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Research Paper

Tumbong Faat : Lepcha Birth Rites and Rituals.

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Abstract

Anthropology of religion looks into the “diverse phenomenon of the study of globalized religions to sectarian movements, indigenous traditions, irreligious and anti- religious group. As an inclusive, comparative study of human societies, from their prehistoric origins to the present, anthropology has sought to describe, classify, and explain religious beliefs and practices”. (Bowie 2006). Anthropologists have considered religion is the product of evolutionary development of human brain. Rites of passage are an intrinsic part of a culture which cannot be kept a side. Each and every community has some rituals, myths for the circle of life and through these rituals they are keeping their traditions alive.

Tumbong Faat is a naming ceremony of the Lepcha community residing in today's Sikkim, Kalimpong, Darjeeling, and Ilam. The main important function of the naming ceremony is to keep the name of the child which gives identity to a person and to renounce the dead ancestors that the successor of the family is born and if something happens to him/her in the material world, and then they have to take responsibility of the child in the spiritual world. Tumbong Faat is the starting of the life cycle ritual of the Lepcha community.

Introduction

The Lepcha Customary Law processes the conditions of antiquity, faith, positiveness, truth, uniformity, reason, logic, wisdom, and validity. The Lepcha are the one, true, indigenous tribal race with their own line of king and rulers found in the annals of the Lepcha history in *Nye Mayel Lyang*, i.e. today's Sikkim, Darjeeling, and Ilam. The Lepcha kings, rulers, priests, priestesses, and wise men have made and drawn the Lepcha Customary Law called *Rong Di Hryim* in Lepcha and practiced them for ages. These Customary Laws enhanced, strengthened them in safeguarding, protecting, securing and defending their privileges, rights, language and cultural heritage as the true sons of the soil of *Nye Mayel Lyang*. The present day Lepchas still continue to practice them.

Although the Lepcha Customary Law written in Lepcha was in existence since a very long time in Manuscript form, the Indigenous Lepcha Tribal Association, Headquarters Kalimpong, is able to translate it into English, publish and distribute it among the Lepchas as well as the relevant local, State and Union Governments for their information, use, exercise and practice. The Lepchas are the autochthones of the Sikkim and Darjeeling hills. They were once a ruling race in power and status to many contemporary outside rulers. Though reliable information on the early history of the Lepchas ruling dynasty is scarce, there are enough evidences to prove that formerly their land was extended from Himalayas down to Titaliya in the vast plains of the India, now in Bangladesh after partition and to the east, it was extended up to Gipmochi mountain (14,523'), the trijunction of Sikkim, Bhutan and Tibet, in China and to the west, it was extended far as the Aroon river, now in Nepal and this ancient land of the ancient people- the Lepchas, with an ancient civilisation with so rich a history and romantic legends and sagas was then called by the name *Mayel Lyang*, which means "the land of hidden paradise, or the delightful region or adobe", because this snow clad Himalayas blessed by God, this sapphire sky and this evergreen lush valleys watered by the two sacred rivers, *Rangnue* and *Rangeet* is, indeed a land of delight and perfect happiness, a true paradise indeed in the world. The Lepcha call themselves as *Rongkup Rumkup* or in short *Rong* which means "the son of snowy peak, the son of God".

The name *lapchay* is given to the Lepcha people by the Nepalese. *Lapchay* means scurrilous speakers, a very contemptuous term referring to the Lepcha and therefore this term needs to be condemned outright. The present name Lepcha addressed to the people is created by the British by anglicizing the Nepali word *lapchay* to Lepcha and by this name, now the *rong*

people are renowned all over the world as lepcha. The lepcha claim themselves not only as the very indigenous race of the Sikkim and 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 different 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 have permanently settled down in Sikkim and Darjeeling.

Statement of the Problem

The problem that has been stated is "*Tumbong Faat* : Lepcha Birth Rites and Rituals ". It is one of the socio-cultural problems that have been changing day by day with the passage of time. The researcher had taken this particular problem because he is eager to know how the lepcha perform the ceremony as they have rich culture and they are the indigenous tribe as considered by the government of West Bengal.

