

Saderlongs: Heritage of Thunder Stones of the Lepchas

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Abstract : *Stones play an important role in the Lepcha culture. One of the most important stones being Saderlong or thunder stones. The world sees them as Neolithic stone tools but for the Lepcha community it has a much deeper meaning and usage. They are used as medicines to cure many general illnesses, as charms to ward off evil auras; they are also put in the foundations while Lepchas build their houses and most of all as protection against thunder. It is a well established belief that these stones are sacred and are objects of divine powers and that comes from the sky. This article explores how the Lepchas have integrated these stones in their culture and given meaning to how these stones came to exist. It also highlights the cultural significance attached to them in the Lepcha culture and the different uses the community derives from these stones.*

Keywords: Stones Play, evil asuras, Lepcha culture, beliefs, sacred stones.

‘Thouth!! Thammatsyo’ is a phrase common among the Lepchas. *Thouth!!* is an expression made with an action of spitting towards the sky and *thammatsyo*, roughly means a bad omen. In many cultures spitting is seen as an action to ward off evil and bad omens. In similar line the Lepchas also enact this as protection against lightning and thunder. Every time thunder strikes, these words are spoken as a protection charm against thunder. The Lepchas fear thunder profusely and it is a taboo to laugh at animals, insects or any inanimate objects including things made of rubber, effigies made of flour, shapes that roughly imitate animals, and many more similar things. Such action

will bring upon the wrath of *Sader* or thunder. The Lepchas live on the foothills of the Himalayas in Sikkim, Darjeeling and Kalimpong districts in West Bengal and in parts of Bhutan and Nepal. They reside on a mountainous terrain. The great Himalayas form a barrier preventing the monsoon winds from passing through. This causes highest rainfall of the country on this part of the subcontinent. Monsoons are always accompanied by thunder.

Living in this environment the Lepchas who call themselves *Rongkups*, meaning children of nature, have formed their own worldviews. As they saw thunder and lightning destroying trees, cattle and many times even humans, they grew fearful of this natural phenomenon and regarded it as the wrath of the Rumor Gods. According to Lepchas the root of this taboo goes back to the story of how the Lepchas came to fear the *Sader* and how *Sader* came to this world.

To understand this folktale we must also look into the composition of the Lepcha social structure. The Lepcha society consists of the community members, their ancestors and then there are the spirits. Almost everything has a spirit, these are known as *Langzee* which are the deities residing on certain sacred places and landscapes, it could be an old tree, a rock, water bodies, etc. they are similar to what the Japanese would call '*yokais*'; they may have animated forms, or may take any desirable form. Then there are the *Dokh*, who are protectors of an area like a forest or a river and are very much territorial in nature. Lastly, the Rum is also the deity who operate on a much larger scale or what can be defined as God. They can be both benevolent and malevolent, depending upon people's attitude towards them. This particular tale is of the time when both human and spirit worlds coexisted and interacted with each other more often.

Once there was a *ryotkup* (an orphan) boy strolling in the forest foraging for food. As he went searching for wild edibles he noticed smoke rising deep in the forest. Instantly he went to investigate. As he made his way through the dense vegetation, he came upon a forest fire. Tall trees and grasses were scorching in redheat. Amongst the blazing fire he saw a white snake; it was in the middle of a fire circle and was unable to move because of immense heat. As the boy watched, the fires get closer to the snake and it was on the verge being burnt alive in the inferno, similar to the vegetation around it. The boy immediately gathered a bunch of branches and started hitting the fire at one end to break the circle. He went on hitting the flames, till he was successful in making an opening through the ring of the fire for the snake to pass through. Once the snake was out of danger it took the form of a human and thanked the boy for saving his life. As payment for saving his life the snake asked the boy to come with him to his home and meet his parents. The boy agreed. The snake took him to a huge lake in the deepest

part of the forest. He then asked the boy to close his eyes tightly and hold on to his tail and not to let go of his tail no matter what. The snake was a water *langzee* (spirit or deity) and lived at the bottom of the lake with his family. They dived into the lake and the boy held on to the snake's tail as instructed by the *langzee*. As they reached the bottom it was a completely different world; a world of magical beings and spirits.

