

INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE SYSTEMS, SOCIO-RELIGIOUS BELIEFS AND PRACTICES OF THE LEPCHA TRIBE OF DZONGU, SIKKIM

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Abstract

Indigenous communities possess a rich body of knowledge which have been accumulated through the generations of observation, and everyday experiences fostered in their socio-religious beliefs and practices that revolve around nature like rivers and mountains. This paper presents an ethnographic account of the Lepcha's indigenous knowledge system of Dzongu, Sikkim by locating socio-religious beliefs and practices in fostering the indigenous knowledge system. Further, it delineates the diverse experiences of the Lepcha emphasizing the need for a meticulous understanding of socio-religious beliefs and practices. To delve into the cultural practices of the target population, the paper falls in the realm of qualitative ethnographic framework thereby assisted by observation, interviews, and interpretative methods. The findings of the study suggest a strategy for preserving invaluable cultural assets further, ensuring their continued vitality for future generations.

Keywords: Socio-religious beliefs, Indigenous knowledge, Lepcha, Dzongu

Introduction

Indigenous knowledge (IK) is garnering significant attention due to global warming and concerns about unsustainable development. The negative consequences of urbanization and modernization have led to the increased development of respect and interest in indigenous knowledge systems (Rao, 2019). IK is based on the experiences accumulated over centuries and passed down orally through generations. Such knowledge covers forest, land, soil, water, flora and fauna. It also includes knowledge of agriculture, architecture, and foraging. People have learned their survival skills and knowledge through constant interactions with the surrounding environment to further explore more options to sustain their livelihoods (Madonsela and Machete, 2023). IK is embedded in the fabric of tradition that is distinctively unique and exclusive to a certain culture or community (Vazquez, 2011). Indigenous people

have an understanding of their circumstances and available resources, they can decide what works and what does not work for them in terms of handling environmental challenges and difficulties based on their indigenous knowledge and practices (Chisenga, 2002). As IK is deeply rooted in local traditions, institutions, and activities of certain cultures and societies, it can be thus described as the knowledge system that is profoundly connected to traditional values and customs of community groups at the regional, local, and indigenous levels (Hudson et al., 2016).

The Lepcha are exemplarily known for the contribution they have made towards safeguarding both the flora and fauna of the regions they have predominantly occupied. Caring and healing of the environment are the central concepts of the Lepcha religious life. This paper presents an overview of the Indigeneity and Indigenous Knowledge System (IKS) of the Lepcha of Sikkim by locating the intersection of socio-cultural, religious, and spiritual beliefs and practices. It presents comprehensive, theoretical, and methodological insights by tracing its existence, importance, and contribution towards fostering environmental sustainability. Furthermore, it delineates the complex and diverse indigenous experiences of the Lepcha, its transition as a result of modernization, and the impact of modernity and developmental projects on the traditional wealth of knowledge. This study seeks to contribute to the understanding of indigeneity and IK of the Lepcha tribe of Dzongu, Sikkim. What are the IKS and practices of the Lepcha tribe of Dzongu, Sikkim? How do community members perceive and experience their socio-religious beliefs and practices? What are the cultural, social, and ecological contexts in which IK and socio-religious practices is produced, shared, and utilized?

Methodology

This paper explores the above research questions and has employed a qualitative, ethnographic research design, combining in-depth interviews, participant observation, case studies, case histories and field notes to gather rich, contextualized primary data. To triangulate the findings, secondary data was sourced from a diverse array of sources, including scholarly articles and books. The collected data underwent thematic analysis to systematically analyse and interpret the collected data. The data is collected mainly from the Bongthings/Muns, elder people of the region, and educated youths of the region. The villages selected for the present study include the villages of Pentong, Lingthem, Hee Gyathang, Gnon-Sangdong, and Passingdang of Dzongu, North Sikkim. Despite the growing importance and significance attached to Indigenous Knowledge System across different disciplines, a notable amount of gap persists in the scholarly literature. The need of the hour is to provide a more nuanced study that systematically examines the complex cultural context in which IK is embedded and transmitted. While existing research has made important contributions to our understanding of IK and indigeneity, the intricacies of cultural, historical, and spatial factors that shape the meaning and significance of IK have received inadequate attention in academic discourse. Thus, this paper aims to address this lacuna through a rich contextualized analysis of the cultural context of IK inherited by the Lepcha Tribe of Sikkim, further contributing towards a comprehensive and culturally sensitive understanding of IK systems.

