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GENDER AND ABORIGINAL TRIBES: A CASE STUDY OF LEPCHAS

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Abstract:

Lepchas are the aboriginal tribes of Darjeeling. Lyangsong Tamsang, the Compiler, Translator and Editor of Lepcha Folklore and Folksongs, in his Introduction to the compilation, writes that The Lepchas refer to themselves as Mutanchi Rong Kup Rum Kup which means the 'Beloved Children of Mother Nature and God'. The Lepchas are nature lovers and worshippers of Mother Nature. The Lepchas see Mother Nature as a medium which brings them closer to their Rum. Tamsang remarks that the Lepchas are probably the only indigenous race, east of Israel, who profess to be 'Children of God' and Mother Nature. This paper highlights the gender concern in Lepcha society by studying their various conventions and customs.

KEYWORDS:

Aboriginal , Lepchas , Inheritance .

INTRODUCTION

Women are respected, honoured and cared by the Lepchas. They believe that their ancestors were created by a female, Itbu moo (their mother creator) and thus they revere the women folk. Further, Women are also equated with Nature which they worship and love for they call themselves Mutanchi Rong Kup Rum Kup which means the 'Beloved Children of Mother Nature'.

CUSTOMARY LAWS :

There are some customary laws in the Lepcha society which favour the female gender.

Female Inheritance- Although the Lepchas follow the Patriarchal system, there are several unwritten norms in their society which provide provisions for safeguarding the interests of the female sex. Unmarried women have the right to be protected and cared for in their father's/ brother's/ uncle's house. Even after the marriage of a woman, her family is obliged to see to her welfare and assist her whenever necessary. A.K Foning in Lepcha: My Vanishing Tribe gives the reader an instance of this practice from his own experience. He states that when his father's youngest sister Jakit had lost her husband, he was obliged to look after her and Sukmit, her daughter till Sukmit started earning after being qualified as a nurse. The writer, being the eldest member of the family had to follow this norm laid down by the society.

The Custom of Atil- According to this Lepcha custom, the female members of the family- daughters, sisters, aunts and cousins are to be given gifts like livestock, chicken, ornaments, a plot of land or a few fruit trees. The women who receive these gifts possess the right to sell the products or dispose of them in any way she desires. Nobody can question her on that account. She may take away the movable property

with her when she gets married. A widow, who for some reason has not re-married is also allowed to enjoy her property, both movable and immovable during her life-time.

ROLE OF WOMEN IN RELIGIOUS RITUALS:

Women play an important part in religious rituals as a Mun (a priestess who is believed to possess the divine power to communicate with the spirit of the dead or even God). The Mun is believed to help in the transportation of the soul of the departed into Rum-Lyang, the place of the gods where the dead unite with the souls of their ancestors. They play a major role in the after-death ceremony called the Sanglyon as the mediator between the departed and his/her relatives. There are several types of Mun:

- Pilon/Pildon Mun: They are the ones who have attained a high degree of spiritual enlightenment and are thus considered to be competent to perform the Sanglyon and to lead the soul of the departed to Rum-Lyang.

- Mun Jyum Mun: They prophesy and treat the sick by using roots and leaves. They are not as powerful as the Pilon/Pildon Mun and are thus sought when lesser exigencies arise. They are competent to function as full-fledged Muns but they do not possess the power to lead the souls of the dead to Rum-Lyang.

- Tangli Mun: They are the women who realise their calling to act as Muns while leading ordinary lives. They perform as narrators of Lungten Sung (Lepcha stories from ancient mythology). They also function as physicians and are in demand for their healing powers.

- Avore Mun: They are the Mun-in-group or women who become Mun as a result of the Mun Spirit appearing in one family or a group of people of the same clan. They may be mother and daughter, aunt and niece, grand-mother and grand-daughter, or in any other order.

MARITAL CUSTOMS:

In the Rong/ Lepcha society, marriage is an institution which unites not just two individuals but two clans. It is considered to be a strong link between two clans or families. Further the system of Aangaop (re-marriage of a widow within her late husband's family) ensures that this link is kept intact and never broken. The various marital rituals also help to depict the attitude of the Lepchas towards the women folk. The bride is considered to be a 'jewel' as she is addressed as the 'jewel bride' in the wedding song (Bree Munlaom Aprya Vom) sung by the elders.

