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The Changing Context of the Lepcha Tribal Marriage


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Marriage is social as well as legal institution in all the societies. "Historically, the reasons for, function of, and frequency of marriage has varied by race or ethnicity, class, gender, and the social and economic structures of society. Regardless of such differences, the institution of marriage is viewed by social scientist as one of the most fundamental elements in the maintenance and reproduction of society itself".⁴⁵ There are many theories on marriage like *Social Exchange theories*, *Carrier-entry theory*, *Psychodynamic theories*, *Alliance theory* etc. Some researchers find the system of patriarchy as the historical roots of marriage where they view wives as the property of their husbands. For example, the tradition of wedding rings historically served to solidify a woman's position as the property of her husband.⁴⁶ Even we can peep into the practice of paying dowry in our country. Here, women have been seen as property to be transferred from their parents to their husbands.

The Lepchas, are the 'real autochthones of Sikkim and Darjeeling Himalayas.'⁴⁷ They call themselves Rongpa⁴⁸ or Raongkup or Rumkup⁴⁹ and are believed to have originated from the mongoloid stock having linguistic affiliation to Tibeto-Burman family. They are one of the ancient tribes recorded in Sikkim as Alice Kandell states, 'Little is known of the history of Sikkim before 700 A.D, when the Lepchas first recorded living in the Mayal Lyang Valley'.⁵⁰ As such, the ancient history of Sikkim is mainly based on Lepcha tradition.⁵¹ O'Malley says the Lepchas are 'the primitive tribe of this region who originally practiced nomadic cultivation'.⁵² They are one of the scheduled tribes of India.

Tribal Marriage: The tribals consider marriage as a contract.⁵³ Due weight is given to the views of both the boy and the girl in the selection of a partner. L.P Vidyathiand and Binay Kumar Rai have quoted Majumdar and Madan, 1956:86, "The tribal marriage is generally regarded as a civil contract and not a religious sacrament and, therefore, religious solemnization does not take place." This may be true with some tribes but this is totally contrasting with the Lepcha tribe.⁵⁴

Marriage Ceremony of the Lepcha: The ancient marriage ceremony of the Lepchas were performed by the *Boongthing*, the Lepcha priest. The bride and the bridegroom are told to be seated on a high pedestal which represents two mountain peaks of the Himalayas. The Boongthing performs the marriage rituals by chanting religious prayers. He holds a wooden cup in his right hand which is filled with rice and millet beer- *Chee* and a small quantity of butter.⁵⁵ *Chee* in Lepcha is a fermented drink. The Boongthing blesses the couple and sprinkles millet chee on them. The bride and bridegroom are given a cup from which they sip *chee* thrice. The relatives of the bridegroom then follow the sipping of the same *chee* thrice. After completion of the ritual of drinking, the wooden cup is returned to the Boongthing. The Boongthing hands over the cup to the bridegroom containing some butter. The bridegroom takes the butter in his finger and puts some in the parting of the bride's hair and also on the bangles on her wrists. This ritual marks the end of the marriage ceremony and the relatives now hand over gifts to the couple. Marked changes have taken place due to which the traditional marriage ritual is no more followed.⁵⁶ Majority of the Lepchas are either Buddhist or Christian now. Instead of Boongting, the lamas or Pastor or Fathers, conduct the wedding ceremony according to their religious order. The use of *chee* is somewhat absent in these ceremonies now especially in the protestant Christian weddings. A couple who has

⁴⁵ William A. Darity JR (editor in chief), *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* 2nd edition, vol.4, Marriage by Kim M. Lloyd and Rosemary Yeilding, GALE, cengage Learning, 2008), p.612

⁴⁶ Ibid. p.614

⁴⁷ West Bengal District Gazeetter, 1980, Darjeeling, p.3.

⁴⁸ H.H. Rishley, *The Gazetteer of Sikkim*, Delhi, L.P. Publications, 1894, 2001(reprint) p.1.

⁴⁹ K.P. Tamsang, *The Lepcha English Encyclopaedic Dictionary*, Kalimpong, Mani Printing Press, 2009, 2nd edition, p.652.

⁵⁰ Alice S. Kandell, Sikkim, *The Hidden Kingdom*, New York, Garden City, Double day, 1971, p.36.

⁵¹ Percy Brown, *Tours in Sikkim and the Darjeeling District*, ed. With additions by Joan townend, 4th ed. Calcutta, w. Newman, 1944, p.4.