Upon reaching his home, the snake instructed the boy that when snake's parent would ask that he may demand anything for saving their son's life, he must ask only for a puppy that sits beside his father and not anything else. The snake told its parents how the boy had rescued it from the fire and saved its life. The parents, expressed their heartfelt gratitude and demanded the boy to ask for anything that he desired. As the snake had previously instructed, the boy asked for the puppy. Bewildered the parents asked the boy to ask for anything else other than the puppy but the boy stuck to his demand. The parents were in a dilemma. They dreaded letting their savior go empty handed, so they agreed and gave away the puppy to him. The boy was sent back to the human world. He went straight to his home and placed the puppy inside his home. To his bewilderment, the puppy turned into a beautiful maiden, who was actually the snake's sister. The boy and the maiden started living together as husband and wife and soon the rumors of the maiden's beauty spread like wild fire and soon reached the ears of a king of the nearby province. Out of curiosity, one day the king himself ventured out to see this exotic beauty. Upon seeing the maiden, the king was dumfounded as she was nothing like he had seen before. He desired her more than anything. He then challenged the husband to compete with him. Each would perform similar tasks and the winner would take the maiden. The husband had no other choice than to comply with the king. The first task was a duel between roosters. The king brought his best fighting rooster and the boy brought a jungle fowl given to him by his wife. Both roosters fought hard and in the end the boy won the duel. Displeased by his failure the king threw in another task. The second task was to see who among the two would be able to excrete the whitest stool. The boy grew very nervous because the task was tougher. He came back home and told his wife about the second challenge. The wife reassured him and started preparing for her husband's victory. She filtered ash water in a bamboo container and made her husband drink it all. Soon he would have dysentery, till nothing remained in his stomach. Next she went to the forest and brought wild yams which she boiled and made her husband eat them all. On the other hand the king made his men bring in all the rice, and pork fats available in the kingdom and ate them. Finally the day of the second competition came. Both parties came and started excreting, the king failed on this task since he was unable to produce white stool, whereas the boy was successful in producing one white stool. Out of pure rage the king ordered that they would battle for the maiden in three days. The boy

was terrified. He rushed home and informed his wife about the battle. The wife then came up with a solution, she asked her husband to go to her parents and ask for two boxes hidden in the treasury of the palace. He did as he was instructed but failed to complete the part where his wife had specifically asked him to not to open the boxes at any cost no matter what noises he heard coming from interior of the boxes. As he was returning home with the boxes, the boxes began to rattle and make loud thuds. Out of curiosity he opened one of the boxes. Out came thunder (male) and asked “where should I hit? What should I hit?” to which the boy replied “hit on the stones and trees”. Just as the boy instructed the thunder destroyed nearly all the forest covering on its way. The wife immediately knew what her husband had done and scolded him for his foolishness. Finally the day of the battle came and the wife instructed the husband that upon opening the box he must instruct the thunder to hit on the king and his army. As he headed to the battlefield the king and his army laughed at him as a single pathetic man was facing the king’s mighty army. So he was given the first chance to draw his weapon. The boy opened the box and out came thunder (female) and asked “what should I hit? Where should I hit?” to which the boy replied ‘hit all those who are laughing’ and the whole army was turned to ashes with a single bolt of lightning. Thus the boy and his wife lived in peace thereafter. Fig 1.1 is an illustration showing the *ryotkup* (orphan boy) from the land and the maiden from the water coming together and the two male and female lightning coming to this world.

From that day onwards it is believed that the Lepchas mustn’t laugh at any living and at certain non-living objects. The deed would call thunder to strike. Even if by mistake the Lepchas happen to laugh upon any insect the elders would take out few strands of hair from the middle of their head and burn it or throw it outside asking thunder not to follow them. Some even would use the *saderlong* (thunder stones) to hit on the pillars of the house saying ‘I have arrived here first, so no need for you to come’.

