

## **Abstract**

### **POLITICS AND DEVELOPMENT OF ETHNO- CONSCIOUSNESS AND IDENTITY: A STUDY OF THE LEPCHAS OF DARJEELING AND SIKKIM**

**(PhD Thesis Submitted to the University of North Bengal 2023)**

Lepchas consider themselves to be the original inhabitants of Sikkim and Darjeeling Hills. They are known as Mutanchi Rongkup or Rongs which means ‘sons of snowy peaks’ They claim their origin from their homeland *Mayel lyang* i.e. ‘land of hidden paradise’. They reside mostly in the state of Sikkim and in the Hills of Darjeeling and Kalimpong. Due to the rearrangement and shuffling of the older Himalayan kingdoms, shifting and overlapping of political boundaries, they are also found in the east part of Nepal, Illam and the western part of Bhutan. Thus, today Lepchas are scattered into three territorial nation states.

This work is a study on the development of ethno- consciousness and the movement for cultural identity among the Lepchas in Darjeeling and Sikkim. It seeks to establish the point that ethnicity and ethnic consciousness are connected with the notion of identity. Today, all modern societies are undergoing a distinct type of structural change due to the emergence of ethnicity. By challenging the forces of modernisation, homogenisation, globalisation, nationalism and cosmopolitan values all ethnic groups are trying to create a distinct cultural space of their own. Even modern nation states based on the principles of equality, democracy, pluralism and republicanism has sought to homogenise all ethnic pluralities. State and its administrative apparatus also shape ethnicity and group identity, as state tends to be controlled or its policies are framed in favour of the interests of the dominant group. When a particular group take control over the institutions of government policy making, it seeks to further its own interest. This leads to disproportionate distribution of state resources and causes resentment among those who have been denied benefits. Thus, the state fails to act as an instrument pursuing distributive justice. This denial of state resources and differential treatment resulting in the marginalization of the community strengthens community consciousness. It is with this background that the study of ethno- consciousness and identity of the Lepchas of Sikkim and Darjeeling becomes pertinent.

Tribal identities have their roots in colonial policies that classified communities and ethnic groups, privileged some and discriminated against others. But the very identity that was previously enforced by the colonisers have increasingly internalised by the people themselves and has become a rallying point for identity assertion. Lepchas became colonised with the coming of Tibetans during the early 17<sup>th</sup> century, under the Gorkhas in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and the British during 19<sup>th</sup> century. The real problem of the Lepchas began with the arrival of British colonialism. Their religion, culture and tradition got eclipsed owing to their conversion into Buddhism, Christianity and Hinduism, with a very insignificant of them practicing animism. This has led many scholars to make the point that Lepchas are a dying race and a vanishing tribe.

The work attempts to understand the political and social processes of the rise or revival of ethno- consciousness and identity among the Lepchas in Sikkim and the District of Darjeeling. The *Rongs* or the Lepchas as they are better known have been increasingly declaring themselves as the original inhabitants and indigenous community of Sikkim and Darjeeling Hills. The claim along with other similar claims has turned the whole geographical space and its history into a contested terrain. The study makes a historical construction of Lepcha identity through colonial narratives. It also tries to look into the historical making of a geographical space and also tries to see the relation between history and identity by making an account on the experiences of the Lepchas with different phases of colonialism. With the coming of British the condition of the Lepchas became worse. The modern governing practices initiated by the British through the establishment of a universal standardised legal system, enumeration and fixing of innumerable communities converted tribes and communities into a measurable category through census reports. In the case of Lepchas, colonial policies of encouraging immigration of Nepalese and other outsiders forced Lepchas to move to the remote and peripheral areas leading to their marginalization and vulnerable position. The post- independent state's policy towards the Lepchas is also a continuation of the colonial state's policies and administrative practices. State formation after independence from the British rule is characterised by some form of assimilationism and benevolent paternalism.

