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Significance of the Lepcha Creation Myths and Folktales

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

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

Introduction

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

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

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

Buddhism. The Lepchas have actively negotiated with the forces of cultural syncretism. Some of them have adhered to shamanism, while some follow Christianity, and others have converted to Buddhism. It is interesting to note that despite the pulls and pressures of cultural syncretism the Lepchas have retained their ecological consciousness. Their myths and legends speak volumes of their ecological concerns and their view that the world cannot sustain with an anthropocentric bias but with a well-ordered synthesis of humans and nature.

Although the knowledge about the early life of the Lepchas is obscure, the long-established and widely accepted accounts of the European travellers have represented them as ‘semi-barbarous’, ‘wretched unmanageable race living the life of wild animals’ inhabiting in an inaccessible tract of land. Hayden White notes that in historical narratives the events are represented as speaking for themselves, this he says is problematic because “real events should not speak, should not tell themselves. Real events should simply be” (Mullard 15). The problem with narrativization of real events according to White is that, the real events do not offer themselves as stories, they just are. Through our study, we wish to put forward an alternative history intensely probing into the oral myths and folktales of the Lepchas. Myths were born out of hopes and fears, tears, and smiles, and they were touched and coloured by all these joys and griefs between the rosy dawn of birth and death’s sad night. Our prime concern is to unravel the human condition of the Lepchas, distancing it from predominant academic history as constructed through the Eurocentric lens. By analyzing the myths and legends we wish to understand their religious worldview and the symbolic value they attach to their mountains and peaks, thereby challenging the imposition of the canonical notion of the Lepcha community. Life, culture, land, identity, belief and values of the Lepchas can be understood with the following observations.

1. Lepchas’ emotional attachment towards mountains

Mountains play a significant role in the Lepcha community. In their creation myth we can see the reference to Kanchendzonga Mountain which is the guardian deity of the Lepcha community. The first ancestors of this community were created by God from the pure and virgin snow of Mount Kanchendzonga’s pinnacle. So, we can say that this mountain is the identity of the Lepchas. Their custom, culture and tradition revolve around it. It is their sacred place, a place which they have been worshipping for ages. Even the prominent rivers Teesta and Rangeet originated from this mountain. They consider these rivers holy as Mount Kanchendzonga is their

source. They pay their reverence to Mount Kanchendzonga when they start their day. A festival named 'Pang Lhabsol' is also organized annually in the month of September in the honour of the great mountain. While the Lepchas call the mountains as their protector and guardian deity, they also refer to a mountain called Tungseng Nareng Chu as unfortunate because according to a creation myth, Fadondthing was sent to live at the top of Tungseng Nareng Chu and NazogngNyu was put next to Naho-Nathar Da, a lake at the base of mountain. In spite of God's command, NazogngNyu climbed the peak of Tungseng Nareng Chu to meet Fadondthing. So, this mountain is considered as an unfortunate mountain peak by the Lepchas (Chakraborty 2013).

Kanchendzonga is not just a mountain; it is the embodiment of Sikkim. It protects them physically from the harshness of the cold winds, from the higher climes and has served as a natural barrier against foreign aggression. In the folktale 'How the Lepchas Got Grain', there is a reference to Mount Kanchendzonga as standing behind the Pun Young Chyu, with its shape like the 'pricked up ears of an alert animal guarding against the faintest suspicious sound of unwelcome intruders trying to get to the secret village (Doma 41). Another folktale "The Race Between Teesta and Rangeet" depicts the mountain Tundong Lho as the protector of Lepcha people which saved so many lives during the clash between these two rivers. So, the Lepcha people offer their prayers to mountain Tundong Lho as it had saved their lives.