Lepcha tribe – the ethnographic focus group

The Lepcha, also known as Rong or Rongpa are the autochthones of Sikkim, found in the Himalayan regions stretching from the eastern parts of Nepal to the Western border of Bhutan with a significant presence in Darjeeling and Kalimpong Hills of West Bengal, Tripura and

Tibet (Arora, 2006). The Lepcha believe that they originated from the ‘People of Mayel’, who live in an unknown location close to the Kanchenjunga, known to be the children of the Goddess *Narzung-nyou*. The Lepcha are divided into four categories corresponding to the regional settlement patterns viz. *Renjongmu* in Sikkim, *Tamsangmu* in Kalimpong, Kurseong, Mirik, and Darjeeling, *Ilammu* in Ilam district of Eastern Nepal, and *Promu* in Bhutan (Lepcha and Patel, 2022). In Sikkim, the Lepcha community is mainly concentrated in the Dzongu Reserve - officially demarcated as the reserve area for the Lepcha community.

In the past, the Lepcha followed Mun or Bongthingism which revolved around ancestor worship, nature, and spirits. The religion persists to this day, existing in tandem with Buddhism and Christianity. Festivals and rituals are observed in honour of the Lepcha ancestors. Their distinct culture is characterized by a strong connection with nature manifested in traditional music, folk dances, folklore, and language.

The Lepcha language, also known as Rongring is rooted in Tibetan script and bears the imprint of Burmese historical and cultural legacy. It is believed to have developed during the 17th century by a Lepcha scholar Thikung Mensalong. The language finds its prominent usage at the time of festivals and religious practices when prayers and chants are made in Rongring by the Bongthings and Muns.

The soft and melodious music of the Rongs reflects a contented and peaceful state of being, dedicated to four emotions viz. love, comedy, tragedy, and ceremony (Sharma, 2013). The musical legacy of the Lepchas forms an important part of their socio-religious life. They possess their distinctive musical instruments viz. *Tungbuk*, *Tangdyu*, and *Pantog Palit*, that are true resemblances of Lepcha ways of life, culture, traditions, religion, customs, manners, and surroundings. The Lepcha’s folktales and folksongs entail invocations of Mother Earth and their sentient beings. They believe that the songs, dances, music, and musical instruments were bestowed upon them by *Naraok Rum*, the God of Lepcha music (Plaisier, 2005). The spiritual tunes and chants rendered by the Muns and Bongthings during ceremonial or healing practices form a significant part of the Lepcha musical legacy.

The staple food of the Lepcha is maize, millet, barley, and rice. In addition, they consume a variety of wild leaves, fruits, tubers, and different types of meat. The *chi*, a brewed beverage, is made from millet and is an essential component of rituals and ceremonies, including marriages. During a marriage ceremony, the bride and groom consume *chi* from the same cup, symbolizing their union and solidifying their status as a married couple. The ritual is also observed by the immediate relatives of the bride and groom, as well as elders present at the ceremony, who drink and share as a means of blessing the newly married couple thereby, highlighting the importance of community ties and interconnectedness among the people (Tamsang, 2001). The traditional attire and cultural practices of the Lepcha people provide insight into their unique identity and way of life highlighting the need for the community to conserve, strengthen, and disseminate their distinctive cultural legacy.

The Lepcha’s mannerism is intricately linked to their environmental context and exhibit a profound sense of self-identification and pride in their cultural patrimony. They have developed a unique way of life, inseparable from the natural world, and their cultural practices and beliefs are deeply rooted in connection to the land and its resources. This close relationship with nature has fostered a strong sense of identity and pride among the Lepcha, which is reflected in their cultural traditions and practices. The Lepcha people's deep connection to their environment

serves as a testament to their resilience adaptability, and commitment to preserving cultural heritage which is a vital aspect of their identity. Lepcha communities often have sacred forests that are considered essential for their cultural and spiritual well-being. The idea of a sacred landscape lies at the core of Lepcha's cosmological attitudes towards the environment and frames their self-identity and indigeneity (Arora, 2006, 65).

