

MAYEL LYANG & THE LEPCHAS

(About Sikkim & Darjeeling)

D. T. TAMLONG



at Gangtok, above - Thikung Tek blessing Khye Bumisa

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Foreword

It was a pleasure for me to write this foreword for Shri Tamlong's book on Lepchas and their homeland '(Mayel Lyang and the Lepchas)'. I have known Shri Tamlong for almost two decades now ever since I was entrusted with the Hill Affairs Department in the early nineties. Shri Tamlong was an Additional District Magistrate in Darjeeling then; and I knew him as a most sincere, polite, hard working and knowledgeable officer. He had already considerable experience, for, he had served in the WBCS Cadre since 1970, having acted as BDO and SDO (in Toofangunge of Coochbehar District). When I met him next after my retirement from Government service in 2003, he had risen to become Principal Secretary to the Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council.

It was during my second meeting that Shri Tamlong showed me a large part of the manuscript of his first book about his experience of District Administration in North Bengal in general and Darjeeling Hill Areas in particular. I was quite impressed with the document, which, I gather, has since been published in the book form – "Darjeeling and North Bengal from an administrator's perspective".

It is, therefore, no surprise to me when I received the manuscript of this book in the form of a compact disk. Mr. Tamlong has indeed narrated the story in a very lucid and thorough manner. It has, however, been of surprise to me – as it will be to many other readers of the book when it is published – that such a small community as the Lepchas should have suffered such vicissitudes in its history over a long period of time and yet be able to maintain its unique language, customs, religious rites etc. unaltered to a large extent.

The term 'Lepcha', Shri Tamlong deploras, comes from the pejorative Nepali word 'Lapchey' which means "inarticulate speech" thereby implying that Lepchas were 'scurrious speakers'. This was most unfortunate as Shri Tamlong has cited instances to show that Lepchas in fact have been generally a courteous, hospitable, cultured and peace loving people. I could not but notice all these qualities reflected in the person of the only Lepcha I know quite well i.e. Shri Tamlong himself. This slander of the Lepcha community by the majority is not, however,

unique in history. In fact, the ancient Greeks believed that civilization was co-terminus with the spread of the Greek language and those who could not speak Greek properly were called "barbarians" which meant 'outsiders' (i.e. beyond the pale of civilization).

The territory of the Lepcha was called 'Mayel Lyang' which meant 'land of hidden paradise' or 'delightful region' of the Kanchanjanga Mountains. In fact, Shri Tamlong's book goes on to show that this Kanchanjanga Mountain plays a key role in the long history of the Lepcha people. They look upon the majestic mountain range as one fit for God and do not like to be out of its sight. That is why they have never strayed far away from Sikkim or Darjeeling district.

As for the origin of the Lepchas different scholars in different periods have argued that the Lepchas had come from the East, the West or from the Northern region of Darjeeling and Sikkim. Some have even wondered if it is in fact one of the lost tribes of Israel. Shri Tamlong rightly comes to the conclusion that whatever be their origin, the Lepchas are in fact one of the oldest inhabitants of this region.

Similarly, the Lepcha language has been studied closely by different authorities, some of whom were eminent linguists. All were unanimous on one point that it was indeed a very ancient language with some unique features. For example, it has a unique way of classifying words of the same nature by simply adding an alphabet as a prefix, e.g. the alphabet "S" when thus used denotes "wildlife of all kinds", or, "R" can be a prefix for denoting "all categories of mountainous rivers" in the region. The language perhaps got its script first around the 17th century. The treaty of 1835 with the East India Company was reportedly written in this script also. Shri Tamlong reports sadly that although Sikkim has recognized the Lepcha language as one of the state languages for imparting primary education in their primary schools, Darjeeling District has not yet done so and he fears that this neglect may gradually lead to the disappearance of this language and script from Darjeeling altogether.

The same fate has overtaken some of the customs and religious practices of the Lepchas. Although most Lepchas are either

Buddhists or Christians now, the practices of Mun and Bongthing are still prevalent though in a gradually weakening form. Bongthingism appears to be a very ancient form of animism which included worship of mountains and streams and involved animal sacrifice in some cases. The history of small but gentle community makes sad reading. Starting with Tibetan influx between 13 & 15th century, there have been various aggressions from outside leading to discrimination, injustice and coercion for the Lepcha community. Even a Blood Covenant signed with these external forces could not protect the Lepchas from their dismal fate.

After reciting the long history of the Lepchas which contain the litany of their suffering, Shri Tamlong comes to a mournful conclusion in the last two chapters titled "Is the Lepcha tribe vanishing? and whither Sikkim". The names of these two chapters give away the essence of this conclusion. But I feel that Shri Tamlong has been unduly pessimistic. He himself indicates in the last chapter the high level of economic prosperity and the high degree of social, educational and cultural development that Sikkim has achieved ever since it became a part of Indian Union.

In these days of Globalization and industrilization many old customs and practices regardless of their antiquity have to fall by the wayside to make way for all round economic development. This has been the general trend of human story and one only hopes that gentle, hard working and peace loving community nestling in the Himalayas also – will share in the prosperity and still retain its indigenous good qualities.

I hope Shri Tamlong will not stop his literary pursuits with this book only but continue to present us more such interesting pieces in future.

