Board, recent political developments in Darjeeling, aims and objectives of this Lepcha Development Board and composition of the Lepcha Development Board.

## **1.2. Background**

The origin of the Lepcha is unknown and many research scholars have different interpretations regarding the origin of the Lepcha people. One version says that it was the Nepalis who called them ‘Lepchas’, meaning vile speakers while other version says that ‘Lapche’ was a type of fish found in Nepal, having the characteristics of being submissive like the Lepchas (Pradhan, p.339).<sup>4</sup> Mr. N T Lepcha (the chief co-ordinator of Lepcha Rights

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year 1971 – 14,588 Lepchas; in the year 1991 – 27,888 Lepchas; in the year 2001 – 32,377 Lepchas in West Bengal state.

<sup>2</sup> There are few factors behind this slow growth rate of the Lepchas such as low sex ratio, low fertility and high mortality among the Lepchas. The practice of Levirate called “Aangaop” in Lepcha, i.e. widow remarrying the younger brother of her deceased husband, women marrying beyond their marriageable age, the inter-marriage of Lepcha women with men of other communities may also be added to the slow growth rate amongst the Lepchas. (Pradhan Alina, 2012).

<sup>3</sup> Roy, D.C (2010). The conversion of Lepcha religion into Buddhism started with the advent of Tibetan rulers in greater Sikkim in the Seventeenth Century. For the smooth functioning of their rule, the first thing which the rulers did was to bring all the subjects under the same religious faith. And the conversion into Christianity started after the British occupied the Darjeeling tract from Sikkim Raja during mid-nineteenth century. Taking the advantage of mass poverty, illiteracy, ignorance and poor health condition, the Christian Missionaries converted large number of Lepchas into Christianity.

Movement) lamented that once the Lepchas were not only the dominant community, but also the only community which had roots in the hills. Gorkhas actually are infiltrators and they have been continually infiltrating since the takeover of Darjeeling by the British from the King of Sikkim in 1835 (Ghosh, 2011). The Lepchas have their own language, also called Lepcha. It belongs to Bodish-Himalayish group of Tibeto-Burman languages. The Lepchas write their language in their own script, called ‘Rong’ or Lepcha script, which is derived from the Tibetan script (Plaisier, p. 1, 2007). Lepcha language is a distinct and rich language of the Eastern Himalayan region. The Christian missionaries were the first to print the Lepcha script in 1845 and devised the Lepcha font for printing the Bible. The Lepcha language was the official and Court language of Darjeeling during the early phase of the British rule. It is reported that during Tibetan rule all the Lepcha manuscripts and documents were burnt to ashes near Gazing in East Sikkim. During the British rule, the Lepcha language was taught in the schools and also used for administrative purposes. But slowly other foreign languages have taken the place of the Lepcha language and the Lepchas have lost their fundamental right to educate themselves in their mother tongue (Roy, D.C. 2010).

The Lepcha religion is known as Mun-Boongthimism and most Lepchas are Tibetan Buddhist by religion. The conversion of Mun-Boongthimism into Buddhism started with the advent of Tibetan rulers in greater Sikkim in the Seventeenth Century. For the smooth functioning of their rule, the first thing which the rulers did was to bring all the subjects under the same religious faith. This conversion continued when the British occupied the Darjeeling tract from Sikkim Raja during mid nineteenth century. The colonial ruler took the advantage of mass poverty, illiteracy, ignorance and poor health condition of the Lepchas and as a consequence of that the Christian Missionaries converted large number of Lepchas into Christianity. As per 1981 census 57.11 per cent Lepchas of West Bengal are Buddhists while 35.70 per cent are Christians and the rest are Hindus. The loss of Lepcha religion in their own homeland and conversion into alien religious faith is a matter of great concern for the Lepchas.

According to Dr. D.C. Roy, the ‘sons of the soil’, the sole inhabitants of the region’ have become minority in their own home land as they comprise only 2 per cent of total population of Darjeeling and 7.80 per cent of total population of Sikkim. In a democracy where number matters a lot, the Lepchas are cornered by the majority from the period of colonial rule. The Tibetan colonial rule has outnumbered the Lepchas by the Tibetans in Sikkim while the British colonial rule is responsible for out numbering the Lepchas by a mixed population in

Darjeeling. As a result the voices of the Lepchas were ignored in the multi-ethnic composition of population of the region (Roy, D. C., 2010).