2. Mountains as human beings

The representation of mountains in Lepcha folktales and creation myths is not only as guardian deities or spirits; rather they also imagine the mountains as living beings or human beings (Kripal 1995). These mountains not only tell the stories of Lepcha communities but also share the personal story/history of their selves (mountains). The folktale "How Jhyo Rathey and Andhi Phoda Got Separated" depicts the story of the conflict between Jhyo Rathey or Tinjhure Hill and Andhi Phoda and also tells us about the romantic relationship of Andhi Phoda and Thasey. According to Lepcha belief these two hills were at a time next to each other. Andhi Phoda was considered to be the 'subordinate' hill to Jhyo Rathey as it was lower in position in comparison to Jhyo Rathey. Falling in love with Thasey (Jhyo Rathey's daughter), he wanted to marry her. When Andhi Phoda asked Thasey's hand for marriage Jhyo Rathey refused the proposal as he "did not like the idea of subordinate marrying his daughter". But Andhi Phoda and Thasey decided to go against her father's will which infuriated Jhyo Rathey and in rage he hit Andhi

Phoda with a table on his chest. Andhi Phoda in retaliation threw a stone at Jhyo Rathey who replied angrily, “How dare you throw a stone at me? Who are you to marry my daughter? You are subordinate to me!” (Doma 81). When “lesser Gods” requested him to forgive Jhyo Rathey, he agreed and moved far away from Thasey who remained a virgin forever by deciding not to marry none. The story also tells that, “a convent built at the top of Thasey is the proof that she never married...” (82). On the other hand, these mountains/hills also act as protectors of Lepcha community from the intruders as reflected in the folktale “How the Lepchas Got Grain”.

In a similar way, mount Tendong becomes the savior of the entire Lepcha community in the folktale: “The Race between Teesta and Rangeet”. In this tale, the lovers Rangeet and Rongnyu (Teesta) decide to race against each other down to the plains in which Teesta wins. Being beaten by a woman, Rangeet floods the riverbank causing a great deluge. This tale subverts the patriarchal norms and convention by permitting a woman (Teesta) to win the match and also reiterates the gender roles prevailing in the human world. To save themselves from the havoc of the great deluge, the Lepchas take shelter on mount ‘Tundong Lho’ which “rose higher and higher to save the Lepchas” (Doma 52). So, the Lepchas consider mount Tendong as the savior of their ancestors. Even today they worship mount Tendong and express their gratitude towards it. As Aden Observes, “The tale of Teesta and Rangeet is significant in the context of the present-day struggle of the Lepcha people against the hydel power project which threatens to obliterate the community’s intimate relationship with the ecology and the land which is sacred to them” (10).

3. Kanchendzonga as the abode of the Lepcha soul

Previously Lepchas thought that they have only one heaven (Rumlyang). But after the introduction of Buddhism, they also believe in Rumlyang (heaven), Nyolyang (hell), Numsyim-Nyolyang (human world), Moonglyang (evil spirit world), Thamchyanglyang (animal world) and Muknyanlyang (demon world). Through the folktales, we come to know about the country of gods (Rumlyang) and the country of ancestors (Mayel Kong). We find the reference to this Mayel Kong in the folktale “How the Lepchas Got Grains” (Doma 40). Located somewhere near Mt. Kanchendzonga lies the Mayel Kong that is known to be the home of their ancestors where there is “never-ending joy, where crops grew hundred times bigger than elsewhere and where the chirping of birds and the fragrance of flowers filled the air.” (Doma 40). This land can be

compared with the 'garden of Eden'. Here seven Lepcha couples live a traditional lepcha life. There is no disease, or any famine and the people are immortal here. Lepchas believe that they will never face hunger because the Mayel beings are always there to bless them with crops. It is believed that only a pure Lepcha (who follows the Lepcha tradition and speaks Lepcha language) can go to this holy land. In the honour of these seven immortal couples (who gave the Lepchas their first seeds of the crops), the Lepchas celebrate Sakyu Rum Faat, a thanksgiving prayer to the God of grain, twice a year. The reference to this land of ancestors is found in the folktale "How the Humans Were Saved from Demons". Here the cat and the dog instruct the youngest daughter to seek help from her great-great grandfather, Jhyo-Jhyo who lives in the fourth mountain, and who will save her from the demon (Doma 115-117).