Constitutional and legal provisions enacted for the protection and welfare of the marginalised communities led to their categorization as Scheduled Tribes by the

Scheduled Tribes Order of 1950 in accordance to Article 342 of the Constitution. Provisions like reservations of seats in legislature, employment and education, right to use one's own language for educational and other purposes including the right to conserve one's language and culture were enumerated as part of the state's integrationist and developmental agenda. But what is stated in the constitutional and legal provisions on the one hand and what actually has followed on the other hand has become quite different. The rupture between the constitutional provisions and the existing ground reality is on account of the divergence in the constitutional, institutional and administrative structure of the state. State and its institutions also trigger ethnic consciousness. State may be controlled by a particular ethnic group whose interest the state chooses to favour, state policies are also shaped by the advice of the leaders of such groups. Thus, the state far from remaining neutral and egalitarian ends up promoting majority ethnicism and consistently makes distinctions by classifying people and groups and sharing resources disproportionately; benefiting some groups and causing harm and denial to some others. This denial of resources and privileges heightens community and group consciousness.

In the development of ethnic consciousness, a closer look into the administrative structure and position of the Lepchas within that structure should also be taken into account. Darjeeling being a district within the state of West Bengal and Sikkim being a federal state. In Sikkim, Lepchas were accorded a special BL status with the right to political representations. Being closer to the state structure and the decision-making process, Lepchas in Sikkim have been able to accrue many benefits in their favour. Various Lepcha Associations have been successfully fighting against all kinds of injustices perpetrated against the Lepcha community and have been actively involved in protecting their socio- economic and cultural rights. Beginning with the grant of official status to Lepcha language in 1977, to its introduction into the school curriculum till the post- graduate level, they have achieved significant benefits. In Darjeeling, their situation is somewhat different. Being already marginalised due the operations of colonial capitalism under British rule, the state even after independence have somehow remained indifferent to the issues pertaining the Lepcha community. They have not yet claimed the agency of reading and writing in their mother tongue even at the primary level of education. Nepali language, which is the dominant regional language have always gained the upper hand in the region.

Promotion of Nepali by sidelining Lepcha language became evident when Government of West Bengal recognised Nepali as an additional official language of the district of Darjeeling in 1961. Further in 1975 Nepali language was accepted as a modern Indian language by the Sahitya Akademi and ultimately included in the 8<sup>th</sup> Schedule of the Indian Constitution. The differential treatment meted to the Lepchas of Darjeeling have further disillusioned them, which is evident from the kinds of identity assertion movements that the region has witnessed in the recent years.

Development initiatives of the state with the construction of hydel power projects on rivers that are considered to be holy for the Lepchas; and upon their holy land ‘Dzongu’, their Mayel Lyang have led Lepchas from both the regions to collectively wage sustained crusades against such projects on the grounds of protecting their culture, tradition and identity. Following Barth and Smith, the work argues that through the actions of ethnic groups and their interests, boundaries are erected, dividing some people and unifying others. Thus, the emerging consciousness of an ethnic group gets accelerated when ethnic boundaries are created and maintained, when an ethnic group starts constructing their culture by reviving their forgotten pasts, myths, symbols, language, religion, memory and their ethnic history. Through a series of literary and scholastic activities, celebrations of the birth anniversaries of their heroes, celebration of traditional Lepcha festivals, customs and traditions, production of ethno- documentary films projecting the Lepcha belief in natural deities, traditions of *munism* and *bongtheism*, attempts are being made by Lepchas in reviving and restoring their historical cultural practices and thus actively involved in the politics of cultural production and cultural revivalism.

Past thus becomes a resource for all ethnic groups giving them a collective identity which paves the way for ethnic political mobilization of the community. It becomes ‘political’ since ethnic boundaries are shaped not only by the members themselves but by external forces like the state and its institutions. Members from the community have been vocal in waging movements and conducting associational politics for the protection and promotion of cultural identity of the Lepchas. Thus, members of an ethnic group not only identify themselves as belonging to a particular group but are also identified by others. Ethnic identity as a constructed category also

implies conscious mobilization of the people in defence of their community's interest. The work is divided into six chapters.

