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**Megalithic Monuments of the
Jewish Lost Tribes**

**Empire and Mission:
Portuguese State and Franciscan
Collaboration in Establishing the
Goa Mission, (1510-1534)**

**Social Transformation and the
Lepchas of Darjeeling Hills:
Role of Christian Missionaries,
Mid 19th Century to 1947**

**Emergence of Pentecostal/
Charismatic Christianity in
post-colonial Goa**

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Social Transformation and the Lepchas of Darjeeling Hills: Role of Christian Missionaries, Mid 19th Century to 1947

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[There have been many studies on the impact of Christian missionaries among the tribes of North East India. Tracing the history of the Christian missions which worked among the Lepchas of Darjeeling, Kalimpong and Kurseong, the author brings to fore one of the contemporary debates on missionary intervention among indigenous communities in the British-ruled regions. While some consider that the success of the Christian mission was due to colonial support, others credit it to the pioneering, dedicated work of the missionaries and the positive response and collaboration of the local converts. The author elucidates that whatever the agency, the impact of the mission on the religious, social, linguistic, and community life of the Lepchas has been tremendous. Today the Lepchas are constructing a new community identity integrating pre and post-conversion elements. - Editor]

1. Introduction

Christian missionaries from the West came to Darjeeling district of West Bengal with their main objective of preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ. It was easier for them to penetrate in this region as it was already under the British administration. Through charity and developmental works they attempted to reach the un-reached: the native Lepchas who were politically, socially, economically and culturally marginalized and oppressed by the dominant groups like the Tibetans (so called *Bhutias*), the British and the Nepalese. The autochthonous Lepchas were a neglected group and hence were better disposed to accept the religion of liberation preached by the missionaries.

Throughout the history of missionary activities in Darjeeling Hills the response from the Lepcha community has been quite positive and remarkable. Studies have shown that there has been substantial transformation among the Lepchas subsequent to their conversion to Christianity. The most conspicuous change in the community seems to be modernization, which unfortunately has purged the community of several age old practices, linguistic resources, religious customs and traditions. Interestingly, the present generation is re-evaluating these community resources in an attempt to establish its indigenous, community identity.

2. Historical Discourse on Missionary Mediation

There are two dominant views regarding the role played by Christian missionaries. The approach taken here is to place these two widely held arguments in the light of the missionary mediation among the Lepchas of Darjeeling Hills.

Some scholars have argued that missionaries were able to carry out their work in India because of colonial monetarism, and evangelicals' political activism. The oppressive political, military and cultural measures which were used by the colonial administrators and expansionists were, on the one hand, largely responsible for bringing the country under the control of the Europeans and facilitated and aided mission societies in their work among the people of India, on the other. The refusal by European historians to acknowledge the explicit connection between the missionary and the colonialist has also shielded missionary work and mission literatures from being criticized.¹ Y. K. Vashum quoting S.P. Sinha points out that "...Christian missionaries are there not for advocating a faith but for keeping imperialism alive". This seems to represent the strongest criticism labeled against the missionaries. There are others who argue that missionary intentions might have been good but they directly or indirectly contributed towards the colonial establishment.²

Studies in missionary history have identified varying focuses of missionary evangelism in the past. While the 18th century was characterized by evangelicalism and European patriotism, the 20th century western mission historians often ignore the mission's political aspect which conformed to that of the colonizer.³ In the latter line of argument are certain educated high caste scholars who see a political design in the works of the missionaries: distribution

of material help to the needy by them was not only an incentive for conversion, but also a means for extending western "political control over India."⁴ Besides, they tend to condemn the missionary faith as a faith of the downtrodden.

Further, they argue that the recorded mission history is incomplete and that it has to be re-read and re-written from a postcolonial perspective. The mission history so far has been written from the colonizer's perspective and it is often argued that de-Europeanizing or "de-hegemonizing" of the mission history will enable historians to retell the history differently and provide a true representation of the people, their culture and the history of a colonized India.⁵

There are other scholars who argue that missionaries had their own goals and objectives which were different from those of the British administrators. It is true that some missionaries took full advantage of British administration under whose patronage they carried forward their gospel, but it is also true that they were the earliest agency of welfare particularly in the tribal areas.⁶ Christianity brought in a new way of life among the tribes. The material progress and literacy achievement among the tribes and low caste converts thanks to missionary mediation cannot be ignored. It may be noted that the missionaries, on one hand, propagated Christianity and laid down, on the other, an extensive network of social services such as education and health care. There were attempts at raising the morals of the converts: they were to abstain from intoxicants, end slavery and maintain personal hygiene.

