

# Reflecting The Folklore of The Lepcha Marriage Concerning The Status of The Women

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## Abstract

The marriage of the Lepcha has been a liberal attitude towards the women, given the time and space (of Ancient and medieval or even in the early modern era, exceptional case though be found of the said period as when compared to the early Vedic or even towards the coming of the colonial era). This is evident when one studies the folklore that deals with the first marriage of the Lepcha. As it is an institution, which is the fabric of society. This paper seeks to explore the narrative of the folklore of the Lepcha marriage while understanding its liberal view of marriage institutions that gave women a secured position in a community. However, community law compensated that security, which is expressed in the form of endogamy. In other words, their freedom was limited to the community and if by any means were to be excluded, their right would be invalid. Therefore, this paper will analyze the folklore of the Lepcha marriage in highlighting the life of Lepcha women. Since this area is largely ignored, Lepcha Folklore gives a clue to understanding the status of women in the Lepcha society, this study gives a different and fresh perspective in understanding the women and thereby their role, status, and place in the said society.

**Key Words: Folklore, Lepcha, Marriage, Custom, Women, Status**

## Introduction

Alan Dundes<sup>1</sup> enunciates folklore as the mirror that reflects the particular culture's condition and values. Remembering this notion; Lepcha's<sup>2</sup> Legend, folklore, and folktales also says that there was a country known as 'Mayel Lyang' (probably Kanchenjunga matches the description narrated in Folklore), amidst the abode of Gods, high up among the clouds in the Himalayas. There lived a simple tribe who called themselves 'Mu-Tanchi-Rong Kup', meaning 'the mother's loved ones'. Lepchas believe that they have come from the original Ney Mayel Lyang country, meaning the land of hidden paradise or the delightful region or abode.<sup>3</sup>

## Folklore of the Lepcha Marriage

Lepchas have their legends and lore regarding the marriage system. Narratives of the origin of the marriage- In the age of yore<sup>4</sup>, when the people lived on hunting and gathering a young, Lepcha

boy named Tarbong-Thing fell in love with a Lepcha woman Narip Noam. The boy arrived at a place called Pari Pagyen in Mayel Lyang for hunting. Fatigued, and hungry, he prepared for his night's stay. He set a Radoo Ramyang, a bamboo trap, to catch birds to satisfy his hunger in the nearby fruit tree. The next day he set the Radoo Ramyang once again on the same fruit tree and went away to look for the village. In the afternoon when he returned to his shelter, he found, only dry twigs and leaves hanging on the trap instead of birds. Out of curiosity the next day once again, very carefully he set Radoo Ramyang on the same fruit tree and hid under the bushes and watched. In the afternoon, he saw a young beautiful girl coming out from the wood towards the trap and freeing the birds one after the other from the trap by putting dry twigs and leaves on it. On seeing this, Tarbong-Thing sneaked behind her and caught her very firmly. The young and beautiful girl although surprised, fought back to free herself from Tarbong-Thing but he somehow, overpowered and subdued her in the end. Tarbong-Thing asked her about freeing the birds from the traps. The young girl replied that she was the guardian, preserver, and champion of the birds and they have an equal right to live in this

<sup>1</sup> American Folklorist

<sup>2</sup> The Lepchas are autochthonous of the Eastern Himalayan part of Sikkim and Darjeeling.

<sup>3</sup> K.P. Tamsang, The Unknown and Untold Realities about the Lepchas, Kalimpong: Mani Printing Press, 1998 2nd edition, p.1.

<sup>4</sup> In Ancient times.

beautiful Mayel Lyang. When she wanted to go home Tarbong-Thing asked her name and place of her residence. She answered that Narip Naom was her name and she is from Sakyong. Tarbong-Thing again asked her if she would elope with him to start a new family life. She replied that Tae-Tanye moo-Nyoo is her mother and he must ask permission from her mother and uncle. Tarbong-Thing returned to his mother, Numkoot Amoo Nyoo, and narrated his stories including his meeting with the young and beautiful Narip Naom. He expressed his desire to his mother because he was in love with Narip Naom and would like to marry her. Numkoot Amoo Nyoo, Tarbong-Thing's mother, summoned her brothers and sent them to Sakyong to ask Narip Naom's hands in marriage to Tarbong-Thing. Narip Naom's mother and uncles were also very happy indeed and welcomed the proposal of a marriage between Narip Naom and Tarbong-Thing. A meeting of the Lepchas was convened at Rungjyeng Purtam to finalize their marriage. In the folklore, Tarbong-Thing and his uncles also gave consent to the interest of the bride price. At the end of the meeting, a bamboo<sup>5</sup> was planted to commemorate the occasion which signifies the never-ending relations between the bride and the groom's family (as the bamboo is a kind of plant which takes time to perish and is difficult to destroy). Tarbong-Thing and his uncles were able to collect the bride price and place them in front of the bride's mother, uncles, aunts, and relatives during the wedding. Thus the first Lepcha marriage ceremony was solemnized between Narip Naom and Tarbong-Thing.

