# Exploring Ethnolinguistic Vitality
# A Case Study of Lepchas in Dzongu Valley

## Satarupa Dattamajumdar, Ph.D.

# Exploring Ethnolinguistic Vitality -
# A Case Study of Lepchas in Dzongu Valley

## Satarupa Dattamajumdar, Ph.D.

Lepcha Family. Picture taken from http://www.lepcha.info/

**Abstract**

The recent comments on the gradual loss of influence of the Lepcha language on the Lepcha community trigger our attention for an intimate look at the Lepcha speech community. According to Landweer (2008), "The indicators of ethno-linguistic vitality are a collection of factors that have been documented in sociolinguistic literature … have been useful in indicating the probable direction a speech community will go relative to the maintenance of, or shift from, its traditional language. No one factor has become a leading indicator of linguistic vitality.

Whether a language appears to be "maintained" or "dying" depends on the collective impact of positive or negative indicators that place the language on a continuum of stable vitality, change in process due to other-language interference, radical shift in process, and death. As such, language maintenance and shift are long-term consequences of consistent patterns of language choice throughout the speech community."

This paper examines the ethno-linguistic vitality of the speech community with special reference to the Lepchas of Dzongu valley, 'the prime Lepcha reserve' in

North Sikkim. In order to explore the endangered situation of the language, the probable direction of language maintenance and shift, towards which the speech community is proceeding has been studied, keeping in view the socio - political aspects of Lepcha life and its impact on the Lepcha language and culture across time in the multilingual setting.

## 1. Introduction

The Lepchas are the original inhabitants of Sikkim and are mostly settled in Dzongu valley in North Sikkim. They are also settled in Kalimpong subdivision of Darjeeling district of West Bengal. Apart from Sikkim and West Bengal, Lepcha is also spoken in Bhutan (lower valleys in the West and South) and Nepal (Mechi zone, Ilam district).

According to the Census of India 2001, total Lepcha population in India was 50,629. The population strength of Lepcha in Sikkim is 35, 728 and 14,721 in West Bengal according to the same census (http://www.census India.gov.in/ Census_Data_2001/ census_Data_ online / Language/partb.htm). Lepchas are also settled in Bhutan (Samasti district), their population strength being 2,000 (2001 Van Driem) and in Nepal (Ilam district) 1,272 (1961 Census of India), [according to http://www.ethnologue.com.

The Lepcha language (which is also known as Rong/Rongaring/Rongring) belongs to the Tibeto-Burman language sub-family under Tibeto-Chinese language family. Lepcha is placed in the non-pronominalised group of the Himalayan languages under the Tibeto-Burman sub-family. Das (1978:18-19) comments, "A good deal of confusion exists about the original homeland of the Lepchas … However, there are a number of legends current among them about their original habitation. Most of these point that they migrated to Sikkim from southern Tibet … It is believed by some that the Lepchas migrated from the Assam hills and entered Sikkim as early as the thirteenth century. Although the Lepchas settled in Sikkim sometimes between ninth and thirteenth century, it became a political entity in the fifth decade of the seventeenth century."

They are mainly agriculturalists, pastoralists and are followers of traditional religion and Buddhism (Lamaist). Lepcha speech community is considered constitutionally in India a scheduled tribe pertaining to the states of West Bengal and Sikkim in India.

## 2. Objectives of the Study

Foning (1972:63) says "…these children of Kongchen will forget to rejoin their ancestors in the land of spirits and thus the Lepchas will just be away and they will be left only as a legendary tribe of the Himalayas to be studied by posterity in schools, colleges and universities."

According to Awasty (1978: 45), "They are fast losing their cultural identity and leaning more towards Nepali social customs."

Foning (1987:305) states, "Anthropologists and research scholars have visited their lands… They have all, although reluctantly referred to this tribe of the Lapchas as 'a dying race'".

The comments on the gradual loss of influence of the Lepcha language on the Lepcha community, in the retrospective literatures trigger attention for an intimate look at the Lepcha speech community.

The paper examines the ethno-linguistic vitality of the speech community with special reference to the Lepchas of Dzongu valley, 'the prime Lepcha reserve' in north Sikkim. In order to explore the endangered situation of the language, the probable direction of language maintenance and shift, towards which the speech community is proceeding has been studied, keeping in view the socio - political aspects of Lepcha life and its impact on the Lepcha language and culture across the time in the multilingual setting.



A Lepcha girl. Picture taken from http://www.lepcha.info/

According to Landweer (2008), "The indicators of ethno-linguistic vitality are a collection of factors that have been documented in sociolinguistic literature … have been useful in indicating the probable direction a speech community will go relative to the maintenance of, or shift from, its traditional language. No one factor has become a leading indicator of linguistic vitality. Whether a language appears to be "maintained" or "dying" depends on the collective impact of positive or negative indicators that place the language on a continuum of stable vitality, change in process due to other-language interference, radical shift in process, and death. As such, language maintenance and shift are long-term consequences of consistent patterns of language choice throughout the speech community."

