

LEPCHA MARRIAGE : AN OVERVIEW

Dr. Anira Phipon Lepcha¹

Abrona Lee Pandi Aden²

¹Assistant Professor, Department of History, Sikkim University

²Assistant Professor, Department of English, Sikkim University

Abstract

Marriage is a key social institution upon which the whole fabric of society is generally built. In the times that we live in, where things are changing at a break-neck speed, the idea of marriage itself is fast becoming redundant. Globalisation and cross-cultural currents have re-defined the idea of marriage and societies across the globe are slowly changing and evolving. This paper seeks to explore marriage among the Lepcha tribe, the indigenous people of the Sikkim and Darjeeling Hills. It seeks to look into the marriage rituals of the Lepchas, and how they have changed over time to accommodate external influences like those of the Tibetan form of Lamaism that infiltrated Sikkim with the coming of the Tibetans to seek refuge in Sikkim after an in-fighting between the “Red Hats” and the “Yellow Hats”, and the Christian missionaries. It discusses the paraphernalia used by the Lepcha priest to solemnize the marriage ceremony, the importance of chee (a fermented beverage made from millet and/or rice) in the Lepcha marriage, and the importance of marriage as a bond cementing individual, familial and societal bonds. It is an attempt to look back into past practices of the Lepchas, to identify the inevitable

changes that they have embraced and to try and understand the intricate relationship between the past and the present which would no doubt affect the future of marriage among the Lepchas.

[Keywords: Lepcha, religion, rituals, tribal beliefs, tribal marriage]

Introduction

Marriage is one of the fundamental units of most societies across the globe. The coming together of two individuals and their families is usually an occasion of great joy and celebration. The utility of marriage in pro-creation and extension of the family bloodline can hardly be overlooked. Marriage is a social as well as a legal institution. “Historically, the reasons for, function of, and frequency of marriage has varied by race or ethnicity, class, gender, and the social and economic structures of society.

Regardless of such differences, the institution of marriage is viewed by social scientists as one of the most fundamental elements in the maintenance and reproduction of society itself”.¹

The notion of marrying differs by cultures today. More industrialized societies are more likely to view love as the primary reason for forming a marital union, whereas less industrialized societies

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.

sometimes practice arranged marriage.

Theories :

Theories regarding marriage try to explain the ways in which marriage is conducted and also the motivation behind marriage. Some marry for love and some for convenience. There are certain theories which try to understand the intricacies of marriage. The marriage market, within the ambit of which prospective brides and grooms survey and deliberate on whom to marry according to the assets and liabilities, is sought to be understood by social exchange theories. The carrier-entry theory arises from the premise of the job search theory according to which people seeking employment look for a job that is satisfactory in terms of the minimum qualifications

necessary for employment. The influence of family background, upbringing and childhood experiences on partner selection is considered by psychodynamic theories of marriage.

Other researchers point to the historical roots of marriage within the system of patriarchy, according to which women are considered to be the property of their husbands. The wedding ring, for instance, is a telling symbol which seems to be sealing a woman as forever tied with and obligated to the man she marries.²

The practice of paying dowry is also evocative of the fact that women were seen as assets to be handed over to the spouses from

² 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.614.

the parents. Within this system, women are simply an economic liability. The bride's family makes attractive offers to the prospective groom's side to try and enhance their daughter's value as a potential partner who would benefit the groom immensely. The higher the dowry, the greater the chances were of selling off daughters and avoiding a bitter life of singleness and societal scorn that branded single women as unmarketable and therefore, unattractive. Though this practice is waning under the global capitalist system yet various cultures around the world still subscribe to the dowry system.³

Anthropologists such as Levi-Strauss also observe

marriage as a structural tool used to forge and strengthen political or commercial alliances across groups. This theory, referred to as alliance theory, maintains that a series of intimate kinship group exchanges of women as the wives of men belonging to a different group is a practice of exogamy motivated by the universal incest taboo. Thus alliance between two groups is formed and consolidated through marriage. Alliance theory argues that complex structures of kinship, and ultimately, of society itself are forged through inter-group marriage.