According to Lepcha belief, a truly religious person will go to 'Rumlyang' (heaven) and a sinner will go to 'Mong-lyang' (hell). Rumlyang is the place of God, and we find the reference to it from the folktale "The Crown of Music" where it is said that the God of music and dance, Narok Rum comes down from Rumlyang (Doma 23). We find the mention of this heaven in the folktale "Lepcha Dem, the Rock Fairy". Here following the words of the Lepcha Dem, the shepherd (her husband) enters into the hut near a spring and finds that the hut and the spring are nothing but heaven and the girl inside the hut is the Rock Fairy (Doma 128-129). They believe that Mayel Kong and Rumlyang are within the empirical realm of Kanchendzonga. The Lepchas' religious, cultural, spiritual beliefs all are connected with Mt. Kanchendzonga. Their entire life revolves around the mountain and after death their soul takes refuge in the lap of Mt. Kanchendzonga.

4. Representation of women in relation to mountains

Representation of women in relation to mountains is one of the significant aspects while dealing with the myths of Lepcha community. Through these myths we can see the notion of the society about women and how they have placed them in reality. In the very beginning mother Itboo-moo created the first man Fadongdthing, her pet creation, from a snow ball. But as he was alone, mother creator gave him a companion, the first woman, NazongNyu, 'just to accompany her male companion'. But she was not independently created rather it was Fadongdthing to whom her existence was dependent upon as his bones were the main elements to give her life (Doma 01).

The tale of Teesta and Rangeet also reflects woman as a subject of subjugation and male anger (Doma, 49-53). In the tale of “Andhi phoda and Jhyo Rathey” too a woman is not allowed to choose her own life partner and family status is important for a marriage alliance between two families (Doma 79-82).

The tale of *Uti* and his lover *Lali Guras* has a similar story, where women were bound to act according to the male wishes. When Lali Guras and his father, went to Uti’s father, he refused to get his daughter married to Lali Guras. But when he realized his mistake about their status, he could not bear the humiliation and jumped into the landslide and died. The same fate met the daughter when she didn’t get any response from her lover (Doma 82-88). So it was always the wishes of the male that were prioritized and women remained the subject of domination and subjugation.

In some instances, women were given importance as Lepcha community believed in Bride Price. The tale of “Tarbongthing and Narip Noam” is one such story. In this tale, Tarbongthing was so much in love that he was ready to pay anything for getting his beloved’s hand. He was ready to collect different kinds of gifts to offer Sakyo Rum Faat to the Gods with chee and butter. This custom is still followed by the Lepchas. All the Gods are invoked and different gifts are prepared for the bride’s family (Doma 30, 38,39). In marriage they even sing to bless the bride:

“Ha aey...!
Let the bride and groom live long
Like the Himalayas standing strong.” (Jha 10)

5. Nuptial Alliance

The Lepchas are a community that believed in cohabitation and out-of-wedlock childbearing. The creation myth of the Lepchas itself tells us that the firstborn man and woman from the fresh snow of the sacred Kanchen Kongchlo lived “as” husband and wife, after breaching the promise of Ibtu-moo the mother creator who warned them to live separately as brother and sister. Marriage in Lepcha culture wasn’t considered as a ceremonial and sacramental event until the solemnized union of Tarbong Nom and Narip Nom, in the folk tale, about their marriage. It is in the search of venison that Tarbong Nom came across the beautiful Narip Nom on the mountain Pdyang Chyu. Tarbong Nom used to set traps to catch colourful birds on the hilltop tree of

Pdyang Chyu , only to have his plans frustrated by Narip Nom who used to set them free. One day when he caught her in the act and fell head over heels in love with her, he immediately proposed to take her home as a gift for his mother. Narip Nom accepted his proposal and advised him to approach her parents to seek her hand in marriage, which Narip Nom courteously followed. It is as if that the mountain in conjunction with the tree on its summit, laden with fruits and flock of birds lured the lovers to the place to bind them in an unbreakable union. The ritual marking the union came to be known as ‘Bri’, meaning to be braided in unification. It is a general norm that two different clans must unify, lest it would be considered as incest and blasphemy.