SD/

*Sujit Sankar Chattopadhyay, IAS(Retd.)
Former Secretary, Government of India*

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There are many who encouraged me in this project and have actively supported me in bringing out this book. I must first mention my wife Amina and son Amos for encouraging me and extending whole hearted support to me in this venture from the day I started gathering information and source materials.

At Pakyong, Sikkim, I got support and encouragement from my nephews VT Lepcha, a retired Superintending Engineer, and ST Lepcha, a Joint Director of Health, Government of Sikkim.

At Gangtok, my old friend, T. Phuntsog, a retired Chief Engineer of Power Deptt, Government of Sikkim, was kind enough to take me to Namgyal Institute of Tibetology and a few other places in Gangtok for collecting source materials.

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At Darjeeling, I have to be grateful to my friend and nephew DT Lepcha IPS for giving me ideas and moral support. I could also get help and support from other members of my community viz Dugey Lepcha, Pasang Lepcha, D.T. Lepcha (L.R.Deptt), Suryaman Lepcha, Capt. L.D. Lepcha, and Mun Jermi Lepcha.

At Kalimpong I got encouragement and support from my auntie-in-law Leom Rongong, uncle-in-law Kogen Rongong, Chanchal

Rongong and Namal Rongong.

I am grateful to Mr. S. S. Chattopadhyay, IAS (Retd), Former Secretary to Government of India, for writing a beautiful Foreword for the book and I would like to express my special thanks to Dr. P. K. Chettri, Additional District Darjeeling for writing a short but analytical review, titled 'An Observation' for this book and also to Professor Amar Rai, who retired recently from the post of Vice Principal, Loreto College, Darjeeling for writing his appraisal in the form of 'review'. I would like to express my gratitude to my friend Sri S. Mukerji, IPS (Retd.), Controller, B. G. Press, Kolkata for encouraging me in this project.

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Ultimately, I thank God for making everything beautiful and blessed in my life.

D. T. Tamlong

Introduction

Lepcha tribe has, for years, been the subject of much curiosity and interest to scholars, anthropologists, historians, social workers and politicians both from India and abroad. All kinds of writers have studied the race and written books based on their investigation and research. Each has given his own version and on several matters there are agreements, but there are also disagreements and contradictions galore on several matters. Some say, the Lepchas have migrated from Mongolia and some others say, they have come from Indo China and yet there are others, who say they are from Middle East or Central Asia.

About the language also, each has similarly given different views—some call it akin to Tibetan, some to Arabic or Hebrew and some others relate it to Nagas or Indo Chinese; so 'Lepcha' stands out 'like an elephant' to several blind persons, each drawing different conclusions from his own perception. No body seems to have concrete evidence as to the correctness of their claim or assertion and in such a situation, the subject, especially the one relating to the origin of the race and the history of the language, will continue to be vague and obscure. Besides, most of the books written by the foreign authors are based on source materials provided by the Sikkim palace and its officers, which are naturally biased against the Lepchas and as such there is bound to be wrong assumptions based on half truths. Of course, we have to be grateful to the learned scholars and authors for unearthing and disclosing many interesting details of our past history, but at the same time we feel pained for some of the hasty conclusions drawn up by some of them and also about the liberties taken by them in expressing their opinions with disparaging remarks, which at some places have bordered on indecency, while describing in their books about the nature and habits of the Lepchas.

Two prominent Lepcha leaders of the community viz. K.P. Tamsang and A.R. Foning have also penned their versions based on their own experience and research. They have explored and brought out mines of information about our tribe and its past history, culture etc, which will inspire and guide our fraternity for all time to come. But still, after all these attempts, complete and accurate history of Lepchas – their language, their culture - will not be possible and the race will continue to be the guinea pigs for further researches and investigations. Even in Singapore, I found some locals there interested in the Lepchas and their culture. I met three Singapore citizens—one lady and two gents, the members of Youth Expedition Project (YEP, an NGO)—who were in some way associated with the construction of some Lepcha houses in Sikkim. Being a Lepcha, I felt that it was my duty and responsibility to place on record whatever I know of my tribe based on my personal experience, as a born-and-brought-up-Lepcha, and also to try to present an analysis of whatever different authors have said or written about our race, so that a clear picture of the tribe, its history and culture without any distortions and exaggerations can be drawn.

The immediate inspiration to write some thing about the Lepchas came from Mr. Proshad Roy, Addl Chief Secretary, Home Department, West Bengal, whom I met last in Darjeeling in 2006. When I told him that I had recently published my first book '*Darjeeling and North Bengal from an Administrator's Perspective*', he casually said to me, 'Why don't you write a book on the Lepchas?' From that day, I started gathering materials on the subject and my efforts have culminated in the publication of this book

The Lepchas, for centuries before the advent of the Tibetans and the Nepalese, being the masters of their own destiny in their own mountainous Mayel Lyang, secure from the outside

world, by nature, are simple, timid, excessively generous, accommodating, loyal, trusting type and not always aggressive. May be some of these qualities, instead of being a boon to the race turned out to be the bane; for taking advantage of the simplicity, generosity and timidity of the community, the clever, cunning and aggressive settlers that came particularly from the north, eventually brought about their subjugation and thereafter causing their gradual assimilation in social, religious and cultural spheres. To add to the misery, the growth of Lepcha population has not been in the same pace with those of other communities. No wonder, A.R. Foning has called his book 'The Lepcha My Vanishing Tribe'.

