



MARRIAGE AND MONEY: BRIDE PRICE AND STATUS OF LEPCHA WOMEN OF SIKKIM AND NORTH BENGAL, INDIA.

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ABSTRACT

Marriage is one of the key social institutions of the society that we live in, but today everything around us is changing and so is the concept of marriage. It is no longer useful and essential. The idea of marriage has been re-defined by globalisation. However, the Lepchas still maintain their old marriage customs. This paper seeks to explore the old system of bride price among the Lepcha tribe, the indigenous people of Sikkim and North Bengal. It seeks to look into the marriage rituals and the old system of bride price known as (*Taya-Kup-Afaar* or *Nyom-sa-afar* or *Myaok panol*), and how they have maintained over time. It discusses the importance of a girl in the family, how the family welcomes a girl child and the society celebrates at the birth of a girl in the village. The Lepcha tribe follows the patriarchal system but as far as the property matters are concerned and as long as the girls are not married and taken away by their husbands they have full right of protection. This paper attempts to study the status of women, the pattern of harmony between men and women in the Lepcha tribal society.

[Keywords: Lepcha, marriage customs, tribal rituals, tribal beliefs, Lepcha women status]

INTRODUCTION

Marriage is a fundamental aspect, a social contact of male and female to satisfy their physical, biological and spiritual satisfactions. This coming together of two individuals helps in procreation of new generation essential for the continuation of human civilization. This is one of the most essential features of any society. Marriage for Lepchas is not just a unification of two individuals but it involves the merging of two clans, two villages, two families and two Moos. This is an important custom for the Lepcha tribes since this helps in keeping the Lepcha society united and homogenous. Some social scientist labelled marriage as one of the most fundamental elements in the maintenance and reproduction of the society itself.¹

There are many theories put forward to understand the term marriage. Theories are invented to explain the ways how this custom works. Research finds that women are obligated to the man they marry, and points out that

¹ Kim M. Lloyd and Rosemary Yeilding, *Marriage*, in William A. Darity Jr (editor in chief), International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences 2nd edition, vol,4, , GALE, cengage Learning, 2008, p.612-613.



women in a patriarchal society after marriage becomes a property of their husbands. The act of dowry is one custom which gives a clear picture of women, who are just a mere liability being handed over to the husbands by their parents. In the present capitalist world though this system merely exist yet some societies around the world still subscribes to this form of custom.

LEPCHA

The Lepchas are believed to have originated from Mongoloid stock having the Tibeto-Burman linguistic traits and they are the indigenous inhabitants of Sikkim and Darjeeling hills.² They address themselves by different terms, '*Rongpa, Raongkup or Rumkup*'. The earliest track of this tribe traces back to when *Ajyo Rengay*, the patriarch is said to have come down south from the Rumtek-Song area or the present day Sikkim. Lepchas believe that they have come from the original Ney Mayel country, a land of plenty, a paradise created by *Itbu-mo*, the mother creator by herself for her chosen people.³ This place is somewhere in the valley of Mount Kanchenjunga. They were the first tribe of Sikkim as according to Alice Kandell, 'Little is known of the history of Sikkim before 700 A.D, when the Lepchas first recorded living in the Mayal Lyang Valley' (1971).

LEPCHA MARRIAGE

As stated above the marriage custom in Lepcha tribe is not just a union, it is seen that even after the death of the husband or the wife the connection between the two clans is never broken. Lepcha marriage features number of rituals and customary practices all along the different stages of wedding process. The oldest form of bride price is still maintained by the Lepcha society. Lepchas, like any other race had their own mythologies and legends regarding the origin of marriage. The priest (*Peeboo/Bekboo or a Boonthing/Mun*) while giving blessings to the newlywed couple always narrates the story about how the Lepcha marriage originated in the lepcha society. After much negotiations and when the date for *Ashake*⁴ 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 there that the bride's side 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 suppose to keep calm and sit quietly all the while. There will be levying fines for each fault according to the custom. These acts are done more in a jest since it adds the value and amusement in the occasion.

The custom of bride price symbolizes both the value of the bride as well as it is a kind of compensation to the parents for giving the girl's hand. The logic behind the bride price is usually believed that the parents take so much pain in the upbringing of a child so the bride price is a form of reward given during the time of marriage. In a Lepcha marriage customs, bride price is one of the most essential customs. The groom has to repay the

² 7West Bengal District Gazeetter, 1980, Darjeeling , p.3.

³ A.R Foning, *Lepcha, My Vanishing Tribe*, Sterling publishers(P) Ltd., 1987, p.2.

⁴ Ashake originally came from the word 'Ashoke' meaning joining or linking; and it is almost the equivalent of what westerners term as 'engagement'.



bride's parents even by selling his labour in the bride's house. The marriage sometimes takes place in credit where the girl stays at her parent's house even after marriage and the groom lives with her till the time he earns enough to repay the amount and take her home. The gift given to the bride as a bride price, in lepcha term is known as '*Lakto-Panol*' also called '*Nyom-Sa-Afar*' and it consists of two full basket of *Chee*⁵, one fore and hind leg of a bull with the tail attached, these legs must retain the hooves, complete with unshaven skin all around, up to about six inches above them. '*Amu dum-dyam*' wearing apparel for the mother, '*Abo Ayong-lu*' a body wrapping shawl for the father, '*Panol*' or presents, for '*Mu-zyong*', the maternal uncle, '*Panol*' for '*Bo-Ku*', the paternal uncle, '*Panol*', for '*Phaming*', the brother, '*Panol*', for '*Mu-nyu*', the maternal aunt, '*Panol*', for '*Bo-nyu*', the paternal aunt. In the modern time becoming the victims of modernism all this gift which were included in the bride price with the exception of '*Amu dum- dyam*' and the share of father, other gifts are offered in the lump sum of either rupees.⁶

In the ancient times the marriage in a Lepcha tribe was considered as a service marriage where the Groom had to serve in the house of his would be in-laws. The groom has to pass through many hard stages before he is eligible to marry the bride. There were generally seven stages in a Lepcha marriage and sometimes it also took seven years for the boy to complete it. In the course of time due to lack of agricultural lands, this system has faded away. This service has been changed and in modern time the boy has to compensate by paying the bride price. The bride price today has reduced to such an extent that today it has just become the symbol of the girl's position in the society.

Apart from the Lepcha believe, there are many scholars who have written about the class and caste structure and status but in a real sense there is no such classification and division in Lepcha Tribe. Though it is seen and read that Lepcha's follow a patriarchal system as rest of the country but in reality their dealing with fellow beings is only the seniority in age is considered. Even women enjoy a comparatively equal status with men. The traditional pattern of marriage has placed the Lepcha women highly in their society. The husbands were generally a temporary bondsmen of their father-in-law where they needed to give their physical labour in lieu of cash already agreed for the marriage.(A.Campbell .1873). Though this old system has turned to bride price today, and even though the bride price has lost its earlier value like the amount, variety and volume but still its very existence places the women highly in the Lepcha society even today. In the present days in case of popular system of Lepcha marriage by elopement, the groom's party has to approach the girl's family for the girl's hand. They are to pay a penalty known as '*Choridanda*'. Even though the leppcha women have lost their earlier higher position yet they still maintain comparative higher position in a patriarchal society than their male counterparts.

⁵ Chee is the strained juice that has been dedicated ton 'mangkung' gods in the name of and on behalf of the groom. 'mangkung' in simple term refers to a supernatural personal spirit, the spirit of one's own personality.

⁶ A.K Foning, *Lepcha, My Vanishing Tribe*, Sterling Publishers(P)Ltd., Delhi, 1987, p.207.