Alternatives to Marriage :

The drops in the marriage rate and the trend of delaying marriages have been

³ Ibid.p.615-616.

accompanied by an increase in alternatives to traditional marriage. Marital dissolution, cohabitation, non marital childbearing and gay marriages have become increasingly evident in European and North American Countries.⁴

In every society, family values and social norms are in place to proscribe appropriate behavior regarding mate selection. Mate selection follows the pattern of marriage- people aspire to marry those of the same race and ethnicity, educational attainment, religion, or social class. But then, finding an exact match in every characteristic is difficult. Matching based on certain characteristics may become more important than on some others. In most societies

religion and race are often the two most important criteria. Religious and racial group boundaries are more likely the hardest to cross in marriage markets.⁵

Tribal Marriage :

Marriage among tribals is generally considered as a contract and due weight is given to the views of both the boy and the girl in regard to the marriage. Vidyarthi and Rai state there are ten specific ways of selecting life partners⁶:

1. Marriage arranged by parents

⁵ Zhenchao Qian, *Marriage Interracial*, in William A. Darity Jr (editor in chief), *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* 2nd edition, vol,4, , GALE, cengage Learning, 2008, p.616.

⁶ Vidyarthi L.P. and B.K. Rai, *The Tribal Culture of India*. New Delhi: Concept Publishing Company, 1985.p. 280.

⁴ Ibid.615.

2. Marriage by mutual consent and elopement
 3. Marriage by exchange, by virtue of which men get wives in exchange for their sisters or female cousins.
 4. Marriage by purchase, where the bride price is paid as a gift rather than as a payment for a thing.
 5. Marriage by service, by virtue of which the groom renders his services to the bride's family in lieu of bride price.
 6. Marriage by capture, where the groom takes the prospective bride by surprise and takes her home with him as his wife.
 7. Marriage on probation, where the boy and girl meet prior to marriage in a bid to understand one another.
 8. Marriage by trial, where boys are expected to prove themselves in terms of gallantry and ability to win over the girl of their choice.
 9. Marriage by intrusion, where the girl intrudes into the prospective groom's house and refuses to leave unless he acknowledges her as his wife.
 10. Marriage by Hindu rites, where tribals take the help of Brahmins to conduct the marriage ceremony. Christian and Islamic rites are also performed by tribal converts.
- Majumdar and Madan (quoted in Vidhyarti and

Rai, p.280) state that the tribal marriage is considered as a civil contract rather than a religious sacrament. Nevertheless, the influence of Hindus have given a value addition to their rites and so tribal marriage rituals are said to be blended with Hindu rituals. Majumdar and Madan identify two broad types of marriage- Regular and irregular. Regular marriages are those endorsed and arranged by parents while irregular marriages are instituted through capture, elopement, intrusion and so on.

The Lepchas :

Believed to have originated from the mongoloid stock and having linguistic affiliation to the Tibeto-Burman family, the Lepchas, are the 'real autochthones of Sikkim and Darjeeling Himalayas.'⁷ They call themselves Rongpa⁸ or Raongkup or Rumkup⁹ and their country Mayel Lyang, meaning *the land of hidden paradise or the delightful region or abode*.¹⁰ They are known by different names as 'Renjyongmu in Sikkim, Tamsangmu in Darjeeling, Illammu in Illam

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

⁸ H.H. Risley, *The Gazetteer of Sikkim*, Delhi, L.P.Publications, 1894, 2001(reprint) p.1.

⁹ K.P. Tamsang, *The Lepcha English Encyclopaedic Dictionary*, Kalimpong, Mani Printing Press, 2009, 2nd edition, p.652.

¹⁰ K.P. Tamsang, *The Unknown and Untold Realities about the Lepchas*, Kalimpong: Mani Printing Press, 1998 2nd edition, p.1.a

province of Nepal and Promu in Bhutan.¹¹ They are the ancient tribe recorded in Sikkim as Alice Kandell states, 'Little is known of the history of Sikkim before 700 A.D, when the Lepchas first recorded living in the Mayal Lyang Valley'.¹² As such, the early history of Sikkim is mainly based on Lepcha tradition.¹³ The Lepchas, says O'Malley, are 'the primitive tribe of this region who originally practiced nomadic cultivation.'¹⁴

¹¹J.R. Subba, 'History, *Culture and Customs of Sikkim*,'New Delhi: Gyan Publishing House, 2008, p249.