Despite inroads made by the other aggressive communities coming from other neighbouring countries in the language, culture, religion, and in social life in the last five centuries or more, the Lepchas have been able to sustain themselves as a separate race, quite distinct from other Indian races. The Lepchas have made a mark for themselves in several fields or professions, be it in the Army or Govt Service or other professions, but still they are far behind the members of other advanced communities in the region. Due to the utter neglect and lack of patronage over the years, the language, under which Official business used to be conducted in Sikkim and Darjeeling earlier and the same was also used for writing the the memorable 'Deed of Grant of Darjeeling' in 1835, signed by the Sikkim Raja giving away Darjeeling tract to the British East India Company, has not been able to prosper at all and the same is now reduced to the use in the Lepcha homes or on social and cultural occasions only. The State of Sikkim has, however, made the language an official language at par with Nepali and Sikkimese Bhutia. This has come as a blessing to the community.

As already explained above, this book is based on my personal knowledge as a born-and -brought-up Lepcha, and also on the basis of whatever I have gleaned from other books I have read and other sources, and naturally, there may be discrepancies and errors of judgement here and there, in which case, I seek the forgiveness of the readers beforehand. I have, again and again, mentioned the Nepalese and the Bhutia communities while relating the history of my community, but that does not mean I have ill feelings towards any of those communities, since whatever have been our past history, all of us have now become a part of a great family, having common objectives and goal, both in Sikkim as well as in Darjeeling. This book, as the title suggests, is about the Lepchas and their ancient Mayel Iyang - Darjeeling and Sikkim—and the courses of history affecting their lives from the past to the present, which I feel, if not written about and published at this juncture by me or other writers who have seen or experienced, will be forgotten in the fast changing world where everything and everybody is being amalgamated, adulterated and obliterated.

Serious endeavour has been made to delve into our past history, our traditional way of life and the trials and tribulations so far faced by our race, and at the same time, I have tried to visualise the difficulties and the challenges that lie ahead of us. As far as I know, no such type of this book—dealing with historical facts relevant to the Lepcha lives— has so far been published by any writer. I am quite confident, the book will be immensely useful to the members of my community, the Government authorities, historians, research scholars and other general readers.



Dr. P. K. Chhetri, WBCS (Exe.)
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An observation

India is a multi-ethnic society having 400 odd distinct communities designated as tribes, comprising about 8 per cent of India's population but distributed unevenly throughout the length and breadth of the country belonging to various racial, linguistic, economic and religious categories.

"A tribe is a segmental organization," writes Sahlins. Each society is held to be autonomous, similar in function and status to any other segment of the tribal society.

Though tribes in India belong to heterogeneous groups of people who differ in terms of their historical background, socio-economic and cultural problems vis-à-vis levels of development, they possess distinctive collective identities. The Lepchas too, as a tribe, very carefully kept intact its identity distinct from other Himalayan groups for years on end. The reason is: they being remained confined to a very small tract of inaccessible mountainous portion in Sikkim. Seldom did visitors make their venture into their territory due to difficult terrain. Their confinement, though not self-imposed, proved advantageous down the ages to maintain their racial purity.

In the world today due to intermixing with outsiders several aboriginal tribes have become extinct. In this case, the Lepchas proved an exception.

Though racial history is subject to an anthropologist, the attempt by the author Mr. D.T. Tamlong deserves appreciation.

In his book 'The Lepchas' he tried to touch upon such virgin areas, which were previously overlooked by earlier writers. Further, he has drawn upon in his work both from written and unwritten sources in the absence of any authentic historical source. This is imperative in order to keep the flow of narrative intact.

There are only few bureaucrats after retirement who tried to produce something meaningful for the benefit of society at large. Hence, as is obvious, such people simply go into oblivion and are forgotten. Mr. Tamlong is unique! He has kept his literary pursuit intact, which merits praise. By writing 'The Lepchas', he has rendered yeoman's service for posterity and immortalized his name.

On the whole the book is interesting to read. It will be an additional contribution to the existing literatures related to the history of the Lepchas. I recommend this book to every discerning reader who is interested to know the Lepchas from more close quarters.

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Review

"The excellence of a gift lies in its appropriateness rather than in its value".

Sri D. Tamlong, IAS (Retd.) has gifted "Mayel Lyang and The Lepchas" to humanity, a work that has been meticulously and aptly written about the "vanishing tribe". The book has been elaborately authenticated by the various works on the Lepchas. To a first-time reader, interested in the Lepchas, the book provides a thorough insight into their origin, history, culture, language and religion.

In the present era, where one is so deeply influenced by the outside world, one tends to forget one's own history, culture and traditions. This book is of immense value for the Lepchas in particular and anthropologists and historians in general. The Lepchas need to take pride in their history, culture, language and religion and uphold these with dignity.

Sri Tamlong, has, to the best of his ability and in his own simplistic style, explained the 'way of life' of the Lepchas and has tried to show that they are not the docile and easy-going people as thought out to be. The Lepchas have played a dominant role in the emergence and development of Sikkim to its present status and are a brave and proud race.

The misconceptions surrounding the Lepchas – their history, culture, traditions, language and religion have been

clarified by the author and one wishes that in the future, the Lepchas be NOT a 'vanishing' BUT a 'flourishing' tribe.