If these were the salutary effects of Christianity, the snapping of the converts' link to their traditional knowledge and religion is often characterized as their fall towards poverty.⁷ But all scholars do not perceive the process in the same vein. According to D. R. Syiemlieh, missionary mediation did change only the "peripheral aspects" of most of the tribals without changing the core of tribal culture, and that conversion tended to bring in divisions among the tribes "on the basis of religion"⁸ but their cultural roots remained intact.

Be that as it may, the context in which Christianity penetrated among the Lepchas was unique. It is generally observed that tribes try to ape many elements of religion and culture of their neighboring communities primarily with the intention of claiming equal status with the latter.⁹ However, in the case of the Lepchas of Darjeeling Hills, it did not happen, as they were largely isolated and were often branded as 'lotus eaters'. Besides, the Lepchas like many other tribes in India, did not have interaction with the proximate non-tribal caste

Hindus or other tribal groups in the region. This kept them apart, and their traditions unsoiled and untouched. But this does not mean that the Lepchas were a static lot--they were a changing society: they were being drawn into the vortex of change which was symbolized by the dominant culture of the missionaries as visualized by some as a "dominant mode of transformation of tribal societies."¹⁰ As such the missionaries with a motive to bring about moral and material progress worked among the Lepchas. They reached out to them through various means and the Lepchas, in turn, embraced the path which ultimately transformed their material culture.

3. From Independence to Marginalisation: Lepchas in Modern Period

Lepchas are the autochthones of Sikkim and Darjeeling Hills. Many scholars believe that the Lepchas were animists like other tribes, but there are opinions that their ancient religion was Boongthingism and Munism. They believed in a Creator God, Itdeburum or Rum.¹¹ Nature worship was also a part of their religious practice and they regarded Mother Kongchen (Mt. Kanchenjunga) as their Guardian deity. With the passage of time, people from other places migrated to Sikkim and came into contact with the Lepchas. In the 13th century Khye - Bhumsa, the son of a noble family of Tibet, came into contact with the Lepchas and entered into a treaty--Treaty of Brotherhood, which opened the entry of Phuntsog Namgyal into Sikkim in 1642 as its first king. After the birth of Namgyal dynasty in Sikkim, the Lepchas were forced to follow Tibetan Lamaism. This process of conversion into Tibetan Lamaism was hastened by the entry of "Red Hat" (Nying ma pas) sect Lamas who were expelled from Tibet by the Yellow Hat sect lamas in early 17th century.¹²

After the Tibetan arrogated the throne, the Buddhists of Tibet began to migrate to Sikkim and founded lamaseries there.¹³ It is said that the Tibetan lamas collected all the manuscripts, books, historical records, written literature on mythology, legends, laws, etc., of the Lepchas and burnt them.¹⁴ With the advent of the dominant Tibetans, the Lepchas had to flee from their ancestral home.¹⁵ The oppression of the Chogyals and Kazis not only marginalized them, but also depleted their morale. The assassination of Lepcha Minister Bolek enhanced their sense of insecurity. During the long rule of Namgyal dynasty, which lasted from 1642 to 1973, the Lepchas were virtually enslaved by the landlords appointed by the king. There was continuous onslaught on

their religion, traditions, language, dress and culture. They were even ripped off from their landholdings. As such their identity was at stake, a situation which was predicted way back in the 17th century.

Three major political interventions made a deep impact on Lepcha independence: the Bhutanese invasion of Sikkim in 1700, Bolek's assassination in 1826, and the granting of Darjeeling to the British in 1835. These events decimated Lepcha socio-political identity and pushed them towards inaccessible remote hill areas of Sikkim, Darjeeling and Kalimpong. The situation was further aggravated because of Bhutanese invasion of Kalimpong and the contiguous regions. Complicating the problems the British entered into Kalimpong by virtue of the Treaty of Sinchula in Nov 1865. The Lepchas were in majority in Kalimpong when the British wielded the administration there.

