



Primitive Lepcha Language in Eastern Himalaya

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Abstract

The Lepcha, a tribe of mid forest of Eastern Himalaya having its language characteristic sharing affinity with compound vowels of the Chinese language and Burmese language. The vowels of Lepcha found some affinities with the Chinese phonetics. The mono-syllable of Lepcha language is expressive along with compound vowels. There are six consonants having similarity with Burmese strokes in Lepcha language.

The writing style, use of monosyllable and phonetic resembling Chinese language and Burmese scripts are uniqueness of Lepcha language. The Lepcha script characteristics are sharp, strokes or pointed. This paper attempted to discourse the Lepcha language and its script for the documentation of information of Lepcha community.

Keywords: Burmese script, Himalayan tribe, Lepcha Language, Lepcha Scripts, Eastern Himalaya.

Introduction

The Lepcha of Sikkim, one of tribes of Eastern Himalaya have female deity to offer worship. The female deity of the Lepcha is Mun. The century old indigenous people lived across ridges and furrows of Himalayan region in search of sustainable livelihood. The community has several sub-sections who are residing in the Himalayan region however their language and the script of their language have no difference. The primordial character of this tribe of Himalayan region was the hunting skills. The tribe have spiritual knowledge and practices of the tantrism. The latter usually practice for the protection of crops, evils and against enemy in case of threats. That knowledge is available in the form of oral chanting. Fundamentally, in the hills, the knowledge of Lepcha developed through bongthings or nun or priest class of each sub-class. Interestingly, there is no caste hierarchy system prevalent in the community which is absolutely commendable. The community has strong bonding with the nature and special persons 'bongthing' or 'nun' who perform all social affairs. Bongthing and Nun of society are considered as the gems of society.



They guide the society as and when require in the hills. In connection to this, the paper intended to study on language and script of Lepcha language to document its information.

Methodology

Reconnaissance of data from the several qualitative sources performed and compared the information with the available data for understanding the language. The field visit and interaction among stakes performed for qualitative and quantitative analysis in the Sikkim.

Results and Discussion

The Lepcha language is rich in use of phonetic however, in this regard, only few literatures are available. During the survey, most of the community stated, 'they do not know when their ancestors arrived in Sikkim'. However, they speak and write their language which still prevalent and popular among their communities. Thus, the language was studied to understand its development.

Bradley (1997) and Gravers (2007) studied and found that the dichotomy of Sino-Burmese stock derives several mid-hill tribes towards the south, east and west of Asia. Out of this stock, several tribes distributed in the hills of South Asian region having some similarity in their cultures, practices and array of the knowledge. So, the language and script are taken into consideration for the study. For instance, ka, gha, ja, pa, ba and ya of Lepcha scripts are having close affinities with the Burmese language where the scripts differ in positioning only. This implies that these Lepcha alphabets are like vertically placing of Burmese alphabets. Further, the Lepcha language possesses the compound vowels ending, like Hanzi of Chinese language which warrants further research. The unique character of the Lepcha community is that they can express with the single consonant syllable by adding vowel on it and need not require the long words. Their monosyllables ending with the sino- vowels are resonating like the Chinese language. The sharp or pointed strokes, uniqueness in orientation and positioning are the phenomenal features of Lepcha language.

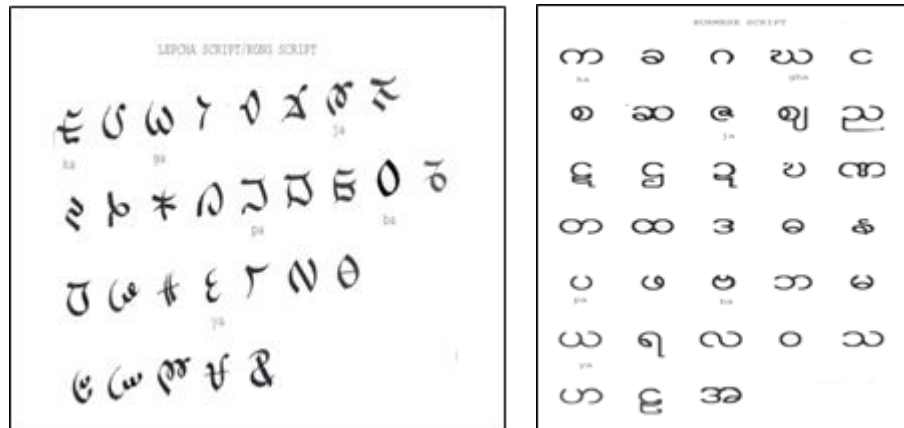


Fig 1: Lepcha scripts and Burmese scripts.