It is encouraging that a work of this nature on a particular tribe in the Hills has been undertaken by someone who understands the ethos of his tribe with distinction. It is also very revealing that the author, in many places, brings out the similarities between the Lepchas and other communities in the Hills. Being the original inhabitants of this region, the influence of the Lepchas on other communities is evident.

The author needs to be complimented for this 'valuable gift' to posterity. The books needs, not only to be read, but chewed and digested.

Amar Singh Rai

Former Lecturer &

Vice Principal

Loreto College

Darjeeling

LEPCHAS & THEIR ORIGIN

Nomenclature 'Lepcha'—Heleen Plaisier, of Leiden University, in her article, 'A BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO LEPCHA ORTHOGRAPHY AND LITERATURE', published in 'Bulletin of Tibetology' in vol. 41, no. 1 at page 7 of May 2005, writes, "The English name 'Lepcha' derives from Nepali Lapce or Lapca, which originally had the derogatory connotation of 'inarticulate speech'. Nowadays, the term 'Lepcha' is widely used without this connotation. The Lepchas call themselves 'Mutanchi Rongkup Rumkup' 'children of Rong and of God.'" This has been accepted by majority of Lepcha people and many writers have also supported this view. There are no two opinions on the view that 'Lepcha' is derived from 'LAPCHEY' i.e. the name given by the Nepalese. Britishers started calling the Lepchas as LEPCHAS anglicizing the word LAPCHEY.

Lepcha language—a sweet language—K.P. Tamsang, in his 'The Unknown and Untold Reality about the Lepchas' at page 2, has written, "The name Lapchey is given to the Lepcha people by the Nepalese". Lapchey means scurrilous speakers, a very contemptuous term referring to the Lepchas and therefore this term needs to be condemned outright because it is most derogatory and unfavourable to the Lepchas, for, the Lepchas are in truth not scurrilous speakers. Because their language is the most simple and pure one and not a single abusive, indecent, obscene, slang, or vulgar word exists in the language as commonly found in all the other languages of the world." All the Lepchas are in agreement with Tamsang in this respect as the Lepcha language in no way can be called 'scurrilous' as it is a sweet language. It is possible that some Nepalese, first meeting a Lepcha speaking a Lepcha word or trying to speak in Nepali (then a foreign language), found or perceived the uttering scurrilous.

All languages sound funny or odd—All foreign languages sound funny or odd while hearing for the first time, and trying to speak or utter the same is also a difficult task. That must have happened

to a Nepalese also while hearing Lepchas speaking in their mother tongue or trying to speak Nepali. But the name has stuck. A long time ago, when a Lepcha member who knew very little Nepali spoke to us in horrible Nepali with odd pronouciations, I used to find it funny and used to laugh, much to the embarrassment of that fellow Lepcha member. There are no 'Bha', 'Gha', 'Jha', 'Dha' etc alphabets in Lepcha, and so instead of 'Bhat' ('rice' in Nepali) the Lepchas utter 'Bat' ('talk' in Nepali) and instead of 'Ghans' ('grass' in Nepali) they pronounce 'Gans' ('morsel' in Nepali) and so on. Similarly for 'Dhan' (riches or paddy in Nepali), Lepchas pronounce 'Dan' i.e. gift in Nepali. Further, there are some Lepcha words, the equivalent pronunciations of which are not found in Nepali and English. In such circumstances, there was bound to be criticism in the way a person spoke a foreign tongue.

Rongs or Rongkup—The Lepchas call themselves 'RONGs' or 'Rongkups'. Tamsang in the above mentioned book at page 1 said, "The Lepchas call themselves "Rongkup Rumkup" or in short "Rong", which means "the son of the snowy peak, the son of God". Sanchita Ghatak in the book, 'People of India, Sikkim' at page 89, has written, "The Lepchas call themselves 'Rong-Kup' or 'Mutanchi Rongkup'. 'Rong' meaning both 'to wait' and 'peak', 'Mutanchi Rongkup' means 'Mother's loved ones'; mother here standing for Mother as creator whom Lepchas call Itburnoo. The Lepchas are also called 'Monpas' by the Tibetans, the Kirata tribe of low land. Bhutias call them 'Maris' which means the same thing." A.K. Das in 'The Lepchas of Darjeeling District' at page 4 says, "Lepchas call themselves 'Rong' meaning thereby the dwellers of rocky land and the term 'Rong' has been derived from the word 'Rinjong', meaning rockland full of respectable people." But the word 'Renjong' in Lepcha is formed of 'Ren' (respected) and 'jong' (like). 'Renjong', therefore, means a respectable person as will be explained in subsequent chapter.

Opinion of Suryaman Lepcha—Ren Suryaman Lepcha has added one more version which was told to him by the older 'Pastor Tingbu' of Gitdabling, according to which some Lepchas who were taken as slaves to Bhutan after the betrayal and assassination of Gyeba Achiok, the Lepcha Raja, at Dalim, believed that their king

would reincarnate some day and they should be waiting (Rong means to wait) for their deliverance and they started calling themselves Rong Kup. But this cannot be accepted as no support for this view has been mentioned anywhere. Whatever may be the actual reasons, the Lepchas call themselves as 'Rongs' and the outsiders know them as the Lepchas and in all historical details also, they are known as the Lepchas or Rongs. Lepchas, in turn, call the Nepalese 'Loom', Limbus as 'Chongs' and the Bhutias as 'Arat' or 'Pot'.