This folklore becomes special in a way as it provides information about the practice of marriage and rituals. The practice became so common among the Lepchas that it became without difficulty Customary Law (Rong Di Hryim). This customary law also provides insight into the community's interest with retrospect to marriage. According to the customary law, before the finalization of marriage, certain criteria were to be fulfilled, this criterion includes economic conditions, mental and physical health, morality, and dignity. These were the qualities that Lepcha would consider an ideal individual appropriate for the marriage. So to obtain the information of the given criteria of the said party (groom), there was a certain process that would act as an instrument to access the data file of the groom. This process

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<sup>5</sup> The sacred bamboo grove of the Lepchas called *Chimoo Aeyong moo pabong* still stands in *Zaongoo*, North Sikkim.

is called Ashake-Yang (depute people to collect information about the groom's family). However, this not only remains the quest to know the character and culture of the groom but if it is qualified then the bride's price issued would be raised. As per the rituals before marriage, the important points shall be examined by the family such as the family should not have been affected by any hereditary diseases like leprosy. Any member of the family should not have been attacked, injured, or killed by a tiger. The family should not have any history of suicidal or murder cases. A family involved in fighting and killing over land and water disputes was not accepted, focusing mostly on the economic condition, social status, and the hereditary history of the family the marriage was decided. As Lepchas were small tribes, there was always a danger of being extinct or if not then impure. It could have been that such threat of extinction was conscious of it. It could also have been the distribution of population in a dispersed manner, interlocking the community with each other, as a result, any community, and unknown to them always remain suspicious, but exogamy took place. As such to counter such a premise Lepcha could have favored endogamy. Therefore, Lepcha marriages give equal importance to i) marriage within the same Aagit (clan). Endogamy (marriage within a specified group) was practiced only after four generations on the mother's side or after the death of the great grandmother. ii) Exogamy (not favored but gave consent reluctantly): It applied only to the men, so when a Lepcha man marries a woman of the non-Lepcha community, the bride will be granted the Lepcha clan/ Aagit with a Lepcha traditional ceremony called Aagit moo by a boongthing/Mun, to safeguard the interest of their future offspring especially girls. But she will not be entitled to land and property. If a Lepcha girl marries a non-Lepcha community she automatically forfeits her claim and right as Lepcha, ancestral land, and property. The Customary Law of the Lepchas also mentions several punishments in case of a violation of the law. They are banned from the community and were never allowed to return to the village. Lepchas took a great deal in avoiding the incest marriage, Lepcha man shall be allowed to marry his mother's clan/Aagit. Gorer quoted nine generations on the father's side and four generations on the mother's side. According to A.K. Das marriage between cousins is forbidden among the Lepchas. Sumit Ghosal states that the exogamy in the Lepcha marriage does not permit marrying relatives. The Lepchas count five

descents on the father's side and three on the mother's side. The importance of the moo/clan<sup>6</sup> in the Lepcha marriage is that the daughters follow the lineage of the mother and the son from his father. Hence both the sexes retain their identity in the family sharing equal importance and value. Veena Bhasin (1989:p.110) and Chi Nakane (1966:p.234) have stated the importance of the moo/clan in marriage and the restrictions followed by the tribe for the same. Lepcha community follows the moo/clan lineage providing some flexibility in choosing their partner therefore caste system was not practiced by them. The tradition of following the moo/clan lineage system in marriage is to avoid marriage within the same clan of the mother and father. As the Lepchas firmly believed that the marriage with their relatives was a curse as their first man and woman gave birth to the devils.<sup>7</sup> Waddel showed the traces of matriarchy amongst the Lepchas in which the children trace their descent through their mothers.