The British's imperialist intervention among the people there tended to divide the Lepcha into two social categories: those 'useful' for British interests and those 'worthless'. The Lepchas fell under the latter category to face a situation of neglect and denial and consequent marginalization. On 1st February, 1835¹⁶ General Lloyd succeeded in obtaining from the Maharaja of Sikkim, the grant of Darjeeling to the British. For economic reasons the British then encouraged en masse migration of outsiders into the area. As a result the pristine Mayel country of the Rong or the Lepchas was soon occupied by "a vast majority of people of mixed ethnic origin."¹⁷ Demographic changes of great consequence were accentuated by the events that followed. In 1839, Campbell was transferred to Darjeeling and he converted it into a sanatorium.¹⁸ Around this period many British nationals began to settle down in Darjeeling which led to the growth of employment opportunities for the natives. This in turn increased the population of the area. By 1852 there were 70 European houses in Darjeeling town.¹⁹ By 1856, this area witnessed the growth of tea industry, which demanded labourers from outside. All these events were instrumental in marginalizing the Lepchas vis a vis the peoples of other ethnic origin.

The condition of the Lepchas in Kalimpong deteriorated because of the C. A. Bell's settlement of 1901-1903. A close look at Bell's Report reveals the British colonial agenda at the cost of the native Lepchas.²⁰ The British treated the Lepchas as an expendable group which could be pushed to the interiors. For the British the requirement was of a law abiding mass, which could be moulded for the development of the region. The other groups or the later

migrants fulfilled these requirements well, and they were made Raiyats. There were no restrictions on these Raiyats to purchase lands from the Lepchas.²¹ The British administration never considered the Lepchas resourceful in raising the coffers of the state. Hence, the British excluded them from the mainstream of society.

This exclusion forced the Lepchas to take refuge in remote hill areas, which were at times inaccessible. Subsequently, the Lepcha language, the Lingua franca of Darjeeling and Kalimpong was gradually replaced by "Hindustani and Tibetan...languages".²² This was another shrewd move of the British to marginalize the Lepchas.

4. Missionary Intervention and Lepcha Response

Man's history is made and unmade by historical chances. It was such a chance that the missionaries began to work among the Lepchas at a time when their socio-political and economic condition was pathetically low due to the reasons mentioned above. Aside the socio-economic and political degradation, what the missionaries prized was the character of the Lepchas. Though the Lepchas were lazy, indolent and timid and not a good taxpayers for the British Government, yet they were the 'only hope and Good Samaritans' for the missionaries. They began to preach the gospel in the local language and idiom which were understood by the Lepcha community. One of the byproducts of the mission intervention was sustenance of the Lepcha language, which, otherwise was dying.

There were other factors which helped Christianity acceptable to the Lepchas. Unlike some other tribes of India where the institution of caste was gradually taking hold of tribal social structure,²³ the Lepchas enjoyed a classless society with no established autonomy like the Bhutias and no caste system like the Hindus.²⁴ It is interesting to note that many of the Lepcha social customs were not against the customs of Christians elsewhere. In Lepcha society the elders were infallible and they held a position of unchallenged obedience. They realized that the ideal of respect for elders was a mandatory Christian ethical practice. Similarly, the Lepchas did not consider Christianity as a strange religion, as their myths, folk tales and oral literature about the concept of creation resembled biblical stories. Many of their legends were markedly similar to the events narrated in the Old Testament: they had, for example, their Adam and

Eve (Fudong thing and Nazongnyu, as Lepcha progenitors); they too were banished from their mountain home; they too had a tower of Babel (Tallom Partam, that is, the tower erected by the Lepchas in Daromden, Sikkim); and they had their own version of the great biblical deluge (Tendong chyu or the Lepcha myth of great deluge in Sikkim).

The missionaries from their part attempted to accommodate local customs and traditions. For instance, the Presbyterian missionaries in Kalimpong ordained an elder Lepcha convert and inducted many other elders as leaders, pastors or patriarchs of the local community. It is construed that such steps were stronger reasons for the positive response of the Lepchas to the gospel.²⁵ They realized that there was a space provided for them to maintain certain ancient norms that were close to their heart. David R. Syiemlieh argues that the Christian missionaries did not unduly interfere in the clan structure of the tribes, partly because it was so confusing to their minds, and partly because to have meddled with it would have been catastrophic.²⁶ It was therefore wise on the part of the missionaries not to have interfered in the deeply rooted clan structure of the Lepcha society.

Overall, the Christian intervention among the Lepchas helped retrieve the lost identity and language of the Lepchas within the framework of Christianity: they were a diminishing tribe and were in danger of losing their identity and language.²⁷ Perhaps the most substantive work of the missionaries was championing education and giving them vocational training and employment.