## 3. Eight Indicators of Vitality

The following eight indicators have been proposed and taken into consideration by Landweer (2008) to produce sociolinguistic profiles of different language groups and in indicating the probable direction of language maintenance and shift of a speech community.

1. Relative position on the urban-rural continuum

2. Domains in which the language is used
3. Frequency and type of code switching
4. Population and group dynamics
5. Distribution of speakers within their own social networks
6. Social outlook regarding and within the speech community
7. Language prestige
8. Access to a stable and acceptable economic base

Each of these indicators has been found pertinent in examining the ethno-linguistic vitality of the Lepcha community with special reference to the Lepchas of Dzongu valley in North Sikkim. The following discussion will examine the manifestation of each of the proposed indicator in the Lepcha speech community with special reference to those of the Dzongu valley.

## 4. Relative Position on the Urban-Rural Continuum

Landweer (2008) proposes a four point scale in order to determine the nature and extent of the language being affected by the language/languages in the proximity or in the hierarchy.

(i) Remote, i.e., no easy access to or from the language community relative to the nearest urban center.

(ii) Marginal access to and from the language community relative to the nearest urban center.

(iii) Fairly easy access to and from the language community relative to the nearest urban center.

(iv) Located within urban confines.

Landweer (2008) mentions, "in the scaled breakdown of these questions that follows, a language remote from an urban community or congregation of other-language speakers would be the least affected therefore the strongest, and a language located within urban confines would be the most affected and thus the weakest."

As far as the Lepchas residing in (different districts like Sankalang, Tingbung, Namprik, Rinku, Kusung, Pasingthung, and Lingia) Dzongu valley is concerned, it can be said that they have limited access to Gangtok, the capital city of Sikkim, the nearest urban center. In spite of 'marginal access' to the urban centre, and socio-cultural homogeneity to some extent, Lepchas of Dzongu valley exhibit language shift to a considerable extent.

## 5. Socio-political History of and Miscegenation in the Region

In this connection, it is worthy to mention the socio-political history of the region, which can validate the present situation. The socio-political dominance of the Nepali language that started from the end of 18th century exerts immense pressure in spite of the fact that Nepali is an Indo-Aryan language and that Lepcha, a Tibeto-Burman language that had a developed tradition.

Apart from the socio-political situation, a close look at the speech community reveals the fact that as the numerical strength of the Lepcha population is comparatively less, the contact situation with Bhotia and Nepali has encouraged them for inter-ethnic marriage system. Field investigation reveals that even with the last generation, inter-ethnic marriages with the Bhotias were socially accepted but not Nepali. But the modern trend speaks of the acceptance of inter-ethnic marriages with the Nepali speech community. Such a situation has been observed by the scholars as the greatest threat to the language. The biological extinction of the community is averted by the community as it tries to check it by relaxing the social rules and allowing marriage outside the community.

Personal observation reveals that due to the socio-cultural change that is affecting even the remotest villages of Dzongu valley, the definition of a prospective spouse has also undergone a drastic change. With a lower numerical strength, along with the change in the socio-cultural outlook, inter-ethnic marriages, especially with the Nepali speech community, is a reality of the day. As a result, language shift in both the lexical and syntactic level in Nepali and Bhotia is a definite feature of  the Lepcha speech community.

## 6. Domains in which the Language is Used



**Lepcha Ritual. Picture taken from http://www.lepcha.info/**

Lepcha has been declared as one of the official languages along with Nepali, Hindi and English by the Government of Sikkim. However, the extensive use of English in the official (legislation, court of justice, etc.) and educational domains shows signs of definite shift. In Sikkim, Lepcha language is included in the curriculum only as a subject matter. Literary aspects like short stories, poems, articles, rapid readers are taught in Lepcha. But there is no scope for the development of other aspects like registral variations or the technical vocables as the language has no place in the scientific and technological subject matters. Historically speaking, though Lepcha vocables for medicinal plants, natural objects, indigenous technology were available, these have been replaced by the English language, which is obviously an indicator of stylistic shrinkage of Lepcha.

Apart from this, an attitudinal study conducted in Dzongu valley reveals that Lepcha language, which is mainly used in the family domain, is frequently used by and associated with the older generation only. The language is occasionally used by the

younger generation in interactions with relatives and neighbours. It is rarely used in the domains like place of work, friends and social gatherings. The use of mother tongue has been reported to be decreasing in the family domain of the Lepcha speech community and Nepali is gaining ground along with Hindi.

As both the traditional religious practices and Buddhism exist simultaneously in Lepcha life, in the sub-domain of religion, Lepcha language is found to be used only by the Boongthing, the leader of the traditional shamanistic religion whereas Tibetan/ Bhotia finds its place in the religious matters practiced in Buddhist Gumphas. Thus Lundweer (2008) aptly says, "The cumulative choices then suggest which of the languages in the community's repertoire is the language of choice for each domain."