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1. *Bulletin of Tibetology*, vol 41, no.1 of May 2005, Sikkim,
2. K.P. Tamsang's 'The Unknown and Untold Reality about the Lepchas'
3. Sanchita Ghatak in 'People of India, Sikkim'
4. A.K. Das in 'The Lepchas of Darjeeling'
5. Ren Suryaman Lepcha's hand written note.

THEORIES OF ORIGIN

K.P. Tamsang's view- In the book 'The Unknown and Untold Reality about the Lepchas', Tamsang, at page 1, has explained as to who the Lepchas are and how they were created in the beginning; the same in his own words, "the Lepcha tradition says that in the beginning, the first and the foremost primogenitors of the Lepchas, Foodongthing and Nazaongnyo were created by God from the pure, virgin snows of the Kingtsoomzaongboo (kanchenjunga) Choo's(mountain's) pinnacle and sent them down to live, prosper and spread all over the fairy land of Mayel Lyang that lies on the lap of Kingtsoomzaongboo Choo, that is Mount Kanchanjunga. Therefore, as the Lepcha's first primogenitors were thus created at the summit of Kingtsoomzaongboo by God Himself, the Lepchas very proudly proclaim themselves as Rongkup, that is, the son of the snowy peak and Rumkup, that is the son of God, in short Rong."

Opinion of Pema Wangchuk and Mita Zulca:—Pema Wangchuk & Mita Zulca in their book, 'Khangchendzonga Sacred Summit' at page 31, have written, "Also, according to the story of origin, the first Lepcha couple, Tukbothing and Nazong Nyu, their

Adam and Eve respectively, were created by Itbu Mu from the fresh snows of Khangchendzonga's summit." They have again said at page 36 of the same book, "Although theories abound how the Lepchas came to Sikkim, it is universally accepted that they have never migrated beyond Khangchendzonga's shadow. It appears that the community made a conscious effort to always keep Khangchendzonga in sight. It is rare to find a Lepcha village from where Khangchendzonga can not be sighted." According to them, Lepcha greetings 'Achuley' refers to the salutation to the mountain i.e. Kanchenjunga. These authors have further observed at page 32, "The Annual Chyu Rum Faat, thanksgiving worship of the mountain gods, is an integral part of the Lepcha rituals and is centered on Kanchenjunga. Apart from this, in every prayer that is offered, the Lepchas first invoke Kong Chen." The other Lepcha name for Kanchenjunga is 'Kong Chen' i.e. big stone. This shows that the Lepchas first originated in the lap of Kanchenjunga and naturally their habitat is in the periphery of that mountain i.e. Sikkim. It is true that even the legends, culture and the religious rituals (Mun-Bongthingism) of the Lepchas are linked to the Kanchenjunga mountain and the great Sikkim rivers i.e. the Teesta and the Rangit, which also originate from the base of this mountain.

R.P. Lama's Views:—The veteran Gorkha writer and social worker of Darjeeling, R.P. Lama, in his book, 'Across The Teesta' at page 153 has written, "...The Lepchas call themselves 'Mutanchi Rong' meaning the beloved children of God. Their original ancestors, 'FOODONGTHING and NAZONG-NU', the first man and woman were created by God from the eternal purity and holy snows of the Himalayas, As such even to this day, Lepchas worship the Himalayas as their guardian deity."

Findings of John Morris:— About the origin of the Lepchas, John Morris in his book, 'LIVING WITH LEPCHAS' at page 63 has written, "Itpumu, the man, Kumsiting, the woman, were born from the two peaks of Kinchinjunga. They had two children, a boy named Tashay Thing, and a girl they gave the name of Nazong Nyu. These two married and had many children: but because they were brother and sister all their children were devils and for this reason their mother refused to suckle them. Eventually they gave birth to a

child which was not a demon. They gave it the name of Ril Bu Shing, and because it was their first real child, the mother treated it tenderly and suckled with loving care. When the demon children saw this they were very angry and decided to do away with Ril Bu Shing. This they did, and he was buried near certain small peak on the right bank of Talung river. The parents were very upset, and deciding that life was insupportable, they divided their property and separated, Tashay Thing going towards Tibet and his wife towards Sikkim. Prior to this the grandmother, Kumsiting, called all her demon grandchildren together and addressed them. All came with the exception of Dom Mung, the demon of leprosy, which did not hear the summon. She told them all that in future there would be no objection to their 'eating the souls' of human beings; but, on the other hand, when offerings were made to them on behalf of these same humans by Bongthing, Mun or Rumfat Bu, they must accept them, and that when they did this they must leave the humans alone. This is said to be the origin of making sacrifices to the various demons. But since Dom Mung was not present at the meeting and did not receive these instructions there is no cure for persons stricken with leprosy. After this Kumsiting created man. The first man was called Tarbong Pu; the first woman Nari Pu. They lived on the twin peaks beyond Seniolchum; and from there all the races of man, including the Lepchas, are descended."

Views of A.K. Das—In 'The Lepchas of Darjeeling' at page 129, Das describes how 'Fadong thing' and 'Nazong nyu', being brother and sister committed sin as a result of which, seven ugly looking sons born by them later killed the good looking eighth one and then on realising their sins, they prayed to God. God then forgave them and blessed them. The ten sons then born to them are regarded as the forefathers of the Lepchas.