The other important reason for the Lepchas' favorable response to the gospel was their quest for liberation--from the bondage of spirit worship in terms of offering sacrifices of animals and food grains,²⁸ which made them economically very poor. On the whole, the Lepchas seem to have been the most hopeful people for the missionaries in the hills. The large number of conversions among the Lepchas might have been because the openness of the Lepcha society, having not bound by caste segmentations or class divisions within the community. Despite certain initial reservations in the beginning, the Lepcha converts did not face any kind of threat, humiliation or social boycott from their family or society as a whole.

5. Missionary Activities in Darjeeling

In this section I attempt to give an overview of the activities of the missionaries who belonged to different denominational Churches.

5.1. Start Mission

In Darjeeling Hills the missionary activities started in 1841 with Start Mission. The Start mission, named after its head, Rev. William Start, along with Niebel, engaged in various evangelical works, the most significant one of which was translation of the gospels into the Lepcha language and publishing them. Printed Christian tracts in Nepali and Lepcha language were distributed thereafter in and around Darjeeling. It may be noted that the Lepchas had received the gospel in print, years before the coming of Start Mission, in the beginning of the 19th century, following the conversion of some Lepchas in 1818. According to Cindy Perry, the accounts on these conversions do not indicate any organized effort of any established mission.

Deeply impressed by the native people (Lepchas, Bhutias and Nepalis),²⁹ Start decided to pitch his tent at Takvar, near Darjeeling. Subsequently, a few books of the Bible were translated and published in Lepcha and Nepali Languages. As per the records, the first printing and publication in Lepcha language was started by these missionaries. The earliest publication was a lithographed edition of *St. Mathew's Gospel* in 1845. The first book to be printed in Lepcha language using moving types, probably the oldest Lepcha printed book, to have survived to the present day, is *The book of Genesis and part of Exodus in Lepcha*, Baptist Mission Press, Calcutta, 1849, translated by Niebel. This book marks the beginning of an era in Lepcha book production. In the same year (1849), Niebel with the help of W. Start, translated and published a second gospel namely *St. John's Gospel*, and in the same year they printed a revised edition of *St. Mathew*.³⁰

A school was also started at Takvar especially for the Lepchas. Thus preaching, printing, publications of the gospels, and educating the Lepchas, started with the coming of the Start missionaries in the hills of Darjeeling. It can be said they were the pioneers of the Christian mission in Darjeeling Hills. When Start retired to England in 1852, Neibel remained alone carrying forward the work until his death in 1865.³¹ This was the end of the first mission among the Lepchas in Darjeeling.

5.2 Catholic Mission

After Start Mission, Catholic missionaries (Loreto nuns) set their foot in Darjeeling in 1846, with a view to opening a school for girls.³² This was achieved in May 1847, when the nuns opened a convent, which was the first and only educational establishment for girls in Darjeeling till 1864, when St. Paul School was founded.³³ The work of the Catholic Mission in the field of education especially among the Lepchas has been commendable. Many of the conversions among the Lepchas seem to have been influenced by the educating missionaries.

5.3 Scottish Mission

Thirty years after (1870) the coming of Start Mission, William Macfarlane of the Church of Scotland Mission came to Darjeeling and started working among the Lepchas and the Nepalis.³⁴ Macfarlane was requested by his Church authorities to start a mission among the aboriginal and non-caste race as the existing orphanage or mission in Gya[Gaya] was not fruitful.³⁵ Reaching Lebong near Darjeeling in 1870, he studied the place and opted to work among the Lepchas in Kalimpong, which had many Lepcha villages.³⁶

He established many schools in which the Lepcha, Bhutia and Nepali students got opportunities to study for the first time. Conversion also began with education. In a short time, many were converted to Christianity at places like Mangwa, Kalimpong, Sittong, Sunathong, Peming, Chibo, etc. With the establishment of churches in these areas, Sunday school and church service, preaching was accelerated.³⁷ Local leaders and catechists imparted education. In 1873 the mission started two formal schools to train Lepcha and Nepali teachers for the district schools. By this time he established 17 schools with 500 boys on the roll.³⁸

Macfarlane gave importance to education to begin with. This is substantiated by Dich B. Dewan who said, 'Rev. W. Macfarlane, due to whose assiduous labour of disseminating the holy gospel and western knowledge among the sleepy hill people of Darjeeling, made them wake up from their deep slumber, was the pioneer missionary to devise a broad scheme of education for this hill region.³⁹ For the missionaries, ministry through education became the most effective means of evangelizing people.⁴⁰ Schools, printing presses

and evangelical work went together. The missionaries targeted mostly non-caste aborigines. As such, Macfarlane's aim in Darjeeling district was mainly the Lepchas.⁴¹

An analysis of the ethnicity of the converts over the subsequent 10 years reveals this trend: individual conversions of Nepalis in Darjeeling area and kin group conversions of Lepchas in Kalimpong area.⁴² Obviously the depth of influence of Christianity on the Lepchas was more.