### **Rituals and customs of the Lepcha Marriage:**

The marriage ceremonies of the Lepchas are still performed by the Boongthing (Lepcha priest). The Lepcha marriage consists of various rituals to be followed, such as i) Nyom- Vyat (the quest for the bride), as above mentioned in the folklore) in which the boy's side preferably the maternal uncle will go along with the Chee-Prok-panol (packet of Chee present). For this rite the middle man called the Pebu/ bek bu<sup>8</sup> along with the maternal uncle plays the major role in gathering the information and asking the hands of the bride. The Pibu/Bek bu of each side maintains contact between families and conducts negotiations for marriage. The middle man and the maternal uncle must always be ready to answer all the queries about the bride her clan and kinsfolk. His status and role are embedded and intrinsic to the matrilineal social structure. He represents the placement of men vis-a-vis women of matrilineal descent. The first initiative for the marriage was always taken from the groom's family. The girl's family is well within their rights to decline or accept the proposal beginning from the engagement rituals. The Lepchas believed that the father and the mother of both the party remain inactive in the process of negotiations to avert the marriage breakup and the bad omen in their families. ii)

<sup>6</sup> *Moo* and *Agit* are used interchangeably which denote Lepcha clan

<sup>7</sup> Lepcha Dupsumong, Lepcha Jati ko Utpti ani Lokkatha, WBMLLDB, 2019, p.18.

<sup>8</sup> Informant or match maker.

Ashake (the joining or the linking functions) or engagement. With the acceptance of the marriage proposal by the girl's parents, the formal offerings from the groom's side are placed. After much negotiations and when the date for Ashake is fixed the groom's party is expected to visit the bride's family in a submissive manner with the necessary customary gifts. In this negotiation, it is always the bride's side that tries to find fault and look for some loopholes but the groom's side instead of taking the challenge and despite the provocations are always supposed to keep calm and sit quietly all the while. There will be levying fines for each fault according to the custom. The social relations between the bride and the groom's party are illustrated through the custom of the submissive nature of the groom's party. The above-mentioned custom is still practiced by the Lepchas. This event can only be finalized when the girl's party secretly enquires as above mentioned about the family of the boy, the hereditary diseases, and their undesirable hardships. If something of this kind is found the girl's party has the liberty to break the negotiation. iii) Bree (the planning and braiding/the wedding ceremony.)<sup>9</sup> The custom of Taya-Kup-Aafaar or Nyaom-Saa-Aafar (Marriage price or the bride price) is practiced amongst the Lepchas. Traditionally it is paid to the bride's parents and relatives that include: a) Nyaom Aasek Gyu (Engagement Price): i) Chi, Fermented beverage (one basket), ii) Phogo Rip Lyaak (garland), iii) Six rupees silver coins. A.R.Fonning makes the list of the presents to be given by the groom at the marriage to the bride's party: Two full baskets of Chi, One fore and Hind legs of a bull with the tail attached, Amu dum-Dyam wearing apparel for mother, Abo Ayong Lu, a body wrapping shawl for the father, Panol or presents for Mu-Azong the maternal uncle, Panol or presents for Bo-Ku the paternal Uncle, Panol or presents for Phaming the brother, Panol or presents for Mu-Nyu the maternal aunt and Panol or presents for Bo-Nyu the paternal aunt. Panol may be offered to the other brothers, uncles, and aunts; but it is not obligatory. Neom Lee hraon: The bride's entrance to her new house includes: One basket of Chi, two bottles of Liquor, and the Front left leg of a bull. Bride's dress and Jewelry: Dum-dyem (Dress) One Set, Jyoordaong Tago (Black gown) one, Takvil lyaak (neckless) made of cane splits, Kagel (bangle) made of cane splits, Aanyaor Kong (earring), Ka-Chhyaop, Panthop

<sup>9</sup> Fonning, A. R. *Lepcha my Vanishing Tribe*, Kalimpong: Upashak Brothers 2nd ed. 2003, p.207.

(badge) made of silver and Sambraang Baor made of silver.<sup>10</sup> In completion of the marriage ceremony, the bride's party offer Neom Mungkong zo- gool a completely dressed cock denoting that their daughter has been handed over to the lap of the Groom's parents.

Coming to the bride price as it is the oldest form (Taya-kup-Afaar or Myaok Panol or Nyom sa afar) is still maintained by the Lepcha society. The girl gives the final approval to the acceptance by touching these presents and the Chi basket. According to Tapan Chattopadhyay "If she picks up a load of Chee and a coin, this will mean that she has given her consent to the marriage."<sup>11</sup> This custom of the Lepchas indicates the compensation paid to the parents of the bride. It is to be paid either by following various rituals that demand the interest of the bridal party or by physical labor if one cannot comply with the demand. However, this is pre-arranged. If the demands are fulfilled then the groom has the right to take her to his abode if demand was unmet then the labor must be provided to the bride's house till he successfully appeases the party. E.T Dalton and H.H. Risley in the second half of the eighties have observed bride price as a compulsory ritual of the Lepcha marriage. They also consider the late marriage of the Lepchas was due to the hardship in organizing the bride price. The bride price was considered indispensable because the groom was bound to pay it by offering his labor to the house of the bride considering it a service marriage. The custom of bride price amongst the Lepchas has given social recognition and an important economic role to women in a rural agricultural society.