Narip Nom’s struggle to win his bride stirred fraternity among his clansmen, as people, as well as creatures from the animal kingdom, came forward to help them collect the objects required for the event that the Lepchas still use till date. During the ceremony, the bride and the groom are seated on a high pedestal to make them resemble two mountain peaks of the Himalayas. This symbolic association of the bride and groom with the mountain peaks reminds us of the star-crossed lovers Andhi Phoda and Thasey in the folktale “How Jhyo Rathey and Andhi Phoda Got Separated”.

In the Lepcha community, the family of the groom has a unique way of confronting the family of the bride. With sober and decorous expression, they begin, “We have come from (location) looking for flowers and we couldn’t help but look at your garden. You seem to have a really beautiful flower, and would it be possible that we can have it?” (Biswakarma 34). A similar expression is found in the folk tale The “Tale of Two Trees”, where Lali Guras (rhododendron) a flowering tree perched on the high altitude goes to seek a bride in the lower altitude of the Himalayas that we have discussed earlier.

6. Supernaturalism in the folklores of the Lepcha world

The Lepcha people and their life were contained within the world of mountains. The supernatural elements in these folklore or folktales show how these myths or stories influence the simple lives of the Lepcha community.

The very first myth is the creation myth, that immediately hints at the supernatural and associates us with the other world like the hidden children of Fadongdthing and NazongNyu, who later became the guardian spirits of the Lepcha community and the first seven abandoned

children eventually became demons like Rumdu Mung, Dom Mung, or the demon king Lasso Mung Pano. The demon king Lasso Mung Pano was later killed by a Bongthing, blessed with supernatural powers by Mother Creator and the Lepcha warriors.

In the folktale, “How the Lepchas got Grain” there is a reference to seven divine couples, known to be the ancestors of Lepchas, who lived in a secret village near Mount Pun Yeung Chyu. The couples could become children in the morning, adults by noon and aged after sunset. These supernatural eternal couples represent the life cycle of human-beings (Doma 40).

The natural phenomena like tree, river, caves or stones retain such supernatural associations, embedded in the folklores of the Lepchas. The two river spirits - Rangeet and Rongnyu and the stories of their love, the tree spirits,- Lali Guras or Rhododendron and Alder Tree named Utis are some examples. In both the tales we can see the different attitudes of the natural objects because of the conflict among good and bad spirits. The cave or the Rock also hints at the otherworldly realm. We evidently find the supernatural details in the folktale named; “The Cave of the Occult Fairies. In this story, Guru Padmasambhava tackled the demon couple in a ‘fierce battle between good and bad’ with his mystic dagger. Later He subjugated the five Khandromas or Dakinis and other demons inside the cave and made them guardian angels, known as occult fairies. These caves and the rocks or stones are described as the abode of the demon-fairies. The folklore traditions of the Lepcha people and their lives thus speak volumes about their unending struggle with nature and the supernatural powers.

7. Caves and rocks in Lepcha creation myth and folk tales

The Lepcha community believes that the caves and rocks as the dwelling places of good and evil spirits have the power to influence the lives of the people. In the creation myth entitled “Children of the Snowy Peaks”, the first Lepcha woman NazogngNyu hid her first children, Nunglennyu and Kothongfi, inside a cave, for she was embarrassed to present them before Itbu-moo, the mother creator. Later, these children were blessed by the mother creator as guardian spirits of all male and female Lepchas. These two deities are still invoked by the shamans especially during Tungbang Faat or Ingrum Faat, for good health, long life and prosperity of a new-born child.