¹²Alice S. Kandell, Sikkim, *The Hidden Kingdom*, New York, Garden City, Double day,1971, p.36.

¹³ Percy Brown, *Tours in Sikkim and the Darjeeling District*, rev.and ed. with additions by Joan Townend, 4th ed.Calcutta, W.Newman,1944, p.4.

¹⁴ LSS O' Malley, *Bengal, Bihar, Orissa and Sikkim*, New Delhi, Ess Ess Publication,1979, p.186.

Lepcha Marriage Ceremony :

The ancient marriage ceremony of the Lepchas were/are performed by the Boongthing (Lepcha priest). The bride and the bridegroom are told to be seated on a high pedestal which represents two mountain peaks of the Himalayas. The Boongthing performs the marriage rituals by chanting religious prayers. He holds a wooden cup in his right hand which is filled with rice and millet beer and a small quantity of butter.¹⁵ The Boongthing blesses the couple and sprinkles millet chee (beverage made from fermented rice, millet/ beer) on them. The bride and bridegroom are given a cup from which they sip chee thrice. The relatives of the bridegroom then follow the

¹⁵ J R Subba ibid p. 264.

sipping of the same chee thrice. After completion of the ritual of drinking, the wooden cup is returned to the Boongthing. The Boongthing hands over the cup to the bridegroom containing some butter. The bridegroom takes the butter in his finger and applies some in the parting of the bride's hair and also on the bangles on her wrists. This ritual marks the end of the marriage ceremony and the relatives now hand over gifts to the couple. Marked changes have taken place due to which the traditional marriage ritual is no more followed.¹⁶

A couple who has only daughters may bring the son-in-law to stay with them. He is treated as a son and is called '*Kamok Myok*'. Their marriage is monogamous.

In case of an infertile wife the husband is allowed to remarry with the consent of the wife. Interestingly Lepchas claim to have a system called *Angnop*. In this system, in case of death of the man's wife, the family of the deceased is obliged to offer a younger unmarried daughter in marriage to the man. Similarly, in case of death of the husband, the family of the deceased is expected to offer an unmarried younger brother to the widow. The bride in the earlier case and the groom in the latter case are called *Angnop*. However, such practices are no more found. During marriage Lepchas claim that as per ritual the strength, steadiness and peace in relationship of the couple are compared with those of Teesta and Rangeet rivers and mountains and hills.

¹⁶ J R Subba, *ibid*, 2007, pp. 264-265.

Clans play an important part in terms of marriage. The Lepchas are divided into a number of patrilineal clans known as Ptso, which are believed to have originated from the supernatural and mythological ancestry. At present, the main functions of the clans are to regulate the marriage and prevent the incest by exogamy. Originally, the Lepcha had their Tasos, the village headmen, who were chosen by all the village male elders for a couple of years.¹⁷

Regarding the clan of the Lepchas, different scholars have given different numbers. "There are 36 such different clans mentioned in the list of the

¹⁷ Sinha, A.C., *Studies in The Himalayan Communities*, Books Today, Oriental Publishers: 1983, New Delhi, p.30.

