

**RESEARCH PAPER****Education of the Lepchas: With Special Reference to Night Schools in West Bengal****Nil Ratan Roy¹ and Prerna R. Lepcha²**¹Department of Education, Tezpur University (A Central University), Napaam, Assam²Department of Education, VisvaBharati, Santiniketan, West BengalEmail: niledn@tezu.ernet.inReceived: 1st February 2017, Revised: 30th March 2017, Accepted: 5th April 2017**ABSTRACT**

The Lepchas are the inhabitants of the Eastern Himalayas and at present live in Darjeeling and surrounding hills of West Bengal, Sikkim, Western part of Bhutan and Illam region of eastern Nepal. The Lepchas call themselves Rong which means son of the snowy peak or the son of God. Education amongst the early native settlers of the Eastern Himalayas was shrouded in ignorance about 200 years ago. There was total absence of formal education and it was through experience that the earliest settlers, the Lepchas learned about what their elders had to offer. The education at that point of time was totally non-formal and incidental. The Lepcha people are known to be rich in legends and folklores. Those days the Lepcha folklores were sufficient as the sources of education in these parts. Looking at the recent development in education of the Lepchas, a vast disparity has been found between the Lepchas dwelling in the urban and Lepchas in the rural areas. At present the Mayelyang Lepcha development board has been working continuously for the upliftment of the Lepcha community as a whole.

Key words: Lepcha, Night School, Traditional Education

INTRODUCTION

Education has always been considered as one of the prime element of social change. Education is regarded as the most effective tool to reach the unreached, understand their habits and bring about progressive change in them. It is a known fact that any civilization in the world corresponds to how well educated its citizens are. It has been the basis of development of human society. Education in Darjeeling hills of West Bengal and specially the education amongst the indigenous primitive Lepcha tribe have seen many phases.

The Lepchas are the inhabitants of the Eastern Himalayas and at present live in Darjeeling and surrounding hills of West Bengal, Sikkim, Western part of Bhutan and Illam region of eastern Nepal. The Lepchas call themselves Rong which means son of the snowy peak or the son of God. Helen Plaiser narrates "The name 'Lepchā' used today is, perhaps, derived from a Lepcha word, Lāpchao, meaning a resting or waiting place on the wayside or a place on the wayside where stones are heaped up as sign post to direct travelers. When the Nepalese first arrived in the Lepcha land and enquired about their identity at such a waiting place, the Rong people not knowing what the Nepalese were enquiring, replied that it is 'Lāpchao' guessing that they were asking the name of the place. Unable to pronounce the name, 'Lāpchao' correctly, the Nepalese addressed the 'Rong' folk as 'Lāpchā' and later 'Lāpche'. When the British finally arrived, in the Lepcha land they, in turn, anglicized it to 'Lepchā'. The Lepcha myths and folktales narrate their origin from the snowy peaks of Mount Kanchenjunga.

"The first and the foremost primogenitors of the Lepchas, Fodongthing and Nazaongnyo were created by God from the pure, virgin snows Kingsoomzaongboo Choo's pinnacles and sent them down to live, prosper and spread all over the fairyland of Mayelyang that lies on the lap of Kingsoomzaongboo Choo that is Mount Kanchenjunga", writes amsang K.P.T.

The mythological origin of the Lepchas has been taken into account by many authors who have worked and are working on Lepchas. The origin of the Lepchas as put forward by Roy 2012 can be examined "over two time periods, the first time period mainly contains the writings of the Europeans who actually initiated the study on Lepchas. The second period is mostly by the Indians who basically follow the view of the Europeans." The first and the foremost report on Lepchas can

be studied from the writings of Campbell, the then Superintendent of Darjeeling in 1840. Regarding the originality of the Lepchas, he wrote, "Lepchas are the most interesting people, and I believe the undoubted origins of the mountain forest surrounding Darjeeling."

