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DE-STEREOTYPING RITES AND CUSTOMS: A CASE STUDY OF LEPCHAS OF DARJEELING HILL

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Abstract:

India possesses many tracts in which there are un-trodden fields of ethnological study. They are still inhabited by aboriginal races that have not changed as yet from their primitive habits and customs indicative of the nature of primitive struggles for life. The customs and rites of the aboriginal tribe like Lepchas of Darjeeling present many attractive features to an Ethnologist, because the traces of survival of early conditions of culture in later times are generally found in rituals, customs and folklores prevalent among the people who are still in the primitive stage of life.

With the aboriginal tribe of Darjeeling Hill most of the seasons of the year (spring, rainy, autumn and winter) is associated with certain customs and rituals. In the month of Chaitra corresponding to March-April the primitive Lepcha people of Darjeeling celebrate the "Lyang Rum Faat". It is the worship of the land or God of the earth and the Lepchas celebrate this every year during the spring season i.e. any day starting from the Hindu Sri Panchami or Basant Panchami Day. In Darjeeling, the ploughing of fields for maize and other crops starts from the Basant Panchami day.

INTRODUCTION

Tendong Lho Rum Faat is an annual, ancient and natural festival of Lepchas which is still celebrated by them with the same fervor and enthusiasm in the month of July (Rainy season). It is a festival of worshipping mountains, rivers, lakes and caves, which they consider as sacred and important to them. In the beginning, the Lepcha priest is known as bungthing invokes their wise ancestors and request them to be one with the creator Liangith-new-roomh and through this ancestral spirit pray their creator to save the Lepchas from famine and deadly natural calamities.

Tendong churumjan i.e. paying homage to Mount Tendong is an important religious occasion participated by all Lepchas irrespective of their social, political and economic differences. Similarly, Kohompo, the small bird also confessed and accepted his mistake of steadying the intoxicant and pleaded for mercy to the mother of creation through chilolataday and secured the safety of Lepchas, otherwise, their destruction was imminent. To perpetuate this festival Lepchas have been celebrating it ever since and they will continue celebrating it in future too because they attach much importance to it.

Tendong has come from Lepcha word 'tun-rong', tun means 'up going or upturned' and rong from arong means horns. (It means that the mountain went up like horns to save the people). Every year during the monsoon season, the mount Tendong is worshipped by offering Chee and other sacrifices by the Bongthing and the occasion has been declared as a holiday in some places. This mountain from which oblations were offered by the Kohom Fo can be seen from the town of Kalimpong and around; it is called 'Tendong Lho', 'the ladder mountain', because through this mountain ladder, people had climbed up to safety.

The legend taken from R.P.Lama's book, 'Across the Teesta' at page 153-154:-in connection with

the great flood is based on the love story between Rongnit (male) and Rongnue (female). The lovers decided to meet at a rendezvous place now known as Teesta, but Rongnit led by a bird roamed many places before arriving at the destination and finds the lover Rongnue led by the snake already arrived. Rongnit, his pride hurt, feels dejected and after exclaiming "Theestha" meaning 'already arrived' starts going back to the Himalayas, causing the great Deluge and Flood. To save the Rongfolk the Tendong Mountain went up and up. Only by the prayer and chi sacrifice made by 'kahom Fo' the flood abated. That is why river 'Rongnue' is now known as Teesta and the meeting place is also called Teesta.

The month of August is particularly characterized by the celebration of the "Pang Lhabsol". On the 15th day of 7th month of Tibetan calendar, this festival takes place. Actually it was started by the great Lhatsun Lama as a thanksgiving ceremony to the Lepcha deity Kanchenjunga and other mountains. It is to be noted that both the Lepcha and the Bhutia communities participate in this celebrations with the Buddhist Lamas and the Lepcha Bongthing and Muns also taking active part. Nowadays this occasion is considered as a celebration of 'Unity Day' of Lepcha-Bhutia-Nepali.

According to Foning (Lepcha My Vanishing Tribe, page 293), "they took up our 'Chyu Rum Faat' worship of our mountain gods and gave it the glorified name of 'Pang Lhabsol' and incorporated into it the Buddhist mystery plays and other dances. They made it brilliantly colorful and ceremoniously ritualistic. The tradition of the main ceremony has been maintained. It is held annually at the palace Tsuk-lakhang or the royal chapel. In all the important monasteries, prayers are offered. At the spacious grounds of the palace white, black and red caparisoned prancing horses, depicting the mounts for the important mountain Gods are led with much drama and fanfare. The lamas, with the accompaniment of monastery music made by the huge Swiss-type blow horns called 'Radong', shake up the whole hill side; 'gyalings' with their shrill ear-piercing tremulous notes give one a weird, awe-inspiring feeling. The beats of the big and small drums keep rhythm and time, along with clashing of the brass cymbals. All of them being played simultaneously help to produce the required eerie effect which suits the amazing spectacle to the very hilt."