Another interpretation is that the process of development imposed by the colonial rulers had reduced the tribe to a state of subordination. The original inhabitants of the land were subjected to a forced homogenization that broke their tribal spirit. The emergence of the so-called modernization also dislocated the people economically and socially. There are two prominent Lepcha Organizations which fight for fulfillment of demands of the Lepchas in Darjeeling hills. The first Lepcha Association was established in 1925. It had affiliation with the Akhil Bharatiya Adivasi Vikash Parishad (ABAVP) in the year 1997. This Association was renamed as “The Indigenous Lepcha Tribal Association” in the year 2004. It worked primarily for introduction of Lepcha language in the schools and colleges of Darjeeling (De, 2011). The Lepchas’ Rights Movement (an umbrella organisation of different Lepcha bodies) is another organization which was set up on the 7th June in 1947 with the hopes and aspirations for a better and dignified life of the Lepchas in independent India (Lepcha. A.T. 2011).

## **2.1. Present Lepcha Organisations**

Presently, there are four prominent Lepcha organizations such as the Indigenous Lepcha Tribal Association (ILTA), the Indigenous Lepcha Forum (ILF), the Lepcha Rights Movements and the Lepcha Youth Association. These organizations worked for the socio-economic, political and cultural development of the Lepchas in Darjeeling. The Lepcha community, being a minority community has neither political value nor political representation in the decision making bodies. Therefore, the Lepcha community very strongly feels that the Government treats the Lepcha community as untouchables and has discriminated them in all fronts. There is a total lack of link and communication between the Government of West Bengal and the Lepcha tribal people living in the Darjeeling District. The policy decisions for the Lepcha are taken without the slightest protection measures and without considering the basic demands of the Lepcha community. In fact after 60 years of India’s Independence the Lepcha language is yet to be introduced in formal education system by the Government of West Bengal (Lepcha, A.T. 2011). So far as the demands of the Lepcha community is concerned they have 3 point Charter of Demands:

1. A separate Lepcha Development Council or Board for the protection of language, culture and Economic Development of Lepcha Community in West Bengal without any territorial jurisdiction.
2. Recognition of Lepcha language and its introduction in Formal Education system.
3. Reservation for People's Representation in State Assembly and Parliament (Ghosh, 2010).

Since 8th August 2011 the Lepchas of Darjeeling have held a series of demonstrations in Kolkata under the banner of Lepcha Rights Movement (LRM). This organization also submitted a MEMORANDUM on 18th August, 2011 to the Darjeeling District Magistrate on the protection of Lepcha's distinct ethnic/tribal and cultural identity; economic development of Lepcha community; opportunity of employment, reservation of posts; declaration of an Assembly Constituency of Darjeeling district in West Bengal Assembly as Schedule Tribe Constituency and it is reserved for Lepchas etc. (De, 2011). They also demanded the setting up of a Lepcha cultural institute for the preservation of the rich cultural heritage of the Lepchas.

## **2.2. The Issue of Gorkhaland**

As we know that the politics of Darjeeling revolves around the issue of Gorkhaland and the Lepcha Associations are against the idea of "Gorkhaland" as they believe that it would put them under the hegemony of the chauvinist aggressive GNLF. In a letter to the Chief Minister of West Bengal Government on 10th September 1986 they opposed the formation of Gorkhaland, reiterating that they were the original inhabitants of the Darjeeling district (from the booklet/white paper 'Gorkhaland Agitation, Facts and Issues', 1987 published by Government of West Bengal- De, Dipak, 2011). Though the Lepchas had representation in the DGHC during Ghising's tenure there was no development of the Lepcha community.