Though this story is also mentioned in Stock’s, *Sikkim Custom and Folklore* (1975:56-58) his is a slightly different version. In his edition characters like the snake is replaced by a big fish and addition of bulls in the three competitions. It missed out some parts of the storey that has been passed down. However, variations are part of the culture. This version may depend on the different milieu where the folktale was molded. Other than that the zest remains the same with the king’s army being annihilated by lightning and the Lepchas coming to fear the lightning.

What is *Saderlong*? Archeological Survey of India, have classified them as ‘Neolithic tools’ (Mishra 2008), the celts. Shape of these is narrow at one end and becomes sharp and broad on the other end, at its edge. Some are very polished; some consist of flaking

marks including the scraping marks from the extensive use by *bongthings* as medicine. Putting it differently the technique used for making these stone tools is of a much higher level as they are very polished. Rarely but surely one can find *saderlong*, which is described by some as round, almost disk like in shape with sloping and thin edges. One such stone was found in Suruk in Kalimpong and now sits at the foundation in one of the houses in Sikkim, given away as a token. This can unravel the evolution time line of these tools as well as the civilization that once flourished in the land. Mullard (2011) provides a series of archaeological findings of many stone tools, which resembled the tools of the Hoabinhian culture of South East Asia, (10,000 to 8,000 B.C.E), and also shared similarities with the Suhan and South China cultural assemblages.

The Neolithic tools the Lepchas collected and revered as charms and gifts, are known as *saderlongs*. Foning mentions that the *saderlongs* or thunder stones used 'both as medicine and as a charm' (Foning 1987:31). It is put into the foundation of any Lepcha house as it is said to protect the house from evils and more importantly it prevents the house from being struck by lightning. The importance of these stones is such that 'one could go as far as to say that a house without one of these objects is not a complete house at all' (*ibid* 1987:30).

According to the Lepchas these stones come from the sky. During thunder storms these stones hit earth, destroying everything that comes in its path. Some also believe that they are sent by the Thunder God, pouring their wrath on Earthly creatures. According to Foning, in the past these stones were in surplus as 'after keeping a few of these stones for oneself, the surplus was deposited in small caves, or placed under big overhanging rocks' (Foning 1978:33). Foning also gives a list of landmarks where once these stones would be reserved for future use. Today most of these places are occupied by different communities, who came to live in these parts of the Himalayas, and the number of stones greatly decreased. The cultural contact has also led the other communities who came in to the area to acquire and adapt these stones as well.

As the lightning strikes, the Lepcha people are always much apprehensive and would ask children not to laugh during a rainy day and especially during a thunder storm. I would often hear my grandmothers and grandfathers saying '*thouth*' and spitting lightly while looking upwards as a way of warding off the possibility of avoiding getting hit by lightning. I still have the habit of saying '*thouth!*' if I happen to laugh at animals or insects the words that follow are '*sader lot simou*' directly translating to '*thout! Lightning will strike*' as a warning. It has been as a part of the Lepcha vocabulary and society since time immemorial.

The Lepchas are also anxious, during a thunder storm but this is of a totally different kind, an insatiable kind. Foning states, 'among the people of my tribe this so called

thunder stone is an object that must be possessed' (1987: 29). They would always be looking forward in knowing whether any *saderlong* or thunder stone is left behind. According to the Lepchas, not every thunder strike turns into a stone. Only if the thunder hits something and accidentally get scared, it is left behind in the form of a stone, otherwise the thunder returns back to its abode in the sky.

These stones are what Foning rightly describes as '*lungten*' (*ibid* 1987:36) or a tradition for the Lepchas. Passed down as sacred heirloom; from generation to generation and so does its stories and significance. For the Lepchas it is not just a stone or a stone tool, it is a part of their cultural setting.

Classification of *Saderlong*: These thunder stones come in many sizes and shapes. The Lepchas believe that there are different types of *Saderlong* depending on the colour and elements they posses. They can be categorized mainly into two different categories:

1. Based on colour and element:
 - i. *Mi Saderlong* or the Fire thunder stone; these are darker in colour.
 - ii. *Ung Saderlong* or water thunder stones; these are light in colour.
2. Based on gender:
 - i. *Sader Aabu* or the male, which while hitting, produces a lot of sound, like throwing a fit of rage.
 - ii. *Sader Aamot* or the female thunder, which produces a lot calmer sounds, giving calmer but unyielding warnings.

