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Language Movement in the Darjeeling Himalayas: Special Reference to the Lepcha Language

Alina Pradhan, Ph.D.

Language has assumed an important place in today's political situation. It is one of the most important marks of identification and it is this that marks off one speech community from another. It is not only a means of communication but it can be used as a strong weapon in the achievement of political power. A situation of conflict may take place between two language speaking groups mainly because of insecurity or fear of losing one's linguistic and cultural identity. "Language is not only a symbol to unite groups, but its effective use or abuse can catapult an ethnic movement." (T.B. Subba, Ethnicity, State and Development: A Case Study of the Gorkhaland Movement, Har Anand Publications with Vikas Publishing House Pvt. Ltd. , New Delhi, 1992, pp.106).

Language demands in India have been expressed in various levels from demands to replace the colonial language to replacement of the national language. To make the regional language as a media of instruction as well as in administrative, tribunal and judicial proceedings and even the same demand in the law courts. Language demands in independent India were thus concerned with various issues like Official Language of the Central Government, the re-organization of the Language in India www.languageinindia.com

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states of the federation along linguistic lines, official language of the states of the federation and language policies relating to education, public employment and general communication.

Politics and Language in India

Even during the British colonial rule in India, H. H. Rishley had laid down that language should be the criteria for territorial re-distribution. Curzon had not accepted this but it was during the 19th Century that the importance of regional language grew with the emergence of an educated middle class who were interested in reviving the rich cultural heritage of India. The Simon Commission had not accepted language as the only criteria for redrawing the provincial boundaries. In the 50's, the demands for linguistic provinces had reached its climax. The J.P.V Committee appointed by the Congress in 1948 (consisting of Jawaharlal Nehru, Patabhi Sitarammayya and Sardar Patel), soon realized the importance of linguistic states and delay in this regard would harm the unity of the country. The States Re-organisation Committee was thus later formed in 1956 to create states on linguistic basis.

National Language Policy in India

It is in Part XVII of the Constitution entitled "Official Languages", that the issue of language is mentioned. These provisions are found in Articles 343-351. Article 343 lays down that Hindi in the Devanagiri script is the Official Language of the Union. Clause 2 of the same Article states that English shall continue to be used for such purposes as might be specified by law up to 1965.

The Constitution has also specified in its VIIIth Schedule, the various languages in the country to be used for purposes specified in Article 345 of the Constitution. It has today recognized 18 languages in the VIIIth Schedule namely Assamese, Bengali, Gujarati, Hindi, Kannada, Kashmiri, Malayalam, Marathi, Oriya, Punjabi, Sanskrit, Tamil, Telugu and Urdu. Sindhi was added in 1967, Nepali, Konkani and Manipuri were added in 1992.

It is the special responsibility of the Centre to safeguard the cultural interests of the minorities and to see that they have adequate facilities for receiving at least the primary education in their mother tongue.(Article 350 A). Not only this, Articles 29 and 30 confer broader rights upon

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linguistic minorities to preserve their distinct language, script and culture (Article 29), and to establish and to administer educational institutions of their choice (Article 30).

In each state, there are groups who speak languages other than the dominant regional language and consider themselves as linguistic minorities. For example, the dominant regional language of West Bengal is Bengali and 86% of the population speaks Bengali. The Nepalis residing in the Darjeeling District consider themselves as a linguistic minority. This paper has made an attempt to see how the Lepchas, an ethnic minority group in the Darjeeling Hills, who in spite of being the original inhabitants of Darjeeling Himalayas have now been claimed as a “vanishing tribe” but are now becoming ethnically conscious and are now trying to revive their Lepcha language. Language rights and access to education in one’s mother tongue is an important aspect, all the more when the languages and the communities who speak them are under threat.

The Nepalis and Lepchas in Darjeeling: A Comparison

In the Census of 1891, 88,000 persons were enumerated having been born in Nepal. In 1901, it was laid down that 61% of the population in Darjeeling District was of Nepali origin (including Newar, Brahmin, Chettri, Rais or Jimdar and others), 27% belonged to the Indian plains (including Rajbansis, Oraons, Mundas, Santhals, Meches and others), Lepchas and Bhutias-3%, Tibetans-1%, Remaining 4% belonged to the upper Hindu castes, Muslims and non tribal Christians from the plains and Europe. “In 1901, the dominant race in the Darjeeling was the Nepalis with a strength of 1,34,000 accounts for more than half the population.”(L.S.S. O’Malley, Bengal District Gazetteer: Darjeeling, 1907. rept., Logos Press, New Delhi. pp41). In 1941, the Nepalis numbered 254,608 or 67.6%, the Lepchas numbered only 12,468. In 1951 they numbered 13,430, in 1961-14,910, 1971-14,568, in 1981-23,493. Comparatively the people of Nepali origin according to the Census of India numbered around 281,952(1951), 524,794(1961) and 616,800(1971). In 1991, the Lepchas numbered 26,920 in the Darjeeling District and 27,888 in the whole of West Bengal compared to the total tribal population of 179153 in Darjeeling

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District and 3808760 in West Bengal. Thus all the statistics show the decrease in the number of Lepchas over the years.