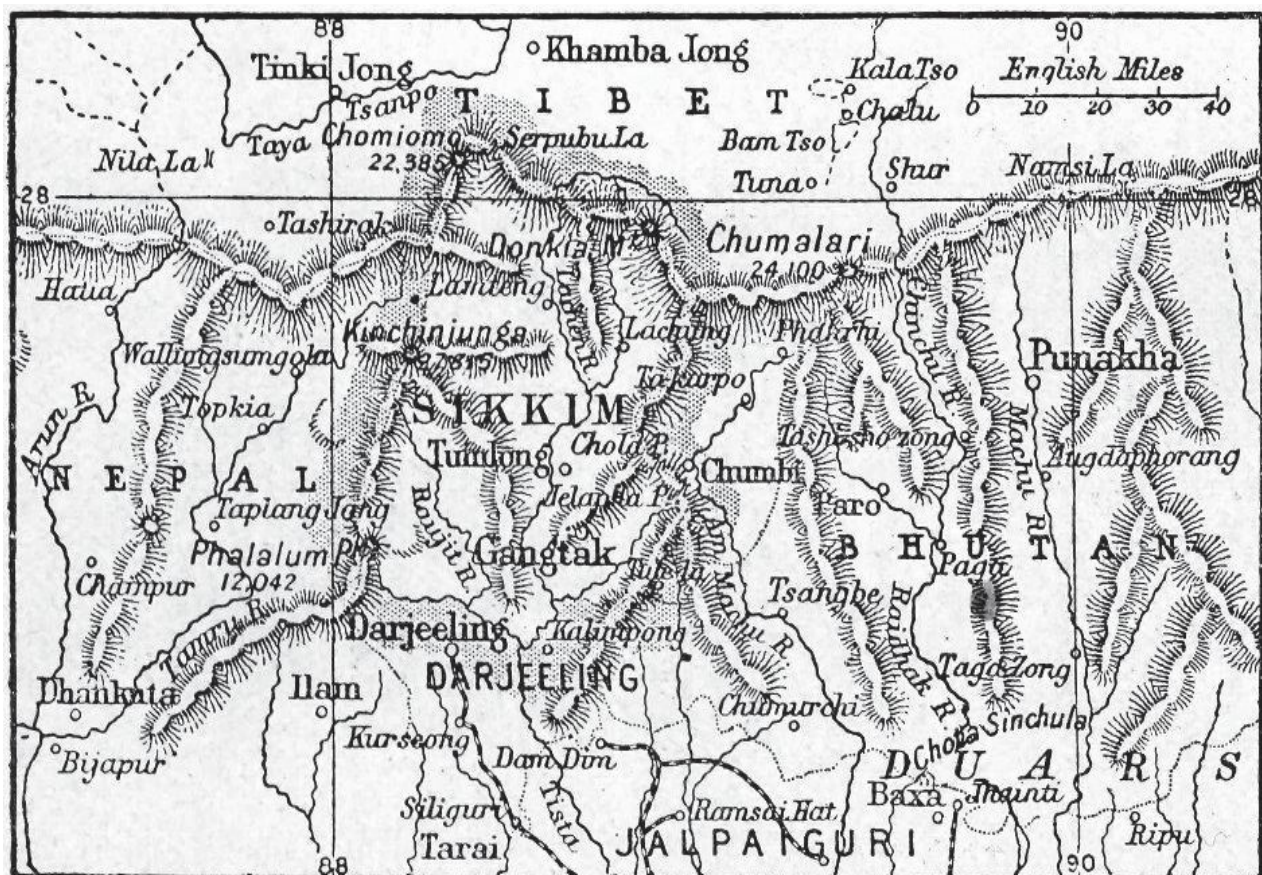
There are various theories regarding the origin of the Lepchas. Without entering into all those confusion we can safely infer that the Lepchas are Mongoloid residents of the eastern Himalayan tract right from the earlier times. Thus they can be considered the original inhabitants of the Eastern Himalayan region including the entire state of Sikkim, Darjeeling hills, eastern Nepal and western Bhutan.

