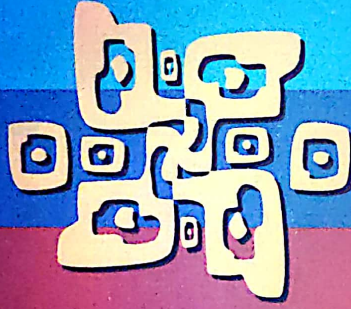




বাংলা অমাজ অংকুতি আহিত্যচর্চা

বহুমাত্রিক চেতনায়



সম্পাদনা

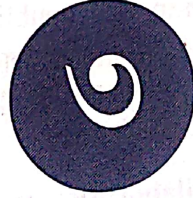
তপন মন্ডল | দীপঙ্কর মল্লিক
রাকেশ জানা | অভি কোলে



বাংলা সমাজ-সংস্কৃতি-সাহিত্যচর্চা বহুমাত্রিক চেতনায়

মেদিনীপুর সিটি কলেজ ও দি গৌরী কালচারাল অ্যান্ড এডুকেশনাল অ্যাসোসিয়েশন-এর যৌথ
উদ্যোগে অনুষ্ঠিত

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Laso Mung and Lepchas' Fight for Survival A Political Interpretation of Lepcha Movement in the Darjeeling District of West Bengal Abhsihek Chakravorty & Dr. Arpita Raj

The origin of Lepchas is shrouded with mystery. Scholars are divided in the topic of their birthplace and the migration they had to reach Sikkim and the northern portion of West Bengal. Some believe that the Lepchas are of Tibeto-Burmese origin with a Chinese connection. During the early 13th century, they migrated from their ancestral places and settled down in North Sikkim first and then came to occupy the hilly region of Darjeeling district. Known as the 'children of the snowy peaks', the Lepchas generally follow the 'Bon' ethno-religious belief. Their indigeneity has labelled them as worshippers of natural elements—the mountains, the rivers, the trees, the birds and various other elements of nature. Their approach towards life is more biocentric than anthropocentric. Though, later the Lepchas came into contact with Buddhism and Christianity, still majority of them try to remain true to their ancestral religious ideologies. Generally, the Lepchas believe that their creator Itbu-moo has created them from the snows of Mount Kangchenjunga and has given them the lower hilly regions to live and prosper. To the Lepchas, the place is known as 'Mayal Lyang' or 'the land of Paradise'. They believe that they live in 'Mayal Lyang' with divine beings- both good and evil. The good and benevolent beings are known as 'rum' and the evil and malevolent beings are known as 'mun'. This co-existence is the main base of Lepcha mythology. This mythological structure of their indigenous culture has been preserved in their different folk narratives and other cultural artifacts.

The Myth of Laso Mung: The Lepchas have a diverse collection of oral traditions which reflect their socio-cultural beliefs through various folk tales and descriptions of rituals. The word 'lungten sung' is generally used to denote the myths associated with the Lepcha origin story. 'Lungten' means 'tradition' and 'sung' means 'narrative' or 'tale' (Bentley, 100). The concept of 'lungten sung' can be understood, from the point of view of the Lepchas, as a structure to sustain their indigenous stories and at the same time, make them movable towards the future. The myth of Laso Mung is deeply connected with the origin story of the Lepchas. 'Laso' can be translated to 'to change appearance' and 'mung' means 'demon'. In Lepcha myth, Laso Mung is a demon, an outcast who threatened to destroy the Lepchas out of existence.

The myth of Laso Mung has been coloured with local variations through the ages while keeping the base model original. In this paper, we will be dealing with the story of Laso Mung popular in the Darjeeling district, especially in Kalimpong. The story begins with the creation of the first Lepcha man and woman by the divine creator Itbu-moo-Fadrongthing and Nazongnyu (Bentley, 103). Both of them were created as brother and sister. Itbu-moo forbade them to indulge in any sexual activities. But, they violated that doctrine and Nazongnyu got pregnant, eventually, for several times giving birth. But, as those babies were unwanted, they were thrown away by the couple only to hide their sin from Itbu-moo. According to Lepcha scholars, the numbers of children thrown away were seven. But, ironically, those children were not dead. In Lepcha myth, those abandoned children became the 'mun' or 'mung' or 'demons'. Generally the demons dwell in the jungles, lone mountain paths and other desolate places to avoid the contact of the Lepchas out of sheer hatred. But occasionally they try to inflict harm on them to satisfy their thirst for revenge for being abandoned by the ancient mother and father of the Lepchas. According to myth, Laso Mung was the eldest of those seven demonic children and he vowed to take revenge on the Lepchas (Doma, 11). It has been stated in the legends that Laso Mung could took the forms of several animals and birds and using that power he started killing the Lepchas without any mercy. Ahbong chyokung sung, a Lepcha book, contains all the details of the tyrannical deeds of Laso Mung (Bentley, 105). Being unable to stop the aggression of the demon king, the Lepchas went to pray to Itbu-moo for help. The Lepcha myth is divided regarding the story of the hero who fought against the demon lord. Majority of the Lepchas from Sikkim (except North Sikkim) and Darjeeling believe that it was Jor bongthing who was send by the divine creator, Itbu debu rum or Itbu-moo, to protect them. Jor bongthing is generally depicted as a demi-god figure who has the power to expel any demonic presence from the environment. This same attribute has also been given to another deity figure Tamsang thing. The mythical figure of Tamsang thing is regarded as the