According to Paul Simick, the president of the Indigenous Lepcha Tribal Forum (it is the political arm of the Indigenous Lepcha Tribal Association (ILTA), "During the chaotic political agitation in the 1980s, the indigenous Lepchas were totally ignored in the overall development process. The indigenous Lepchas have felt left out for nearly a quarter of a century because of the apathetic attitude of the DGHC and the state government. There was no thought of their well-being and no attempts whatsoever to conserve their culture, customs

and traditions” (Ravidas, 2010). He again argued that the Indigenous Lepcha Forum will not join any other minority communities from the hills in supporting the Gorkhaland movement. To him, “This is not to say we oppose the demand for a separate state. We will be supporting the movement as a community and not merely as individuals as was being done till today.” He argued that the DGHC experience has taught them that the interest of the Lepchas was never taken care of and they did not even have a reservation of seat in the council. Now they want constitutional guarantee for the protection of their interest in future dispensations (Telegraph Correspondent, 2008). He again pointed out that the Lepchas constituted about 20 per cent of the nearly nine-lakh hill population and they should be made an integral part of any political settlement in Darjeeling.

### **3.2. Lepcha Development Board**

Now in this section we will emphasize on the factors behind the formation of the Lepcha Development Board. After the agreement of the Gorkha Territorial Administration (GTA) in July 2011,<sup>5</sup> the Lepchas also have been agitating for a separate development council and they had been organizing several rallies and dharnas in Kalimpong and Calcutta from 9 August to 7 September 2011. The Lepchas also sat on an indefinite Dharna from 1 September 2011 in front of the Sub-Divisional Officer’s Office, of Kalimpong. Then on 18<sup>th</sup> August, 2011 the LRM (Lepcha Rights Movement) submitted a memorandum to the Darjeeling district magistrate, demanding a separate Lepcha Development Council for the protection of their language, culture and economic development (Banerjee, 2011). Then on 2<sup>nd</sup> September 2011 the Chief Minister of West Bengal made an announcement that a “Lepcha Development Council” would be established for the betterment, advancement of the original Lepcha tribes in West Bengal (Lepcha, A. T. 2011). Finally the Cabinet of the Government of West Bengal cleared the proposal for a separate Lepcha Development Board (LDB) on 5<sup>th</sup> February, 2013. There are few factors behind the formation of this Lepcha Development Board and these are loss of Identity of the Lepchas, deprivation from all the fronts, lack of development of the

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<sup>5</sup> A tripartite agreement paving the way for the setting up of the Gorkhaland Territorial Administration (GTA), an elected body for the Darjeeling hills, was signed at Pintail village here on Monday. Joint Secretary in the Union Home Ministry, K. K. Pathak; West Bengal Home Secretary G.D. Gautama; and GJM general secretary Roshan Giri signed the accord (Dutta 2011).

Lepcha community in the tenure of DGHC and last but not least, the formation of the GTA. We will analyse these factors as follows:-

**a. Loss of Identity of the Lepchas :-**

As we have mentioned the Lepcha tribe is an original inhabitant of the Eastern Himalayas so they have the same rights as those of the Nepalese. But ‘the sons of soil’, ‘the sole inhabitants of the region’ have become minority in their own land. The Lepchas have this feeling that they are aliens in their homeland while ‘Nepali speaking migrants-Gorkhas dominate the political and economic space of Darjeeling because of their sheer numbers (Ghosh, 2011). The Lepcha Rights Movement strongly reacted on Govt. of India’s decision for referring the Lepchas of the Darjeeling hills as “Sikkimese” through a notification by the Union Ministry of culture on September 10, 2004. Bhupendra Lepcha, the convener of the Lepcha Rights Movement argued that by dubbing Lepchas as Sikkimese the government is trying to blatantly compromise Lepcha identity as original inhabitants of the Darjeeling hills. According to him, if the Lepcha community is dubbed as Skkimese then they will be outsiders in their own land and if they are categorized as Gorkhas, then they fear losing their distinct identity. He urged that the Government must clear its stand and the general feeling among the Lepchas is that they were being pushed against the walls (Ravidas R. , 2011).