Indigeneity and Indigenous Knowledge System (IKS)

For thousands of years, Indigenous communities have been guarding and protecting Mother Nature and have retained their deep connection. The cultural praxis of Indigenous communities is socially constructed through unique cultures and ways of life that are distinct from the rest of the dominant societies. The immediate environment that the indigenous people surround is inextricably linked to their cultures, identities, customs, livelihoods, and spiritual and physical well-being. Indigeneity refers to the quality of a particular community's identity that connects them to distinct places with knowledge and authentic ways of life. It is a multifaceted approach that encompasses the experiences and worldviews of people who are indigenous or native to a particular place. The discourse on indigeneity asserts the characteristic features and complex nature of indigenous identities and practices. Indigeneity as a concept serves as a foundation for the formation, identification, and recognition of indigenous identity thereby contributing towards the preservation of distinct beliefs and idiosyncratic traditions and cultural practices. Indigeneity is crucial for understanding and deciphering the worldviews of the indigenous communities which is integral to the unique, complex, and nuanced experiences.

IKS is the traditional knowledge systems, beliefs, practices, and wisdom inherited by the Indigenous peoples. It encompasses the distinct and unique worldviews, epistemologies, and cosmologies of indigenous peoples and is applied to a plethora of disciplines. It entails a series of interconnected domains on weather patterns, natural resource management, environmental stewardship, sustainable practices, and spiritual and cultural practices. IK refers to the body of knowledge used by Indigenous people to fulfil their community requirements and ensure sustainable livelihoods (Chikaire et al, 2012). Knowledge is characterized by its distinctive features which coalesces both the physical and spiritual dimensions, thus reflecting an absolute understanding of the interconnectedness of all living beings and the cosmos. Indigenous knowledge aids in enabling responsiveness to local environments and ecosystems which in turn caters to furthering environmental stewardship and sustainability. IK offers significant contributions towards addressing location-specific issues by developing strategic and logical frameworks. IK plays a major role in enabling responsiveness to one's natural habitat and ecosystems, thereby fostering a better understanding of environmental sustainability. It contributes significantly towards global knowledge and development which makes it vital for future generations to incorporate it in their daily lives further preventing it from being completely eradicated from the society. The conservation and proper dissemination of this knowledge is important for maintaining cultural diversity and for the promotion of public health and community well-being of the people. It can be explained as the aggregate of experiences and knowledge of a particular group that helps them formulate decisions in times of crises and challenges (ibid, 2012). The Lepcha's IK constitutes a comprehensive database of approaches based on ecosystem management and nature-driven solutions to address environmental crises and disasters.

Lepcha Indigenous Knowledge System

The Lepcha tribe strengthen the rich cultural diversity of the state as they share a profound relationship with nature and immediate natural surroundings. It is believed that today, the Dzongu ‘reserve’ remains the last reserve of the Lepcha in North Sikkim where community-based knowledge persists alongside Western practices in certain contexts. One of the respondents says

I have been living in this village for years and our village has been here for generations, depending on the forest for sustenance of livelihood. Every morning, I wake up before the breaking of dawn and head towards the forest to collect firewood and fodder for our cattle. The forest provides us with everything we need including firewood for cooking, fruits and vegetables for food, herbs for medicines, and clean air for breathing. In the summer, we take our cattle for grazing in the fields, and in the winter, we rely on the forest wood and fallen leaves that provide warmth and shelter to the cattle. Our dependence on nature has taught us to live in harmony with Mother Nature, using only what we require and giving back in return. The forest that we rely on not only serves as a medium for survival for us but also acts as our spiritual home. We believe that all forms of nature – the lush green forests, the majestic mountains, the serene rivers, and the fauna are all connected and that we are all part of this web of life. As a villager, I am also aware of the changes that are happening in the world around us like climate change, changes in weather patterns, and the shrinking of forests which in turn has gradually started affecting our way of life. But we as a community, have been working on it and making great efforts to protect our forests and preserve our traditions. Although our livelihoods depend on forests and their resources, we are determined to pass on a healthy and thriving forest to our descendants and future generations.