Another important festival "Chu Rum Faat" or the worship of the mountain gods, centered on the great Kanchenjunga takes place in the month of October. The date scheduled for observing this ritual in Darjeeling area for the year 2007 is 6th October. This has to be observed during the autumn season before the onset of winter, with the main purpose to plead to God for adequate snowfall in the winter to feed the rivers below and also for the protection of the Rongfolk.

The method of this worship, by different groups living in the different regions, tends to vary, but the main purpose and aim behind it is basically the same. It is to be noted that Bongthings was commissioned to undertake the rituals of the worship and the appeasement of the gods and demons of the plains to the south. The traditional place for this offering is on the hill overlooking the limitless vast plains; it is above the Golma forest, near Sevoke, about fifteen kilometers from Siliguri town, where the river Rongnyu, leaving the hills, enters the plains. After the opening rituals at the Tsuk Lhakhang have been completed, the royal Bongthing returns home with presents from the palace. Among other things he takes back with him a full grown yack bull which is sacrificed at the altar at Tingvoong at the community worship at the special shrine which they have their purpose. Formerly, the Chyu Rum Faat used to take place in a particular location where there would be a shrine where the worship used to be conducted in the presence of whole community, who would attend on the occasion. But, nowadays, because of the overwhelming increase in population of the immigrants, value of the holy places is getting affected.

Last but not the least another important festival celebrated in the month of December or sometimes in January (winter season) is popularly known as Nambun. The literary meaning of the term Nambun can be understood by breaking the syllable of the word as- Nam means Year and Bun means New. In a simple word it is New Year's Day. Regarding its time period, we can say, it usually falls during the month of December or sometimes in January i.e. depending on which day the new moon falls and the Nambun period starts from new moon day, usually the first day of Paus. There is one traditional belief behind celebrating this festival i.e. it took one year for God Tashey Thing to slay the king of the devils Laso Mung.

For the Nambun or the New Year's Day, the first thing we do is to offer prayers to the gods to keep us hale and hearty, and to help us to live comfortable lives throughout the coming year. In contrast to this, on New Year's Eve, we offer appeasement to the demons and the devils, so that, being engaged with the things offered they may not continue coming after us and pestering in the coming year.

Mainly two ceremonies are collaborated with the celebrations of this festival viz. Lut Dyan and Pik Sat respectively. Let us discuss the procedures of these ceremonies later in this article in brief.

Lut Dyan or throwing away or discarding of the unwanted and the undesirable being-the devils, demons, and evil spirits. On the roughly constructed bamboo tray, some of the important articles like cereal items, small leaves, twigs, fruits, roots, sugarcane etc. are placed one after another as offering to the devil. Pik-Sat is a kind of purification ceremony. By keeping all those items in tray, head of the family or

Bongthing used to call all the members of the family as per seniority wise, one by one, purify with the traditional brushes from head to toe. It is assumed that sickness and other undesirable in the person of each member is thus transferred to the tray and the member is cleansed.

After this ceremony each and every member of the family payed their obeisance and respect to the elder by bowing their head turn by turn. Then there was the convention of drinking chi from the same pot starting from the senior most turn by turn as well as eating of gruel (Tok-tok in Lepcha).

Nambun or New Year's Day festival can be considered as a thanks giving function. This is the one festival where each family and community as a whole seems to revel and make merry. A day's Government holiday is also declared during the Nambun in Darjeeling District.

As already mentioned the important festivals of Lepchas of all seasons, now let's highlight the involvement of some religious persons in the above discussed festivals. Mention may be made of the Bongthing. The central religious roles in the Lepcha community are traditionally occupied by the Mun and Bongthing, who both function as shamans. The Bongthing is traditionally a male shaman who presides at recurring religious ceremonies and seasonal festivals.

Apart from the festivals, if we focus on the dances offered by Lepchas, we can consider it as the part and parcel of their ceremonies. It is to be noted that in most of the festivals and other ceremonies, Chaams are performed. These are masked dance dramas with liturgical significance, performed in monastery. The ornate masks and customs are of resplendent colour and the dances are finely choreographed sequences requiring skill, training and vigour.

CONCLUSION:

The study of customs and manners in different places of India would give us an excellent food for thought and it may also arouse a speculative idea in the minds of people in ETHNOLOGICAL studies. It is always hard though, to speculate with any exactitude on an ethnic connection or other isolation as the case may be, merely from the similarity of rituals and customs; yet it must be remembered that there is still ample scope and utility for special investigation into the manners and customs of the aboriginal fragments and other primitive communities who have still retained in them the glimpse of primitive culture.

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¹⁰.A.R.Foning, 'Lepcha My Vanishing Tribe', Sterling Publishers Private Limited, Delhi,1987,pp.46-47

¹¹.Ibid,p.47

¹².Pik-Sat-purification ceremony

¹³Chi-a national drink of Lepchas

¹⁴.Gruel-made of rice and minced meat for breakfast

¹⁵.D.T.Tamlong,'Mayel Lyang and the Lepchas'p.247

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