

## **A Lepcha Monastery in Kalimpong: Changing Religious and Cultural Contours.**

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Buddhism in this part of our vast and diverse country is mainly known to be the Tibetan form of Buddhism, though we are aware of the fact that Buddhism originated in India as a religion which flourished in Tibet, now a part of Republic of China. One can debate as to the territory of Tibet and its annexation by China, but whenever Buddhism is discussed in these parts; one can identify its similarity with Tibet. The reason being the proximity of Kalimpong to Tibet, its age old trade route, which not only brought trade into India and Tibet but also along with it came its religion which is commonly known as the Tibetan form of Buddhism. If one wanders along Kalimpong one can see the influence of Buddhism from Monasteries, art, and culture which can be easily traced to Tibet.

Keeping in mind the natives of this region, recognized by the Government of India as the indigenous people who prefer to be known as the children of the mighty Kanchenjunga, a term given by the British as “*Lepchas*” which they are now more commonly known all over the world. The Rongs or The Lepchas, being the natives of this region have been influenced by the various forms of religion and beliefs that have crossed their path over the centuries. From Christianity to Buddhism, the Lepchas have incorporated these religions from the missionaries that came to Kalimpong to the various other bordering Buddhist states.

Among all the Buddhist monasteries in Kalimpong lies a Lepcha Monastery, situated in the Municipal area of Kalimpong Town at Bong Busty Ward no.13 in its possession bordering approximately 2.24 acres of land. Out of which .50 acres have been donated to build hostel for the Lepcha youth by the monastery. Where in the students are housed for free for completing their education and need to pay only for the food they consume. As the Buddhist religion preaches in giving to the needy this monastery has shown the way for the others to follow. Not highly advertised nor financed for its maintenance and upkeep this monastery has till date survived on its own with kind gestures by the members of one hundred and eighty, odd families who are Lepchas but Buddhist, living in the surrounding villages nearby.

Once in its prime this monastery was situated at the present day Golf Grounds overlooking the river Relli. The Monastery was shifted to Kaffer by the British as the then monastery area was made into an army base which one can see today. But due to the sentiments and demand of the Lepcha Buddhists, the monastery was brought back to its present address. The Founder of this monastery was a monk named Lama Hishey Rabgay, who according to sources and history had gone to Bhutan, a Buddhist territory till date and returned as a guru to his native place where he laid the foundation of this monastery in 1690 at the present day army golf grounds. Late Lama Hishey Rabgay, had learnt his form of Buddhism from Bhutan and looked up to the great Shabdrung Rimpoche as his master and Guru, and had mastered the art of Drukpa Kagyud

Buddhist lineage which is still the very essence of Buddhism practiced and preached in this present day monastery.

It is believed that upon the arrival of the Late Lama Hishey Rabgay and during his possible meditation and retreat his attendant who was a lady became his wife. Upon receiving the news the then grate Shabdrung Rimpoche blessed him with a unique ability, which was bestowed upon him and later carried forward by his descendents for sustaining themselves and their family members. The unique blessing that was given by Shabdrung Rimpoche was the ability to control hailstorms. The reason being (which can be debatable) upon hearing about these mystical abilities was that this region of Kalimpong was and still an agricultural belt. The sustenance of human habitat depends on the crops that grow in the fields. Any untoward incidents in the fields would mean a bad year for the farmers. As such these unique abilities to control hailstorms with practice and prayers would mean the dominance of religion in this case, Buddhism preached in the monastery which had these special abilities on the population which mainly comprised of the indigenous Lepchas who have retained most of the agricultural lands in these areas.

There are certain instances and eye witnesses that have witnessed and recalled the occurrence of these powers and can even vogue for the events that had followed, for instance Mr. Edward who was a neighbor to this present day Monastery had according to sources encountered this hailstones only on his part of the property after he ridiculed a monk of this monastery. Though Mr. Edward has sold his property and a school with huge building stands tall in his area the old people of surrounding area still keep the stories to tell. Another instance of the British calling the monks of this monastery to stop a forest fire from spreading with hailstorm is also commonly heard of in the monastery area.

Upon enquiry at the monastery the present day Monk who heads the monastery, Lama Rabden Lepcha confirms these unique abilities and instances of making hailstorms appear and disappear. According to him the practice of this ability is still being preached to younger monks and disciples who wish to take up the monastic approach in this particular monastery. According to him this ability requires sincere efforts in meditation and a firm grip on prayers which generally lasts for three months, where in the monk who seems fit to take on this meditation must sit on strict isolation with no contact of human beings, sun rays, and wind. He would also have to stay silent and eat only one meal a day with meditation being his sole friend and companion. These prayers and practice takes place in between the months of December to May every year and are conducted in the vicinity of the monastery.

The person behind shifting of the Lepcha Monastery from the Golf Grounds area of present day Durpin to Kaffer was Dr. Grahams, he was given the responsibility to survey and remodel the area of Kalimpong town. Some would want to argue that the British wanted the Tribes to remain across the river Relli marking the boundaries between the British who preached Christianity and the Tribes who had taken refuge in Buddhism. What so ever was the reason behind relocation of this monastery it affected the population to migrate with it (monastery) even today we see a lot

of Lepcha Buddhists who are beyond the river Relli, a number of old Monasteries also, but very few remain Buddhist.