A.R. Foning's findings:—A.R. Foning in his book, 'Lepcha My Vanishing Tribe' at page 88 describes the creation of first man and woman as follows: "Itbu-moo, the Great Mother Creator, after having created every thing on land and in the sea and sky, created Tukbothing to be Lord over them all and to enjoy it. After some time, feeling a bit of inadequacy in her project, from Takbothing's

'nungyong', literally meaning 'marrow', and in figurative meaning, 'wisdom', created Nazong Nu and gave her to him as a companion and helpmate..” Here also, just as stated by Pema Wangchuk and Mita Zulca above, Foning describes the first man as Tukbothing instead of Foodongthing. The actual location of the creation has not been indicated here. But he asserts that the Lepchas are the autochthones and has expressed as such at several places in his book mentioned above.

Minor differences of opinion:—Slight differences have emerged while giving the names to the first man and the woman by the different scholars as we find them called 'Foodongthing or Tukbothing or Tashay Thing or itpumu or Tarbong pu' for the man and 'Nazaongnyu or Kumsithing or Nari pu' for the woman. It is difficult to say which view is universally accepted by the Lepchas or by the historians; but it has been generally accepted by all that Foodongthing and Nazongnyu were the first Lepcha man and Lepcha woman respectively created by Itboomoo (mother creator).

The place of origin:- The opinions and the observations given in the above paragraphs indicate that the location of the creation of the first Lepcha primogenitors was Kanchenjungha and its periphery ie Sikkim. There are, however, some scholars who ascribe to the theory of migration of the tribe from the east.

The Lepchas firmly believe that they are the autochthones of Sikkim and Darjeeling. However, various authors and historians, past and present, have given conflicting and confusing theories about the actual origin of the Lepcha race, but most firmly believe that the race first originated in Sikkim only, while some say that the Lepchas migrated from the north and quite a number say they came from the east. There are also people, who conjecture that they have come from the west. This is evident from the following passages.

K.P. Tamsang's opinion:—K.P. Tamsang in his book, 'The Unknown and Untold Reality about the Lepchas' at page 3 has stated the following:—

"The Lepchas claim themselves not only as the very indigenous race of the Sikkim and the Darjeeling District, but also the very primeval people of the world. But here too, as far as the origin of the Lepchas is concerned, many foreign writers, anthropologists, linguists and serologists have conflicting opinions and views. Mackean, Shafer, Siiger and many others are of the opinion that the Lepchas have migrated from the east in ancient times and permanently settled down in Sikkim and Darjeeling. Many others have the suppositions and imaginations that the Lepchas may have migrated from the north. Many say that the Lepchas have definitely migrated from the west, for the Lepchas have in some way descended from the European stock, that is, the Lepcha race was founded by three warriors who had remained behind from the campaign of Alexander the Great. Many writers merely imagine that the Lepchas are the very descendants of the missing tribe of Israel by merely comparing the biblical legend of the Flood (Noah's time), the Tower of Babylon, and many identical names of places like Ararat, Illam, Sidon and many similar names of the Kings of Old Testament with that of the Lepchas' Flood (Teesta-Rangit rising upto Tendong peak), the earthen Tower of Tallaom Purtam, Araot Lho, Sadam, Illam etc etc. Also innumerable Indo-European languages including English, Latin, German, Dutch, Gothic, Scandinaveans words with identical meanings and sounds with Lepcha words such as tall, see, seem, hook, poke, he, his, him, you, mo, roll, cub, knock, dam, tago, etc are found in Lepcha language. Also, innumerable identical Tibeto-Burman languages including Nagas, Khasis, Burmese, Chinese, Laosians, Tibetans, Meches, Mros, Magars, Tamangs, Limboos words with identical meanings and sounds with Lepcha words etc don't prove that the Lepchas have either migrated from the east, north, west and south to Sikkim or to say that the Lepchas are of the same stock with Western European people, or with the North-Eastern Indian people, and the South-Eastern Asian people..". Tamsang asserts that the Lepchas and their language must have gone to other parts of the world in the distant past and hence the Lepchas are the autochthones of Sikkim and Darjeeling.

Theory of migration from the east:—Foning also mentions about hearing the story of three strange brothers proceeding from the land of the rising sun and through strange circumstances one ended up settling in Jalpaiguri and Coochbehar as the present day Mechs and Kochs and another in eastern Nepal as Jimdars (Rais) or Kiratas, the last one landing in Mayel country ie Sikkim as the Lepchas. To back up this claim, he points out certain similarities seen in the Lepchas, Kochs, Mechs and the Jimdars. For the second part of his theory, Foning has found support from Haffden Siiger when, he after comparing the language and the people of the east with the Lepchas and their language, has hazarded that the Lepchas might have migrated from the east. J.C.White is also of the opinion that the Lepchas came from the east.

Theory of migration from Israel—I remember the conversation I had long time ago with Mr. D.Ramsong Foning, now retired DSP, when he had said that the Lepchas had similarities with Israelis in many respects and our race might have come from there. It was some sort of a shock to me then. It is, however, true some of the Biblical stories relating to the Israelis e.g (1) of creation of 1st Man and Woman, (2) Great Flood of Noah's time and (3) Tower of Babel under Nimrod's time have similarities with some Lepcha folk lore and stories and some of the Lepcha words have similarities with those found in middle East and Europe. Lepcha marriage custom of having to pay the price of the bride or giving a certain period of service in lieu of the price is also similar to the one followed by Israelis in ancient times. Fred Pinn compares the Lepcha marriage custom with the bible story of Jacob having to serve his father-in-law Laban for a certain period for winning the wife for himself. Even the custom of marrying the widow by the deceased husband's brother or other kin of the husband was a common practice among both the Israelis and the Lepchas. J.C.White in 'SIKHIM AND BHUTAN' has thus described Lepcha features, "...smaller and lighter in build with finer cut features, in many cases almost Jewish...."