In the first chapter, along with the statement of the problem, an introduction to the area of study is given. With a brief theoretical insight, this chapter makes a review of all existing literature. It also gives a theoretical framework to understand the emergence of ethno-consciousness among the Lepchas of Sikkim and the hills of Darjeeling and Kalimpong.

In the second chapter titled 'Lepchas: Their Social and Cultural Profile' attempt is made to give an account of the origin of the Lepcha tribe, their social and cultural profile; and an insider's account about the history of the Lepchas. Language and literature, which is considered as a repository of a community's history and culture is the next theme of this chapter. It also focusses on the literary activism and the movement for linguistic assertion among the Lepchas in response to the dominant and homogenising impulse of Nepali linguistic nationalism with the standardisation of Nepali language and literature.

The third chapter is titled 'Lepchas in Sikkim: Experience Under Namgyal Rule till The British and After'. Any work on the Lepcha tribe becomes incomplete without taking reference of the history of Sikkim, since the establishment of Namgyal kingdom in the early seventeenth century because with this began the first phase of colonisation of the Lepchas. Coming of Bhutias laid the foundation of a kingdom with a state system based on feudal order. State formation took place in entirely Tibetan-Buddhist ethos. The Sikkimese political system based on Lamaist theocracy, had many features of Tibetan feudalism; the ruler was not only the head of the state but also an incarnate lama with the responsibility to rule the subjects in accordance with the tenets of the '*Chhos*' or the Dharma. This helped to accomplish the task of converting Lepchas into the Buddhist faith conveniently. Establishment of the Bhutia kingdom and the spread of Buddhism colonized not only the Lepchas but the entire geographical and political landscape. The chapter also gives an account of the Lepchas in the period immediately after independence in 1947. Freedom from British rule did not give them access to democratic participation and decision making. They were sandwiched between the more assertive Nepalis and the dominant Bhutia

community. Since one's ability to influence the political process also became dependent upon numbers games.

The fourth chapter is titled 'Colonial Encounter and Experiences of the Lepchas of Darjeeling since 1835' gives an account of the Lepchas of Darjeeling from 1835. Prior to this date, Darjeeling was an intrinsic part of the kingdom of Sikkim. Thus, the colonial history of Darjeeling begins with the Deed of 1835. With the arrival of British in Darjeeling, Lepchas were subjected to the worst forms of colonialism. Taking advantage of the backwardness of the Lepchas, European missionaries converted a large number of them into the Christian faith. The chapter also discusses how Lepchas were affected due to the emergence of Nepali linguistic nationalism. Lepchas were forced to study and communicate in a new language. Their language was considered to be backward for not being able to cope with the advancements made by Nepali literature in the 1920s and 1930s. In response to such developments, attempts were made by the Lepchas in the 1920s to work for the introduction of Lepcha language at the primary stage of education since 1925s with the formation of the first Lepcha Association.

The fifth chapter titled 'Ethnic Political Mobilization of the Lepchas: Towards a Movement for Cultural Identity' seeks to explain how ethno- consciousness and consciousness about one's ethnic identity is followed by a set of activities aimed at political mobilisation of the community. The chapter gives an account of the organisational activities conducted by different Lepcha ethnic associations in both Sikkim and Darjeeling including Kalimpong. The chapter discusses the different ways by which Lepchas have been able to carve their differences by the creation of boundaries and boundary maintenance process. The role of external factors i.e., the political process and the political institutions that shape and determine ethnic identity is also highlighted by locating the Lepchas within the particular political structure.

The last and the concluding chapter makes an attempt to provide answers to the research questions posed at the beginning of the research work. In providing answers to the questions, a comparison is made between the state administrative structures in both Darjeeling and Sikkim, by locating the experiences of the Lepchas within this administrative structure. In doing so the chapter tries to study whether state patronage or the absence of it have a bearing on the socio- economic and political

status of the Lepchas. It also tries to show how the success of ethnic revivalism and mobilization is determined to a large extent by the level of state patronage received and the advocacy of their interests and issues by the political parties. The chapter ends by indicating certain areas that can be taken up by future researchers.