Review of Literature

Foning, (1987) in his book "Lepcha My Vanishing Tribe" stated that the Lepcha are the indigenous tribe. The original in habitat of the lepchas, described in their myths as *Mayel lyang* and considered by them as their sacred heritage and is covered by Sikkim, parts of eastern Nepal, the Darjeeling district and a section of Bhutan. The acquisition and cultural penetration of this habitat was effected partly by military conquest, partly by the amalgamation of Lepcha with such populations as Tibetans, Nepalese and Bhutanese. The Lepcha derived some cultural benefits from contacts with Tibetan Buddhism; they had disastrous results of the Nepalese immigration, and particularly the destruction of forests by the newly settled cultivators.

After the immigration the peaceful and inoffensive Lepcha suffered and got exploited by other powerful communities. And after the passage of time the Lepcha land were taken over by the foreign settlers. The Lepcha are actually Animist (who worships nature) but after intermixing with the other communities some of Lepcha got converted themselves to Buddhist and Christians. Some Christian Lepcha translated some sections of bible into lepcha script and the Christian missionaries gave them some credit for the printing of bible into lepcha language.

Before Christianity prevailed into the land of Lepchas (Mayel lyang). Buddhism was already being practiced by the Lepcha so all of the Lepcha were Buddhist. The adoption of Buddhist beliefs and rites by the Lepchas is a well known fact, but the details of the parallels between Lepchas and the Tibetan practices represents a valuable addition to our knowledge of the penetration of Buddhism into the tribal religions of Sikkim, Bhutan and Arunachal Pradesh.

The Lepchas were originally a tribe belonging to the group of shifting cultivators inhabiting the foothills and middle ranges of the eastern Himalayas closely related to Nishi, Adi, and Miri, and others and that would still be part of this ancient population if they had not been forcibly subjected to the influence of Tibetans, and Bhutanese and had not been partly converted to Christianity.

Singh, (1994) in his book "The Scheduled Tribe" stated that the Lepcha calls themselves as *Rongkup* and claim to be the early inhabitants of Sikkim and West Bengal. *Rong* means dwellers of a rocky land. They believe that their homeland was the legendary kingdom of *Mayel lyang*. According to the 1981 census, their population was 24,952 in Sikkim and 23,409 in West Bengal. They use the Tibetan script for writing. The Lepcha are a mongoloid group characterised by short stature, and show a tendency towards a broad head shape and a broad facial profile with a short and often narrow nasal feature. They are non-vegetarians. Rice, wheat and maize are their staple food. The Lepcha men and women drink a homemade alcoholic beverage (*chi*). The Lepcha observe pre delivery and post delivery restrictions and birth pollution. The naming ceremony is usually observed on the third day after the birth.

Tamsang, (1983) in his book "The Unknown and The Untold Reality About the Lepchas" in his book he states that the Lepchas have their own ancient religion called *boongthingism* and *munism*. Their religion is simple. They believe in existence of God called *Rum*, and him to them offers praying and thanksgiving. The first fruit of the season are always offered to God. They also believe in evil spirits who causes illness and misfortune, and to them also they offer offerings. The purity of their beliefs is now perverted by the introduction of various 'isms' but it had and still has, however, but little hold on them. From the birth till death and till the soul of the dead person is taken to heaven, the *boongthing* performs the religious ceremony and the rituals of the Lepcha. Three days after the birth the naming ceremony is performed i.e. *tungbong faat*.

Objectives

- (a) To find out the beliefs and practices behind the naming ceremony among the Lepcha Tribe.
- (b) To find out the symbolic meaning of performing birth rites and rituals.
- (c) To assess the change and continuity of the rituals.

Research Method

Research in “common parlance refers to a search of knowledge one can also define research as a research as scientific and systematic search for pertinent information on a specific topic. In fact, research is an art of scientific investigation” (Kothari, 2004). Redman and Mory define research as a movement from the known to unknown. It is actually voyage of discovery. The present investigation is explorative in nature which is intended to explore the lepchas birth rites and rituals.

Data Collection: To facilitate the purpose of present research both primary and secondary data was collected. The Primary data was collected from the proposed field that was in Gitdubling village, Kalimpong, WestBengal. In this period the researcher stayed at Gitdubling village and interacted with the villagers intensively to collect first hand data about the village as well as to gather data for the Lepchas birth rites and rituals. For the purpose of collecting secondary data several books, journals and blogs have been consulted.