The Lepcha script is known as Rong script. Some of the Lepcha literatures are *La-zong* (book of Lepcha alphabet), *ta-lyang sa-tsuk rum* (Gods of Heaven and Sun), *Phyuk-bu Pa-ke sa nam-thar* (story or legend of the wealthy man Pa-ke), *Kar-thak Uk-dre sa sung* (story of minister Ukdre), a book of moral teaching and *Thok-dra mun-lom* (funeral prayer) (Hodgson, 1820) etc. Some section believed that the Lepcha language derived from the Tibetan script having Burmese influence, and other believed that it was devised in the beginning of 18th century by prince Phyagdor Namgyal of the Tibetan dynasty in Sikkim, or by scholar Thikúng Men Salóng in the 17th century. But there was an insufficient scientific literature on the development of language. Some of historical collection of Lepcha language and related works found in the studies of Hodgson (1820) and Waterhouse (2004). Nevertheless, it is attempted to discourse some names and terminologies used among the community vis-à-vis to the Chinese language with meanings.

The Lepcha name, Thikúng Men Salóng, who was the great personality of Lepcha community. The meaning of same name in Chinese language is like ‘Thi’ means grant, ‘Kung’ means correct, ‘men’ means men, ‘sa’ means let go and ‘long’ means dragon. Similarly, ‘Mayel’ of Lepcha language means the mother earth where Lepcha community resides, likewise, Ma in Chinese language means ‘mother’ and ye means ‘also’.

Other different usages and their meanings, for instances, the term ‘Nu’ means woman in Chinese whereas, in Lepcha Language, the respectable woman having leadership and knowledge of the society customary and culture, and belief. Similarly, Kye- bhumsa refers to the knowledgeable



personality of Tibetan plateau in Lepcha community on the other hand the Chinese language defines Kye means 'keepers of keys', 'bu' means highland and 'sa' means third or appellation of older brother. This might be an explanation of consecration of the Guru Tashi's son, who was the king of Chumbi valley. He travelled to the south towards Sikkim might be for the expansion of emperor and business. He studied Mayel, subsequently within no time extended friendship and annexed Mayel and consecrated Phu-n-sok nam-g-yal, third generation of Guru Tashi as the King of Mayel which was renamed as Sikkim in due course of time.

The another terms Te-koung- Tek is the epithet used for the spiritual leader of Lepcha. The literary meaning of Te-koung –Tek in Chinese language is like 'Te' means moral character – 'kyoung' – traditional Chinese dynasty or pinyin, 'Tek' means virtuous. One of the terms refers to the agreement between the two communities is Kayu- bhe-lum-cho. It referred the day of agreement between Guru Tashi's son and the head of Lepcha. The meaning in Chinese language of this term is like 'Kayu' means road, 'bhe' means exhausted, 'lum' means human relation and 'chok' means to forcefully make oneself -make look more handsome. In addition to this, the Mayel community had social bonding with the Chaung community who were in existence with them and their bonding still persistent in the society of Sikkim. The 'Chaung' means mature women in Chinese language.

The study of different terms depicted that the Lepcha language might have some affinities with other languages however it could not be ascertained unless there is detail researches. During the reign of British India, many scholars and researchers engaged to study the communities and resources for scientific resource management and trades (Pels, 1994; White, 1890; Kurtmeyer, 2006) however, all old literatures of Lepcha are yet to be discovered and documented (Hodgsen, 1820).

Aggregating the information after the survey, it was found that there were following information in the Lepcha community, for instance, moral educations literatures, rituals books, traditions, crafts, weaving, domestication ideas, farming techniques, resource mapping, designing, music, spiritual knowledge and priest class which represent a complete society. Notes of Chakraborty (1978) included to understand the scenario of past Himalayan region as under:

“About 9th century the kirat kings being independent were fighting with each other. Shrijonga the grandson of Galijonga, becoming independent, brought all the kings under his region. After establishing peace through out the country, he gathered all the ancient books together, invented a script and spread learning throughout the Kirat



country. Therefore this is also called the Shirijonga script.... This script has been noticed even in the Kathmandu valley. A Kirat inscription has been inscribed on the western foundation of the Uma-Maheshwar temple at Mahalakshmi tikhel located a furlong southward Patan Tundikhel” (Chakraborty, 1978)

Next, the noteworthy point is that the British scholars believed that the Burmese script was developed c. 1058 from the Mon script (Harvey, 1925). And the Burmese language has a history of script development from the eleven century following the cursive format in 17th century for the wider uses (Lieberman, 2003).

In conclusion, observing the Lepcha language, it seems that the Lepcha language have a cursive format which might have affinity with Burmese language. Besides that it might have some affinity with Chinese language too.

So, the study implies that the primitive language of Lepcha might have some affinities with cursive format of Burmese and Chinese compound vowels however this cannot be ascertained without performing further more researches. There are many stories to be unfolded for the understanding of the primitive language of Lepcha as the tribe have the complete knowledge of resources, socio-cultural development, arts, weaving, music, rituals, spiritual knowledge or preachers, crafts and religion, which warrants further researches.

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