BOUNDARY OF MAYELYANG OR THE LAND OF THE LEPCHA

It is a known fact that the Lepchas call themselves 'Mutanchi Rong Kup Rum Kup' or in short Rong which means 'son of snowy peak' or the 'son of God' and they call their home land Nye Mayel Renjyaong Lyang or simply Mayelyang which means land of hidden paradise or the delightful region or abode. The Kanchenjunga is considered to be divine by the Lepcha people and it is worshipped in almost all occasions. The very three aspect of the Lepchas i.e. their name, homeland and their spiritual belief connect the Lepcha with the mountain region of Eastern Himalayas.

K.P. Tamsang, the eminent Lepcha scholar while describing the original homeland of the Lepchas writes: "Formerly their land extended from the Himalayas down to the Titaliya in the vast plains of India, now in Bangladesh after partition and to the east, it was extended to Gopmochi mountain (14,523), the Trijunction of Sikkim, Bhutan and Tibet, now Chinese Tibet, and to the west it was extended as far as the Aron river, now in Nepal and this ancient land of the ancient people, the Lepchas, with so rich a history and romantic legends and sagas was then called by the name Mayelyang" (Tamsang,1983).

Fig 1: Old Map of Northeast India and Borderlands before the Darjeeling Tract was Annexed from Sikkim



(Source: Map of north-east India from <http://www.facebook.com/Vintage.Sikkim>)

However over the years, Mayelyang has seen a whole number of shuffling and reshuffling and the original Mayelyang has been divided among five countries: India, Nepal, Bhutan, Tibet and Bangladesh. Apart from the political displacement and geographical division the lands occupied by the Lepchas, their educational ground too faced many transition. In the current study the Lepchas residing in the Darjeeling hills of West Bengal have been taken into consideration comprising of areas in and around Darjeeling, Kalimpong and Kurseong.

EDUCATION OF THE LEPCHAS IN WEST BENGAL

Education amongst the early native settlers of the Eastern Himalayas was shrouded in ignorance about 200 years ago. There was total absence of formal education and it was through experience that the earliest settlers, the Lepchas learned about what their elders had to offer. The education at that point of time was totally non-formal and incidental. The Lepcha people are known to be rich in legends and folklores. Myths, legends and folktales for them were the oldest traditional accounts of what was once a reality. Those days the Lepcha folklores were sufficient as the sources of education in these parts. The mythological stories speak about the language of the Lepchas as the language of God and the script given by God. When we look into the earlier era, as the Lepchas were bestowed with their own language and it was through their informal gatherings that education was imparted to the younger generation through oral narratives about their life experiences. Storytelling by far holds the most prominent place in the heart of the Lepchas and also is an effective way of channeling education. Keeping in mind the above facts the present investigators prepared the paper with the following objectives-

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. To know about the indigenous Lepcha tribe.
2. To explore the history of education of the Lepchas in West Bengal.
3. To study the present status of education of the Lepchas in West Bengal.
4. To find out how the Lepcha night schools are functioning.

METHODOLOGY

The present study insists the ethnographic approach; the primary data has been collected from the field by administering interviews. Secondary sources collected from various sources like- the government records, Lepcha development Board records, community library resources, documentation cells, books, gazetteers, journals etc. The design of the study is shown in the table 1.

Table 1: Design of the Sstudy

S.No	Objectives	Nature of data	Tools and techniques
1	To know about the indigenous Lepcha tribe.	Secondary data	Documentary Analysis
2	To explore the geographical boundaries of the land of the Lepchas.	Primary and Secondary data	Documentary Analysis
3	To explore the history of education of the Lepchas in West Bengal	Primary and secondary data	Documentary Analysis
4	To study the present status of education of the Lepchas in West Bengal	Primary and secondary data	Documentary Analysis
5	To find out how the Lepcha night schools are functioning	Primary data and secondary data	Interview