The primary data have been collected into two phases. At beginning the researcher filled in the household census form from each household in village where the following information like the name of individuals, their age, sex, educational status, ethnic affiliation, religion, marital status, occupation, income etc. Side by side, some basic information about the village like its history, culture, environment, agriculture, source of water, health institution, educational institution, sanitation and drainage, market, housing of the village, dress pattern, leisure activities of the villagers, festival observed by them etc. have also been collected to gain familiarity with the village and to get overall knowledge about the village. After completing the household census, the researcher started to collect the data for his topic. As the researcher's topic was the Lepchas birth rites and rituals, where the researcher interviewed some key informants and some village people with the help of unstructured

interview schedule. The researcher tried to observe all the things which seemed to him as sociologically important and meaningful.

Data Processing and Analysis: After returning from the field the researcher prepared the socio demographic profile tables for the village description, side by side the researcher personally wrote down all cases to delineate sociologically meaningful information. Then the researcher started to write his dissertation for which he have processed and analyzed the primary data and have also consulted the reverent books, journals, and blogs etc. for secondary data and for conceptualization.

Limitations

The study was conducted in a village so; it was difficult for the researcher to find houses, as it was a hamlet/dispersed settlement and no proper metalled road for travelling. Some villagers were not so friendly and behaved in an improper manner. As everyone knows to get something we have to lose something. The researcher had to travel long distance without having any clue about the path leads. The provision for village map was also not available, so the researcher had a hard time encountering wildly around the village. The village people remained busy with their household activities; they could not spend much time in answering the question.

Lepcha Birth Rites and Rituals

When a women becomes pregnant, then during the fifth month of pregnancy a prayer is conducted i.e. *Muisam*. While conducting *Muisam* an ox is required for sacrifice and after the prayer the meat of an ox is cooked and serves to the members of family. *Muisam* prayer is conducted just to say god (*Idbudevurum*) to protect the child which is in the womb of mother and the god (*Idbudevurum*) sends two protectors for the child i.e. *Naglenuneo* and *Kothongpi*.

After the birth of the child if the child/infant is a boy, then after three days name keeping ceremony is done i.e. known as *Tungbong Faat* in lepcha , *nauran* in nepali. And if the child is a girl then four days after the birth the naming ceremony is done. If a mother procreates a twins (girl and a boy). The same procedure is followed boy's name keeping ceremony is done earlier than the girl.

Preparation before the Ceremony

The day before the ceremony, earlier night if the child is a boy then a cock i.e. *Higbuu* in Lepcha, is slaughtered boiled and dressed. And in the case of a girl child, a hen i.e. *Higbumm* in Lepcha, is slaughtered boiled and dressed. On the ceremonial day in early morning the fresh banana leaf is kept upon the big plate made of bamboo i.e. known as *nanglo* in Nepali and *rongtaluing* in Lepcha. Then on the banana leaf, the dressed chicken is kept and one can of local alcoholic drink is kept i.e. known as *chi* in Lepcha, *jarr* in Nepali. Beside these items some fruits, vegetables, flowers and some boiled rice is kept. And in a small bowl a *cheelok* i.e. Holy water is kept to sprinkle all over the house and to the people present out there during the time of ritual. After sometime the priest i.e. *bongthing* in Lepcha, starts praying to *Idbudevurum* and *Nanglenuneo* and *Kothongphi* the protector of the child and thanks them for protecting the child. In the case of a boy child he inherits the jati of the father and in case of the girl child she inherits the jati of her mother but the title is same for both girl and the boy child.

After the ceremony the priest, the caretaker of pregnant mother are treated and served well with some delicious food and drinks.

In the case of the Christian Lepchas the above rituals are the except the *Muisam* ritual. The Christian Lepcha also have their Lepcha name beside their Christian name. Firstly, the Christians Lepcha keep their Lepcha name and after a week they visit the church and adopt the Christian name. In the name keeping ceremony only the relatives are invited.

Importance of Naming Ceremony

The main important function of the naming ceremony is to keep the name of the child which gives identity to a person and to renounce the dead ancestors that the successor of the family is born and if something happens to him/her in the material world, and then they have to take responsibility of the child in the spiritual world.