Maharaja. Each family has been called by the name of the place where they lived... Further, each clan of Lepcha again ascribes its own origin."¹⁸ H.H. Risley has mentioned 39 different clans of the Lepchas in Sikkim.¹⁹ In reality, there appears 12 different clans among Lepchas which include- Sengdeng-mo, Lingsim-mo, Hee-mo, Karthok-mo and the descendants of Thekong Salung along with those clans named after the places they inhabit. About the clan structure of the Lepchas Morris (1938) writes, "The Lepcha tribe is composed of a number of clans, called pu-tso. No one can say how many clans there are, for this grouping seems to be a purely local one. In the Kalimpong

¹⁸ Subba, 2007, p. 251

¹⁹ See Sikkim Gazetteer, 1894

district only the names of over forty different clans were recorded, but in Lingtem [area of Sikkim] there were but fourteen, all of them different from those I has already collected.”²⁰

It is found that each clan name invariably ends in ‘moo’. In Lepcha language word ‘Moo’ means, ‘dwellers of’ and it is also seen that each of these clan names has an equivalent and exact name of some village or locality in Sikkim, Darjeeling and Nepal region even today. This means that Lepchas have acquired clan names from the locality or village where they originally came from. The suffix ‘Putso’ is sometimes found added to the clan name. This form of address is mostly used

by the “Tibetanised tribesmen on the Renjyong [Sikkim] side.”²¹ Some of the clans acquired their clan names because of the official positions held by some of their ancestors. As Foning believes, these titles came about very much later, under the rule of Tibetan and Bhutanese masters. The Karthakmoo, Tasso-moo, Phipon-moo are examples of this type.²²

Nakane is also of the idea that these clans are territorial in origin.²³ Lepchas claim that each clan was assigned a particular mountain/hill (called Chu) a cave/passage to mountain (called Lep) and lake

²⁰ John Morris. *Living with Lepchas*. London: William Heinemann Ltd. 1938.p.64

²¹ Foning A. R., *Lepcha my Vanishing Tribe* , Kalimpong: Upashak Brothers 2nd ed. 2003, p.134.

²² *ibid.*, p.134.

²³ Chie Nakane, 1966, p. 234.

(called Doh) in that hill. However, only a few are aware of their Chu-Doh-Lep. They observe clan exogamy. Nakane (1966) mentions that kinship on the mother's side seems much less important in determining avoidance of marriage than that on the father's side. She further mentions that she found no marriage between the same patri-clan. According to Gorer, as quoted by Nakane, (1966) any sexual connection with blood relations for nine generations on the father's side and four on the mother's is considered incestuous. In the earlier days the daughters used to follow the mother's lineage because of which daughters would inherit the property belonging to the mother. However, Nakane observes that in areas where majority of the people are

Lepcha, all the children are counted as members of the father's clan but at the same time women have other different supernatural guardians. But in areas with mixed population Lepchas show greater patrilineal tendency.²⁴ These factors restrict inter-marriage between particular clans or lineage. However, there is no clan or lineage solidarity, and no political organisation in terms of kinship network.²⁵

Contrary to the Lepcha belief, many scholars, both Indian and foreign, have written about their caste and class structure, but in a real sense the society does not follow class, creed and ranking in the community. In their day

²⁴ Chie Nakane *ibid.*, p. 234.

²⁵ Chie Nakane *ibid.*, p.235

to-day dealings with fellow beings, it is only the seniority of age that is considered. They only have the tradition of clan exogamy. The clan structure in Lepcha society is very vital and deeply rooted. At the time of marriage, clan is given much importance because the couple from the same clan cannot marry.

It is shocking to state that even this clan structure is influenced. Culture, customs and traditions likewise seem to be getting diversified to a marked degree. This has been the effect of extraneous culture and influence over them..."²⁶ But again, it is interesting to know that even the word used to denote is not from their language. "Putcho",

meaning clan or sub-tribe, used freely in Sikkim and the Illam side of Nepal is not a Lepcha word. Similarly the term 'Aden Putcho' and 'Berfong Putcho', the so called 'plebeians' and 'patricians' are late innovations and came in with the introduction of feudalism by the Tibetan rulers."²⁷

The Christian missionaries reached Lepchas through various means and they in turn embraced the path which ultimately transformed their material culture. It is interesting to note that many of the Lepchas' social customs were not dissimilar from that of the Christians. Further they lacked a strong religious mooring and were forced for a long time to embrace Tibetan Lamaism. It is

²⁶ Foning p.8

due to many reasons Christian missionaries managed to tackle the Lepchas and they left an indelible mark in championing the cause of educating and giving them some kind of training and employment. Another aspect of the Lepchas' response to the Christianity is the space provided for them to maintain some ancient norms that were close to their heart.