The Lepchas: The Original Inhabitants of Darjeeling Hills

The Lepchas were the original inhabitants of Darjeeling hills and Sikkim, which they fondly called the “Mayel Lyang” or the Abode of the Gods. There are different versions of the term ‘Lepcha’. One version says that it was the Nepalis who called them “Lapches” meaning vile speakers. Another version says that “Lapche” was a type of fish found in Nepal having the characteristics of being submissive like the Lepchas. But the Lepchas themselves prefer to be called “Rongs” or Mutanchi Rongkup” meaning “Beloved sons of the Mother of Creation”. Some others believe that the word Lepcha comes from the word “Lep” meaning a well of procreation in ‘Mayel Kyong’. It is believed that it is the door through which the first among the Lepchas, Fudong Thing (male) and Nuzong Nyu (female) were made to step down from paradise into this world.

Another important question that arises is their story of migration. But historians like Gorer says that there is no tradition of migration among the Lepchas. Ram Rahul believes that “the original home of the Lepchas is Sikkim itself because the hills, mountains and streams of the region have Lepcha names.” (Ram Rahul, *The Himalayan Borderland*, Vikas, New Delhi, 1970, pp.31)

The Lepchas themselves believe that man was the last creation amongst the many creatures that God created. Man was created out of snow in the valley of the mighty “Kanchanjanga”. “They believe that they are the descendants of Fudong Thing and Nuzong Nyu and strongly believe that they are the indigenous people of Darjeeling and Sikkim, the very primeval people of the world and whose origin is as old as the Himalayas.”(K.P. Tamsang, *The Unknown and Untold Reality About the Lepchas*, published by Lyangsong Tamsang, Luen Sun Offset Printing Co. Ltd., Hongkong, 1983,pp10)

It was the Britishers who later in the middle of the 19th Century encouraged the migration of the Nepalis (whom they found as a hardworking and laborious working force) to Darjeeling

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Hills. Darjeeling had been made into a sanitarium for the weary British soldiers. Not only this, another important factor for the large inflow of the Nepalis was the establishment of the tea industry, which required a large labour force. Construction of roads and railways all demanded workers. The first tea plantation was established in 1856 and by 1866 there were 39 tea gardens. Agriculture also encouraged migration. Moreover, the social, economic and political conditions of British India were different compared to those found Nepal. In British India, slavery, caste rigours and customs like Sati were abolished or being reformed. In Nepal, it was the Brahmins and Chhetris, the two dominant groups amongst the Nepalis, who occupied dominant socio-economic and political spheres. Moreover, increase in population in Nepal hills brought about pressure on land, which further led to their movement to Darjeeling and Sikkim, where land was plentiful at that time. The living with the Lepchas and Bhutias and the absence of the caste system in their society, dissolved their feelings of superiority and inferiority. They developed a strong “we” feeling of Nepali jati. Irrespective of their ethnic diversity, the Nepalis developed a common feeling of identity around the lingua franca “Nepali”. The Lepchas and Bhutias too started to speak the Nepali language, thus forsaking their own languages. This can be applied mainly to the Lepchas. In fact, Lepcha was the official language of Darjeeling District until 1911. The “Deed of Grant” under which Darjeeling was granted as a gift in 1835 by Sikkim to British India was translated to Hindustani. Another important document, “Proclamation of 1838” by Colonel Llyod on the land taxation in the Lepcha language was translated into Persian, Hindustani and Bengali.

The Lepcha Language: Origin and Development

The Nepalis who became the most dominant group in the Darjeeling hills soon started their movement for its recognition as the medium of instruction in schools as well as for its Constitutional recognition. But the language movement by the Nepalis could not remain the only language movement in the Hills

The Lepchas had already established the Lepcha Association in 1921 under Mr. Sando Tshering Tamsang and Mr. G. T. Sitling as General Secretary. But it was registered only in 1925 under the Presidentship of Mr. G.T.Sitling. It has been affiliated with the Akhil Bharatiya

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Adhivasi Parishad from 27th March, 1997. It has been renamed as the Indigenous Lepcha Tribal Association (ILTA) from 8th March, 2004.