The *Mi saderlong* is considered to be extremely dangerous and destructive. It is darker in shade ranging from almost black, reddish black, dark greenish, dark grey, etc. as can be seen in fig 1.3, fig 1.4, fig 1.6 and fig 1.7. This can hit on anything; humans, cattle, stones, trees, houses, etc.; while the *ung saderlong* is believed to be more subtle and do not hit often. If it happens to hit, it is usually near water bodies. They are lighter in colour, shades ranging from light mustard to beige, light grey or to skin tone, etc. These can be seen in fig 1.2, fig 1.3, fig 1.4 and fig 1.5. These are hard to find. Based on this their gender is determined. The *mi saderlong* are considered as the *aabu* or the male and the *ung saderlong* as the *aamot* or the female stones.

People reported to have found them near water bodies. As we sat talking to Ren Ong Tshering Lepcha, the head *yukmun* (lama or monk in Lepcha) of Yang Pelling Gambu, Suruk, Kalimpong, he narrated how he came across an *ung saderlong* shown in fig 1.3. He was conducting one of the annual rituals that each household has to carry out. The ritual as usual had taken the whole day. It was usual for the *yukmuns* to return home late at night since the houses in the village are spread widely. Sometimes they also have

to cover other villages nearby. On this particular night after the ritual was complete, he and his apprentices had parted ways and he was walking home alone. It was a well lit night as the full moon followed him. The path could be clearly seen as Suruk has an abundant of light grey soil that moonlight illuminates perfectly. As he continued his journey back home, he noticed something that was illuminating brighter than its surroundings on the path. He grew curious and as per human instinct went to examine it. He found that it was the light beige coloured stone. He at once knew what it was, so he brought it home and had kept it ever since for medicinal purposes. The other saderlong in the same picture, a *mi saderlong* also owned by him was passed down by his father. Mr. Ong Tshering was hesitant to show us the *saderlongs* at first. Only when I introduced myself further as being a part of the village with the help of my guide, a paternal kin of my mother that he gladly showed us the *saderlongs*. People are not willing to show these saderlongs to anyone as they are considered sacred and a family heirloom. Being connected to the village from my maternal side was an advantage for me. The pen placed near the objects is used as to give a sense of measurement in the pictures taken.

Another *saderlong* was found by Ms. Mangalmit Lepcha from Yang Gairi Gaon, Suruk in Kalimpong. It was mid-summer, she along with all the village members were preparing field for rice cultivation. As she was tilling the field she noticed a stone in the mud. This was like no other stone, 'it was smooth, beige and shaped like an axe', as she described. She had seen *saderlong* before to unmistakably recognize one. She kept it for many years until it was collected by a relative to be a part of her new home in Sikkim. The *saderlong* in fig 1.4 is a family heirloom passed down to Mr. S. M Lepcha the former *Thom Sezum* (Community Association) President of Darjeeling, by his in-laws in Kalimpong. His in-laws converted from Buddhism to Christianity. Thus the old practices were given up, but they could not just give up the stones, so they passed it on to their son-in-law in Darjeeling, who still follows the traditional practices. The stones he inherited consist of a male and female *saderlong* recognized by their colours. He keeps it safely in his cupboard.

One of the main places one can surely hope to find these stones are in possession of a *Bongthing*, they keep it for medicinal purposes and also for protection. The ritual specialist will offer a mixture of the stone's powder mixed with water also along with other medicines. It is also used to cure pneumonia, high fever and even gout.

It is also used for making sacred pendants, to ward off evil. As seen in fig 1.5 and fig 1.6 the stones have been scrapped at places, this was used by the *Bongthing* of Gor (Dzongu, North Sikkim), Ren. Dorjee Tshering Lepcha, astalismsans. He made for people asking him for protection from evil forces and *nung* (food poisoning). He scrapped the

saderlongs into a small piece of paper, along with other ingredients, including human bones, horns; bones and claws from different animals and birds. Details of which are not be given in order to maintain some confidentiality. Other ingredients used were *sathim chya* (porcupine quills), shells, moult from a *Pamol Bu* (cobra), parts of a vehicle that was in an accident, a rope used for suicide, walnut having three parts, and other unique seeds many more of such things. These are collected or passed down from generation to generation as part of their traditional practices.