Because of all the above similarities of the Lepchas with Israelis, some people have hazarded that the Lepchas might be the 'lost tribe of Israel'.

Lepchas, the actual original aborigines – Whatever be the minor differences of opinion about the actual origin of the Lepcha tribe, there is absolute unanimity on the assumption that the Lepchas are the most ancient tribe and undisputedly the original aborigines of Sikkim and their life and culture revolve around Kanchejungha mountain and the rivers Teesta and Rangit, which are considered as their sacred deities. In deference to high regard given to Kanchanjungha by the Lepchas and other Sikkimese, the mountaineers who manage to reach the summit of that mountain, stop about a feet or so below the peak point and thereby ensuring the chastity and sanctity of the peak. Kanchenjunga is the only mountain in the world given such respect. Maharaja, Sir Tashi Namgyal of Sikkim, while giving permission for Kanchenjunga Expedition in 1955, enjoined on the expedition leader to ensure sanctity of the peak. Tamsang, Pema Wangchuk and Nita Zulca firmly believe that the Lepchas were created out of pure snows of Kanchenjunga. Tamsang also explains that 'Rongkup' by which Lepchas call themselves means 'sons of God' or 'sons of mountains'. Lepcha tradition of worshipping the Sikkimese mountains like the Kanchenjunga and the Tendong mountain have been recognised as a part of Sikkim State culture and tradition, and hence the occasions are treated as State festivals. 'Pang Lhabso' is the festival for the worship of Lepcha deity (or God) Kanchenjunga and 'Tendong Lho Rumpf', the festival for the worship of Tendong mountain, located above Namchi, as this latter mountain is said to have saved the Lepcha race from the Great flood in ancient time. Tamsang, further, totally negates the theory of migration of the Lepchas from the east or west or north or south, but goes so far as to assert that if at all there was migration, it might be from Sikkim to other places.

Existence of 'Mayel' village in the lap of Kanchenjunga— Many research scholars and writers mention the existence of a 'Mayel village' in the lap of Kanchenjunga and it was here, Mother creator, Itbumoo, after creating the Lepcha race in this 'Mayel Kyung' from the pure snows of Kanchenjunga, is supposed to have given each of the 108 clans of the Lepcha, a 'Chyu' (mountain peak), a 'Lep' (cave) and a 'Da' (Lake), all located in the periphery of Kanchenjunga. The use of 'Chyu' and 'Da' is for survival and

existence of each Lepcha, while it is believed that 'Lep' is where the soul will go after death. This 'Mayel Kyung', known to the Lepcha tribes and believed by them as 'the home of their ancestors' is supposed to be somewhere in the inaccessible part of Kanchenjunga. None except the great Lepcha legendary figure Thekung Mensalong has actually seen this mysterious village, from where he was said to have brought horticulture and grain seeds for Sikkim in ancient time. After the creation and growth of the race in this Mayel village, they started worshipping Kanchenjunga as Rum or God. Lepcha Muns and Bongthings have to invoke Kanchenjunga (Lepcha God or Rum) in every Lepcha ritual.

Worship of Teesta and Rangit—Like the Ganga and the Jamuna to the Hindus, rivers Teesta(Runyu) and Rangit both originating from the glaciers of Kanchenjunga are considered 'holy' to the Lepcha race. Interestingly, all the major rivers of Sikkim are also named with words starting from 'R' e.g. Rongnyu(for Teesta), Rongit, Ramam, Rishi, Relli, Rongpo, Rungbee, Ratong, Rumphiu etc and all these names are in Lepcha.

The existence of the Lepchas in Sikkim from ancient time—Lepcha folklore like 'Tal Lom Partam' i.e, making the way to go to heaven, by constructing a stairway of earthen pots some 3600 years ago from a location in Daramden and also the Lepcha legends of Rongnu-Rongit—their love story and the great flood—clearly confirm that the Lepcha race have been in Sikkim from time immemorial i.e, from thousands of years ago. Dharnidhar Dahal in 'Sikkimko Rajnaitik Itihas' at page 2 mentions the existence of Lepcha king and the Lepcha race during the reign of Chandragupta Maurya in 330 B.C. The mountains, rivers and the places in Sikkim, Darjeeling district, Jalpaiguri, western Bhutan and eastern Nepal named in Lepcha language further confirm that the Lepcha race belonged to this region from ancient time. No historian or scholars both from India or from abroad have raised any doubt about the claim of the Lepchas being the original aborigines of Darjeeling and Sikkim; they have rather supported this claim with their findings based on the earliest available stories and records. In the Coronation booklet published by the palace,

under the chapter 'The Religion of Sikkim', it has been written, "At first the Lepchas, the original residents of the land were known to be Bonpo Shamanists. In the eight century Guru Padma Sambhava taught Buddhism in Sikkim." That means the Bhutia rulers admit that Lepchas are the original inhabitants of Sikkim and that they were there even during the 8th century. Because of all these facts, the Sikkim Government in 2005, has moved the Central Government to recognize the Lepchas under the category of the 'Most Primitive Tribe'.