heroic figure who saved the Lepchas from Laso Mung in the northern portion of Sikkim and the inhabitants of Kalimpong (Bentley, 107). He is also regarded as the first ritual specialist for the Lepchas. The story goes on that after fighting with the demi-god, both directly and indirectly, Laso Mung escaped to Saynol kung, a mountain in Mayal lyang. There he took refuge in the tree Sangli kung. In the legends, the Sangli kung (a type of sago palm tree) has been mentioned as the final inhabitant of the demon king before his supposed death. The tree was cut down by the Lepcha warriors and Laso Mung was finally defeated after a vicious battle. His body was chopped to pieces and turned to ashes so that he could not resurrect (Doma, 20). The continuous battle with the demon king and his defeat mark an important phase in Lepcha origin story. The whole story gives the Lepchas a sense of reawakening from a dark period. The long war taught them about animals, birds, trees, the usage of medicinal plants and other things necessary for survival. Even they learned to count time also. The day Laso Mung was defeated is known as the last day, Marlavo, of the last month of the Lepcha twelve month calendar. The next day, in Lepcha folk narratives, is known as Namsoong or Nambun, the first day of the first month of the Lepcha new year (Doma, 21).

Laso Mung and Lepcha's fight for socio-cultural existence in Darjeeling District :

The Laso Mung myth of the Lepchas represents their fight for survival against the threat of annihilation posed by the demon king. These efforts of the Lepchas to exist can be analysed from socio-political perspective. The northern part of Sikkim and the Darjeeling district of West Bengal are known as the primary habitats of the Lepchas. These lands are known as, as stated earlier, 'Mayel Lyang' or 'Delightful Region' or 'Land of Hidden Paradise' (Das & Pal, 1). If we try to assess the history of the Lepchas, we will locate their struggles against various socio-political threats within their own lands. Lepchas of Darjeeling district are constantly facing the aggressive political oppression by the Gorkhas and Nepalis. Because of the majority in numbers, the Gorkhas and the Nepalis are getting the political superiority in the district. As a result, the Lepchas are lacking the foothold to maintain their cultural integrity. The issue of 'Gorkhaland' has impacted the Lepcha indigenous development a great deal. The Gorkha National Liberation Front has been a massive obstacle for the Lepchas to gain any political ground in Darjeeling district. The chauvinism of the Gorkhas can be parallelly seen in the Laso Mung myth. The demon king stands for the doom of the Lepchas and their lands. Their efforts to defeat him can be seen as a political struggle to challenge the politically powerful Gorkhas and the Nepalis. Generally, there are four Lepcha political associations fighting for the Lepcha indigeneity—the Indigenous Lepcha Forum (ILF), the Lepcha Youth Association (LYA), the Indigenous Lepcha Tribal Association (ILTA) and the Lepcha Rights

Movement (LRM) (Das & Pal, 4). Their major concern is the political instability the Lepchas are facing in the Darjeeling district of West Bengal. The Lepchas believe that the people of Bengal still consider them as untouchables and that is the main reason for the lack of any effort to understand their plights. This issue of untouchability is separating them to become an integral part of Bengal culture. To improve their chance of survival, both as a community and a cultural body, Lepcha organizations have put forwarded some necessary demands- a separate Lepcha Development Council, preservation and application of Lepcha language in the academic structure and reservation of seats for the Lepchas in the State Assembly and the Parliament (Ghosh, 2010). The Lepcha Rights Movement has also given a memorandum to the District Magistrate of Darjeeling on 18th August, 2011 for the sake of the protection of their lands, language and ethnic indigenous cultural identity. On 5th February, 2013, Government of West Bengal has approved the formation of a separate Lepcha Development Board (LDB) (Das & Pal, 5-6). It is fascinating to see how the Lepchas' political struggle is deeply connected to their origin story, particularly in their fight against Laso Mung. If we consider the demon king's ability to manipulate the Lepchas by taking the forms of several animals and birds to endanger their existence, it can be interpreted as the false consciousness promoted by the main stream cultures. False consciousness is a tool for manipulating the ideas of the oppressed class by using various modes of social artifacts (Nayar, 181). Even when we are talking about their protagonists in their battle against the demon, Jor Bongthing and Tamsang thing, they can be seen as the carriers of their indigenous values in front of the whole world to secure their linguistic and cultural freedom. The tale of Laso Mung symbolically states the survival of the Lepchas against all odds to uphold their cultural indigeneity. It can be seen as a motto statement for them to gain socio-political stability in the cultural-political milieu of West Bengal.

Conclusion :

Though the Laso Mung myth actively symbolizes the attempts of the Lepchas to secure socio-political freedom, it can be viewed as a double edged sword also. Laso Mung himself was made an outcast by his parents. He became an untouchable. That became the motive behind his revenge against the Lepcha community. It can be noted that, perhaps, the Lepcha themselves have been securing the idea, through their folk tales, that political and cultural antagonism can lead to alienation which can, eventually, dissolve the identity of any community. Thus, Laso Mung can be interpreted as tool which can remind the Lepchas of the crime committed by their divine parents; at the same time it can glorify the victory of the Lepchas over something evil denoting their indigenous unity.

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