EDUCATION AND THELEPCHAS

The Lepchas have their own language and script. During the pre-British period, the Lepcha language was the language of the region. Mainwaring has written, 'all Tibetan, Bhutias, or other who entered the country and spoke, in which the rule of Colonel Llyod, business was carried on, and justice in the English court administered, in the character of which, decrees and documents were written and recorded (Mainwaring 1876, Reprint 1985). One of the three languages in which the deed of the gift of Darjeeling was written was Lepcha. However there are no record of any traditional educational institution, but they are known to be the most knowledgeable amongst the

other tribes of the region. They are so attune with nature that, “the Lepchas can tell you the name of all, they can distinguish at glance the difference of species of each genus of plants, which would require the skill of a practiced botanist to perceive; and this nomenclature and information extends to beasts, to birds, and to everything around them, animate and inanimate; without instruction, they seem to acquire their knowledge by intuition alone.”(Ibit:p-xix). The early education of the Lepchas was very simple and practical. The nature itself was their teacher. Their whole physical being was attuned to nature. They were aware of all their surroundings the plants, the trees, the rivers and so on. They had extensive knowledge about the gifts of nature and they adjusted their stay accordingly. The Lepchas were born naturalist and they could easily identify edible roots and fruits and other useful plants. They had their very own art of hunting and fishing techniques. These life skills that they attained during their lifetime formed a major part of their education. Education then was totally based on experience, practical and life- centric. Here we can say that the education was experience based because the elders were always ready to share their experience with others. They usually used to gather around the hearth in the evenings and share their knowledge about all the things related to their society and tradition. The elderly experienced people were the storehouse of knowledge and they were often experts on medicinal plants and herbs who could tend to the ailments and various diseases that affected the people. The knowledge was obtained as a result of experience, contact and interaction with the surroundings. Education was practical because the youngsters were getting practically trained and prepared through observing the acts, ceremonies, rituals etc. The children and the young learned by participating in various activities under the observation of experienced elders. The education again was project based and life centric because the activities were carried out individually or in groups to cater to the needs of the family. A world renowned botanist, Dr. J.D. Hooker, the Director of Kew Garden, England, who visited the Darjeeling, Sikkim, and Nepal Himalayas in the late 1840s and early 1850s, complemented the Lepchas as pure naturalists and born botanists.

Putting together the historical evidences, when the Blood brotherhood treaty signed between the The-Kung Tek, the Lepchas leader and Khy-Buma during the mid 1400s pave the way for Tibetan suzerainty over Nye MayeLyang and brought the sons of soil, the Lepchas under the Tibetans. The Tibetans collected and destroyed the Lepcha manuscripts that were available in the region. Slowly Buddhism gained its popularity and animism soon lost its grip on the Lepchas. It was only after the Europeans entered the region that formal education came into force in general. Till that day they gained education through experiences and the religious education through monasteries in particular.

However, among all the controversial views, it has been accepted by most of the scholars that the Buddhist missionaries led by Chador Namgyal, the third consecrated Sikkimese ruler and a good friend of Lepchas, took the initiative of spreading the Lepcha script in the 1700s and the Christian missionaries were the first to print it. Since the beginning of nineteenth century, systems and institutions of indigenous education in India were gradually being replaced by British Indian education systems. Christians Missionaries along with other voluntary organizations played a major role in some regions such as in Darjeeling hills in India in spreading education among the masses.

When the East India Company in 1835 first acquired the nucleus of the Darjeeling District from the Raja of Sikkim, it was almost under forest and relatively uninhabited. ‘The Darjeeling deed of Grant, 1835’ written in the Lepcha language with Hindustani translation at the bottom and the Royal Seal of the Maharaja of Sikkim on the middle top of the document is an ample, tangible proof, and confirmation of the fact that the Lepcha language was once the lingua franca and official language of the Darjeeling District. Until the advent of East India Company, conventional education in Lamaist Buddhist scriptures and rituals was provided by the monasteries. However for the ensuing of modern secular education, the district owes much to the efforts of various European Christian Missions.