All the above factors based on historical facts and mythological stories, have convincingly proved beyond all doubt that the Lepchas are the original aborigines of Darjeeling and Sikkim. It is immaterial to say here, for the sake of argument, whether they originated here, even though there is ample evidence to suggest that they did originate here in Sikkim, or they have migrated to this place from elsewhere, but the historical fact is that the ***Lepchas were the only occupiers of this part of Sikkim and Darjeeling from ancient time as all the writers have confirmed that they (the Lepchas) were the original residents of Sikkim.*** For further confirmation, we may do well to examine what some other scholars have said in this regard.

Observation of J.C. White:—J.C. White, who was the first Political Officer of Sikkim during the period 1888-1907, in his book, 'Sikkim and Bhutan' at page 7 has said, "The aboriginal inhabitants of Sikkim are the Lepchas and the language they use is Lepcha. Their origin is doubtful, as they did not enter Sikkim across the Himalayas or from Tibet, but are supposed to have come from the east along the foothills from the direction of Assam and upper Burmah. They bear little resemblance to the Tibetans, they are smaller and slightly built with finer cut features, in many cases almost Jewish and their language is a distinct one, not a dialect of Tibetan."

Gorer's views:—Geoffrey Gorer in his book, 'HIMALAYAN VILLAGE' at page 35 has said, "There is no generally accepted theory among those anthropologists who believe that every tribe originally came from somewhere else as to the place of origin of the Lepchas. Various parts of Tibet and Mongolia have been

suggested and a certain similarity has apparently been found between the Lepcha language and some dialect spoken in Indo-China. The Lepchas themselves have no tradition of migration and place the home of their ancestors—people of Mayel—in one of the inaccessible valleys of Kinchenjunga.” He has further said “...It seems certain that they were originally the only inhabitants of this large mountainous land..”

Opinion of E.C. Dozey:— In his book titled, “A CONCISE HISTORY OF THE DARJEELING DISTRICT, Since 1835” at page 274 Dozey has said, “...Lepchas, or as they call themselves, the Rongpa or Ravine folk; a most charming people, whose origin is obscure, though it is thought they migrated to their present abode along the foothills of the Himalayas from the east, not from Tibet. They are a distinct race, with a language, both spoken and written, of their own, and with very marked characteristics. Their features are distinctly aquiline, a marked contrast to the usual Mongolian type seen about these parts...” He has in the above mentioned book at page 41 said, “...the aborigines of that land, the Lepchas” referring to Sikkim and further beyond in the same page, we find written, “...the Lepcha once possessed all the hill territory of Sikkim and Darjeeling, including the Daling sub-division”

Views of L.S.S. O'Malley:—O'Malley, in his book ‘History of Darjeeling’ at page 44 has said, “The Lepchas are the aboriginal inhabitants of the country, who call themselves Rong, i.e, the squatters, and their country the land of cavesFormerly they possessed all the hill country of Darjeeling and Sikkim.”

Hunter's Remarks:—W.W. Hunter in “A Statistical Account of Bengal, Vol X, London, 1876” has written, “The Lepchas are considered to be the aboriginal inhabitants of the hilly portion of the district. At all events they are the first known occupiers of this tract (Darjeeling tract) and of independent Sikkim.”

Views of H. G. Joshi:— H.G. Joshi in his book ‘Sikkim Past and Present’ at page 137 has said, “The Lepchas, who call themselves “Rong Pa” (ravine folk) are believed to have been the original inhabitants of Sikkim”. In the book he has written in page 138:— “Their (Bhutias) bonds with the Lepchas date back to more than

500 years when a blood brotherhood was established between their tribal chiefs at Kabi Lungtsok in north Sikkim”

Opinion of Sanchita Ghatak:—Sanchita Ghatak has described Lepchas as “the principal tribal people of Sikkim” in the book, ‘People of India, Sikkim’ compiled by Sri K.S. Sing. She has further said “...Lepchas are supposed to be the original inhabitants of Sikkim.”

Assertion of Fred Pinn:—In his “The Road of Destiny, Darjeeling Letters 1839” under the chapter “The Lepcha Problem” at page 170, Fred Pinn has said, “....when for countless generations they (Lepchas) had been used to roam large parts of Sikkim, being the original inhabitants of the country.”

References:

K.P. Tamsang's 'The Unknown and Untold Reality About The Lepchas'

Pema Wangchuk and Mita Zulca in 'Kanchenjunga Sacred Summit'

R.P. Lama's 'Across the Teesta'

John Morris in 'Living with Lepchas'

A.K. Das in 'The Lepchas of Darjeeling'

A.R. Foning's 'The Lepcha My Vanishing Tribe'

J.C. White's 'SIKHIM BHUTAN'

G.Gorer's 'Himalayan Village'

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L. S. S.O Malley in 'History of Darjeeling'

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Sanchita Ghatak in 'People of India, Sikkim'

Dharnidhar Dahal's 'Sikkimko Rajnaitik Itihas'

Fred Pinn in 'Road of Destiny'

H.G. Joshi in 'Sikkim Past and Present'

For the Lepchas 'Darjeeling' means Darju-Lyang

i.e. Land of God