David R. Syiemlich argues that the Christian missionaries did not unduly interfere in the clan structure of the several tribes, partly because it was so confusing to their mind, but more so because to have meddled with it would have been catastrophic.²⁸ It was

therefore a very wise decision of the missionaries not to interfere with the deeply rooted clan structure of the Lepcha society. It would have been very difficult for the missionaries to herd the Lepchas into Christianity otherwise.

The Lepcha converts still follow clan structure while choosing the bride/groom. The Lepchas were not averse to polygamy, but Christianity gave them moral lessons regarding marriage based on biblical disciplines. In contrast to traditional Lepcha marriage ceremony, which might last for months of celebration with locally made beer, songs and dances involving

²⁸ D.R. Syiemlich, "Christian Missions and Tribes in the Hills of North East India"

in Tanka Bahadur Subba & Sujit Som (eds), *Between Ethnography and Fiction*, Orient Longman, 2005, p. 154

huge expense, sometimes much difficult for the poor to afford, the Christian Marriage ceremony, conducted in the church seems popular and preferred among the Lepcha converts, which was found not as demanding in terms of both, time and money.

In recent times it is also seen that the majority of the Lepcha Christian brides and grooms wear their traditional dress instead of gowns and suits which shows their inclination towards their ethnic culture and a sense of responsibility towards the same. In order to give a modern outlook to the Lepcha dress, we can find the emergence of several Lepcha designers both males and females opening boutiques and advertising their products in

different websites. The prevalent inter-tribe or mixed marriage has definitely had an impact on customary practices of the society. It is almost always preferable to marry within the same community.

Marriage as a basic institution constituting the society exerts a great deal of influence on the society. In the multi-cultural and globalised world we live in today, it is no longer possible to become a purist in the strictest sense of the term. Cultures traverse across time and space in this world of porous borders and identity is always in a state of becoming rather than being. The Lepchas have not been averse to change and their marriage customs and rituals have been subjected to inevitable change and influences.

In times such as ours when the institution of marriage itself is fast being conceived as redundant and meaningless, it is very essential to study and document these social practices in order for one to understand one's roots and not get lost in the vast multi-dimensional milieu of the global village that one lives in.

References

1. Alice S. Kandell. *Sikkim, The Hidden Kingdom*. New York: Double Day, 1971.
2. Brown, Percy. *Tours in Sikkim and the Darjeeling District*, with additions by Joan Townend, 4th ed. Calcutta, W. Newman, 1944.
3. D.R Syiemlieh. *Christian Missions and Tribes in the Hills of North East India*. in Tanka Bahadur Subba & Sujit Som (eds), *Between Ethnography and Fiction*, Orient Longman, 2005.
4. Foning A. R., *Lepcha my Vanishing Tribe*. Kalimpong: Upashak Brothers 2nd ed, 2003.
5. H.H. Risley. *The Gazetteer of Sikkim*. 1894. Delhi: L.P. Publications, 2001.
6. J.R. Subba, *History, Culture and Customs of Sikkim*. New Delhi: Gyan Publishing House, 2008.
7. LSSO' Malley, *Bengal, Bihar, Orissa and Sikkim*. New Delhi: Ess Ess Publication, 1979.
8. Morris, John. *Living with Lepchas*. London: William Heinemann Ltd, 1938.
9. Sinha, A.C., *Studies in The Himalayan Communities*. New Delhi: Oriental publishers, 1983.
10. Tamsang, K.P. *The Lepcha English Encyclopaedic Dictionary*. Kalimpong: Mani Printing Press, 2009, 2nd edition.
11. Tamsang, K.P. *The Unknown and Untold Realities about the Lepchas*. Kalimpong: Mani Printing Press, 1998 2nd edition.
12. Vidyarthi L.P. and B.K. Rai. *The Tribal Culture of India*. New Delhi: Concept Publishing Company, 1985.
13. *West Bengal District Gazetteer*, 1980, Darjeeling.