During the transfer of the hill territory of Darjeeling, the simple, innocent, but true sons of the soil, and master, the Lepchas, were completely ignored. Their thoughts, opinions and fundamental rights were never considered and accounted for by both the East India Company and Raja of Sikkim. The Lepchas of the Darjeeling hills were transferred or sold like animals. Thus the process

of the Lepchas annihilation in the Darjeeling hills began. It was estimated that this hill tract of 138 square miles contained a population of one hundred Lepchas (Dash, 1947) only. A primitive system of Government at the time hardly did anything to encourage the original inhabitants, the Lepchas, for their development.

However, in 1841 one school was established at Takvar in Darjeeling by Rev. William Start particularly for the local children and this paved way for the development of formal education system amongst the tribe. It was his first attempt to reach the Lepchas through education (O'Malley 1907). "The chief objective of the mission was to convert the Lepchas into Christianity; hence for the evangelical work and purposes they translated "The Book of Genesis and part of Exodus in Lepcha in 1849 and the Gospels of Matthews etc (Hatthorn 1863). It is clear that the first effort in the field of education was made by the non-British Christian Missionary. Even though short lived, the Lepcha school at Tukvar was the earliest school known in the Darjeeling Hill tract. This was the beginning of the Lepcha language school and Lepchas coming into contact with the modern education."

Until 1911 the Lepcha language was the official language in the Darjeeling Hills. Unfortunately, at the present time, only in the interior region, the Lepcha language has remained to be the mother tongue of the Lepchas; but in the urban areas in general and also in a few rural areas where they live in small numbers, their language is generally under the spell of Nepali language. Decades ago Florence Donaldson, 1900 had remarked that their rich and beautiful language has been preserved from probable extinction by the effort of General G.B. Mainwaring and others. General G.B. Mainwaring (1876 XII) remarked that, "numerous tribes that had flocked into the land ruined the Lepchas. It was at the expense of widely prevalent Lepcha language that Hindustani was made the chief language in the Darjeeling Hills. Oppressed and crushed on all side, the Lepcha race and language came to be considered unfashionable". Both A Turnbull and W S Sutherland "had lamented the need for Lepcha literature but the pressure of other work and the lack of educated translators left this need unfulfilled. In 1920 itself the Lepchas demanded that the language be introduced in schools like Nepali language. Unfortunately the British turned down their demand. On top of that, the Nepali Textbook Committee in 1929 gave the following argument: (i) As there was no Lepcha textbooks, there is no point in teaching a boy Lepcha language, (ii) Unless the language is actually dying out, the majority of Lepchas boys will learn to speak it in their homes, (iii) the written language of Lepchas is of no practical use in their life, (iv) The Lepchaboy already has to study both Nepali and Hindi at some stage or other, so why add to his difficulty by teaching him to read a third language is which there is practically no literature.

The Indian constitution has laid down various rights and privileges for linguistic and religious minorities. Article 350 A lays down that, "it shall be the endeavour of every State and every local authority within the state to provide adequate facilities for instruction in the mother tongue at the primary stage of education to children belonging to linguistic minority groups. Though these provisions were clearly spelt out, the minority language of Lepchas were clearly neglected. It was mainly because of this the Lepcha were forced to study in an alien language. Over the years the need for the recognition of Lepcha language grew which eventually led to the formation of an official Lepcha development body. On this context the ILTA president LyangsongTamsang remarked "Until 1911, Lepcha was the official language of the Darjeeling hills. It became unfashionable to the then rulers and was replaced by Hindi/Hindustani and later by English till 1947. So much so the Lepchas' very rich and ancient language and literature did not get its due place in the schools in their own homeland of Darjeeling hills.' According to Census of Darjeeling district, in the year 1872- there was 3,952 Lepchas; in the year 1901-9, 972 Lepchas; in the year 1931-12,101 Lepchas; in the year 1941-12,468 Lepchas, in the year 1951-13, 168 Lepchas; in the year 1981-22, 749 Lepchas; in the year 1991-26,920 Lepchas; in the year 2001-31, 210 Lepchas in Darjeeling district. Lepcha population increased during the period 1872 to 2001 from 3,952 to 31,210 in Darjeeling district.