## 7. Frequency and Type of Code Switching

The code mixing and code switching aspects are quite extensively exhibited by the Lepcha speakers. Code-mixing and code-switching in Nepali is a dominant feature of the Lepcha speech community. Not only Nepali, the promotion of Hindi by the government --- both at the Centre and State levels, has also replaced Lepcha language in different domains of social life. The Lepchas have considered Hindi as a link language to the extent that it is replacing their own language for the last two generations. The active acquisition and use of the English language has also been observed among the younger generation.

In this connection it is worth mentioning that, agreeing with Pandit (1972, 1977), Gnanasundaram and Elangaiyan (2000:37) point out, "The borrowing and mixing at the lexical and structural levels do not necessarily indicate a shift towards language loss. They may indicate a pattern of language use of bilinguals and language change in contact situation as long as they can be shown to be instances of convergence, a phenomenon well attested among the languages of the Indian subcontinent."

If such a trend continues and covers the entire lexicon and grammar, and if there is no sociolinguistic identification of the language other than a variety of the dominant language, 'then it is possible to speak of language loss'. The potentiality of language shift or loss in such a multilingual social network has been observed by Abbi (1977:133) as, "the contact induced changes in languages… led to linguistic typological homogeneity on the one hand and to a tendency of language attrition on the other hand, tug of war between language maintenance (retention of mother tongue) and language proficiency in the dominant contact language; the tribal language probably passes through a transition period of language change and language convergence which probably tries to avoid the expected language shift or loss."

Thus the interplay of the embedded language (i.e, forms from one language) and the matrix language (that is, utterance that is primarily composed of another language) within the same conversation cannot be determined objectively as yet to conclude on the language loss or shift.

## 8. Population and Group Dynamics

*Language in India www.languageinindia.com* **8 : 7 2008**
**Satarupa Dattamajumdar, Ph.D. Exploring Ethnolinguistic Vitality: A Case**
**Study of Lepchas in Dzongu Valley**

6

Landweer (2008) argues that the following factors are determinants of the group dynamics of the concerned population. "Are there speakers of the language? How is that group of speakers impacted by the language characteristics of the immigrants who came to live among them? A scale relative to maintaining a critical mass of speakers follows, where the least undermining situation would be where the immigrants to the community become actively bilingual in the community's language. By contrast, the most detrimental to the local vernacular would be the situation where immigrants chose to maintain their own mother tongue and insisted others in the community learn to speak it."

In order to examine the factor of 'population and group dynamics' of ethno-linguistic vitality in relation to the Lepcha speech community, a close look at the socio-political history of the Lepcha inhabiting areas is felt to be essential.

## 9. Historical Documents – Entry of Lamaism

Historical documents reveal that the first major contact with the Lepcha land and people was established by the ethnic group of people from 'Kham', a province of Tibet sometime during the 13th or the 14th century. Siiger (1967:26) states, "From a strictly historical point of view we know hardly anything about the Lepchas until about the year 1600 A.D, when a branch of Tibetan Minyang dynasty from the eastern Kham province took part in the great migration of Tibetan nobles, entered Sikkim, and some decades later made themselves kings." Awasty (1978:30) supports the same argument by stating, "...with the establishment of Lamaism in the 17th c, the Lepcha script must have been developed, based on the Tibetan alphabet. The main Lepcha works were Tibetan scriptures translated into Lepcha to facilitate the progress of the Lamaistic religion among the Lepchas. There are however, references to even earlier Lepcha manuscripts narrating Lepcha mythology and legends which according to Gorer and even Father Rey, were destroyed by the Tibetan lamas in their zeal to convert the Lepchas. This view of fanaticism of Lamaism in Sikkim is held by the Christian missionaries."

Along with the migration of the 'Khamba' Tibetans, Buddhist religion came to the land, resulting in the conversion of a number of Lepchas to Buddhism by the Tibetan monks. As a result of the introduction of Buddhism, the traditional Lepcha scripture was gradually replaced by the Tibetan and the impact of Tibetan culture led to the gradual infiltration of new ideas. Das (1978:15) rightly points out, "This phase of Lepcha culture is the history of dominance of Tibetans over the Lepchas in every sphere of their life and activities… (ibid:243) The language with its literature, which flourished during the reign of the Lepcha kings, got a rude set back after the dominance of the Tibetans who gradually replaced Lepcha literature, etc., by their own language."

## 10. The Bhutanese and Nepali Entry

The next socio-political phase of Lepcha life was marked by the advent of the Bhutanese after 1700. The eastern and western frontiers of the land were attacked by the Bhutanese and Gurkhas, threatening the territorial integrity of Sikkim. The end of the 18th c, (1788-89) was marked by the invasion of Sikkim by Nepal. Foning

(1987:283) opines, "Large scale migration took place at any time to overwhelm the autochthons, like the Nepalese immigration in the nineteenth century."