The Lepcha of Sikkim have taken several measures to preserve its cultural traditions and its natural environment. They possess a rich cultural heritage that encompasses distinct IKS that have been passed down orally across generations making it an important aspect of the cultural heritage. IKS is significant in the lives of the Lepcha as it demonstrates their profound sense of connection with Mother Earth, thus, making their knowledge a valuable and important asset. One of the respondents narrates,

there is a general saying among the local populace of the Eastern Himalayan Region that the increasing pace of development triggers the Lepcha into incremental integration towards nature. While I do acknowledge the benefits of modern development in the region, I am also aware of the destruction that it has caused or is bound to cause in the future. Such banes of urban developments have driven me and the other locals to reevaluate our relationship with nature and take conservation efforts seriously. Having witnessed the detrimental effects of unchecked modernization in this region and beyond, I and my fellow community members have been taking measures to safeguard this region’s biodiversity. To prevent further environmental degradation, we have formed community groups and associations that is primarily focused on preserving the local environment. These initiatives serve as a vigilant watchdog, protecting against external threats that could disturb and disrupt the region’s delicate ecosystem.

This narrative further substantiates the assertion that the Lepcha exhibit a profound affinity towards the natural world, fostered by their long-standing environmental resilience.

Traditional Healing Practices and Ethnomedicine

Sikkim is popularly known as the “Land of healers” due to the significant presence of healers from different ethnic communities (Lepcha, Bhutia, Limboo, and Nepali). As the name suggests, these are traditional approaches to health and treatment of certain sicknesses and diseases. The Lepcha have their own set of faith healers known as Bongthings/Muns and folk medicine practitioners. In the process, the healer relies on locally available flora and fauna to meet their health and medicinal requirements. In times of illnesses, they either summon the Bongthings to perform curative techniques via propitiation of spirits or take medicinal herbs given by the medicine man. The traditional Lepcha’s health services are based on diagnosis emphasizing the good and the bad spirits responsible for causing sicknesses and diseases. One of the Bongthings of Gnon-Sangdong village, Dzongu shared his insight that many illnesses are believed to be caused by malevolent or ancestral spirits.

When an individual offends their ancestors, they must endure suffering consequently. (He illustrated this argument with a personal anecdote). I had once gone through severe pain and headache after cutting off my hair. The pain was so intense that I sought the guidance of a senior Bongthing of another village who explained that the pain could be due to the act of cutting my hair, which angered and displeased my ancestors thereby causing me severe headaches. I recounted a dream in which I was admonished not to cut my hair by my ancestors. However, through some healing rituals, I was finally treated by the senior bongthing and cured of the pain. Since that incident, the bongthing has refrained me from cutting my hair, and I have now embraced a lifelong commitment to growing it.

The Lepcha of the Dzongu Valley possesses extensive knowledge of the usage of various kinds of plants and biotic resources. They have been living harmoniously with nature over centuries, thereby exhibiting a deep sense of familiarity with local flora and their ethnomedicinal properties. The famous naturalist Hooker (1854) described Lepcha as great nature lovers, good entomologists, and botanists who had a name for all the plants and insects of the region. Their expertise in medicinal plants and natural remedies has been providing effective treatments for various kinds of ailments in their local habitats. Curative natural medicines, mostly prescribed by a Bongthing or a local medicine man called *mandaok* are used for treating various health issues. *Mandaoks* are the local medicine men of the region who possess a unique knowledge system pertaining to the amalgamation of botanical expertise, alchemy, superstition, oral traditions, and unwritten conventions (Das, 2016). One of the respondents shared that he has relied solely on the *Mandaok* since his birth.

I trust only the herbal medicines prescribed by the *mandaok* and have never taken the help of allopathic medicine or treatments. Despite, my children’s attempts to give me modern medicine, I discretely dispose of them and seek the *mandaok*’s expertise instead. My concern is that the *mandaok* is aging and the village may not have a similarly skilled practitioner in the future.

The plant *phagorip* is considered a potent medicine for treating diabetes and regarded as the most sacred one that forms an essential part of the rituals conducted by Bongthings and Muns. One respondent recounted a personal experience of successfully treating diabetes using the *phagorip* plant.

A local medicine man, known as *mandaok*, advised me to consume the plant daily and by consistently following the regimen, the respondent’s blood sugar levels gradually returned to

normalcy and fully recovered. Inspired by this positive outcome, he recommends the consumption of *phagorip* plant to fellow villagers suffering from diabetes.