The Lepchas are considered as the most ancient of all communities having a rich and varied culture and tradition. “They are probably the only indigenous race east of Israel who claim themselves to be the children of God.” (Aachuley, April 2002, pp20). In the various villages and hamlets, especially where they live in compact areas (e.g., a village in Takdah in Darjeeling sub-division, Mane Gumba, Bong Basti, Tashiding, Tanek, Ngnassey villages in Kalimpong sub-division), the Lepchas know their language. In Ngnassey basti , having a total of 82 households, 50 houses are Lepcha households and a vast majority of them know the Lepcha language. But in spite of this, they have to converse in the Nepali language with the other hill communities. It is today being observed that the linguistic consciousness has gripped them and they are now eager to keep their language and culture intact.

The Lepchas have a rich and highly developed script. It is believed to have been invented by Thekong Mensalong, a legendary figure, who lived towards the beginning of the 17th Century. Others say that it was given by the Mother Creator, Itbu Moo herself with the mountains, rivers and lakes. Another version is that it was invented by Chador Namgyal, the third consecrated ruler of Sikkim.

The Tibetans translated the remaining books of the Lepchas in Tibetan. The Tashi Namthar or Namthar Tsung, containing the biography of Padmasambhava, the one responsible for taking Buddhism into Tibet “acted as one piece of literature that carried the torch of the written language of the Lepchas undermined for centuries together.”(A.R.Foning,Lepcha:My Vanishing Tribe, Sterling Publishers Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi,1987,pp.154). After the Bhutanese attack of Mayel Lyang in 1700’s, the Lepchas came under the Gorkha threat under Prithivi Narayan Shah. In fact when Darjeeling was granted as a gift to British East India Company, the deed was written in English, Hindustani and Lepcha. The British initially tried to bring about the progress of the Lepchas even though like the Tibetans, they wanted to bring about the conversion of the Lepchas to Christianity. It was mainly for this purpose that Genesis, a part of Exodus, Gospels of Mark and John were translated into Lepcha and Hymn books were printed in 1911.Christian

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prayers and hymns were done in Lepcha. The Baptist Mission in Calcutta had also taken a fount for Lepcha. Colonel G.B. Mainwaring of the Bengal Staff Corps was so impressed with the Lepchas , that he married a Lepcha woman, learnt their language and also wrote the Grammar of the Rong(Lepcha) language in 1876. The Lepcha language was also the language of the courts, administration and justice. Everyone inhabiting the region knew the language.

However as Nepali was fast gaining pre-dominance in the hills, more attention was given to it rather than to the Lepcha language. Both A. Turnbull and W.S. Sutherland (Scottish missionaries and educators), “had lamented the need for Lepcha literature but the pressure of other work and lack of educated translators left this need unfulfilled.”(Cindy Perry,Nepali Around the World: Emphasizng Nepali Christians of the Himalayas, Ekta Books, Kathmandu, Nepal,1997,pp.44). In the 1920’s itself, the Lepchas demanded that their language be introduced in the various schools like Nepali. Unfortunately, the British Government turned down their demand. On top of that, the Nepali Text Book Committee in 1929 gave the following arguments(i) As there was no Lepcha text books, there is no point in teaching a boy Lepcha language,(ii) Unless the language is actually dying out, the majority of the Lepcha boys will learn to speak it in their homes,(iii)The written language of Lepchas is of no practical use in after life,(iv)The Lepcha boy already has to study both Nepali and Hindi at some stage or other, why add to his difficulty by teaching him to read a third language in which there is practically no literature.(Report of the of the Text Book Committee,1926,pp14).

Even after the Britishers left India, it seemed that the West Bengal Government did not give the Lepchas their due. Hindi, Tibetan, Urdu, Nepali, Bengali and Dzonka languages were accepted in the various schools and colleges in Darjeeling District. The Lepcha language has been virtually ignored in their own homeland. Nepali, Tibetan and Lepcha are called the three fraternal languages of the Darjeeling District. Bhutia and Nepali are taught from the primary stage up to the University level but the Lepcha language, the oldest, richest and the most developed language had been debarred from being recognized as a language also. The Bengal Government too showed a step motherly treatment to the Lepchas. It was mainly because of the various efforts of the Nepali Academy and the dominant Nepali population’s assertive behavior that they had succeeded in introducing Nepali as one of the subjects in the various schools right Language in India www.languageinindia.com

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up to the graduation and post graduation levels. It was also introduced as one of the Official languages in the three sub-divisions of Darjeeling District. The Lepcha language failed to be introduced even in the primary level of education, let alone being the official language of the District.