⁵² LSSO' Malley, *Bengal, Bihar, Orissa and Sikkim*, New Delhi, Ess Ess Publication, 1979, p.186.

⁵³ L.P. Vidyathiand and Binay Kumar Rai, *The Tribal Culture of India*, Concept Publishing Company, 2nd edition, New Delhi, 1985, p.279.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ J R Subba, *History, Culture and Customs of Sikkim*, New Delhi: Gyan Publishing House, 2008 p.264.

⁵⁶ J R Subba, Op.cit., 2007, pp. 264-265.

only daughters may bring the son-in-law to stay with them. He is treated as a son and is called '*Kamok Myok*'. Their marriage is monogamous. In case of an infertile wife the husband is allowed to remarry with the consent of the wife. Interestingly Lepchas claim to have a system called *Angnop*. In this system, in case of death of the man's wife, the family of the deceased is obliged to offer a younger unmarried daughter in marriage to the man. Similarly, in case of death of the husband, the family of the deceased is expected to offer an unmarried younger brother to the widow. The bride in the earlier case and the groom in the latter case are called *Angnop*. However, such practices are no more found and are considered as outdated. During marriage Lepchas claim that as per ritual the strength, steadiness and peace in relationship of the couple are compared with those of Teesta and Rangeet rivers and mountains and hills.

Clans play an important part in terms of marriage. The Lepcha areas are divided into a number of patrilineal clans known as *Ptso*, which are believed to have originated from the supernatural and mythological ancestry. At present, the main functions of the clans are to regulate the marriage and prevent the incest by exogamy. Originally, "the Lepcha had their Tassos, the village headmen, who were chosen by all the village male elders for a couple of years."⁵⁷

About the clan of the Lepchas, different scholars have given different numbers. "There are 36 such different clans mentioned in the list of the Maharaja. Each family has been called by the name of the place where they lived... Further, each clan of Lepcha again ascribes its own origin."⁵⁸ H.H.Risley has mentioned 39 different clans of the Lepchas in Sikkim.⁵⁹ In reality, there appears 12 different clans among Lepchas which include- Sengdeng-mo, Lingsim-mo, Hee- mo, Karthok-mo and the descendants of Thekong Salung along with those clans named after the places they inhabit. About the clan structure of the Lepchas Morris (1938) writes, "The Lepcha tribe is composed of a number of clans, called pu-tso. No one can say how many clans there are, for this grouping seems to be a purely local one. In the Kalimpong district only the names of over forty different clans were recorded, but in Lintem [area of Sikkim] there were but fourteen, all of them different from those I have already collected."⁶⁰

It is found that each clan name invariably ends in 'moo'. In Lepcha language word 'Moo' means, 'dwellers of' and it is also seen that each of these clan names has an equivalent and exact name of some village or locality in Sikkim, Darjeeling and Nepal region even today. This means that Lepchas has acquired clan names from the locality or village where they originally come from. The suffix 'Putso' is sometimes found added to the clan name. This form of address is mostly used by the "Tibetanised tribesmen on the Renjyong [Sikkim] side."⁶¹ Some of the clans acquired their clan names because of the official positions held by some of their ancestors. As Foning believes, these titles came about very much later, under the rule of Tibetan and Bhutanese masters. The *Karthakmoo*, *Tasso-moo*, *Phipon-moo* are examples of this type.⁶²

Nakane is also of the idea that these clans are territorial in origin.⁶³ Lepchas claim that each clan was assigned a particular mountain/hill (called *Chu*) a cave/passage to mountain (called *Lep*) and lake (called *Doh*) in that hill. However, only a few are aware of their *Chu-Doh-Lep*. They observe clan exogamy. Nakane (1966) mentions that kinship on the mother's side seems much less important in determining avoidance of marriage than that on the father's side. She further mentions that she found no marriage between the same patri-clan. According to Gorer, as quoted by Nakane, (1966) any sexual connection with blood relations for nine generations on the father's side and four on the mother's is considered incestuous. In the earlier days the daughters used to follow the mother's lineage because of which the property belonging to mother would used to get inherited by daughters. However, Nakane observes that in areas where majority of the people are Lepcha, all the children are counted as members of the father's clan but at the same time women have other different supernatural guardians. But in areas with mixed population Lepchas show greater patrilineal tendency.⁶⁴ These factors restrict inter-marriage between particular clans or lineage. However, there is no clan or lineage solidarity, and no political organisation in terms of kinship network.⁶⁵