The symbolical representation of caves and rocks found in the folk tale “The Caves of the Occult Fairies” implies the intersection of Tantric Buddhism with the earlier belief system of Munism and Bongthism of the Lepcha community. At the very outset of the folk tale, it is clearly

stated that Guru Padmasambhava was a great Indian tantric master, and he was known to the Sikkimese people as Guru Rimpoche. In the second half of the eighth century this spiritual master came to a conical hill situated to the south face of Mount Kanchendongza which is located in west Sikkim. When Padmasambhava came to Sikkim to bless the land, a demon couple followed him and he subsequently killed both the demons. The female demon took refuge in a cave chased by Guru Rimpoche and he killed her through his mystic weapon Vajrakila which was created by his meditative trance in the cave.

As evidence of the guru's meditation inside the cave on the banks of the river Rangeet, an imprint of the mystic dagger on the left wall of the cave was discovered. Similarly, on the right wall were figures of five Khandroma or Dakinis, or perhaps other demons which had followed Padmasambhava. The tantric master is believed to have subjugated these demons and made them guardian angels of the cave. The cave later came to be known as KhandroSangphug, or the cave of the occult fairies (Doma 78).

The description of the tunnel that leads to the 'sanctum sanctorum' of the cave may be linked with the concept of Beyul which is similar to the concept of Gyanganj by Indian yogic tradition or Shangrila in Tibetan Buddhist tradition. This sacred or hidden land is located in the fourth dimension which is invisible to the people who live in the three-dimensional mundane world. It can only be accessible either by the highest level of spiritual power gained through intense meditative practice or by the blessings and will of the spiritual masters who reside in that sacred and hidden land. "There is a tunnel in the cave, ten or twelve yards long and barely two or three feet in height. This narrow tunnel leads to the sanctum sanctorum of the cave where Padmasambhava is known to have meditated to acquire his powers. A deep imprint of his seat in meditation and an impression of the master's crown are visible on the roof of the sanctum sanctorum" (Doma 78).

Inside the cave there is a stone that can be associated with the Buddhist concept of mandala. According to Tantric Buddhism which perhaps came from the Terma tradition, mandala is the visualized ideal universe leading to Nirvana or spiritual enlightenment which can be achieved through intense spiritual practice. Mandala can also be an external or instrumental aid to achieve Buddhahood. The following lines clearly indicate the belief system of the Lepcha community concerning mandala: "A square shaped stone nearby is described as the mandala and to the east of this lies the seven *norbusamphel* or mind-glowing gems and a methodological text for the appropriation of fairies" (Doma 78). The Lamas among the Lepcha community still

practice such type of meditation and sometimes as retrievers they go to the caves for spiritual realization. The devotees of the Lepcha people visit such caves once in a year to worship these caves in order to be protected from demons and evil.

8. Religion

Munism or Bongthingism is the traditional polytheistic, shamanistic, and syncretic religion of the Lepcha people. The exonym “Mun” derives from the traditional belief in spirits called mun or mung. The bongthing is traditionally a male shaman presiding at religious ceremonies and healing rituals. The mun, often but not necessarily a female shaman, is a healer who exorcises evil spirits, helps to heal illness, and guides souls to their afterlife destinations. Mun spirits are of two general types: the benevolent or white magician, *taung-li mun*, and the malevolent, or black magician, *mung-sekmun* or *mung*. Lepchas have a dualistic belief in good and evil spirits. “Chi” or “Chiang” (fermented millet brew), is an intoxicating drink required for all sacrificial ceremonies and rituals. From the study of Doma’s folktales, some devil spirits are *Rumdu Mung*, the devil of smallpox; *Dom Mung*, the devil of leprosy; *Arot Mung*, the devil of accidents and misfortunes; *Asor Mung*, the devil causing the death of unborn children and mothers during childbirth, *Deut Mung*, and the demon king *Lasso Mung Puno*. The tale: “The Death of Lasso Mung Puno”, is about Fadongthing and NazongNyu’s seven abandoned children, who became demons and wanted to destroy the Lepchas. There began a twelve-year war between Lepchas and the demon king Lasso Mung Puno. Listening to the cries and prayers of the people Itbu-moo sent a species of bamboo “payong” to rescue them. But one after the another, beetle, grasshopper, and cricket failed to save them. At last, on top of Pandim Chyu, the Great Mother created a “bongthing” and blessed him with supernatural powers and made him a mediator between Ram Lyang and Mayel Lyang. But when the bongthing was busy in animal sacrifice to appease the demons, he forgot his responsibilities. Itbu-moo then chose Nyolik Nyosong, a female from the human being, and made her a ‘mun’ (Doma 11-18).