Urtica dioica, often known as common nettle or stinging nettle, is used by the Lepcha for curing cough and diarrhoea. The stinging nettle, in the form of soup, is also consumed by pregnant women for its perceived health benefits. The soup is believed to facilitate easier childbirth, thus reflecting the tribes' emphasis on using natural remedies to support maternal health and well-being. The leaves and stems of the bamboo are also used for treating different kinds of ailments like cough, wounds, piles, and other inflammatory conditions. The *Bambusa tulda* locally known as *Paoshiding ying* is one of the bamboo species used to treat fever, rheumatism, and digestive issues.

Agriculture and traditional farming practices

Agricultural practices are closely connected to the 'People of Mayel'. Indigenous traditional methods of agriculture like storage of grains, slash and burn method have been in practice since time immemorial, have been passed down through generations and are deeply rooted in their culture and way of life. The Lepcha practice terrace farming, use organic manures, and practice crop rotation to maintain soil fertility and soil health. Organic farming also forms an important aspect of Lepcha tradition and identity that reflects their strong connection with nature and traditional practices. One of the local farmers commented that

the recognition given to the state of Sikkim as the first organic state in the world is significant in encouraging them to practice sustainable farming in the long run. The efforts of the people of the government, and the encouragement and accolades that they have received from people and organizations across the world have been significant in boosting the morale of local agricultural workers like me towards organic farming practices.

Since the livelihoods of most Lepcha are rooted in their respective landscape, agriculture forms an important source for them to earn a livelihood for themselves. Their knowledge of the landscape and farming techniques display their excellent skill in the region. Mixed farming is practiced in most villages wherein a total of 50-60 varieties of crops are cultivated. There is a famous saying,

“if a famine occurs, a monkey may die of scarcity of food and hunger, but a Lepcha will never die and will find something or the other from their region to satiate their hunger” (Lepcha, 2021, p.7).

Handlooms and Handicrafts

Bamboo and cane form a crucial component of their economic well-being. They are used in food, shelter, household items, ornaments, and fishing rods. The approach of using bamboo and cane for making artifacts is a timeless tradition dating back to the origin of the tribe. The Lepcha believe that their houses can be protected and guarded from evil spirits if they keep bamboo or cane artifacts in their houses. One of the respondents from Pentong, Dzongu, shared his insights on the practice of keeping bamboo products at Lepcha homes primarily to decorate and also to ward off the evil spirits from their houses. He explained:

according to our traditional beliefs, bamboo possesses spiritual significance and is considered a sacred plant. Keeping bamboo products at homes helps to repel negative energies and evil spirits, thus acting as a protective shield around family members.

The utilization of bamboo for making household artifacts and cloth articles demonstrates significant potential of the tribe and can be promoted as one of the alternative livelihood

strategies for the community. The following bamboo species are used for making crafts and tools:

Table 1. Bamboo Species

Local Name	Botanical Name
<i>Mahlu</i>	<i>Banbusa Nutans</i>
<i>Pshi/pashipo/Podiyang</i>	<i>Bambusa Pallida</i>
<i>Paoshiding ying</i>	<i>Bambusa tulda</i>
<i>Poh</i>	<i>Dendrocalamus hamiltonii var</i>
<i>Payong</i>	<i>Cephalostachyum capitatum</i>
<i>Prong</i>	<i>Schizostachyum fuchsianum</i>

The *Sumok-thyaktuk*, famously known as Lepcha's hat is the oldest form of craft that is being practiced till date. The craft is Sikkim's 500-year-old art and was originally made as headgear for the royal soldiers. It is important to note that:

On 22 April 2024, Government of India bestowed Padma Shri to Ren Jorden Lepcha for his dedication towards passionately preserving the rich cultural heritage of the Lepcha tribe by weaving these traditional hats - *Sumok Thyaktuk* and many other captivating bamboo crafts.