Macfarlane was so impressed with the Lepchas that one of his reports contains these significant words: "On the whole the Lepchas seem to be the most hopeful people for us in the hills; and Kalimpong seems to be the best centre from which to operate upon them in the scattered localities in which they are settled on both sides of the Teesta."⁴³ Making use of the local resources, he employed three of them, among whom were two Lepchas, as catechists in Kalimpong to assist him. Two illustrious examples were a certain Namthak Rongong and Dyongshi Sada who accepted Christ in 1878, and eventually became pastors in Darjeeling and Sitong, respectively.⁴⁴

Development of the Christian community went hand in hand with institutional development: churches, schools, training centres, etc. The Turnbull High School and the Nepali Girls High School in Darjeeling, the Scottish Universities Mission Institute (SUMI), Girls High School, Industrial Training Center, and the Tibetan Mission Center, in Kalimpong are some of the best specimens.⁴⁵ All these mission activities also generated employment among the people and helped them improve the level of their livelihood. Obviously, conversion enhanced because of these humanitarian activities.

5.4 Young Guild Mission

After the demise (1886) of William Macfarlane, Sutherland continued his work in Kalimpong. He was later (1889) assisted by Mr. and Mrs. Graham of Young Guild Mission.⁴⁶ Graham started a home (Dr. Graham's Home) in Kalimpong and his wife started an industrial centre for women.⁴⁷ Other evangelical works were setting up schools, medical training centers, hospitals, orphanage, craft and cottage industries, etc. To cure diseases like dysentery, tuberculosis, hepatitis, and malaria, which were rampant there they founded Charters Hospital in 1893 assisted by a women's guild. Promising hill lads

were selected and sent to higher learning centres to qualify as doctors. Ongden Lepcha was one of the first doctors in Kalimpong from the Lepcha community.

Mrs. Graham was always deeply concerned about the Lepcha and Nepalese women folk. She decided to start a cottage industry where Lepcha, Nepali and Bhutia women learnt and gained expertise in knitting, embroidery and crochet work, which helped them make a little more money to help the family. They also started a silk industry in Kalimpong in 1890.⁴⁸ By 1905, a craft institute for men was started and they were encouraged in woodcarving and silver work. With a view to teaching the hill people, a carving and carpentry school was opened in 1906. It is found that a significant number of Lepchas, both men and women, were engaged in such activities, which gave them a new profession and economic stability.

As a matter of fact the churches in these areas are working with the same zeal and spirit till date. The only truly social welfare agency operating in the area is the church.⁴⁹ In many ways the missionaries served people in the hills, but there are certain grey areas because of which Christian communities have criticized even people like Graham: that the converts were confined to employment in Christian schools and hospitals, which were somehow related to evangelization, that they were discouraged from going into business, etc. To a certain extent, this was true. Though the Christians became more literate, they remained poorer, and tended to carry less clout in local administration and politics, in comparison with the trading communities from the plains which monopolized the hill trade.⁵⁰

The missionaries were fond of the Lepchas as they were the more docile, submissive and open to the gospel. Graham had a close rapport with them and was protective towards them. But it is surprising that he did try to prevent them from joining military service. Nor would he allow them to join government services. This was a peculiar behavior towards his favorite tribe. Graham's biographer J. R. Minto (1995) states, "perhaps he wanted the tribe, he loved so much to remain simple, plain and artless." This statement however ignores Graham's actual intention. By not allowing Lepchas to join the government services, Graham fulfilled his mission by anointing the educated Lepchas as preachers and catechists to spread the gospel among their own people. He showed warm feelings for the Lepchas because of the fact that Lepchas formed 80% of Christian community in the district. The Lepchas provided the active

Christian leadership in the church. Men like Namthark Lepcha, C. T. Sitling, Dyongshi Sada, Rup Singh Lepcha 'Pandit', Tshering Simik, P. S. Targain and numerous others worked as Christian leaders. The works carried out by these local missionaries cannot be ignored. They showed great personal sacrifice for building mission centers and working among the tribes till 1942. Sources reveal that in 1970, out of 27 pastors in the Eastern Himalayan Church, 21 were Lepchas. Even in today's context in the whole region of Darjeeling, Kalimpong and Sikkim more than 50% of the church leaders are Lepchas.⁵¹

6. Missionary Mediation and Social Transformation of the Lepchas

Social Transformation is a process of social change. In this process there are different variables, which come into play. Among these, education and religion are the widely accepted variables. Whether religious conversion, rationality and skills acquired through modern education thanks to the missionaries in the hills of Darjeeling had a role to play in the social transformation of the Lepchas is a question to be attended to. As such some of the major changes observed are discussed in the following headings.