Naming a baby is considered to be sacred and therefore is an important Hindu tradition. It involves the immediate families and also close relatives and friends. Traditionally known as *Namkaran* or *Namakarana Sanskar*, this ceremony is conducted in an elaborate form on the eleventh day after birth.

The *Namakarna Sanskar* is usually held after ten nights of a baby's delivery. These ten post natal days are considered inauspicious and the mother and child are considered to be unclean. Traditionally, mother and child are separated from the rest of the family during these ten days, where no one can touch the baby or the mother except a helper is allowed to touch the baby or the mother. All festivals and events in the family and extended family are postponed by ten nights. After those ten nights, the house is cleaned and sanctified for the ceremony. The mother and child are bathed traditionally and are prepared for the ceremony relatives and close friends are invited to be a part of this occasion and bless the child priests are called and an elaborate ritual takes place.

In India as the majority of the people are Hindus, the naming of the baby varies from state to state. In some states like Maharashtra, Bengal and Gujarat the paternal aunt has the honour of naming her brother's child. And in rest of the states mother and father decides the name of the child by consultation.

Similarly, in case of Muslims the baby is named on the day of birth by his/her mother and father who make the decision together on what the child should be called. They choose an appropriate name and on the baby's day of birth the father must have a sheep slaughtered and given to poor to give charity on his baby's birth. If he does not have enough funds he may do it any time in future as long as it is done in general.

In the case of Christianity naming a child is usually through the baptism ceremony. Though this is true for majority of the Christian population, the tradition of the land they were born might differ.

In reference to Judaism, in the Jewish tradition, baby boys are named at "Brit Milah" on the eight day after their birth. Girls are not named at one uniform time. Common Ashkenazi custom maintains that girls should be named when the father is called up to the Torah.

In case of Buddhism, the name of the baby is kept on the very first day after the birth by the mother and father.

Changes in the Rituals

In comparison to the older times many changes has taken place from technology to society everything has changed same way in the nature of the human beings have also changed from dogmatic to liberal. Now a day though the rituals are still followed but slight changes

have taken place. Not much things have been changed in the rituals but still some slight changes had taken place. In the olden times it was necessary that the local beverage i.e. *chi* was prepared in the name of the child on the seventh month in the mother's womb. The beverage is one of the most essential element for the ceremony but it is not prepared on the seventh month rather now a days it is prepared three days earlier before the ceremony. And the other slight change that has taken place is the *cheelok* i.e. holy water was to be sprinkled with the help of bamboo spoon but it is not necessary now a day. Now days the holy water is sprinkled with flower.

Findings of the Study

After the in-depth study it has been found that the main aim of the practice is to give identity to a person and some socio-cultural significance is also there. The practice of the naming ceremony is a cultural significance and preserving our ancient culture that has been followed by our ancestors. In this modern time there may be a lot of changes but still everything has not been forgotten. The naming ceremony is not only celebrated in India but all over the world. The naming ceremony has many other social functions it bring all the relatives as well as other people together. In this heck of time it calls everyone out for the celebration and joy and gives the feeling of oneness to the family members. The researcher sees the ceremony as the first stage of the cycle of life. It is the major one as it is the beginning.

Conclusion

The naming ceremony is not only a ceremony it contains deep meaning. It not only gives identity but all brings all the family as well as relatives together. The naming ceremonies by the Lepcha of Git Dubling are practiced joyfully. As the researcher has come to the end of his study he wanted to say that the practice of the naming ceremony is passed down from generation after generations, so, one's prime duty is to preserve their culture without hesitating. Every body's culture is rich in their own ways so preserve it and cherish it rather being too late. Finally, the researcher hopes that the information provided from his dissertation would serve as a framework for the future study as he has indicated.

Summary

The lepchas of the Gitdubling are simple and kind hearted. The naming ceremonies among the lepchas of Gitdubling are practiced traditionally and joyfully. They give the same

importance to the naming ceremony as compared to the other ceremonies. The researcher found that they had preserved their culture very well and they are passing their culture to their younger generation by teaching them. The researcher found that many older people were the head of the family so; no new or transformed rituals are practiced. The *Boongthing* was also very old and he had two students who were attaining knowledge from the *Boongthing*, to carry on the legacy as it is one of the most and foremost cycle of the life.

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