



A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF THE PARALLELS BETWEEN LEPCHA MYTHS AND BIBLICAL NARRATIVES

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Abstract

The Lepchas are an Indigenous community residing in a reserve in Sikkim and are considered the original inhabitants of this land. Lepcha myths are spiritual tales that have religious tones carried throughout the story and are based on real life events. A.R Foning states that Lepcha myths and Biblical stories and Greek myths have a few similarities. It is to be noted that the stories have not emerged from the other but are purely coincidental. Biblical stories are also religious stories that are read and considered by Christians. The purpose of the paper is to study the parallels between the Lepcha myths and Biblical stories that share these similarities and consider the differences as well. The paper focuses on three Biblical stories which include the Creation story, The Tower of Babel and The Marriage of Jacob and Rachel. The Lepcha Myths that will be analysed include 'Children of the Snowy Peak', 'Stairway of Heaven' The Marriage of Tarbong Nom and Narip Nom'

Keywords: Story-telling, Similarity, Biblical, Folktales

Introduction: Lepcha Folktales

The Lepchas are an indigenous group of people who reside in the eastern Himalayan regions of India since the beginning. Today they reside in the Dzongu reserve located in the northern regions of the state of Sikkim. The Lepchas are popularly called Rongs. They consider themselves to be the children of God. The Lepchas like many of the other indigenous communities have their own folktales consisting of myths, legends and folktales. These myths and legends are religious in nature and are called 'lungten sung'. Lepcha folktales are narrated usually at events such as marriages, deaths, harvest time and more frequently in the evenings after a day's work. These stories were initially passed on in the oral tradition to the younger members by the Elders of the community. The Elders were tasked with the responsibility of passing these stories to the younger generations because the future of the Lepcha community depends on the implementation of these morals, traditions and customs. Lepcha stories give detailed accounts of the origin of this community on this earth. They highlight their oppression over demonic forces, the importance of performing rituals and implementing traditions sacred to their community and also highlights the sacred relationship between man and all the living creatures living within their land. These stories are narrated in the Rong language and are narrated with vividness and precision. The dialogues within these stories are short and straightforward. These stories are set in the ancient Kingdom of Sikkim and all the regions that were a part of this kingdom which included Darjeeling, Kalimpong, parts of Tibet, Bhutan and Nepal. Nature in these regions such as the mountains and rivers are personified and are vital to the existence of this community. The living creatures including animals' birds, insects are also personified and live among them like as if they are one among them. These stories are didactic in nature

and are always hiding within it a moral lesson to be considered by members of this community. These teachings are not directly imparted but are expected to be understood by the Lepchas.

Biblical Stories

Author A.R Foning a Lepcha writer himself noticed that the myths of his own community are homogenous with that of Biblical stories. Foning states: “our beliefs in the divine...and our practises in our daily lives may well be those of Patriarch Abrahams’s people in the ancient land of Jews in the hoary past” (Foning, 110). The Bible is considered the holy scriptures of all those members who practise Christianity. The Bible is divided into two parts. The Old Testament and the New Testament. The story of the Creation and consequently of Abraham and his descendants who happened to be the Children of Israel are narrated from the Old Testament. The children of Israel are the Jews that Foning references in his book. Foning lists out in detail a few stories in the Bible that are similar to Lepcha myths that are usually narrated and in recent years available in written texts. It must be noted that Biblical stories are narrated and recorded. They were not passed down in the oral traditions. Lepcha myths like Biblical stories are religious in nature. However, Biblical stories are read and wisdom so attained are for the spiritual and moralistic upliftment of the Christian man who applies it. However, Lepcha stories are not just narrated for the spiritual conditions of the community but is also vital for the preservation of the Lepcha community from being utterly destroyed from the face of the earth. The stories that Foning references are found in the Old Testament, particularly the first five books written by Moses. He makes a mention of the ‘Creation’ story and the ‘Fall of Man’, found in the first chapter of Genesis, the first

book of the Bible. The Tower of Babel is another story also found in the book of Genesis. It has to be noted that Foning does very clearly state that these stories are mere coincidences and that his people did not hail from these countries. Foning also states that unlike the Christians who are no longer following the primitive practises mentioned in these passages the Lepchas still do practise their traditional customs to protect their community.