6.1 Change in Religious Life

Before adopting Buddhism and Christianity the animist Lepchas used to perform various rituals. They used to worship evil spirits, demons, etc., and used to do animal sacrifices performed by Boongthing and Mun. They were nature worshippers and worshipped Mount Kanchendzonga, Tendong hill, rivers, lakes and trees of Sikkim. The word 'Rong-Dung-Geet' signifies that the Lepcha tribe was brought up in their own culture from their origin.

With the advent of missionaries and their gospel, the Lepchas in the Darjeeling hills responded to Christianity through which their notion of God and their concept of religion and faith changed, and because of which their earlier social customs and religious ceremonies went into the limbo. The Buddhist Lepchas followed Lamaism along with their primitive beliefs. Rituals and rites are performed by both the lamas and the Lepcha priests (Boongthing and Mun). But the Lepchas who have accepted Christianity as their religion do not practice Boongthingism and Munism. Their mode of worship, festivals, adopted norms and institutional practices, and so on have changed. Christian ways of worship and prayers have taken hold of their religious mores.

Their social interaction and behavior have also changed. The church has become their authority and is the sole means of social communication. In this way, their networks with tradition and social group outside the Church have almost vanished. Thus, a new kind of religious and social norm has come to the fore. The change is so profound that even their names bear a Christian stamp.

6.2 Socio-cultural Changes

6.2.1 Dress-code

The dress code of the Lepcha men and women has vanished. The non-Christian Lepchas wear their traditional dresses at least in social and religious function whereas the converts do not even possess them. The Lepcha women and girls today wear sari, pants or salwar instead of their traditional dress called Dum-hum or Paki, and the 'Lyak,' and do not wear their traditional jewellery. Likewise men's traditional dress code has been replaced by pants and shirt. This is because of their affiliation with the church, the vehicle of modernization, which seems to be more important than their ethnic identity. The only tradition which they follow today is the clan exogamy while choosing marriage partner.

6.2.2 Marriage Customs and Ceremony

The Lepcha converts still follow clan structure while choosing the bride/groom. The Lepchas were not averse to polygamy; but Christianity gave them moral lessons based on biblical disciplines. In contrast to traditional Lepcha marriage ceremony, which lasts for months of celebration with locally made beer, songs and dances and which involves huge expense, the Christian marriage ceremony, conducted in the church seems popular and preferred by the Lepcha converts of Darjeeling. This is because of the simplicity and frugality of the process involved.

6.2.3 New trends in Art and food culture

The spread of modern education has significantly altered the ways of the youth. The Lepcha boys earlier used to follow only the chores of ancestors like hunting and fishing. But in the light of the missionary activities they learnt

many things like woodcarving, art and craft etc. The taking of 'Che' (fermented rice beer) and 'Aarok' (distilled wine) was quite common not only with the Lepcha men, but also women and children. But such practices are detested in Christian circles and churches. Therefore, the converts keep themselves away from such habits. Further, the traditional food of the Lepchas i.e., the bread made from buck wheat, millet, maize, yam, and stinging nettle are often ignored. In sum, their contact with the missionaries has helped them to shed off some of their bad habits, but at the same time the contact has eroded their traditional identity. Hence some argue that Christian missionaries have brought many positive changes among the converts such as literacy, better hygienic conditions and such manners and behavior that are considered more refined.⁵² But such argument is lopsided in the sense that it ignores the loss of their traditional mores.