A lay man named Manga Lepcha who was a farmer by profession took upon himself to bring back the monastery from the allotted plot in Kaffer. Since he had no children he donated his entire property to the monastery after his death in 1898. The present day monastery was completed by 1905; it was a wooden cum stone structure two storied which was damaged in the 2011 devastating earthquake and is being repaired. With the donation of members of the Lepcha Buddhist families in cash and kind (the families who cannot not pay in cash help as laborers for repairs) today this monastery still stands tall. Though no financial support has been provided by any organization or any government agency this monastery is struggling to survive and preach its age old traditions in the field of Buddhism.

On approaching the monastery, one can see two Chorten<sup>1</sup> on the left one which belongs in the memory of late monk lama Sangey Lepcha the 5<sup>th</sup> Pathi Lama of the old Lepcha Monastery who passed away in the year 2012. The second belongs to Sanchamit Lepcha a resident of 8<sup>th</sup> mile Kalimpong who had donated a lot for this present day monastery. The outer lower floor of the monastery is surrounded by prayer wheels, which leads to the main entry point of the monastery. There are stairs leading to the first floor of the main altar where one can find paintings of the Buddha and Shabdrung Rimpoche<sup>2</sup>. The main altar consists of Guru Rimpoche on the extreme left, followed by the Lord Buddha in the middle and Chenrezig also known as Avalokiteshvara embodiment of compassion, Guru Senge Dradok the sixth manifestation of Guru Rimpoche or Guru Padmasambhava made of clay in the extreme right with, idol of first Shabdrung Rimpoche, Chepagmed also known as Amitayus the Buddha of boundless life or the Buddha of Limitless life, and Yeshe Kkandro or Yeshe Tsogyal consort of Guru Rimpoche and also one of the chief disciple.

Among the holy books or sacred texts there are sixteen numbers of “*Bum*” Lepcha term, one number of Damong, and recently given Kangyur text donated by Bodh Gaya in the month of February 2018. There is ample amount of barren land below the monastery which once was used for agriculture but now due to the shortage of water the fields remain barren. There are few huts where the families of the monks have been residing for years if not ages where they have kept hens and goats for their lively hood. The number of Monks at present is numbered at five and they start their morning prayers by five in the morning by offering water, sang (incense), serkim (golden offerings) and lighting of butter lamps and lasts till seven in the morning.

The celebration of Guru Thechu, Guru Rimpoche’s birth anniversary is a yearly affair, Mani Monlam or confession of Chenrezig in the month of February and September is also followed yearly. Buddha Jayanti is celebrated here and Tsepag med prayers and Yangdrup a ritual for good fortune is also performed. Thanks giving prayers are performed in the evening where the water bowls are emptied and turned upside down. The texts used here are the Tibetan Texts and

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<sup>1</sup> Known as Stupa in English “*Chorten*” is a Tibetan Term, this term is popularly known to the people of this region.

<sup>2</sup>Known as Ngawang Namgyal, a lama from Drukpa Lineage from Tibet and the founder of Bhutan.

the preaching's made simple by relating them in the most common language used in the region being Nepali. Lay men, women and children are given teachings in simple aspects of Buddhism and its approach in day to day life so that the future of this form of Buddhism may prevail in coming years.

#### Customs and traditions:

**Marriage:** Blessing is given by the monks to both Bride and groom. Here special mention should be made in regards to marriage of different communities. If the bridegroom is a Lepcha Buddhist the bride needs to be converted to Lepcha Buddhist by converting her to Lepcha Tribe of a different sect than the bridegroom's. A new name is given to the bride and henceforth all her matters relating to her religion are performed in Lepcha Buddhist customs and traditions.

**Birth:** A child is blessed on the third day not exceeding fourth and a new name is given till the seventeenth day of being born. The blessing prayers continue for two hours at present, the infant is given a bath, cleansed, given new clothes to wear and family and friends are invited for a feast.

**Death:** The Lepcha Buddhist burn the bodies of the dead ones after proper prayers, on the fourth day the ashes are taken to the river particularly to Teesta in Kalimpong for the final ritual or resting place of the soul. It is believed by the Lepchas that we come from the womb of our mother and we on our death should go back to the mother being Teesta. It is believed that Teesta is the female river among the three rivers mainly Rangeet, Relli and Teesta.

The future of this monastery as related by Monk Lama Rabden Lepcha, who heads the monastery depends entirely on the families that have been attached to this monastery. The succession of Lamaism for this monastery in particular has been hereditary, but now that he has been blessed by girl children of his own line of succession has naturally hit a dead end, as a result he has been trying hard to find disciples who can take forward this unique ability of hailstorm manipulation which has been passed down from generations and can be taken forward to the future so that the hundred and eighty odd families who's belief and faith remains in this form of monastic life.

To know about a place which had its significance in history, its struggles, the sincerity, dedication, and social obligation which it gives along with hope to the people in and around its vicinity does require special mention and we should be able to bring forward its story, for some of us it may well be a script, for others a fable well written, but for many it is a piece of pride in history if spoken about could well be a beginning for something fruitful. Though insignificant in this world of Buddhism this monastery is struggling to sustain itself so that the teachings of its past guru's remain immortal in the hearts and minds of simple Lepcha Buddhists.

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