‘Creation’ and ‘Children of The Snowy Peak’

The ‘Creation’ and ‘Children of the Snowy Peak’ are two similar stories found in the Bible and Lepcha myths respectively. The Creation focuses on how God created the universe and all the creatures occupying the air, land and sea. However, God felt that something was missing and decided to create humans. He first created man whose name was Adam who was made from the dust of the ground. His wife Eve was made from the ribs of Adam. Together they lived in the garden of Eden where all the living creatures were also living. God gave them one specific instruction and told them not to eat of the fruit of the tree of good and evil and that if they did so they would die. Satan tempted Eve and she ate of the fruit and then fed her husband. When God came to visit them as he did regularly in the evening, they hid themselves in shame of their nakedness and on finding them out God banished them from the Garden of Eden. They had to work hard and toil for their survival.

Similarly, ‘Children of the Snowy Peak’ dwells on the story of the Lepchas and how they came to exist on this earth. Itbu-Moo the Creator resided in Kanchenjunga. She shaped the mountains, rivers and the lakes in the regions. Unhappy with just these she created the first man Fudongthing and Nazong Nyu. Nazong Nyu was

created from the bones of Fudongthing. These two unlike Adam and Eve were created as brother sisters, which is the first point of difference. These two creatures like Adam and Eve were also given an instruction. The instruction however was different from the Biblical story. The first Lepcha man and woman were not allowed to live together and were asked to live in separate places. However, as they grew older, just like Eve, the first Lepcha woman was tempted as a result of loneliness. She fell in love with her brother against the instruction of the Creator and began to visit him and eventually had seven children which they abandoned. When the Creator finds out, she banishes them to the foothills where they were separated from the realm of God and even for a while lost the connection of the divine.

In both the Creation stories there is the presence of a sacred land. These places and natural elements were created because of divine intervention and not arbitrarily placed. In the Bible, the Garden of Eden was where God came down, met and walked with the first couple. The Lepchas had Mayel Lang. These two places on Earth had important rivers flow through these regions. The rivers that flowed through the Garden of Eden were Pison, Gihon, Hiddekel, and Euphrates. These rivers signified Gods abundance and overflowing provision of Gods abundance. The significant rivers in the Lepcha folktales are the Teesta and Rongeet which flows through the land to make it fruitful. Both the stories share the same idea. Man's disobedience cut of a sacred and divine connection between man and the Creator. This act of disobedience in both cases also impacted the future generations.

'Tower of Babel' and The 'Stairway Of Heaven'

The story of the 'Tower of Babel' is recorded in Genesis chapter eleven. The incident occurred in a place called Babel. Until this time, the people of the earth spoke a single language. However, as recorded in the Bible the people decided to build themselves a city, with a tower that reaches the heavens, to make a name for themselves; otherwise, they would be scattered over the face of the whole earth. God was very displeased with their pride when he came to see them. He realised they eventually would realise everything they envision would be impossible. He then decided to confuse their language and they all scattered to different regions.

The 'Stairway to Heaven' one of the many Lepcha myths bears resemblance to the above Biblical story. The Lepchas as a result of their sinful origins were never allowed to see the Creator or any divine creature as long as they lived. However, these Lepchas many years since decided to build a tower to see the place where the gods lived. They decided to build a tower with pots. As the tower kept getting bigger the lack of proper communication led to misinformation being passed down from above. Eventually one worker could not hear the instruction from above and thought he was asked to "smash it down" (Doma, 49). Eventually they all came crashing down and the people scattered and spoke different languages. The story bears significance in many ways. The message conveyed through both the stories focuses on the consequence of sin. In the first story the act of sin was a result of pride and in the Lepcha myth it was a result of the sin committed by the first humans which impacted them later. Unlike the Biblical story, the Lepcha myth also lays emphasis on the importance of communication among members of the community. It was a lack of communication that led to the fall of the

tower. However, the result of such an attack led to the loss of a singular language in both stories and separation from the others.