According to Census, in the year 1961 there was -15,309 Lepchas; in the year 1971-14, 588 Lepchas; in the year 1991-27,888 Lepchas; in the year 2001-32,377 Lepchas in West Bengal state. The community at large suffered huge setback and this can be revealed in the study in the year 1985 made by T.B. Subba "The Lepchas: From Legends to present day, on the education of Lepcha

in Darjeeling hills during the 1980s. His study reveal that only 26.8% of the Lepcha community was educated till the primary level, 28.2% up to secondary level and only 1.9% up to the college level and above. It was noticed that very few households of Lepchas were educated till the university level.

Now with the Indigenous Lepcha population of Darjeeling hills extending more that 1.5 lakhs increased sufficiently and their literacy rate is 75.2% in the census 2001 (male 81.7% and female 68.7%). The Lepchas found no support from the government so the Association on its own initiative had started opening Lepcha Night Schools in different Lepcha dominated villages in Darjeeling hills for promoting the Lepcha culture and need of Lepcha language amongst the younger generation. The oldest Lepcha school dates back to 1957 in Ngassey in Kalimpong sub-division of Darjeeling district which is still functioning today. In the year 2003 twenty seven Lepcha night schools sprung up in different parts of Kalimpong subdivision. General Secretary of the Lepcha association L.S. Tamsang said: "The younger generation of the Lepcha is showing a lot of interest in the language. It is through their initiative that such schools are coming up. Their dedication surprises me. It also makes me happy that these children are doing it on their' own. They collect donations from people and raise funds by performing drama and dance shows. They use this money to open night schools. They collect much of the money during Lepcha New Year, when they go around to community homes and sing songs to get donations. We also try to help them by donating some money but we can't do much because of our financial constraints". The children received help and encouragement from the villages where they tried to set up schools. The workers hired to construct the schools did so for half the normal wage. Villagers also helped by providing free food to the workers. Lepcha night schools were also opened in different villages of Kalimpong like Byong, Pochaok, Dabling, Lingsey and Zo during that year.

However in West Bengal, it was only in September 2010, the state education department decided to introduce the Lepcha language in the primary and secondary schools in the Darjeeling hills. The decision was conveyed by Education minister Partha De to a delegation of the Indigenous Lepcha Tribal Association (ILTA) which called on him in Calcutta. During the meeting, a committee was formed to work on the textbooks, syllabus, curriculum, and selection of Lepcha language teachers. The committee was to submit its report to the minister. The introduction of the Lepcha language in schools was the culmination of a 14-year effort of the ILTA.

THE LEPCHA NIGHT SCHOOLS

At present, the Indigenous Lepcha Tribal Association, Headquarters Kalimpong has opened up more than forty Lepcha Night Schools in remote Lepcha villages where the four skills of the Lepcha language and culture are imparted to the Lepcha children without any financial assistance and support from the Governments, Local, State and Central. The night school starts from 4 pm to 6 pm in the winters and 5 pm to 8 pm during the summers. The Lepcha language is not the only thing that is taught in these schools. On weekends classes are held on different aspects of Lepcha culture from music to drama. Most of the night schools have a hall where the children are seated according to their age. Some of the night schools functioning in and around Kalimpong hills are as follows-

1. Samsing Kyong Seyjum Pakang Night School in Pakang Area.
2. Upper Pakang Kyong Seyjum Night School in Upper Pakang Area.
3. Sonagoan Kyong Seyjum Night School in Sonagoan Area.
4. Upper Pochaok Lepcha Night school in upper Pochok Area.
5. Lower Pochaok Lepcha Night School in lower Pochok Area.
6. Lower Beong Lepcha Night School in lower Byong Area.
7. Lower Dabling Lepcha Night School in lower Dabling Area.
8. Ryong Lepcha Night school in Reong Area.
9. Norlock Lepcha Night School in Norlock Area.