ORIGIN OF THE LEPCHA MARRIAGE (Namko Bree Aait Sung):

The origin of the Lepcha marriage can be traced with the help of Namko Bree Aait Sung [Namko Bree- Uniting a man and a woman in holy matrimony; Aait-Origin, Sung-Tale]. According to this tale Tarbongthing, the first Lepcha male created by Itbu moo set off from his home to explore Mayel Lyang. After exploring the utopian homeland of the Lepchas he arrives at a place where he decided to rest. Hungry and tired, he set his Radoo Ramyang (bamboo trap) to catch a few birds. However, he is astonished to see his trap filled with dry twigs and leaves instead of birds. This continues for two days. On the third day he hides himself and kept a close watch on his trap. While doing so, he sees a beautiful young girl freeing the birds trapped in the Radoo Ramyang and filling it with twigs and leaves. When he comes before the girl, he realises that she is Narip Noam- the Guardian, Preserver and Champion of birds. [Here again we see a woman equated with Nature.] Tarbongthing falls in love with her and decides to marry her. Narip Noam agrees to this proposition on the condition that he is to visit her parents and ask her hand in marriage. Finally, their marriage is finalised after Tarbongthing and his parents promise to provide the necessary items to be presented as Bride Price. Thus, the first Lepcha marriage was solemnised at Tarbong Narip Purtam, Sakyong Faokraam Takraam (Dzongu, North Sikkim).

LEPCHA MARRIAGE CUSTOMARY LAWS:

Lyangsong Tamsang in 'Naamko Bree' the Lepcha Marriage [Himalyan Research Journal Vol.1] lists the Lepcha marriage customary laws. An analysis of those laws reveals the reverential attitude of the Lepchas towards women.

Bride Price-The practice of bride price which is to be paid by the groom's family to the bride and her family reflect the idea that daughters are precious to a family and her husband has to offer a bride price to compensate for her absence in her household after marriage. The bride price consists of the following-

Nyaom aasek Gyu (Engagement price);

Myaok Panaol (Customary presents to the bride's family);
Nyaom Lee Hraon (Items to be arranged for the bride's entrance to her new house);
Nyaom Mongkong Zo-gool (a dressed cock to be presented to the bride's family on completion of the marriage);
Dress and jewels for the Bride.

Widow Re-marriage (Aangaop)-Further, the Lepchas follow the system of Aangaop- Re-marriage of widower/widow within his/her spouse's family in order to keep the bond between two families intact. This practice allows a widow to remarry (after the untimely death of her husband) her husband's single young brother or his single nephew. Under this system, the children of the previous marriage are cared for by the second husband. The system of Aangaop stresses on the equal treatment of men and women as both the sexes are given the liberty to marry after the loss of a partner.

Bree Munlaom apya Vom (Blessings to A Bride) - The wedding song sung at the end of the wedding by the elders also underlines the fact that the bride is valued by them and by the Lepcha society as a whole. She is addressed as a 'jewel' which is given to the groom's family by her parents and which brings light to the house she is married into:

“Into the laps of groom's parents
The jewel bride is entrusted....
Let the jewel bride shine,
Let her bring light to this house
From this day onwards...”

Therefore an analysis of the customs and religious rituals of the Lepchas reveals their attitude towards the women-folk. They respect, honour and care for their female relations. Unlike in most societies, the women are given the right to inherit the property they have been given by their fathers/brothers/uncles. Females are often given the status of religious leaders when they take on the function of priestesses/Muns. The importance given to a Lepcha woman can also be witnessed in the marital rituals and customs wherein she is treated as a valuable jewel whose absence in her parents' house is to be compensated by her husband through the payment of a bride price, a practice which stands in stark contrast to the evil practice of dowry. The system of Aangaop ensures that a female who has lost her spouse to death is treated at par with a widower. Both the sexes can re-marry within the family of their dead spouse which saves them from a life of loneliness and hardships resulting from the absence of a partner (especially in the case of a widow). Thus, one can remark that women enjoy a fairly high and special status in the Lepcha society.

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