Contrary to the Lepcha belief, many scholars, both Indian and foreigners, have written about their caste and class structure, but in real sense the society does not follow class, creed and ranking in the community. In their day to-day dealings with fellow beings, it is only the seniority of age that is considered. They only have the tradition of clan exogamy. The clan structure in Lepcha society is very vital and deeply rooted. At the time of marriage, clan is given much importance because the couple from the same clan cannot marry. It is shocking to

⁵⁷ Sinha, A.C., *Studies in The Himalayan Communities*, Books Today, Oriental Publishers, 1983, New Delhi, p.30.

⁵⁸ Subba, 2007, p. 251.

⁵⁹ See Sikkim Gazetteer, 1894.

⁶⁰ John Morris. *Living with Lepchas*. London: William Heinemann Ltd. 1938.p.64.

⁶¹ Foning A R. *Lepcha my Vanishing Tribe*, Kalimpong: Upashak Brothers 2nd ed. 2003,p.134.

⁶² Ibid.p.134

⁶³ Chie Nakane, 1966, p. 234

⁶⁴ Chie Nakane Ibid.p.234.

⁶⁵ Ibid.p.235.

state that even this clan structure is influenced. Culture, customs and traditions likewise seem to be getting diversified to a marked degree. This has been the effect of extraneous culture and influence over them."⁶⁶

But again, it is interesting to know that even the word used to denote is not from their language. "Putcho", meaning clan or sub-tribe, used freely in Sikkim and the Illam side of Nepal is not a Lepcha word. Similarly the term 'Aden Putcho' and 'Berfong putcho', the so called 'plebeians' and 'patricians' are late innovations and came in with the introduction of feudalism by the Tibetan rulers."⁶⁷

The Christian missionaries reached Lepchas through various means and they in turn embraced the path which ultimately transformed their material culture. It is interesting to note that many of the Lepchas social customs were not dissimilar from that of the Christians. Further they lacked a strong religious mooring and were forced for a long time to embrace Tibetan Lamaism. It is due to many reasons Christian missionaries managed to tackle the Lepchas and they left an indelible mark in championing the cause of educating and giving them some kind of training and employment. Another aspect of the Lepchas response to the Christianity is the space provided for them to maintain some ancient norms that were close to their heart. David R. Syiemlich argues, that the Christian missionaries did not unduly interfere in the clan structure of the several tribes, partly because it was so confusing to their mind, but more so because to have meddled with it would have been catastrophic.⁶⁸ It was therefore a very wise and intended thought of the missionaries not to interfere the deeply rooted clan structure of the Lepcha society which otherwise would have been difficult for the missionaries to herd them into Christianity.

The Lepcha converts into Christianity still follow clan structure while choosing their life partner. The Lepcha practiced polygamy, but the impact of Christianity has tremendous impact in this sphere. In contrast to traditional Lepcha marriage ceremony, which might last for months of celebration with locally made beer, songs and dances and which involves huge expense, sometimes much difficult task for the poor to afford, the Christian Marriage ceremony, conducted in the church seems popular and preferred among the Lepcha converts, which was found undemanding in terms of both, time and money. The use of traditional dress by the Christian bride and the groom these days can be noticed which reflects their pride in their culture. This can also be because of the influence of awareness created by the Lepcha associations at every block and villages for safeguarding the indigenous culture.

One can witness the delaying marriages, marital dissolution, cohabitation; non marital childbearing and the drop in the marriage rate are increasing day by day in the lepcha society. Religious and racial group boundaries are more likely the hardest to cross in marriage markets.⁶⁹ Even among the Lepchas, it is always preferred that a Christian Lepcha should marry with a Christian Lepcha.

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⁶⁶ Foning op.cit., p.127.

⁶⁷ Foning p.8.

⁶⁸ D.R. Syiemlich, Christian Missions and Tribes in the Hills of North East India, in Tanka Bahadur Subba & Sujit Som (eds), *Between Ethnography and Fiction*, Orient Longman, 2005, p. 154.

⁶⁹ William A. Darity JR (editor in chief), *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* 2nd edition, vol.4, *Marriage Interracial*, Zhenchao Qian, GALE, cengage Learning, 2008, p.616.