VISION BEHIND ESTABLISHING THE LEPCHA NIGHT SCHOOL IN PAKANG AREA

The above mentioned areas in and around Kalimpong, fall under the Lepcha belt wherein 99% of the population are Lepchas. Due to acculturation and enculturation, the culture, language, custom and tradition was being mixed with the influx of other cultures. Thus to preserve and transfer the

pure knowledge of the Lepchas, night schools were established first by the village community, i.e known as Kyong in Lepcha language, in Samsing in Pakang area by the vision of Ren. Dup Tshering Lepcha Ethenmoo in the year 1993. In these schools the children learn the Lepcha language and familiarize themselves with the Lepcha culture and custom.

SAMSINGKYONGSEYJUMPAKANG NIGHT SCHOOL

The President of Samsing Kyong Seyjum, Ren. Timbo Tshering Molommu Lepcha, who rendered his support for the research and gave the necessary information about the night school in that particular kyong/village. It was established in the year 1993 with an aim to preserve Lepcha language and culture. Ren. Dup Tshering Lepcha Ethenmoo who is the founder and also the teacher renders his selfless support in the functioning of the night school

The school starts at 5 till 7 pm from Monday to Saturday. The school remains closed during the monsoon season for almost three months because these schools are in far-flung areas and there're dangers of landslide and roadblocks. The level of the river water rises and it becomes difficult for the children to communicate. Basic Lepcha language, Lepcha culture including dance and songs as well as Basic English is taught. Voluntary teachers from the same area and foreign volunteers also come to learn Lepcha language and teach Basic English to the children. Frequent class tests are conducted to test the students' performance. Books are provided by the Lepcha development board. Children within the age- group of 8-16 years and children who can walk come to school. There were 10-11 students in the year 1993, at present there are 24-25 students. There are other two night schools functioning in this area- Upper Pakang Kyong Seyjum Night School and Sonagaon night school.

UPPER POCHAOKLEPCHA NIGHT SCHOOL

Ren Sukh Singh Lepcha, a Lepcha activist and a writer and also the person responsible for the development of Lepchas in that area who resides in Upper Pochaok, who also provided valuable information about the functioning of the night schools. It was established in the year 1994 by Ren. Buddha Singh. At present Phur Tshering Lepcha and Sanomith Lepcha are responsible for running the classes. The enrolment in the year 1994 there were more than twenty students and at present there are above forty students.

The syllabus and the school timings are the same for all these schools. These are the two major schools functioning in this area. The researcher visited the schools but due to the monsoon the schools were closed. However the researcher was able to gather information by interviewing the administrators of the schools. As the schools were closed the researcher did not have an opportunity to observe the class-room i.e., the Lepcha teachings conducted by the teachers, the class-room environment and the participation of the students in a class-room.

CONCLUSION

Looking at the recent development in education of the Lepchas, a vast disparity has been found between the Lepchas dwelling in the urban and Lepchas in the rural areas. At present the Mayelyang Lepcha development board has been working continuously for the upliftment of the Lepcha community as a whole. The Association is also publishing Lepcha text books for the children and other Lepcha literary works on their own. The Association has also been very actively organizing various seminars, workshops and conferences to create awareness among the common Lepchas. The Lepcha language board not only provides education but also conducts examination and issues certificates to successful candidates. The Lepcha Language Development Board of Examination has carried out examinations on three levels as follows:-

1. Term One – Primary Education Standard
2. Term Two- Jr. High School Standard
3. Term Three- Madhyamik Education Standard

The effort made by the Association is indeed a matter of great pride. Thus it is now in the hands of the Lepcha themselves to preserve and maintain their distinct identity or prefer to merge with other dominant culture. Education is the sole tool to create consciousness among the common

Lepchas. The present picture shows that the more than ninety percent Lepcha are inhabitants of remote corners of Darjeeling Hills. Therefore, along with the association, the government and also the common Lepchas should work hand in hand to bring about progress through education.

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