The Lepcha used their carpentry skills in the construction of houses and monasteries. In the past, the Lepcha were not much into beautification and mere ornamentation without proper usage, however, these days, with the influence of Lamaism the Lepcha boast their intricate woodwork and carpentry skills. As bamboo is abundant in the region, it is one of the chief raw materials used for making local crafts like baskets, mats, hats, trays, mugs, and flutes. One of the respondents highlighted the pivotal role bamboo plays in the daily lives of the Lepcha tribe. Its versatility is leveraged to craft an array of tools, crafts, and artifacts, thereby simplifying many of their tasks. Notably, this sustainable resource has been an integral part of Lepcha tradition and heritage, dating back to their ancestors' time, and continues to remain an important aspect of Lepcha's cultural identity.

The Lepcha cane bridge is one of the characteristic constructions of the Himalayan objects of art. In the Lepcha language, it is called "*Ru-soam*" and it is usually made up of canes and bamboo collected from the nearby jungles. The Indigenous Knowledge of the Lepcha concerning the construction of cane bridges has demonstrated exceptional utility to this day when modern bridges collapse due to incessant monsoon rainfall or any other natural calamities. At times of natural disasters or the destruction of modern, concrete bridges, the Lepcha come together collectively and construct cane bridges to foster transportation and connectivity for local residents in the villages.

Ecological Knowledge and Natural Resource Management

The Lepcha has been an expert in understanding the patterns of local ecology, including plants, animals, and natural resources. For them, the forest fulfils many functions by acting as the their prime protector and provider of resources. The Lepcha incorporate sustainable practices for resource management and conservation of natural resources that are based on their traditional knowledge of the environment. The forest of Dzongu has been a protected land due to which most of the relics and plants in the forest have survived to date. For village dwellers, the forest provides them with various resources like food, medicinal plants, clean air, exclusive flora, and fauna therefore, preserving these resources through proper management becomes essential for the community. A resident of Lingthem Village eloquently expressed the community's deep

connection with nature, stating that the village and the surrounding forests provide them with all the requirements, from sustenance to shelter. Further, emphasizing the importance of reciprocity, the resident urged, “If we do not care for nature, who will?” The resident also underscored the cultural significance of preserving the natural world, warning that failure to conserve the environment would incur the wrath of their deities, who would be disheartened by humanity’s neglect. To avoid this fate, the resident advocated for responsible management and conservation of the forest and its resources, stressing the importance of preserving the delicate balance between human needs and environmental stewardship.

The importance of Indigenous knowledge in natural disasters and over-utilization or mis-utilization of natural resources are the pressing issues of the modern era. The efforts made by the indigenous communities in safeguarding their natural abode from outside interferences and infiltrators have always been noteworthy and laden with multiple challenges. The loss of biodiversity jeopardizes the ecological integrity of tribal communities and disrupts their intricate web of relationships. Discourse on indigenous knowledge and its implications on the surrounding regions is important in coping with environmental crises (Asante, 2024). There is a growing need to embrace modern epistemologies that overlook the invaluable insights borrowed from IKS. The increased rates of deforestation, pollution and forced allocation of projects contribute significantly to the decline in biodiversity of the region. Nature has been an integral part of the Lepcha, and their way of life emanates out of their belief in nature (Lepcha, 2020). With unchecked capitalist models of development within the state, much of their region has been affected thus causing immense damage to the ecology of the region. The Lepcha have been vocal against such disturbances and have organized protests in the past against the construction of hydro projects in the sensitive terrain and geomorphic landforms of the state.

Socio-religious beliefs and Practices

Religious beliefs and practices of the tribes vary across communities and people based on the multicultural heritage and diverse ecological conditions. The religious belief system of the tribals in India may be classified into three different categories: (a) Sacred Area: The sacred geographical concept pertaining to tribal religion in India, with their sacred groves, sacred performance and sacred ritual. In Dzongu tribal villages, one can find sacred places like lakes, trees, caves etc. which are regarded as sacred places of worship and reverence (b) Sacred Being: Amongst the Lepcha tribals of Dzongu region, Sikkim, their deceased ancestors are believed to be their most sacred beings. Their clan deities and spirits form an important aspect of their religious worldview. (c) Sacred Specialist: A section of the populace is regarded as mediators between common people and the almighty. Amongst the Lepcha people of Dzongu, Sikkim, the sacred specialists like Bongthings and Muns are responsible for performing the rituals and healing practices (Bhoi, 2018).