With such contact situations with the Bhutanese and Nepali communities, the Lepcha social life changed to some extent, giving rise to conflicts and tensions on the one hand and destruction of Lepcha scriptures on the other. Inter-mixing in terms of marriage and other social activities became evident resulting in the infiltration of new ideas and exposures.

## 11. The Metamorphosis

The metamorphosis of the speech community took place with the constant migration of the three ethnic communities --- Tibetans, Bhutanese and Nepalese. This has been aptly observed by Foning (1987:283) as, "In time due to intermarriage between the native Rongfolk and the migrating people, new tribes came into being. The tribes thus formed incorporated the culture, customs and traditions of the two inter-mingling tribes and, as a result, a new and a separate tribe came into existence. The best example of this type of the tribe is the 'Denjongpa' people, a cross between the Lepchas and the Khamba Tibetans."

## 12. The Entry of the British – More Nepalis Arrived and Their Impact

With the advent of the British in the following phase of development, Lepcha socio-political life was pressurized as forests were reserved and taxes were imposed on the 'son of the soil' as an administrative measure by the British. With the Nepal war of 1816, Nepalese migrated in large number and took part in the development. This resulted in rapid out-numbering of the Lepchas by the settlers from Nepal.

Therefore Foning (1987:283) aptly observes, "… today, the vast majority of people inhabiting the old-time Mayel country of the Rongfolk are the people of mixed ethnic origin from the country of Nepal." He also points out (1987:296), "Both in the urban and the rural areas, the Nepali language has virtually become the 'Lingua Franca' for the people of different ethnic groups that one finds in the regions."

## 13. Missionary Activities



**Lepcha School Children. Picture taken from http://www.lepcha.info/**

*Language in India www.languageinindia.com* **8 : 7 2008**
**Satarupa Dattamajumdar, Ph.D. Exploring Ethnolinguistic Vitality: A Case Study of Lepchas in Dzongu Valley**

8

The British rule that took control in 1841, marked the advent of missionary activities which could convert a section of the Lepcha community into Christianity along with teaching English language. But Buddhism Lamaism continued its hold on the common people. This resulted in creating a gap within the community --- those with Christian education could raise their standard of living and outlook with English education and those who still adhered to their age old traditional beliefs and customs. This situation has been observed by Das (1978: 259) as "The conflict of these two major religious groups of Lepchas at times results in creating a gulf within the community due to differences in social, religious and cultural traits." The expansion of the tea manufacturing industry by the British led the original inhabitants of the land, the Lepchas to recede into interiors, resulting to a situation detrimental to the local vernacular.

## 14. A Brief Linguistic Revival

Mainwaring (1876) mentions that Lepcha was the language for the entire Sikkim. The Tibetans, the Bhutias and other immigrants used to communicate in the Lepcha language. Business, justice, recording of decrees and documents were carried on in the Lepcha language, under the rule of Col. Llyod in Darjeeling. In this connection the name of Reverend Mr. William Start is worthy to mention as he established a school for the Lepchas and employed the Moravian system of education. At that time a Lepcha primer and a dictionary was also compiled. Foning (1987 :155) comments on the situation as, "At the same time he tried to convert them to the new faith of Christianity, which he thought would bring an all round improvement … These missionaries did exactly what the Tibetan Lamas had done about a century and a half earlier by translating their religious books for the purpose of converting them to their own faiths … with the death of Rev. C.G. Neible in 1865 (one of the missionaries), the grand and admirable effort of these missionaries faded out completely."

## 15. A Set Back for the Lepcha Language

Soon the Lepcha language received a set back and started to be considered as the language of the aboriginal people who are socially and culturally backward. Foning (1987:160) as, "The government language report gave unfavourable findings. This was the result of a politically motivated action on the part of the British government." It is not clear how this charge could be proved except by justifying the overall impression that the British were against or looked down upon everything that is native or national.

## 16. The Changes in Indo-Sikkim Relations – The Arrival of Democracy

With the breaking of World War I in 1914, the socio-religious aspect underwent a sea change in the Lepcha horizon. The period which was followed by the departure of the British from the Indian sub-continent, marked a radical change in the socio-political and socio-cultural scenario of the Indo-Sikkim relationship. According to Singh (1993:3), "The period between 1950 and 1973 was marked by several important events in Sikkim, like the emergence of various political parties, formation of State Assembly, introduction of franchise on the basis of party formula. The tension that

developed between the Durbar and the various political parties led to the agitation of 1973, the signing of the May Agreement in 1973, formation of a popular ministry in 1974, and finally its merger with Indian Union in 1975." That the tripartite agreement that called for a resolution of the dilemma of the conflict between the existing Tibetan theocratic feudalism and the emerging trend of liberal democracy stands as an instance of world polity has been observed by Joshi (2004).

