

## WHEN NURKIT RETURNS

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Nurkit is an amalgamation of two Lepcha words; *nur*, also spelled *noor*, meaning ‘pearl’ and *kit*, often understood to mean ‘attraction’ and used as a suffix with female names.

Nurkit is the name of my six-year-old cousin living in New York. She argues in English. She smooth-talks in Nepali. She is taught Lepcha words at home and learns Spanish in school. She knows Korean phrases from television soaps and dances to Hindi songs from Bollywood movies. She is the embodiment of this century’s multi-lingual generation whose vocabulary makes us wonder if we are speaking the same language.

But if one was to question her who she was, the responses would usually include;

‘I am Indian’

‘I am American’

‘I am Indian American’ or

‘I am Lepcha’, depending on who is asking the question in which context and time.

If the former three responses are familiar to a questioner’s ears, the first one raises quizzical looks for her ‘non-Indian’ features. With straight black hair, slanted eyes and fair skin, she is usually identified with either Chinese or Korean children. But it is the last response ‘I am Lepcha’ that is foreign to all her classmates and teachers. So, that answer is only used when she has to answer relatives visiting the family who question so as to check if she is at least aware of her roots.

For Nurkit, the last response does not necessarily garner further probing. She had answered what the aunt wanted to hear and she could now go out and play with her friends. But the simple phrase ‘I am Lepcha’ has been a haunting identification for many a Lepcha today.

Distributed across four geographical locations in the course of history, the Lepcha population is scattered across Sikkim, Darjeeling hills, South-West Bhutan and Eastern Nepal. Interestingly, the traditional Lepcha boundaries tell of a united *Mayel Lyang* comprising of all these locations where Lepchas resided in their land of eternal

purity. Known to have a close relationship with nature, it was the hills and valleys, the rivers and streams that carried the history and story of the Lepchas. If the mountains spoke for their clan identity, the rivers like Teesta and Rangeet narrated the greatest love story ever told. There seemed to be an intrinsic connection with the existence of even the most miniscule insect or the most insignificant plant around the environment. They spoke a language that was devoid of abuse and harshness. There was a reasoning that surpassed any scientific logic to the systematic arrangement of Lepcha ways of life. Yet, time proved brutal and has since changed and transformed the original ways to an almost lost account of the indigenous inhabitants of the land.

Political history speaks of a time during the thirteenth century when a 'blood treaty' was signed between *Thikung Tek*, a notable Lepcha figure and *Khye Bumsa*, the Tibetan counterpart which paved way for the first foreign dominance over the region. Since then, the Bhutanese control over Kalimpong Lepchas during the eighteenth century and the gifting of Darjeeling to the East India Company during the early nineteenth century only speaks for further dissection and division of the Lepcha land. The British developed the tea industry, bringing Nepalese laborers and settlers who exploited the untouched land and bountiful forests to their advantage. In these developments, the original inhabitants of the region had not only accommodated outsiders into their land but had complacently adjusted their lifestyle to the likes of the Tibetans, Bhutanese and Nepalese influences.

It was the breaking of political boundaries into four separate regions that divided the Lepcha territory. Cultural contact and the need to interact with neighboring communities eventually faded the cultural boundaries too. The Lepcha identity and its distinctiveness gradually diluted in the plethora of cultures thriving in the hills the Lepchas called home.

Still, their different linguistic and traditional traits garnered noticeable acceptance of this group of people in their respective places of residence. In Sikkim, Lepchas are recognised as aboriginals and are even granted the 'primitive tribe' status. In the Darjeeling hills, they are labeled as 'Scheduled Tribe' according to the Indian Constitution, while Nepal acknowledges the Lepchas as a 'minor ethnic group.' Impassively, Bhutan is the only country which included Lepchas under a general category with the Nepalese population.

