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Significance of the Lepcha Creation Myths and Folktales

**(A group project by the Research Scholars of the Cooch Behar Panchanan Barma University)*

Abstract: Lepcha is a community nestled in the Southern region of the Himalayas (Sikkim and Darjeeling). Folktales and creation myths of a particular community document their ethnic identity, practices, knowledge about flora and fauna, ritualistic beliefs, and socio-cultural aspects. These tales can also be recognized as Alternative Histories. The creation myths recount that there is a holistic contribution and influence of nature in Lepcha consciousness and life which provides a cloak of protection to them. Before the absorption of Buddhism, Christianity, and Hinduism in Lepcha culture, Lepchas primarily believed in Munism or Bongthism, the traditional polytheistic, shamanistic and syncretic religion of the Lepcha people. Their reverence for the mountains is conspicuously visible in their behavioral patterns. It is interesting to note that there are different types of connotations about different mountains. Mount Kanchendzonga is considered as a guardian deity or primordial mother as it witnessed the birth of the first man and woman – Phadongthing and Nazongnyu, whereas Tangseng Narang Chu is considered as the most unfortunate peak as Phadongthing and Nazongnyu disobeying God's command sinned there. Mt. Kanchenjunga has preoccupied not only the mindscape of Lepcha people but also every aspect of their lives, most prominently the socio-cultural aspect. Every festival they observe, every ritual they follow, dance and song; every rhythm of their lives pulsate with the omnipresent Mt. Kanchendzonga. Lepcha Folktales like- "How Jhyo Rathe and Andhi Phoda Got Separated", "The Race between Teesta and Rangeet" and "The Cave of Occult Fairie" evidently portray these instances. This essay attempts to re-examine the Lepcha Folktales and Creation Myths to find out how mountains work as a binding factor of the Lepcha people's unique cultural identity. The Lepcha Folktales and Creation Myths suggest that all the Lepcha clans have a mythical connection with a particular mountain which they worship but in the wake of urbanization, retaining Dzongu's religious identity and sanctity are a cause for great anxiety and concern.

Keywords: Mountains, Folktales, Creation Myths, Alternative History, Urbanization

Introduction

When the wind calls, you know that somewhere in the mountain it has found the answers that you were looking for. The pull of the horizon overcomes the inertia of reason." - Vikram Oberoi

The Lepcha community is a tribe that takes pride in calling themselves *Mutunchi Rongkup Romkup*, meaning 'beloved children of God'. They have an intrinsic and unadulterated relationship with the mountains and peaks and alternatively address themselves as 'children of Rong'. The word 'rong' means dwellers of a rocky island. The megalith Kanchendzonga occupies a paramount and infallible position in the lives of the Lepcha people. The origination of the Lepcha tribe remains a contested issue. Some anthropologists argue that they have descended from Myanmar, while others attribute the genesis of the Lepchas to Tibet or Mongolia. However, the Lepchas strongly believe that they are the indigenous people of the Sikkim and Darjeeling hills. Presently, the Lepcha community nestles in the western and south-western Sikkim, Bhutan, Tibet, Nepal and the hills of West Bengal. The word Lepcha is derived from the Nepalese word 'Lepche' meaning "vile speakers" or "inarticulate speech". Previously the word was considered derogatory; however, no negative connotation is associated with it now. The Lepchas are often categorized into two distinct groups based on their anthropological features: the nomadic shepherds and the agriculturalists. The nomadic shepherds have an erect nose, big eyes, a pale complexion, and a tall figure. The agriculturalists are shorter in stature with a flat nose and very small eyes covered by eyelids without eyelashes and extremely pale tone of the skin. They belong to the Non-Mongoloid and Mongoloid stock, respectively.

The Lepchas consider their tribal homeland a sacred space and gleefully refer to it as 'Mayel Lyang' or 'the hidden paradise'. The Rong folk are faithful nature worshippers. They acknowledge that the soul/ spirit or sentience exist not only in humans but also in other geographic features. The 'mun' and 'bongthing' play a central religious role in the Lepcha community. Both function as shamans and preside over sacrosanct customs and rituals. Their unflinching veneration of natural phenomena, - both celestial and terrestrial is clearly expressed in their myths and folktales. It must be mentioned here that their distinct traditional nature-worship has been subject to the forces of modernity. Tensions were felt in their primordial structure of religion and adaptations made when they came in close proximity to Christianity and

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