## 17. The Remnants or the Relics of Original Lepcha

The settlement pattern of the Lepchas as mentioned earlier informs that the Lepchas are settled in the states of Sikkim, Darjeeling district (Kalimpong sub-division) of West Bengal, Bhutan and Nepal .In this connection it is pertinent to cite Gorer (1984:37): "It is only in Zongu and in one or two small villages outside the reserve that there is a homogeneous Lepcha society, practically undisturbed by alien influence. These survivals can be considered artificial, as without the indirect pacification of the British government and the benevolence of the Maharaja, these Lepchas would, like their fellows, have been ousted from the little and poor land which remains to them."

## 18. The Fragmentation of the Lepcha Community

This fragmentation of the population can be traced in the political history of the region. The Lepcha as a community came under three different alien rulers ---- Tibetans in Sikkim in 1642, Bhutanese in Damsang area in 1707 and British in Darjeeling area in 1835. As mentioned by Roy (2005:37), "The fourth political reshuffling occurred in 1865 when Kalimpong and the adjoining areas were taken over by the British from the Bhutan through a war. … Due to this political change, Lepchas of Kalimpong and Darjeeling areas came under the same political authority… Lepchas in Bhutan became insignificant compared to other community."

## 19. Vulnerable to Language Shift

Further with the independence of India in 1947, the linguistic state reorganization of 1956, and the merger of Sikkim with the Indian Union in 1975 resulted in the geopolitical divisions that ultimately led to the fragmentation of the Lepcha tribal community into smaller divisions. The low numerical strength of the Lepcha population has led to crop up situations that are more vulnerable to language shift.

The socio-linguistic and socio-political development that took place in the post-independence period in the Lepcha inhabiting areas of Sikkim exhibit a sociolinguistic mosaic of Hindi, Nepali, Bhotia and Lepcha languages along with English.

As already mentioned, the replacement of Lepcha by Nepali and Bhotia in various spheres of social life started as early as 17th century. However, the dominance of English and Hindi is a relatively later development, due more to the influence of independent India. Therefore both the immigrants to the Lepcha speaking community as well as the geo-political reshuffling at different points of time have made the Lepchas become "bilinguals" in Nepali, Bhotia, Hindi and English. Thus keeping in

view the argument made by Lundweer (2008)that, "the most detrimental to the local vernacular would be the situation where immigrants chose to maintain their own mother tongue and insisted others in the community learn to speak it."

The Lepcha language can be undoubtedly said to be endangered.

## 20. Distribution of Speakers Within Their Own Social Networks

Lundweer (2008) points out the importance of the network of the social situations that are supportive to ethno-linguistic vitality of the language under consideration.

Multiplex relationships are very important in maintaining the identity of the community and its language. Dense multiplex network is in existence when "ego relates to other individuals in a number of capacities simultaneously. Thus, ego might be the neighbor of a man, who is his brother, who also serves as the local catechist for community children including ego's children. Of course ego and his brother are from the same clan and share clan obligations with the same group of people. Thus, in this example, ego and his brother share at least four relational links: parentage, neighborhood, religious instruction, and clan membership" (Lundweer 2008). This muliplex network acts as a supportive element to the vernacular. On the other hand the context, where individuals are isolated in their social roles, low population density and in uniplex network are detrimental to the maintenance of the vernacular.

As already mentioned earlier, due to the expatriate population across time and inter-ethnic marriage, this factor of ethno-linguistic vitality seems not to be operative positively in the case of the Lepcha community. The Lepcha speech community in Dzongu valley does not exhibit a dense multiplex social network and therefore is vulnerable in the maintenance of mother tongue.

## 21. Social Outlook regarding and within the Speech Community

Language as a marker of ethnic identity, enables the speech community in the choice and use of their mother tongue. This integrative motive is not only dependant upon the perception of the community regarding their own language and culture but also depends on the perception of the members of the other neighbouring speech communities. "How well a group is perceived by outsiders and whether or not it is supported by outsiders (e.g. by government funding of development projects) also has an impact on the value associated with the group's language. Thus, the sixth indicator of ethno-linguistic vitality is a measure of the language community's social outlook both internally and externally … greater the positive internal identity, external status, and cultural distinctions the better in the support of the vernacular language" has been stated rightly by Lundweer(2008).

## 22. The Social Consequences of Being Considered as a Scheduled Tribe

In order to examine the ethno-linguistic vitality of the Lepcha speech community in the light of both internal and external social outlook, it is pertinent to mention the fact that Lepcha is considered a schedule tribe in Sikkim.

According to scholars like Annamalai (1990), as the tribal languages are considered as languages at the lowest rung of the linguistic hierarchy, these receive a nominal and inadequate patronage. As a result, they generally tend towards shift.