The territorial categorisations with these different designations further weakened the Lepcha identity. The various borders have divided the Lepchas even within the nation state of India. The Lepchas

of Sikkim are a privileged lot, with the government recognising Lepcha festivals and calling for state holidays. On the other hand, the Lepchas of Darjeeling hills embody a neglected and ignored sentiment as the Lepcha language has yet to find a place even in the primary school syllabus. There, uneasiness creeps in when we are to respond to the question, 'Who are you?'

Responses may vary depending on context, but our foremost answer to the above question is usually our name. In this case, Nurkit is a good example of an unquestionable Lepcha name. But for someone like me, my name is no indicator of my Lepcha identity. I have had respectable government officials mock and question my Lepcha-ness because my name is not Lepcha.

True enough, our generation of Lepcha citizens grow up in Lepcha households with either Buddhist or Biblical names. We attend missionary institutions and converse fluently in both English and Nepali, with Nepali being the *lingua franca* of our present surroundings. Some of us can hardly recognise the Lepcha script and the usage of Lepcha vocabulary is limited to meal times with *zo* (rice) and *ung* (water), words we learned when we were kids. After school finals, we are ready to venture out. Our parents work hard to provide for our academic quest as metro cities or somewhere abroad become easy attractions for interested students. While away from home, we find new joy in the unlimited information on the World Wide Web. Believe it or not, we have Google alerts on anything Lepcha-related and have joined every networking community to do with Lepchas. We even sign our emails with the infamous *aachuley* slogan.

Indeed, we are proud Rongcup. We are the emerging force of our community, wired and connected to the world of information and technology. We stay connected with news from home because it gives us a sense of belongingness when in foreign land.

We applaud at Paril Lepcha's archery feat. We are anxious about Dawa and Tenzing's fast against the hydel projects in Dzongu. We feel the need to do something for our people. We want to be a part of happenings in the hills. We show solidarity by raising funds for Paril's archery equipment or send encouraging messages to the hunger strikers through the internet. But we do not always find peace in their undertakings. We have failed to understand why our busy cousins are fighting for Gorkhaland in our own motherland. 'How dare? It's ridiculous!' are some common phrases that pop up on internet chats regarding the movement.

Our grandmothers told us of tearful incidents from the Bhutanese invasion and the atrocities they committed. Our fathers told us of British dominion by providing education only till a certain level. We got angry. It was injustice. But what could we do? We are often discarded as the simple and docile people. But nobody understood our silent rage.

Today, a new generation of Lepchas have sprung up. We have felt the right to regain what is lost. We want to reaffirm our identity. We want to believe in our *Mayel Lyang*. But it is unclear if we have done anything significantly different than our forefathers. We shook heads when we heard stories of our grandfathers giving a large piece of land in exchange for a knife. We gasped at tales about granduncles who gave away free lands. Unfortunately we seem to be doing the same for our future generations to be shocked at our feat.

Recent events are witness to some Lepchas who remained numb while others fasted till bone-dry for the preservation of Dzongu reserve. Some have found solace in fighting for a Gorkhaland in their own homeland while others cannot digest the invasion and are staying put. The present-day crisis is cunningly clever as our identity with our land is being snatched away from under our noses. History is as crude as ever and even today the Lepchas seem to be on the losing side. It not just divided the one beautiful place into four separate regions, but has further divided an identity into different ideas and ideologies.

At this juncture, the demand for a separate state in the Darjeeling hills makes us wonder if perhaps there is light at the end of the tunnel. But the name 'Gorkhaland' for a state in the Lepcha hills deceives its exclusive characteristics. It ignores the heartbeat of the people whose history is embedded in the land and its features. So it is hoped that the demand for a state with a name of Lepcha origin might find its place on the map of India. It is a prayer that the sun decides to shine on the rainy hills.

It is hoped that when Nurkit decides to return to the hills, she will be glad that the hills are welcoming her home. It is desired that Nurkit's final response- 'I am Lepcha' will be a valid answer even to the ears of her classmates and teachers at school.