Bongthing rituals generally include prayers, herbs, and amulets, and may also include directed breathing or spitting by the priest. Spirit possession is considered to occur in various ways: from a subtle headache to violent, uncontrollable madness. Ceremonies generally seek to appease these spirits by animal sacrifice, especially goats and pigs. According to Doma’s folktales, *Narok Rum*, God of music; *Anyu Malti Mu*, the God of Wine; *Sakyu Rum*, the God of

food; *Mayel Yook Rum*, the God of hunters; *Ibu Debu Rum*, head of the male Gods; river spirits Rangeet and Rongnyu, Mountain spirits Jhyo Rathey and Aandhi Phoda and the first man and woman Fudongthing and NazongNyu are also worshipped simultaneously side by side. With the advent of Mahayana Buddhism in the seventh century, practitioners follow the bon faith alongside the Mahayana faith and in due course there have been instances of religious syncreticism.

9. Festivals and rituals

Mt. Kangchendzonga has preoccupied not only the mindscape of the Lepcha people, but also every aspect of their lives, most prominently the socio-cultural aspect. Every festival they observe, every ritual they follow, every rhythm of their lives pulsates with the benign presence of their eternal provider and protector. The salutation that they offer to each other by saying “Achulay” is in fact a salutation to the great Kanchendzonga. Among the festivals of the Lepchas, the most celebrated, oldest and significant one is *TendongLho Rum Faat* (‘Lho’ means hill, ‘Rum’ means God and ‘Faat’ means festival or worship). On this auspicious occasion, celebrated every year on August 8, the elders and the youngsters among the Lepcha community climb the sacred Mt. Tendong through long muddy path to pray and worship the mountain and the residing mountain deities. The festival is commemorated with same enthusiasm even today. In fact, the Sikkim government has recognized the Tendong festival as an official state holiday since 1997.

Legend has it that during Great Deluge, Mt. Tendong (‘the hill of the raised horn’) rose like a horn from the head of a deity and the Lepchas climbed the hill and took refuge there and was thus saved by Mt. Tendong. Since then, this mountain has become a part of their identity. It is known from Arun Moitra’s book, *Sikkimer Adibashi Lepcha* (1921) that throughout the months of March and April, the Lepchas celebrate Kingstoom Zaongboo Festival in the honour of Mt. Kanchendzonga. By observing the subsisting presence of the flashing sunrays on the peak of Kanchendzonga from sun-up to sun-down the Lepchas christened the mountain as “Kingstoom Zaongboo” meaning ‘auspicious bright forehead’. Moitra also talks about the Sakyu Festival at the center of which there is the belief that all the grains, fruits and flowers have come to this world from the hidden land of paradise called Mayel Lyang situated somewhere at

the foothills of Kanchendzonga. Kanchendzonga's significance to the Lepchas can also be ascertained from the celebration of Chyu Rum Faat festival (Chyu means snowy range), held annually in the honour of the sacred summit. The festival is observed both at individual households and at community level. It aims to bring solidarity at the community level. The elders ask the present generation to learn and follow the rituals sincerely so that the age-old tradition does not fade into oblivion.