The beliefs and practices of all societies and communities in the world are manifested in the form of celebration of rituals, festivals and ceremonies (Chakraborty, 2018). Today, the Lepcha tribal community of Dzongu, Sikkim maintains their existence, their indigenous religious affiliations and their unique identity in the threshold of Buddhism and Hinduism. The earliest Lepcha settlers were the followers of the Bon faith and Mun faith. The basis of these faiths lies in the worshipping of spirits (benevolent and malevolent) and spirits of mountains, rivers and forests. The Lepchas follow several deities and some of the well-known among them include

Itbu-rum, Itbu-debu-rum, Kongchen-Konglo and Tamsang-thing. The Lepchas also celebrate several festivals like the *Nam-soong* and *Tendong-Lho-Rum-Faat* Festival with much pomp and fervor in an effort to pay reverence to their deities, celebrate their indigenous identity and mark their existence in the land of Sikkim as an early inhabitant.

Bongthing-Mun

In Lepcha traditional practices, the Bongthing and Mun play an important function who are given the responsibility of performing various mystic jobs pertaining to healing rituals and protection from misfortunes, disaster, etc. The Lepchas of Dzongu, Sikkim practice their religious beliefs in syncretic form where they follow their indigenous religion-Bongthingism/Munism simultaneously with Buddhism/Lamaism. Bongthingism/Munism is based on animistic and shamanistic beliefs. Bongthingism, also known as Mun religion, is an ancient aspect of Lepcha's culture and identity. The main function of the Mun or Bongthingism is to provide relief to people in times of stress, distress, and sickness. Bongthings and Mun are the male and female priests or priestesses who are responsible for officiating various rituals (birth to death) and ceremonies and act as mediators between Gods, humans, and spirits. They are believed to be the children of God who occupy an important position in the Lepcha religious discourse, the stewards and knowledge keepers. Bongthingism is rooted in Lepcha's cosmology, myths, legends, and oral traditions that give explanations to the origin of the world, the role of spirits and deities, the relationship between humans and the supernatural realm, prevalence of benevolent and malevolent spirits. One of the Bongthings from Lingthem, Dzongu exclaimed that the festivals are celebrated collectively by the community to offer prayers and seek protection from infections and natural disasters. It is celebrated in honour of Mother Nature. Bongthingism is a socio-cultural institution that keeps the Lepcha community united as it governs various aspects of their life including the rituals and ceremonies related to birth, marriage, death, and agriculture.

The Lepcha people have been nature worshippers since time immemorial with a rich ethnographic landscape built around the spiritual realm that comprises both the benevolent and malevolent. They worship mountains, rocks, trees, rivers, streams, caves, and other natural objects as they believed that these were where their spirits resided. Nature worship is one of the crucial aspects of Lepcha culture which is reflected even in their songs, dances, and festivals. The Lepcha community of Sikkim regards their land, mountains, and rivers as sacred components of their cultural heritage. The two main rivers namely, Teesta and Rangeet are the bloodline of the Lepcha community and the Bongthings believe that the rivers are one of the important means for the Lepchas in reaching their afterlife and being one with their ancestors (Lepcha and Patel, 2022).

Signs and symbols

The Lepcha have many symbols of worship like the prayer flags, amulets, and ritual objects that are used in their religious rites and practices. These signs and symbols play a significant role. As religion is deeply ingrained in the value system of the Lepcha, its symbols are entrenched in being used to deliver important social messages for the well-being of the community. The worldviews of the Lepcha people emanate from the objects and symbols based on symbolic meanings offered by the society and the collective whole (Leigh and Gabel, 1992). One of the respondents from Pentong village shared,

living in Mayellyang, a region surrounded by rivers and lush green forests, signs, and symbols about traditional religion play a vital role in our day-to-day lives. These symbols are not just mere representations; but hold deep spiritual significance that help us connect to our ancestors, forests, land, and the divine. For us, the symbol of the ‘*Sutshuk Lavo*’ – a wooden or metal carving of the sun and moon that holds the tail of a holy bird – *Nubong Ong Fo* (The Racket tailed Drongo) or the tail of peacock in the current scenario due to the scarce availability of *Nubong Ong Fo* bird is considered very sacred and given utmost reverence. The sun and moon are believed to protect the Lepchas from evil spirits and the ill effects of eclipses. The tail of the bird is said to symbolize love and blessings. We revere and worship the symbol, and the Lepcha men adorn their hats – Sumok-thyaktuk with this symbol and wear it during important occasions and festivals. These symbols are not just limited to our spiritual and religious practices; they are an integral part of our daily lives. For, us these signs and symbols are a connection to our past, our land, and our people.