In this connection it is observed that though the attitude of the neighbouring speech communities regarding the linguistic status of the Lepcha speech community is not very encouraging, institutional and individual efforts both at the governmental and non-governmental levels for the development of the language and culture show evidence in support of Lepcha vernacular.

## 23. Language Developmental Activities

Institutional effort "…is another attempt to create awareness and motivation towards tribal literacy among the larger population of the (same) tribal language speakers who are fragmented into smaller groups in different states." (Gnanasundaram and Elangaiyan 2000:41).

Institutional effort is considered to be a means to reverse language shift. Institutional efforts in terms of the recognition of the Lepcha indigenous script, promotion of the use of the language in literatures in terms of creative writing, use of the language in the print and audio-visual media is evident in Sikkim only.

*Sikkim Herald*, a weekly newspaper, is published from the Information and Public Relations Department, Govt of Sikkim, Gangtok. All India Radio broadcasts regional news in Lepcha everyday at 6.45 p.m. for five minutes. A composite program constituting of three or four Lepcha folk songs and talk in Lepcha on social or environmental affairs are also broadcast everyday from 4.30 to 5 P.M. A Lepcha literary magazine *Songfum*, meaning 'Dawn,' is published quarterly or half yearly by *Renjyong Mutanchi Amureeng Tarwat Prongzun*, Gangtok. The journal *Sakchum Aal*, meaning 'endeavour' is published yearly from Tadong Degree College, Gangtok and another magazine *Midyak* meaning 'flame' is also published yearly from south Sikkim.

Some of the agencies, both governmental as well as NGOs that make deliberate effort for the promotion of the Lepcha language are *Lepcha Association*, *Sikkim Lepcha Literary Organisation*, *Sikkim Academy* under the Department of Culture and Heritage, Government.of Sikkim, *Lom Aal Shezum* and *Rong Ong Shezum*, the youth associations of Gangtok .

## 24. Language Prestige

We notice the operation of the integrative motive and awareness of the speech community among the Lepcha speakers in their recognition of their mother tongue and Lepcha culture, in spite of their bilingual proficiency in the dominant and contact languages--- Nepali, Hindi and English. Such a self esteem of the speech community may not lead to a situation of complete language loss.

Close observation during field investigation reveals the self-esteem of the group, which is reflected in their maintenance of folk song, folk dance, folk music,

documentation of indigenous activities and even in the preservation of their traditional dresses as a part of special conscious effort.

The Lepcha language is a regionally recognized language. It has been declared as one of the three official language of Sikkim (vide notification dated October 17, 1977).

## 25. Access to a Stable and Acceptable Economic Base

Gnanasundaram and Elangaiyan (2000:40) mention, "certain tribes disown their tribal languages at the mental level only as they do not want themselves to be identified with a language which has earned some 'stigma'. That is, in such cases, there is a denial of having a 'tribal language' as mother tongue, even though in reality they have the language and use the same." As regards Lepcha language, the above mentioned situation seems not to be operative.

Field investigation reveals that, in the villages of Dzongu valley, due to the drastic decrease of cardamom cultivation, the major cash crop, over last few years, the economy of the Lepchas has received a set back. As a result, emphasis has been given to other occupations and learning of other languages especially English and Hindi has been felt mandatory to cope up with the situation. But mother tongue maintenance has not attained any such status of 'denial' attitude. Rather, consciousness for uplifting Lepcha culture and folk activities is observed. These have received a thrust especially when the Lepchas of Dzongu valley attempt to promote 'eco-tourism'--- a recent trend of one of the changed occupational patterns. Though language shift especially to English is a reality of the 'tourism industry', language maintenance also continues simultaneously as a part of uplifting the concerned culture in terms of folk tales, folk songs, folk dances, etc.----a strategy adopted as a part of the promotion of the concept of 'eco-tourism'.

## 26. Conclusion

While discussing the factors of ethnolinguistic vitality, a note of caution has been stated by Landweer (2008): "The absence of indicators of ethno-linguistic vitality— and by implication the presence of characteristics associated with language shift—is not foolproof in the prediction of language shift or death, but they do seem to suggest the direction the language is taking. It may be that language maintenance is not completely associated with the QUANTITY of the indicators present, but perhaps the QUALITY of interrelationships between relatively positive and relatively negative forces, leading to language maintenance or language death, respectively."

Lepcha speech community does not show any sign for linguistic shrinkage, and also does not show evidence for language shift in the truest sense of the term. In spite of having a low numerical strength, the Lepcha speech community being a minority group is also provided with certain privileges as a part of governmental effort.

Furthermore, in connection with the discussion regarding the ethno-linguistic vitality --- the dilemma of language maintenance and shift of Lepcha, a Tibeto-Burman language, the observations of Gnanasundaram and Elangaiyan (2000:31) is pertinent. "In the Indian context, according to the extensive field experience of Indian linguists,

we find that there has been no language loss among the speakers of the languages belonging to the Tibeto Burman family of languages."