6.2.4 Displacement of Indigenous Medicines

In the process of preaching the gospels and converting the Lepchas, missionaries used various means. Along with education and industries, activities like medical practices and hospital services were also used as influences. It has been often argued that European medicines and hospitals were instrumental in saving lives and improving the living qualities of the people. What is never acknowledged is the displacement of traditional indigenous medicines and medical practitioners and the cultural role they played.⁵³ According to Hughes Charles (1968) ethno-medicine deals with those beliefs and practices relating to health and diseases, which are products of indigenous cultural development. As such the Lepchas of this region had acquired vast knowledge about the various use of wild flora (ethno-medicine) and fauna (for healing and medicine), which are dying out very fast. As these people have long and frequent contact with forest and wild life, this indigenous knowledge are automatically passed over to children from their elders. Lepcha Boongthing and Mun know of particular plants having different medicinal values, that is not a common knowledge. But unfortunately the tradition no more exists. As the bulk of the Lepcha population (almost 70%) in Darjeeling hills have converted to Christianity, Boongthing and Mun culture is dying out very fast. The concept of medicine or medical advancement and development along with technological development that was initiated by the missionaries in the hills of Darjeeling has greatly influenced the traditional indigenous medicinal practices among

the Lepchas. It is very hard to find youths, resolved to shoulder this traditional knowledge from the Boongthing or Mun, who are masters of ethno-medicine.

Healing is an important part of the Lepcha religion. The Boongthing enters into a trance while chanting the songs of the spirit and then he delves into the recesses of the causes behind the diseases which he is expected to cure. Using a gamut of accessories like parts of animals and human body, sticks, nettle plants and stones he alleviates the suffering of the sick persons. But these practices have died because of their association with the missionaries, who consider such practices as a mark of superstition. This is an unfortunate twirl in the cultural fabric of the Lepchas.

6.2.5 Maintenance and Shift in Language Use

Religious affiliation is one of the prime factors that bring linguistic variation and shift. Every speech community may be assumed to leave special characteristics of language structure and language use, which are appropriate for religious purposes in religious settings or on religious occasions. For example the speech variety or lexical choices made by Lepchas Boongthing or Mun (Lepcha Priests/Priestess) while performing religious ceremonies and rites are different from ordinary language. But because of the lack of mass practices of traditional religious rituals, such linguistic uses are very rare these days. It is believed that whenever the use of a language or language variety is spreading it may be assumed that religious beliefs and practices will in some way affect the rate and extent of the spread.⁵⁴

In Darjeeling Hills, Buddhism has helped to a great extent towards the spread of Tibetan and Bhutia language and Hinduism and Christianity increased the boundary of Nepali language. As a matter of fact, some Lepchas have switched over to Bhutia language and many have acquired it as a subsidiary language. With the influence of Christianity the Lepcha converts have totally lost their language. In the beginning, missionaries like Start and Niebel, with a view to reaching the gospel, tried to develop Lepcha language and printed and published many Lepcha texts, however because of the influence of Nepali as dominant language of the region, Lepcha language is dying very fast. Since the congregation consists of people from different linguistic backgrounds Christian religious services are conducted in Nepali language, which was/is the lingua-franca of the region. Though Bible is translated into the Lepcha

language, the readily available religious scripture and texts are either in Nepali or in English. Older converts or the older generations, unlike the younger generation, were/are more inclined towards the use of Lepcha language. Further, the declining use of the mother tongue among the Lepcha converts is because of population intermixture. Racial and linguistic affiliation hardly matter or are hardly taken into consideration during the time of marriage among the converts. The only criterion she or he has to fulfill is to be a member of a church or denomination. This is the reason why a large number of inter-community marriages is found among the Christian Lepchas, which ultimately hamper the use of the mother tongue.

6.3 Changes in Society, Structure and Community

6.3.1 Emergence of the Middle Class

One of the significant transformations in Lepcha society is the shift in profession. The Lepcha society in Darjeeling Hills and Sikkim was divided into two distinct classes or strata. There were a few aristocrats who were associated with the palace in Sikkim as ministers, and others holding high posts as chieftains, Kazis, Jon-phens, Thekadars, Mondals and landlords in different places. They were directly or indirectly associated with the administration of the state whereas, the bulk of the Lepcha population was confined to remote terrains and was poor. They used to practice jhum and shifting cultivation and for months they depended on forest produce.

As mentioned above, with the advent of missionaries and various other activities like modern education, medical or hospital services, craft industries and other such skills brought about a new revolution in the Lepcha society. The bulk of these economically backward Lepcha population living in inaccessible areas responded to the missionaries and the gospel, which in turn provided them the opportunity to acquire modern education and other facilities rendered by the missionaries. As a result, they became educated, rational, and skilled. It is because of this shift in profession that they slowly shifted from the profession of cultivators and animal husbandry. Besides, many of them were trained as religious leaders and catechists. As they were submissive, docile and trustworthy by nature, the missionaries held them near to their hearts and provided them the maximum opportunities. Therefore, in early or mid 19th century, a large number of educated Lepcha converts changed their professions

that marked the emergence of a middle class among the Lepchas of Darjeeling hills. During this time all the primary schools, medical dispensaries and hospitals in hills of Darjeeling were run by the missionaries. In Darjeeling, a majority of the early primary school teachers and church pastors were from the Lepcha community.

