

EDITORIAL INTRODUCTION

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THIS ISSUE

The Lepchas have captured the imagination of scholars and travellers since the middle of the nineteenth century, resulting in the publication of a large number of studies on their culture, religion, language, script and literature from the 1840s until today.

From an anthropological perspective, the Lepchas of Sikkim became a classic ethnic group following the publication of Geoffrey Gorer's study of the Lepchas of Lingthem: *Himalayan Village: an Account of the Lepchas of Sikkim* in 1938. Subsequent monographs that put the Lepchas on the anthropological map were Halfdan Siiger's study of Tingvong, *The Lepchas: Culture and Religion of Himalayan People* (1967) based on fieldwork carried out in Dzongu 1949 and Arthur Foning's *Lepcha, My Vanishing Tribe* published in 1987.

The Lepcha language, script, folklore and literature have continued to motivate scholars over the years, resulting in a number of publications on these subjects, including a *Grammar of Lepcha* (2007) by Heleen Plaisier. However, no major anthropological studies of the Lepchas of Sikkim, based on long-term fieldwork, have been undertaken since Gorer's and Siiger's pioneering works with the exception of some notable contributions such as Nebesky-Wojtkowitz's numerous articles published in the 1950s, Chie Nakane's article *A Plural Society in Sikkim* (1966), Veena Bhasin's *Ecology, Culture, and Change: Tribals of Sikkim Himalayas* (1989) and R.R. Gowloong's *Lingthem Revisited: Social Changes in a Lepcha Village of North Sikkim* (1995).

As Research Coordinator at the Namgyal Institute of Tibetology, in recent years I have had the good fortune to meet a number of students and researchers in Sikkim and have witnessed a resurgence of interest in all aspects of Lepcha life and culture. In addition, the ongoing protest staged by some Lepchas of Dzongu against the construction of hydro-electric projects within the limits of the Lepcha reserve of Dzongu has sparked further interest in this Himalayan community.

While outsiders are showing a renewed appreciation for Lepcha culture, Lepchas themselves are becoming increasingly aware of the

ongoing loss of their traditional Lepcha heritage. This concern is evident in many of the articles published in this issue, particularly those by Charisma Lepcha, Pema Wangchuk, Jenny Bentley and Kerry Little.

The surge of interest in what can be termed Lepcha Studies has inspired me to devote an issue of the *Bulletin of Tibetology* to the subject, and publish the results of some recent research initiatives and literary writings by students and researchers currently working on subjects relating to the Lepchas. It is also hoped that this surge of interest, particularly among anthropology students, will again result in substantial contributions to Lepcha Studies.

The first article by Charisma Lepcha illustrates the struggle of Lepcha youth with their loss of identity. Although more of a literary essay, Charisma conveys important issues that resonate with some of the subsequent articles. With a recent MA in anthropology from the North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong, we hope that Charisma will pursue further studies and carry out further research among her own community.

The second article, by Heleen Plaisier, is an excellent introduction to Halfdan Siiger's work on the Lepchas of Sikkim. Having consulted the Siiger archives in Copenhagen, the author first takes us through Siiger's own fieldwork experience of Dzongu in 1949 by quoting directly from Siiger's travel journals. She then presents Siiger's extensive ethnological description of the Lepcha people which appeared in two volumes in 1967 and introduces the third unpublished volume on Lepcha religion which she is currently preparing for publication.

The third article, by Pema Wangchuk, presents a journalistic account of the events surrounding the Lepcha protest staged against the construction of hydro-electric projects in the Lepcha reserve of Dzongu, North Sikkim. Although the movement started as early as 2002, it gained considerable momentum and international attention only in 2007. Considering the interest the movement has generated, we thought it important to provide an objective article offering a chronological record in order to facilitate the understanding of this complex historical struggle as it relates to the Lepchas and indeed to Sikkim.

The fourth article by Jenny Bentley is based on data collected for her master's thesis in social anthropology. She explores the notion of 'vanishing' Lepcha and the changes the community have experienced in recent decades, particularly in relation to religion, education and migrant labour. The fear of their culture vanishing has inspired the formation of a number of Lepcha associations that aim to protect and promote Lepcha culture. The author explores the

spread of these associations and associated movements of cultural revival.

The fifth and final article in this issue is an essay by Kerry Little on Lepcha hunters and their hidden landscapes. Former hunter-gatherers, the Lepchas have now abandoned their guns, bows and arrows, and shifting cultivation in order to become settled agriculturalists. Quoting stories recounted to her by former hunters, she introduces us to the erstwhile hunting world of Dzongu. Her descriptions and writing style, although not within the style of anthropology, allow us to enter, feel and explore the world of Lepcha hunters, and the ritual and mythical creatures that live there.

This issue is completed by a book review of Pema Wangchuk and Mita Zulca's *Khangchendzonga: Sacred Summit* and an obituary of one of the Institute's first students, Dzongsar Ngari Chödje Thingo Rinpoche (1945-2008).

In conclusion, I would like to thank all those who, in various ways, contributed in putting this issue together. This issue and its Lepcha theme was initially planned with Brigitte Steinmann who, together with Asen Balikci, Jackie Hiltz and Mark Turin, contributed much-appreciated editorial help. Heleen Plaisier acted as co-editor in the later stages, suggesting additional contributions and editing a number of articles. At the institute, I would like to thank Kesang Choden and Kunga Yonten Hochotsang. Further inspiration for this issue came from our Lepcha friends who never tire of the struggle for the preservation of their Lepcha heritage.

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