Efforts Made by the Lepchas to Bring Linguistic and Cultural Consciousness

As already mentioned above, there are certain provisions in the Constitution of India for linguistic and religious minorities. But the minority language of the Lepchas was grossly neglected. It was mainly because of this that the Lepcha children were forced to study in an alien language. But in spite of indignation on the part of the Lepchas, there is no protest or revolt among them. However today, under the leadership of the Lepcha Association (Rong Schezom), with its headquarters at Kalimpong, the language and cultural consciousness amongst the Lepchas is fast growing ground. The Association has various objectives, namely “(i) Recognition and introduction of the Lepcha language in the schools and colleges for Lepcha children in Darjeeling District,(ii) Recognition of indigenous tribal Lepchas under the list of Primitive Tribal Group,(iii) The Correction of Census Data and Publication of genuine and authentic figures for the Lepcha population.”(Aachuley, April, 2002).

A protest rally was organized by the Lepchas under the Indigenous Lepcha Tribal Association on 11th October,2004 in Kalimpong. Its main demand was for the introduction of Lepcha language in the schools and colleges. Moreover it was mainly to bring cultural revivalism among the Lepchas, that the Lepcha Cultural Centre or Longtek Chok Lee was established in Kalimpong in 1967. Some Lepcha songs, music, folk tales, dramas (like “Teesta Rangeet, dance drama written by noted Lepcha scholar, author and linguist, K.P.Tamsang in 1960’s), “Nalmit”(1970) were written and enacted, centred around the Lepcha language, literature and culture. The Mani Printing Press in Kalimpong owned by a Nepali (Newar) added Lepcha to the already existing sections of English, Nepali and Tibetan. It helped to bring out a bi-monthly journal called Aachuley. The Annual Bi-Lingual magazine, King Gyaeboo Achyok is also there in English and Lepcha, first published on 20th December,1995. They have various books to their credit including a huge Lepcha English Encyclopedia Dictionary written by K.P.Tamsang.(Some

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Publications in 2004 include P.T. Lepcha's Mayel Pandour (Treasure of the Lepcha world, an award winning book), Rong Sung Gyaom (A Collection of Lepcha Folk Tales) and others. He was awarded the Bhasha Sammelan Award in the year 2000). Not only this, various books have been translated from other languages into Lepcha like the Gitanjali written by Rabindranath Tagore. (March 2006). Certain books in the Lepcha language have also been translated into other languages like "Introduction to the Indigenous Lepcha Tribe" has been translated from Lepcha to Hindi. (November 2005). "Lepcha Folklore and Folk Songs" has been translated into Bengali from Lepcha. (This was done by Sahitya Akademi, Eastern Region and Jadavpur University in collaboration with ILTA). It is no wonder that the Lepchas in Darjeeling District the indigenous community of the area, are demanding that Primary education should be given in their own mother tongue to the Lepcha children, in lieu with Article 350A of the Constitution.

The Lepchas of Darjeeling District compare themselves to their brethren in Sikkim. Lepcha was already taught in the various primary schools before Sikkim was integrated as a part of India on 19th April 1975. It is also recognized as one of the ten official languages of Sikkim (Sikkim Official Act 1977(5 of 1977) Amendment, 1995). It was laid down by the Pawan Chamling Government that Lepcha will be taught up to the degree level in colleges of Tadong and Namchi in Sikkim from the year 2000 onwards. "Even though the colleges in Sikkim come under the North Bengal University, Lepcha language has been recognized out there, but not in the Darjeeling District. It is discrimination against us, Lepchas of Darjeeling District by North Bengal University," said ILTA General Secretary, Mr. Lyangsong Tamsang. The ILTA on its own efforts has been successful in establishing Lepcha schools all over the district. At present, there are 30 night schools in Kalimpong sub-division, 2 in Darjeeling, 3 in Sittong (Kurseong) 1 in Mirik and also one each in Delhi and Kolkata. (In Gnassey village, Lepcha school was established in 1957 and is still running today. Presently there are 22 students in the age group 16-35. Classes are held on weekends in the evenings for one hour. The same is true of other villages as well.)

The Lepchas have a rich language but the problem lies in the usage of the language. The Lepchas are today encouraged to know, preserve and promote their language and culture. The

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K.P. Tamsang Language and Literary Award is given to persons and associations for maintenance and promotion of Lepcha language and culture.

Lepcha Language Finally Gets Introduced in Schools

The long struggle of the Lepchas for the introduction of Lepcha language finally paid off when the School Education Department, Govt. of West Bengal decided to introduce the Lepcha language in the Government Primary and Secondary schools in the Darjeeling hills for the Lepcha children as an optional subject from February, 2011.

The efforts of the ILTA under the Presidentship of Mr. Lyansang Tamsang especially were to be credited for this successful endeavour. The Lepchas today are now satisfied with the decision of the Government.

Compared to the majority group, the Nepalis, who have always enjoyed the benefits of the authorities and powers to be, the Lepchas, being numerically inferior, have now found a small measure of their sense of belonging with their rightful demands being met slowly but surely. The only way now, for them to preserve their ethnic identity, will be to use, propagate and maintain their language, literature, ancient heritage and rich culture.

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