From the *Handbook of Nature Based Festival of Sikkim*, we come to know that at the advent of the New Year, the Lepchas celebrate Namsong or Nambum Festival. They observe this festival in order to keep away the evil spirits from the sacred land. The festival demonstrates the establishment of peace overpowering evil. Legend behind this festival portrays Lepcha people's victory over Lashong Mung Puno, the demon king after a prolonged war lasting twelve years. In each of these twelve years, the demon king assumed forms of different animals and later these animals represented the various months of the Lepcha year. During this festival, people gather to enjoy and pray for a prosperous New Year.

The Lepchas even make replicas of the original "Big Stone" (Mt Kanchendzonga) with small and larger stones to worship the mountain from a distance. Tapan Chattopadhyay in his book *Lepchas and Their Heritage* (2013) talks about two kinds of stones – *sadaer longs* ('gifts from the thunder-god) and *long-chokes* (vertical stones signifying past events). Dr. Shera Pandi Molommu in an article writes "... these stone Long choks were erected for the dead to show him the direction to his final resting place and ... as a sacred place not to be stepped upon or polluted" (Molommu 17). Most remarkable among the surviving long chokes are nine stones at Kavi near Gangtok, laid by the Lepcha priest, Thekong Tek to signify his blessings to the pact with Bhutia chief, Khye Bumsa and the subsequent Tibetan hegemony. Legend has it that Thekong Tek saw through his spiritual insight that one of Bumsa's children would rule Sikkim. He immediately resorted to form a brotherhood pact with the Tibetans. The treaty was conducted at 'Ka-We-Long-Chaok' and Mt. Kanchendzonga was invoked as witness to solemnize the undertaking between indigenous Lepchas and immigrant Tibetans. With the forces of urbanization, these sacred stones have lost their significance, and exist only as mute witness and a lost cause. In spite of being influenced by the all-pervasive modernization, the idyllic backdrop

of Mt. Kanchendzonga will continue to prevail in the psychic graph of the Lepchas, - the true children of the mountains.

10. Dance, music, and folklores

From today onwards, all of you present here will excel in singing and dancing and everyone will like your performances. May you all become absolute masters of Lepcha folk songs, dances, music, and musical instruments? And when I feel like it, I too will descend to Mayel Lyang and dance with you (Doma 25).

According to the Lepcha folklore, this boon of Narok Rum, the Music God of the Lepchas, resulted in the predominance of dance and music in this tribe. It is associated with a legend of Narok Ram, a celestial high-altitude God who descended and joined the merriment of Lepchas. After the defeat and death of the devil, Lasso Mung Panu, in the hands of Itbo-Moo, the Mother Creator, the Lepchas celebrated continuously for seven days and the Music God mesmerized at their devotion gifted the crown of music to this tribe. Thus, the day is marked by the celebration of the victory of Mother Creator, every year on Nambum evening and the celebration continues for seven days. Every occasion i.e. birth, marriage, festivals are incomplete without performances. Songs and dances of any tribe attest to their unique identities and are to some extent enmeshed with their lifestyle.

10.1.1 Chu-faat dance:

This is an ancient dance form of the Lepcha tribe. They perform this in the foothills of mighty Kanchendzonga, in honour of the sacred summit and its four associate peaks- Mt. Kabru, Mt. Pandim, Mt. Simbrum, and Mt. Narsing. These peaks are believed to be repositories of five hidden treasures i.e. salt, medicine, minerals, sacred scriptures, and food grains. Dancers carry butter lamps and bamboo leaves in their hands and perform this ‘Chu-Faat’ dance while singing a devotional song.

10.1.2 Tendong-faat:

This ritual dance is performed after Lepchas present their offerings to Tendong hill situated in South Sikkim. It is associated with the folktale “The Race between Teesta and Rangeet” which unfolds the tale of two lovers- Rangyo and Rangeet.