However, though it was reasonable enough for the earlier scholars to be alarmed with the worn out demographic and linguistic status of the Lepcha, the present investigation brings into light the fact that the language and the speech community is probably in a phase of transition regarding language change and language convergence. This may not lead to language death, shift or loss, though it cannot be denied that linguistic shrinkage is a definite phenomenon of the present scenario for the Lepcha speech community. Therefore, the necessity for arresting such linguistic erosion is essential. Inclusion of Lepcha intelligentsia in the language planning aspects of their own mother tongue is recommended for such prevention.

# BIBLIOGRAPHY

Abbi, A.1977. 'Languages in contact in Jharkhand'. In Abbi,A. (ed.) *Languages of Tribal and Indigenous People in India*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidas Publishers Pvt. Ltd.

Annamalai, E.1990. Linguistic dominance and Cultural dominance: A Study of Tribal Bilingualism in India. In Pattanayak, D. P. (ed.). *Multilingualism in India*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.

Asher, R.E. (ed.) 1994. *Encyclopaedia of Language and Linguistics*. Vol. IV. Oxford: Pergamon Press.

Awasty, Indira.1978. *Between Sikkim and Bhutan (the Lepchas and Bhutanis of Pedong)*. Delhi: B.R. Publishing Corporation.

Benedict, Paul K.1972. *Sino-Tibetan: A Conspectus*. Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press

Bhadra, M. 1992. *Sikkim: Democracy and Social Change*. Calcutta: Minerva Associates.

Blandford, W.T.1871. 'Journey through Sikkim'. JASB. vol.XI, Pt II.

Campbell, A.1840. 'Note on Lepchas of Sikkim'. JASB vol.IX: 379-393

Campbell, A. 1849. 'Journal of a trip to Sikkim in December 1848, with Sketchmap' JASB.vol.XVIII:482-541

Kloss. A, Mahapatra, B. P., Padmanabha, P., MacConnell, G.D. & Verma, V. S.(ed.) 1989. *The Written Languages of the World: A Survey of the Degree and Modes of Use. Non- Constitutional Languages of India*. Vol. II. India: Registrar General & Census Commissioner.

Chakraborti, A. 1978. *Read Lepcha* (An introduction to the Lepcha or Rong Scripts Self instructor for reading the language). New Delhi.

*Language in India* www.languageinindia.com **8 : 7 2008**
**Satarupa Dattamajumdar, Ph.D. Exploring Ethnolinguistic Vitality: A Case Study of Lepchas in Dzongu Valley**

14

Chattopadhyay, T. 1946. *Lepchas and their heritage*. Delhi: B.R. Publishing.

Das, A. K. and Banerjee, S.1962. *The Lepchas of Darjeeling District*. Govt. of West Bengal: Director of Tribal Welfare.

Das, A. K.1975. 'The Lepchas in the eyes of earlier authors'. *Bulletin of the Cultural Research Institute*. Vol.XI, No.1&2:80-90.

Das, A. K.1978. The Lepchas of West Bengal. S. Dey for Editions Indian.

Debbarman, P.1992. 'Education among the Lepchas of Darjeeling'. *Bulletin of the Cultural Research Institute*. Vol.XVIII, No.1&2:29-31

Foning, A. R.1972. 'The Children of Kanchenjunga'.*Bulletin of the Cultural Research Institute*. Vol.IX,No.1&2:61-63.

Foning, A. R. 1979. 'A short account of the Lepcha Language'. *Bulletin of the Cultural Research Institute*. Vol.XIII, No.3&4:20-30.

Foning, A. R.1980. 'Some customary laws of our Lepcha Tribe'. *Bulletin of the Cultural Research Institute*. Vol.XIV, No.1&2:17-21.

Foning, A. R. 1987. *Lepcha, my vanishing tribe*. New Delhi: Sterling

Gorer, G. 1984. *Lepchas of Sikkim*. Delhi: Cultural Publishing House.

Gnanasundaram,V. and Elangaiyan, R. 2000. 'Endangered Languages in the Indian Context.' In Koul, O. N. and Devaki, L. (ed.) *Linguistic Heritage of India and Asia*. Mysore:CIIL.

Grierson, G.A.1987. *Language of North East India*. Vol.I &II. Delhi: Gian Publisher.

Grierson, G.A. 1908.*Linguistic Survey of India*. Vol. III, Pt.I.

Hermanns, Matthias. 1954. *The Indo-Tibetans; The Indo-Tibetan & Mongoloid Problem in the Southern Himalaya and North –Northeast India*. Bombay: K.L. Fernandes

Haugen, E.1972. *The Ecology of Language : Essays by Einar Haugen*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Hodgson, B. H. 1847. 'On the Aborigines of the Sub-Himalayas' JASB.vol.XVI:1235-1244.