Another *Bongthing* from Tingvong, Dzongu (Sikkim), sharing almost a similar name Ren. Tshering Dorjee Lepcha, identified three types of *saderlong* based on their elements, such as, Water or *Ung Saderlong*, Air or *Sakmut Saderlong* and Fire or *Mi Saderlong*. These are classified on the basis of their colour. The *sakmut saderlong* is very light in colour, almost white. The *ung saderlong* is also light in colour but with a hint of *afong*, that is blue spots or shades. According to him the *ung saderlong* come out of water and are found near water bodies. The *mi saderlong* is dark almost black in colour. This along with *sakmut saderlong* falls from the sky. He further describes *sader* or lightning as something that roams the sky and has wings. Its form is undefined. However human cognition collectively with the forces of nature tries to give a form to the reasoning of what is going on around them. This might be a similar instance. He, like the other *Bongthings* also uses these stones to cure illnesses and ward off evil auras. He often gives away medicines made of these stones for lactating mothers with coagulated of breast milk. According to him, the other use of the stones is that, if by mistake they, especially children, laugh at any animals or insects, they take the stone and strike it on the main pillars of the house, so as to prevent lightning from striking their houses.

Other than being used for medicinal purposes and as talismans they are placed under the foundation of a house to be built to keep the house safe from lightning. One or many can be used in the foundation of a house as part of the whole architecture. Even my own house was laid on a foundation of *saderlongs* on all corners. As my father counts there are seven *saderlong* buried beneath the house, which act as grounding against lightning conductor and protect us from lightning.

Some are of the belief that these are pre-historic stone tools, remnants of the past civilizations. Foning calls them 'as all educated people now know, are nothing but tools used by prehistoric men' (Foning 1987:36). But no one exactly knows enough about them since not much archeological study has been carried out on them till now. To put these sacred objects through scientific tests would also be unethical, firstly, because they hold very important and sacred place in the socio-cultural and religious lives of the Lepcha community. Secondly, putting them through tests would demean their cultural value as they would be treated as just an ordinary object whereas for the

Lepchas these stones are much more than that.

Dr. P. K. Mishra and team from the Archaeological Survey of India conducted a survey within the state of Sikkim. It resulted in the publication of the volume *Archeological Exploration in Sikkim, 2008*. It was an attempt at documenting the archeological tools and important archeological sites of Sikkim. Samples taken into consideration were only from the region in and around Gangtok, East Sikkim. Out of the 51 sites that he mentions in his book 48 are in East Sikkim and only three from North Sikkim. These sites are Pengla, Swarani and Tingda. He and his team have also totally overlooked the Lepcha community, whom he clearly stated as 'the earliest settlers in Sikkim' (Mishra 2008:1). He has taken a large amount of samples from communities other than the Lepchas. He wrote extensively about the history of Sikkim starting from post Buddhism. Pre Buddhism is not taken into account. Though the book deals with tools beyond that time period, whether they had no access to the Lepcha community or had any other intention is not explained.

These stones also form an important part of the Lepcha history. These stones, as determined by the ASI, are stone tools from the Neolithic period, points out the tribe's early migration history. The Lepchas have no memories or oral history of using these stones other than as *saderlongs*, meaning they must have travelled to these areas after the Neolithic time period. According to some theory, Sikkim and adjoining hills were used as a passage for the Neolithic culture into India. There were people coming to this area but clearly they did not stay for long. The Lepchas are the first to settle and acquaint with the land, as they were the first ones to identify and assimilate these stones into their own culture, which were left behind by the perished mobile civilization that passed through these lands long-ago. As most stones are found in fields and near water bodies, it is safe to assume that the fields are suitable land for small scale agriculture even in the past, so it may have been a site of horticulture or agricultural activities. Water bodies are another crucial part of human survival, so the major water sources must have been used in the past as well. The stones left behind as evidence of activities near major water sources. A proper study has to be carried out to identify the proper age of these celts, since the Neolithic period in itself is under scrutiny.