6.3.2 Attitude towards Women

Lepcha is a primitive but permissive society. In traditional Lepcha society a sense of equal partnership among men and women prevails. However with the dynamics of social change women were restricted within their own locality. Also fathers/men were regarded as the sole authority for decision making, regardless of familiar or outside affairs. Education for the girl child was unheard of. But the missionary activities brought about significant change in this attitude. With the opening up of schools, convents, weaving, lace making and craft institutes, Lepcha women in the area were liberated from the age-old compulsion of being in domestic environment. Missionaries openly involved and advocated for women education. Besides, these, skill development training for women provided employment and income. This way they could help their male counterparts to ease their burden to earn and look after their families. Hence, the Lepcha men became more accommodative and co-operative towards the earning women who were assets to the family.

Further, Christian beliefs and moorings provided equal rights to women. They became more open and rational. Women were also provided with religious leadership training and were equally allowed to go for preaching the gospel in far off places. Therefore, an overall change in attitude towards women was perceived.

6.3.3 Rejection of Traditional Authority

Despite being a primitive society the Lepchas were ruled by a leader or a chieftain. The chieftain or the Mondal or in certain cases even the Boongthing used to enjoy the authoritative power. The elders in the family also enjoyed the power to make decisions. However after their conversion the Lepchas share equal right under the authority of the church.

6.3.4 Crisis of Community Identity

Thanzanva (2001) says that in a rapidly changing context, the tribal people have experienced an acute sense of identity crisis. There are two recognizable phases in this crisis: first, the impact of British administration and with it the conversion to Christianity, and secondly, the consequent social upheavals. The spread of British administration and conversion to the Christian faith led the tribal people to a new consciousness of their identity. That consciousness was the beginning of their search for identity.⁵⁵ As has been mentioned earlier, with conversion to Buddhism and Christianity, a great discontinuity in socio-cultural traditions of the Lepchas occurred. On one hand, the new ideas acquired from modern education and development partially displaced the age-old traditions, practices, rituals and rites, and on the other hand, these brought a new consciousness about their identity. It is said that crisis of identity happens whenever there is a break down of an old identity which is unable to cope with the changing situation. This is a common problem of minority groups whose identities are threatened either in the interaction with larger dominant groups or in the modernization process.⁵⁶ It is found that the young generation Lepchas find no value in the old Lepcha system. But the emergence of ethnic consciousness and politics has made the Lepchas more conscious. So far as socio-political rights are concerned, the Lepcha society is in the process of an ethnic construct, irrespective of its different religious affiliation. It is worth mentioning here that the intention of the missionaries was to convert the Lepchas and to make them progressive. If the conversion did make a part of Lepcha society progressive, it was done selectively to preserve their traditional thinking. As such, presently the Lepcha converts have started understanding the significance of their cultural identity, which they intend to preserve with the help of the left over traditional thinking.

7. Conclusion

The Lepcha society today is at the threshold of tradition and modernity. It is evident that the Christian missionaries played a significant role in bringing about much transformation in the Lepcha society in Darjeeling Hills. The Lepchas responded to the missionaries and the gospel right from the beginning. It is evident that they lacked organized religion and strong religious mooring, which made the task of missionaries easier while working with them. In this regard the accommodative nature of Lepcha society also helped the

missionaries. At the same time, even after religious conversion, some converts sought to protect their traditional cultural beliefs. It is sometimes said that the conversion of tribal people to Christianity does not lead to the destruction of tribal religions but rather to its renewal. The Christian missionaries also took special care to enable them to negotiate with modernity without interfering with the traditional cultural activities and ways of life.

It is found that the Lepcha converts to Christianity progressed materially compared to the Lepchas following other faiths. Moreover the Lepchas took full advantage of the various progressive activities carried out by the Christian missionaries, which made them more progressive and modern. Modernism is a social process effected through mission education which gave new insights and social enhancement. Many traditions were ignored while deeply rooted values like clan culture and egalitarian structure still rule the society. In Lepcha society today, some kind of identity quest can be viewed. The younger generation is in the process of constructing a new new community identity, integrating both pre-conversion and post-conversion ones.

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