Hodgson,B.H.1850. 'Aborigines of the Northeast Frontier' JASB.vol.XIX:309-316.

Hodgson, B. H. 1857. 'Comparative Vocabulary of the Languages of the broken Tribes of Nepal' JASB vol.XXVI:317-371

*Language in India* www.languageinindia.com **8 : 7 2008**
**Satarupa Dattamajumdar, Ph.D. Exploring Ethnolinguistic Vitality: A Case Study of Lepchas in Dzongu Valley**

15

Joshi, H.G. 2004. *Sikkim: Past and Present*. New Delhi: Mittal Publication.

Landweer, L. 1991. Schlie-Landweer priority allocation assessment device: Rationale. In Gloria E. Kindell (ed.), *Proceedings of the Summer Institute of Linguistics International Assessment Conference*, Horseleys Green, 23–31 May 1989, 49–57. Dallas, Tex.: Summer Institute of Linguistics.

Landweer, L. and Greg, P. 1989. *Sociolinguistic survey of the Labu language group*. ms.

Landweer, L. and Tuula, T. 1989a. *Sociolinguistic survey of Vanimo*. ms.

Landweer, L. and Tuula, T. 1989b. *A report of the sociolinguistic survey: Koita(bu) language community, Central Province, Papua New Guinea*. ms.

Landweer, L. 1998. Sociolinguistic survey report of the Anuki language: Cape Vogel, Milne Bay Province, Papua New Guinea. ms.

Landweer, L., Nicki M., and Marisa M. 1999. Pre-allocation sociolinguistic survey report of Maiadom. ms.

Landweer, L. and Karla S. 1999. *Pre-allocation sociolinguistics survey report of Momu Baibai*. ms.

Lundweer, L. 2008. www@sil.org

Mainwaring, G. B.1876. *A Grammar of the Rong (Lepcha) language as it exists in the Dorjeeling and Sikkim Hills*. Calcutta.

Mainwaring, G. B.1898. *Dictionary of the Lepcha Language*. Revised and completed by Albert Grunwedel.Berlin: Unger.

Mallick, B. & Chowdhuri, M. K. 1980. 'Ngsaey – A Lepcha dominated village'. *Bulletin of the Cultural Research Institute*. Vol.XIV ,No.1&2: 93-95.

Morris,J. 1938.*Living with Lepchas*. London; Toronto, William Heinemann.

Neethivanan, J. 1967. 'Notes on Investigation among the Lepchas' *Darjeeling District Census Handbook*. West Bengal: Census of India 1967.

Pandit, P. B. 1972. India as a Sociolinguistic Area. Poona: University of Poona.

Pandit, P. B. 1977. Language in a Plural Society. The Seventh Devraj Chanana Memorial Committee, Delhi.

Risley, H.H.1894. *The Gazetteer of Sikkim*. Calcutta:Bengal Secretariat Press.

Roy, D. C. 2005. *Dynamics of Social Formation Among the Lepchas*. New Delhi: Akansha Publishing House.

*Language in India www.languageinindia.com* **8 : 7 2008**
**Satarupa Dattamajumdar, Ph.D. Exploring Ethnolinguistic Vitality: A Case Study of Lepchas in Dzongu Valley**

16

Plaisier, H. 2003. *'Lepcha'. The Sino-Tibetan Languages*. (Thurgood and Lapolla ed.) London & NewYork:Routledge.

Siiger, Halfdan. 1967. *The Lepchas: Culture, religion of a Himalayan People*. Pt. I &II. National Museum Ethnographic Series, Vol. II, Pt I. Copenhagen. Denmark: Copenhagen National Museum.

Singh, K. S. (ed.) 1993. *People of India: Sikkim*. Vol. XXXIX . Anthropological Survey of India. Calcutta: Seagull Books.

Sprigg, R. K. 1982. 'The Lepcha language and Three Hundred Years of Tibetan Influence of Sikkim'. JASB.vol.XXIV.No.1-4; 16-31.

Stocks, C. De Beauvoir. 1925. 'Folklore and Customs of the Lepchas of Sikkim' JASB. Art.No. 23.New Series.vol.XXI:325-505.

Waddell, L. A. 1898. 'The lepcha or Rong Language as illustrated in its songs'. JASB vol.LXVII(3):75-85.

Wurm, S. A. 1993. Information Document. The Red book of Languages in Danger of Disappearing. UNESCO.

**Satarupa Dattamajumdar, Ph.D.**
**Asiatic Society of Bengal**
**Kolkata**
**West Bengal, India**
**satarupa_dattamajumdar@yahoo.com**

*Language in India www.languageinindia.com* **8 : 7 2008**
**Satarupa Dattamajumdar, Ph.D. Exploring Ethnolinguistic Vitality: A Case Study of Lepchas in Dzongu Valley**

17