Conclusion: With little literature available on these stone we can only rely on the oral history for further details and understanding. The cultural aspect of the Lepchas can be seen centred around stones especially the *saderlong*. The *saderlongs* have been a part of the Lepcha society since time immemorial. These are considered as something which fell from the sky and has become a part of their society as a *ter* (treasure), a sign of great fortune and also protection. It has also been used in the Lepcha architecture,

giving it both cultural and architectural significance. It is more than a simple stone or a stone tool. The cultural sentiments attached to these stones, it makes them all the more 'treasure' for the Lepchas. The village *Bongthing* always keeps two or three of these stones with him, which he uses as a medicine and to ward off evil.

Although the researchers call the *saderlong* as 'Neolithic Celts' (Lepcha 2019, Mishra 2008) and 'stone tools' (Fonning 1987); there still remains an array of cultural relationships between people of the present day and the *saderlong*. This requires to be unveiled. Present research is an attempt to connect the gap left untouched by works of scholars like Mishra. They are correct in their methodologies but failed to uncover the people's perspectives. The stones also form an important part of the Lepcha history. The stones, determined by the ASI as stone tools belonging to the Neolithic period might also provide information on the tribe's migration history. As stated by McCracken 'Objects carry social and personal information within a larger framework. They communicate relationships and mediate progress through the social world. Their diffusion bridges cultural boundaries and connects centers with peripheries. Although artifacts are produced at particular moments, their persistence creates histories. In addition to information and ideas, they can convey hidden cultural constraints, moral standards, social fears, and emotionality' (McCracken 1988:28).

The Lepchas have no memories or oral history of using these stones other than as *saderlongs*, meaning they must have travelled to these areas after the Neolithic time period. According to some theory, Sikkim and adjoining hills were used as a passage for the Neolithic culture into India. There were people coming to this area but probably they did not stay for long. As for the Lepchas they must be the first settlers to settle and get acquainted with the land, since they were the first ones to identify and assimilate these stones into their own culture, which was left behind by the perished mobile civilization that passed through these lands long-ago. As most stones are found in fields and near water bodies, it is safe to assume that the fields are suitable land for small scale agriculture even in the past. Therefore it could have been a place for horticulture or agricultural activities. Water bodies are another crucial part of human survival, so the major water sources must have been used in the past as well. The stones left behind as evidence of activities near major water sources. A proper study has to be carried out to identify the proper age of these celts as the Neolithic period in itself is under scrutiny. One can never exclude the possibility that the Lepchas could have truly used these stones before the concept of society and community as of today existed.

At present, other than the Lepchas, *saderlongs* are kept by other community members as well, but not extensively used as in case of the Lepchas. They are either part of display or collection for collectors and enthusiasts. The examples are quite evident in the

'*Archeological Explorations of Sikkim 2008*'. They call it '*Chataryang Dhunga*'. It has same meaning as *Saderlong* that is the thunder stone. Mr. Ganesh Kumar Pradhan, curator of the Ram Gauri Museum in Renok, East Sikkim, has in his display a '*Chataryang Dhunga*' he collected from his village long ago. This is shown in Fig 1.4. The written records on these celts are rare. Those available are inconclusive. There is much we know and much we can never know because these stones are perishing. The only ones we may find now are buried deep beneath old houses.

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Figures:



Fig 1.1: illustration of how *sader* coming to the world



Fig 1.2 and 1.3: an *Ung Saderlong*, a *Mi* and *Ung Saderlongs* from Suruk Kalimpong.



Fig 1.4: *Ung saderlong* (bottom) and *Mi saderlong* (top) from Darjeeling



Fig 1.5: an *Ung saderlong* from Gor, North Sikkim.



Fig 1.6: a *Mi Saderlong* from Gor, North Sikkim



Fig 1.7: *Saderlong* from Ram Gauri Museum, Renok Sikkim

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