**Role and Status of Lepcha women:** Marriage as an institution has always been considered an important aspect of society. Men and women of different races and lands pass through different stages of cultural evolutions and have evolved different customs and rituals to regulate such relations. Socially sanctioned rites involved in marriage provide several relationships at different levels— be it, bride and groom, within the Varna and among the kinfolds.<sup>12</sup> Therefore, marriage has been considered a family affair rather than the personal one. The marriage of the Lepcha features several rituals and customary practices all along

the different stages of the wedding process in which the role and the status of the women are noteworthy. Commencement of the search for the Bride is the first rite amongst all the marriage ceremonies and the Lepcha marriage ceremony also starts with the same. The first initiation of the marriage was given priority to a man. Although they were given the right, the woman too had the right to accept or decline, nevertheless they remain the second. It cannot be ignored that the women were given the priority to choose their life partner or husband. However, there is a limitation only if the criteria are filled as above mentioned only then the right to choose or reject its partner was applicable. It must also be remembered that this conduct (for the bride) largely remained abstract for even males could enjoy such liberty. Nevertheless, the initiation of such a sacred ceremony must first be commenced. It is also to be remembered that, the practice of Bride price among the tribe shows, the valuable contribution of women to society. This system lifted the burden of the parents in searching for and selecting the groom for their daughter. This was the reason the birth of the girl was also welcome and raised as equal to the boys though certain limitations were found as above mentioned. As stated by Gorer in his work the practice of divorce was not in vogue amongst the Lepchas. On the untimely death of a husband, the young widow if she wishes shall be betrothed and married to the single younger brother or single nephew of her husband if both the party wishes after the consultation with the family and the elders after a year. The same custom was followed if the wife died untimely to keep the strong bond with the family, clan, and the village the Lepchas followed the Aangaop system. This system may have also been adopted to avoid the custom of bride price again to the same family. Keeping in mind the expenditure of the marriage ceremony the Lepchas may have avoided the economic problem by giving this Aangaop system and also preventing the transfer of the lands or the properties outside the family. If in case there is no unmarried male member of the family the widow is allowed to return to her parent's house with a milch cow. If the widow would like to marry again, she has to return the bride price of her deceased husband. This custom of returning the bride price to her deceased husband also indicates the end of the marriage relations with the husband and his family. After returning the bride price the widow will not have any connection with her deceased husband's family. The marriage of the Lepchas acts as a

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. p. 134.

<sup>11</sup> Chattopadhyay, Tapan, *Lepchas, and their heritage*, New Delhi, (1990) P.53.

<sup>12</sup> Kumkum, Roy, *the Power of Gender and the Gender of Power*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, (2010), 223.

social bond that unites families and clans. The bride price is also a symbol of the women's relationship with her husband. This is also applied to the widower. The status and role of the woman are well illustrated by the plight of the widow; the remarriage was allowed with the consent of the widow. Complying with this they have an Aangaop system where both men and women can accept or reject this Aangaop as per their decision. Lepchas practiced widow remarriage where both wife/husband can decide, not like as Prem Chowdhary has shown concerning Haryana, if a man dies, his wife is forced into marriage with one or the other of his younger siblings. The widow remarriage amongst the Lepcha community was practiced in its ordinary sense but never obtaining a son as Rig Vedic people like is mentioned by Dr. Avinash Chandra Das in his book 'Rig Vedic Culture. Although the Lepcha marriage system differs from the traditional Hindu form, the Hindu caste system is diffused into this area and plays a part in the choice of the marriage partner.

## CONCLUSION

Although it is seen and read that Lepchas follow a patriarchal system but in reality, patriarchal domination over women does not appear in the Lepcha society. But male domination as rulers and male control as head of the family can be seen. Women enjoy comparatively equal status with men particularly in choosing a life partner although with some flaws. The Lepcha tribe follows the patriarchal system, but as far as property matters are concerned, as long as the girls are not married and taken away by their husbands, they have full protection. The properties were distributed amongst the siblings. But whenever the daughter gets married automatically she loses the property rights of her parents. The property of the female lineage will be inherited by the daughters if they remain single or marry within the Lepcha community. After marriage, the wife shares the property with her husband but was restricted from selling the property as the inheritance rights are in the hands of their offspring. The unmarried daughters will have the right to sell and hand over their property as per their wish. The traditional pattern of marriage has placed the Lepcha women in a relatively good position in their society. Women were not subjugated and exploited but given a share of the family property and the right in making decisions.

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