10.2 Music:

To grasp the uniqueness and ethnicity of any tribe it is significant to delve into their music and folksongs. Legends recount the creation of musical instruments, soulful birds, and yeti’s

dwelling stories which bear the great significance of the mountains, caves, and valleys. “The Abominable Snowman” (Doma 95) reminds us of Atek, a herder inhabitant of Middle Himalayas and plays “Puntong Palit” (bamboo flute). Flute’s music attracted a female yeti who came every evening to listen to him. It stayed till dawn which made Atek’s life miserable. Atek tricked yeti to run to the snow-covered upper Himalayas. Lepchas believe that the yeti was influenced by Atek’s music, so till now, people refrain from playing flute and whistling while traveling the high, snowy mountains as it can attract a yeti. ‘Bird with Golden beak’ (Doma 63) holds an important significance for the Lepcha community. Chamongfo (Himalayan whistling thrush), a low altitude creature prayed to a high-altitude Male God Itbu Debo Rum in a melodious tune and got a golden beak as a gift from him. ‘Namsamay and His Magic Drum’ (Doma 130) is a tale about Kappura and her two sons named Kesamay (tiger-child) and Namsamay (human-child). While growing up they became rivals and Kesamay tried to kill Namsamay. But Kesamay himself got killed when Namsamay tried to retaliate. Namsamay took a hollow log of *hongshing* (coral tree) and stretched the dried skin of Kesamay on both sides and invented a drum that produced a rhythmic tune. People flocked around Namsamay’s place and some of them inculcated this art to become professional drummers.

Conclusion

The representation and significance of the mountains in Lepcha folktales and creation myths thus contain the evidence of their history and identity. The Lepcha myths of creation locate the genesis of the Lepcha tribe in the mighty Kongchen Konglo or Kanchendzonga. The idea of purity is linked to these mountain peaks from where the life-giving rivers flow. It seems to endow great value and prestige to the Lepcha tradition and culture. In colonial historical narrative of Sikkim and Darjeeling, this indigenous culture of Lepcha community has been overshadowed by colonizers profit making enterprises. In this regard, the creation myths and folktales of Lepchas provide an alternative history, indispensable for understanding the true history of Lepcha people. They believe that the recent developmental projects taken by the concerned authorities somehow erode their indigenous cultural identity and work as a threat to the Lepcha culture and their sacred land. Perhaps, this is one of reasons why the Lepcha people are protesting against these projects. For instance, we have seen that Lepchas are protesting against the construction of 520 MW hydropower project near the Kanchendzonga National Park

since 2007. Along with Teesta Dam, another controversial project is Panan Hydropower Project which has acquired both the private land and the forest land. This project has trespassed into the land of Dzongu (which is traditionally known as Mayal Lyang or paradise in Lepcha language). Sikkim government officials say that these projects will bring prosperity and development into the remotest corners of Dzongu. But the Lepchas started hunger strike in June 2007 against such projects. They are concerned that the developmental projects would not only destroy the ecosystem of the Teesta river basin and the Kanchendzonga National Park (UNESCO World Heritage Site), but also destroy the sanctity of their holy land, Dzongu. We have observed many landslides, earthquakes, and flashfloods after the construction of dams on the Teesta River. They believe that their race was created in the holy land of Dzongu and Mt. Kanchendzonga is the abode of the Lepcha Souls and after death their souls are taken to the sacred summit along the River Teesta. So, dams on Teesta somehow destroy the sanctity of this river. Their land is their identity, so, the conservation of their holy land is important. And there is a need for sustainable development which supports both. To conclude, it can be deduced that, the representation and significance of the mountains and peaks as reflected in their creation myth and folk tales uphold the profound ethnic cultural and religious identity of Lepchas. The tribe's harmonious relationship with the rhythm of nature constitutes their unique cultural identity.

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