‘The Marriage of Jacob and Rachel’ and ‘The Marriage of Tarbong Nom and Narip Nom’

Jacob was the grandson of Abraham and the brother of his twin Esau. His mother Rebecca favoured him. Jacob stole his brother’s birthright in exchange for some stew and stole his brothers blessing by disguising himself like his hairy brother Esau. Esau was furious with Jacob. Fearing he might kill Jacob, his mother sent him to his uncle Laban who lived in a place called Haran. Laban who had two daughters Leah and Rachel and Jacob wanted to marry Rachel. Laban agreed to the union if he worked for him for seven years. At the end of the seven years Laban deceived him and got him married to Leah. Furious, Jacob confronts him. Laban agreed to get him married to Rachel if he worked for him for another seven years. Jacob married Rachel but he had to earn it by working for Laban for fourteen years.

‘The Marriage of Tarbong Nom and Narip Nom’ provides an account of how Tarbong Nom completes a series of tasks to win Narip Nom’s hand in marriage. When he meets her, she states that to win her hand in marriage she must meet her uncle and mother. The relatives tell him he must go to Nepal and get a pig, go to Tibet and get a material for a Lepcha shawl and to Bhutan to get millet seeds to make ‘chee’ a fermented drink the Lepchas drink during special occasions. Right before his marriage to Narip Nom they ran out of fire and the powder to make chee. Although Tarbong Nom did not retrieve these items himself he had to wait patiently till

these things arrived before he could marry Narip Nom. After these gifts arrived, they had to wait for Narip Nom's family to accept the gifts as a symbol of their acceptance of the marriage.

Both the stories lay emphasis on hard work. However, in the Biblical story Jacob was tricked into working for his uncle. It could be probably because as long Jacob worked for Laban his household was prosperous. Jacob was cheated in the process. However, Tarbong Nom had a choice and on completing the tasks he was rewarded rightfully by being able to marry Narip Nom. The price at the completion of the tasks was a bride. However, the brides were both different. Rachel wanted to willingly marry Jacob. The agreement of marriage between the two was mutual. However, in the Lepcha myth Narip Nom did not mutually agree to marriage. She wanted the consent of her mother and her uncle. Another point of difference was Jacob sought no one's help while trying to win Laban's approval for his daughter's hand in marriage. However, Tarbong Nom sought the help of his brothers and other creatures of the land like the cockroach and the grasshopper to help him achieve his goal. Jacob's story is ridden with bitterness, lies and deceit. He was cheated and as a result of this he was married also to Leah which he did not consent. In the Lepcha myth Tarbong Nom was not cheated and his marriage to Narip Nom was amicable and pleasant not shrouded in deceit and trickery.

Conclusion

Biblical stories and Lepcha myths do bear resemblance as justified by A.R Foning himself. Major points of similarities between these two different religious stories include that both have a moralistic undertone. These tales are rooted in reality and the readers are expected to understand the lessons that are echoed throughout

these stories. This can be seen in the story of the ‘Tower of Babel’ and ‘Stairway to Heaven’. These stories share similar creation stories. Both stories reiterate how earth felt empty despite the abundance of creatures and natural resources existing in their sacred spaces. The creation of humans completed the earth and brought about the fullness that the Creator in both the stories were desiring on Earth. Both the stories also emphasise how the consequence of the first humans on earth impacted the generations to come. The stories ‘The Marriage of Jacob and Rachel’ and ‘The Marriage of Tarbong Nom and Narip Nom’ emphasise how marriage to both the couples came with a task that needed to be achieved through hard work and patience. The stories clearly have differences. It has to be noted that all Lepcha myths do not bear resemblance to Biblical stories. Both may be religious but the Creator is different, the sacred landscapes are located in different places and the purpose of these stories among their respective communities are entirely different.

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