**b. Deprivation from all the fronts:-**

There was a feeling among the Lepchas that they were deprived on all fronts; they had lost their land, language, identity and so on. The Lepchas strongly feel that the government treats them as untouchable and have discriminated against them on all fronts. To them during British rule the Lepcha language was an official language of the region but after independence this language has been ignored. The successive governments in West Bengal did not take any initiative to teach this old language in schools and colleges in the hills where there were enough Lepcha Tribal students. (Agencies, 2011). The Lepchas of the hills were not being able to get jobs in the state police and the Eastern Frontier Rifles because these post were reserved for the Gorkha community.

### **c. Lack of development of the Lepcha community in the tenure of DGHC**

During the tenure of DGHC (Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council) the indigenous Lepchas were paid no attention in the overall development process. They were suffering from the apathetic attitude of the DGHC and the state government. There was no thought of their well-being and no attempts whatsoever to conserve their culture, customs and tradition.

### **d. Formation of the GTA**

Finally when a tripartite agreement for the formation of the GTA was signed on 18<sup>th</sup> July 2011 among the Govt. of India, Govt. of West Bengal and the GJM, the original inhabitants were simply ignored as if they have nothing to say. Not only that within the GTA also there were no nominated members from the Lepcha community. In such a situation how the voices and issues of the Lepchas in the Darjeeling hills would be addressed? Hence the Lepchas also have been demanding a separate council and staging movements, demonstrations, Dharna, Rally in Kolkata and Kalimpong since August 2011. Lyangsong Tamsang, president of Kalimpong-based Indigenous Lepcha Tribal Association argued that “Our demand for the development council is non-territorial. Its members will be elected by Lepchas of all faiths and focus on delivering development to our people and preservation of our language and culture. But the funds should come directly to the Lepcha Development Council, not through the GTA,”.

## **3.2. Lepcha Development Board (LDB) and Gorkha Territorial Administration (GTA)**

In this section we will focus on the recent political development in the Darjeeling hills and more particularly after the announcement of the formation of the Lepcha Development Board in the Darjeeling hills. The Chief Minister of West Bengal Ms. Mamata Banerjee argued that the formation of this LDB was on the basis of GTA memorandum of agreement (MOA) but the leaders of the GJM claimed that there is no provision for the formation of this Council or Board. Now if we look at the GTA agreement there is a clause which says, “The GTA Sabha shall consist of forty five elected members and five members to be nominated by the Governor to give representation to members of SC,ST, women and minority communities”,. The Lepchas are a minority section in the hills and at present the GTA Sabha does not have

any nominated members of the Lepcha community. According to the GTA Act, “the members to be nominated...by the Governor may include due representation of minorities, SCs STs and women” (Cheetri, 2013). On the basis of that the State Govt. decided to form such a Board under the State backward classes welfare department and outside the purview of the GTA.

The GJM leader Bimal Gurung threatened to launch a ‘violent agitation’ for Gorkhaland and had called a 12 hour shutdown on February 9, 2013 to protest against the West Bengal decision to set up a LDB. The GJM leader Bimal Gurung argued that he is not against the development of any communities in the region but without the proper functioning of GTA, LDC would be a tool to divide people in the Darjeeling hills (BHUTIA, 2013). Binay Tamang, the Assistant Secretary of GJM argued that this council would destroy the social and secular fabric of the hills and it would create confusion in the hills once again. He further argued that the decision to set up Buddhist and Lepcha Council would open a Pandora’s Box as it was based on religion and now the Christians, Muslims and Hindus residing in the hills will now start clamoring for such a body. For this reason they want the Lepcha Development Board should be brought under purview of the GTA. (Cheetri, 2013).

On the other hand the Lepcha Rights Movement and ILTA (Indigenous Lepcha Tribal Association) launched an indefinite hunger strike in Kalimpong Town Hall and Tricon Park on 7<sup>th</sup> February, 2013 in support of the formation of a LDB by the state government. Finally the ILTA called back its hunger strike on 12<sup>th</sup> February, 2013 after the assurance had been given by North Bengal Development Minister, Gautam Deb. Mr. Deb pointed out that LDB will be implemented without any delay under the ‘backward classes welfare department’(Correspondent, 2013). Then on 12<sup>th</sup> February 2013 the state backward classes department issued a resolution for setting up of Mayel Lyang Lepcha Development Board for the development of the Lepchas under its administrative control and outside the purview of GTA. The term Mayal Lyang Lepcha in Lepcha language loosely means the land of the Lepchas (Bureau, 2013).