This narrative thus highlights the importance of signs and symbols in the life of tribal people, and how their worldviews are shaped by the impact of society.

Current Scenario and the Influence of other religious practices

Lepcha by tradition are nature worshippers but recently, they have converted to Buddhism or Christianity. In the present day, due to the influence of Lamaism or Buddhism in the regions of Dzongu, and Sikkim, many residents of the region practice a syncretic form of religion. Religion is a social phenomenon that unites people (Durkheim,1995) and helps them prevent their ethnicity from being further eradicated from society. With time, Bongthingism has been influenced by other religions like Buddhism, Christianity, and Hinduism, leading to a syncretic form of belief system. One of the respondents from Hee Gyathang village narrates, my ancestors have lived in this village for generations, practicing our traditional religion and living close to Mother Nature. With the coming of outsiders and the influence of modernization, our region has changed over a period of time. Many of my community members living in Kalimpong, Darjeeling, and elsewhere have completely converted themselves to Christianity or Buddhism, and our traditional religion and practices are slowly fading away. However, if you look at the Lepcha community of Dzongu, the influence is not that much, our community in Dzongu has managed to preserve its cultural heritage and traditional practices. We have maintained a unique blend of indigenous beliefs, and incorporated elements of Buddhism while continuing to honour our ancestral traditions, such as Bongthingism and nature worship. This harmonious fusion of old and new has allowed us to retain our distinct identity, even as the world around us changes. Our resilience in preserving our culture and traditions is a testament to the strength and richness of our indigenous and ancestral heritage.

This mere expression and examination on the views of my subject sheds light on the complex dynamics between Lepcha tribal traditions and external influences that is currently prevalent in the Lepcha society.

Conclusion

Indigenous knowledge plays a vital role in fostering subsistence strategies towards proper management, preservation, and conservation of local natural resources. This study has traced the prevalence and significance of Lepcha’s indigenous knowledge system locating the impact of modernity and unchecked developmental projects. The traditional wealth of knowledge in medicine, weather forecasting, and disaster mitigation has been discussed

emphasizing the discourse of indigeneity and indigenous knowledge systems. The Lepcha, like many other indigenous communities around the world, have a well-developed traditional IKS for natural resource management and coping strategies. The coping strategies that the Lepcha have developed over the years make them more resilient to environmental changes and natural disasters. Natural disaster management in the Dzongu region has been deeply rooted in local communities since time immemorial. The community uses indigenous knowledge to monitor and thereby establish early warning indicators for the benefit of their community and future generations. The paper throws light on the wealth of indigenous knowledge of the Lepcha community which is essential to achieve sustainable development. The knowledge that the community inherits can be utilized for the assessment of biodiversity. Thereby, it necessitates the larger social aggregate to acknowledge IKS to promote sustainable use of natural resources and foster amiable relationships. Overall, the IKS of the Lepcha reflects a holistic understanding of the immediate environment, nature, and community since times immemorial the knowledge system provides valuable insights into sustainable living and ecological conservation. The cultural practices of the Lepcha highlight empathetic attitudes toward the environment thus, embodying an ecological worldview. They possess comprehensive knowledge of the faunal and floral diversity that enables them to coexist with nature for generations. With the boom in modernization, the language, religion, culture, customs, and social normativity of the community are gradually changing. Traditional knowledge systems used in the context of medicine, healing, weather forecasting, and agricultural practices are slowly dwindling and evolving as the traditional practitioners – *bongthings* and *muns* are aging and the upcoming generations are finding it difficult to pick up the knowledge of their predecessors. Thus, it is pertinent to conserve and promote traditional cultural knowledge and practices as such knowledge has been significant for both cultural and biodiversity conservation. Moreover, Indigenous knowledge is important not only for the tribal but to the entire mankind. Hence documentation and conservation of all traditional knowledge must be prioritized and addressed with vigorous and sustained effort.

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