### **3.3. Objectives of LDB**

This section will deal with the aims and objective of the LDB. The LDB would be formed as registered cooperative society guided by the West Bengal Societies Registration Act 1961. The objectives of this newly formed LDB are (a) to undertake all necessary activities for the protection, promotion and safeguarding of the Lepcha language, tradition and culture; (b) to undertake activities to protect historical and culturally significant landmarks of the community; (c) to provide support to museum, community radio, publishing unit and mass media units; (d) to undertake activities to popularize, promote and enhance products of artisans, farmers and other tradition based items and help the artistes and artisans engaged in traditional activities; (e) to protect and promote customary rights of the community; (f) to establish a centre for the protection of the Lepcha heritage; (g) to take up social welfare activities catering to the requirements of the community; (h) to promote education among the Lepcha community; (i) to publish or cause to be published useful literature, papers, books, research works, magazines of the Lepcha community etc.

The others objective are (j) to work in association with all Government agencies for awareness generation regarding various programme of development and social welfare, education, literacy etc.; (k) to undertake necessary activities for natural resource management, alternative energy, ecology and environment; (l) to construct, maintain, improve, develop, any building, houses or other infrastructure and purchase land and other moveable and immovable assets for the benefit of the community; (m) to set up mobile health unit, village health centres and to promote Lepcha medicinal practices; (n) to take up livelihood development of the community; (o) to undertake and provide legal assistance to protect assets of the community members; (p) to raise loan and credit to fulfill the objectives from national and international financial institution, subject to observation of statutory rules and executive instructions; (q) to obtain fund from different Government departments for fulfillment of the aforesaid objectives; (r) to undertake activities for the overall development of the Lepcha community throughout West Bengal; (s) to do all such acts, deeds, matters and things connected thereto and therewith as may be necessary or deemed to be necessary as well as incidental or conducive to the foregoing objects (Correspondent, 2013).

### **3.4. Composition of LDB**

So far as the composition of this board is concerned it will have two separate wings- the General and the Executive but members of both the bodies will be nominated. The general body will have 31 members, of whom four will be government officials and the rest nominated by the government from among the Lepchas. The general body would be the apex body of the board. It will have the power to pass audited accounts and budget estimates. The general body will be headed by a chairperson nominated by the state government from the Lepcha community. The four state officials will be the member secretary and three ex-officio members. For the post of member secretary, the state will appoint a senior bureaucrat on deputation. The executive body will have 11 members, of which two would be government officers and the rest, including the chairman and the vice-chairman, would be Lepchas nominated by the state. (Bureau Telegraph, 2013).

### **4. Conclusion**

To conclude, this LDB will provide the Lepchas a political platform in the very complicated politics of Darjeeling hills. The demands and issues of the Lepchas were ignored by both the leaders of the GNLFF and the Gorkha Janmukti Morcha but now with this formation of the LDB the Lepchas can easily raise their issues and grievances. The GJM referred this formation of the LDB as divide and rule policy in the hills by the State Government. The relations between the GJM and Mamata Banerjee deteriorated completely during her last visit in January, 2013 as the supporters of the GJM have demanded a separate Gorkhaland state and in response Ms. Banerjee told to them that she can be “rough and tough” in handling this situation. As a consequence of that situation within one day of her visit to Darjeeling she announced that her government will set up two separate councils respectively for the Lepchas and the Buddhists. This move clearly indicates that her government wants the dominance and support base of the GJM needs to be diluted at any cost. Now it will be interesting to see how far this LDB will fulfill the demands and aspirations of the Lepchas in future or is it going to be only a showpiece board in the hills? Whether the Lepcha language will get recognition in the formal education system of the hills and whether the Lepchas will get job reservations? These are some of the questions which need to be addressed for further research on the Lepchas.

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