

Indigenous Lepcha Language and Identity: A Reflection on the Traditional Knowledge of Lepcha Community

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ABSTRACT

Indigenous peoples are traditionally understood as communities with longstanding relationships to their ancestral lands, distinct languages, cultures, traditions, and systems of knowledge. The Lepchas are an Indigenous community of Sikkim with a rich cultural heritage and a close relationship with the natural environment. Their traditional knowledge encompasses extensive understanding of flora and fauna, cultural practices, oral traditions and ways of interacting with nature. However, the growing influence of modern science and technology, along with changing social and cultural practices, has contributed to the gradual decline of the Lepcha language, traditional knowledge and cultural practices. These changes pose significant challenges to the preservation and transmission of Lepcha cultural identity. This study examines the role of traditional knowledge and oral traditions in preserving and strengthening Lepcha cultural identity. It explores how Indigenous Knowledge is transmitted across generations and how language, oral narratives, cultural practices, and the relationship with nature contribute to the continuity of Lepcha identity. The study adopts a qualitative, mixed methods approach, drawing on both primary and secondary sources. Primary data are collected through oral accounts, interviews, and observations, while secondary sources include books, articles and other relevant scholarly materials. The study argues that documenting, preserving and promoting traditional knowledge and oral traditions are essential for sustaining Lepcha cultural identity ensuring its transmission to future generations.

Keywords: Lepcha, Cultural Identity, Indigenous Knowledge, Traditional Knowledge, Oral Tradition

1. Introduction

The Lepchas are the indigenous race of the Sikkim, Darjeeling District, and Illam (Nepal) Himalayas. They call themselves *Mutanchi Rong Kup Rum Kup*, meaning the “beloved children of mother nature and God” in Lepcha. How the term *Lepcha*, describe the Indigenous race is according to the folks the name Lepcha, used today is perhaps, derived from a Lepcha word *lapchao*, meaning a resting or waiting place on the way side or a place on the wayside where stones are heaped up as a sign post to direct travelers. When the Nepalese first arrive in the Lepcha land, and enquired about their identity at such a waiting place, the Rong people not

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knowing what the Nepalese were enquiring, replied that is *lapchao*, guessing that they were asking the name of a place .unable to pronounce the name, *lapchao* correctly the Nepalese addressed the Rong Folk as Lapcha, later the when the Britishers arrived the Lepcha land they anglicized to *lepcha*. The Rong people never address themselves as *Lepcha*, they address themselves as Mutanchi or simply *Rong* (Tamsang,Lyangsong, Lepcha Folklore and Folk Songs,2014).

Politically or geographically the Lepchas are now divided into four groups, however, linguistically and culturally, they remain as one. There is no history of Lepcha migration. They have their own distinct language, religion, culture and tradition like other indigenous group of the world. The Lepcha language is Known as ‘Rong Aring’, this indigenous language of the Lepcha community plays an important role in their life. “Language was not a mere string of words. It had suggestive power well beyond the immediate and lexical meaning. “(Indigenous Knowledge, page iii, para 3). In Lepcha community this indigenous *Rong Aring* is also not just a word, but it also has a hidden power which evokes memories, experiences, which conveys cultural, social and historical context, connects people, communities and identities further with time it shapes perception, builds relationship, create culture and transform lives.

This paper aims to focus especially on the Indigenous people of Sikkim and is an attempt to study the role of traditional knowledge in preserving Lepcha Culture. Lepcha community define traditional knowledge that their ancestors pass on to them and that evolves over time. It is knowledge that is attached to a certain place. This knowledge is embedded in the practices that been conducted over several generations. Their oral traditions and knowledge about the environment give them food and clothes to cover their bare skin. Lepchas are generally nature worshipper and they have a good knowledge about the flora and fauna. J. C. White, the first Political agent of British India, to Sikkim, in his book “Sikkim and Bhutan”, 1887-1908, wrote, “They are great nature lovers and good entomologist and botanist, and have their own names for every animal, insect and plant, and I should think unequalled anywhere as collectors”.

The above statement of J.C. White (1887-1908) shows the richness of Rong Aring and their knowledge of trees and plants, enabled them to make best use of locally available forest plants. Shelters were made out of bamboo, woods and leaves. Bamboo and cane were used with extraordinary craftsmanship and agility to build a foot suspension bridge.

2. Methodology

This study investigates the role of traditional knowledge in preserving Lepcha culture. To ensure a comprehensive analysis, data has been collected from both primary and secondary sources.

3. Literature Review

Traditional knowledge is Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) which is also known as Indigenous Knowledge or native science. Traditional Knowledge is a collection of practical knowledge that has been passed down through generations and is collectively owned by indigenous community. Traditional knowledge is passed down orally, rather than being written down and is typically held collectively, and is specific to cultures and locations. The

preservation of Traditional knowledge is a key part of the cultural heritage of humanity and is essential for the continued existence of indigenous and traditional peoples.

In any community language plays an important role in building the relationship among people of the society whether to transfer ideas or any knowledge, tradition, culture and customs. Simply stated in the book “Linguistic anthropology”, the study of language as a cultural resource and speaking as a cultural practice. As an inherently interdisciplinary field, it relies on and expands existing methods in other disciplines linguistics and anthropology in particular, with the general goal of providing an understanding the multifarious aspects of the language as a set of cultural practices or representation of social order.

“Language as a cultural resource”, in this statement I also want to include my story, that how language plays as an intermediary in our community in order to understand the traditional knowledge. There was a time when I suffered from a terrible toothache, which kept me awake at night. I told my amu (Mother) about it, and to ease the pain, I even considered having the tooth pulled out. However, in our village, there was a man who practiced a form of traditional healing. He performed certain rituals and made a religious thread (*Butti*), which he instructed me to wear as a necklace. If the toothache began, I was supposed to hang it on my ear. Along with the thread, he also gave me some rice, which he told me to use as part of remedy. After following these instructions, I felt relief from the pain and was able to sleep peacefully again. But, unfortunately, a year later, the toothache returned. Once again, I told amu about it. One evening, she went down to the stream to collect a type of algae wrapped in large leaves. She didn't tell anyone what she was doing and kept the algae hidden. After dinner, she secretly placed the algae into a bamboo container (*Pothiut*), filled it with hot water, she stirs it and tightly covered it. Amu then instructed me to position the side of my face with the toothache over the container so that the hot steam would reach my painful tooth. She told me to keep my mouth closed tightly around the container and hold it there until the water inside cooled down. She also instructed me to keep my saliva inside, not to spit it out. The next morning, my amu carefully opened the container, poured the contents onto the ground, and looked at it herself. According to her belief, if I saw the bacteria, the treatment wouldn't work, so she kept it hidden from me. She told me that the bacteria from my tooth had fallen into the container. Miraculously, after that treatment, I no longer experienced any from my toothache. This remedy for my toothache had been passed down through generation in my family. My amu had learned it from her mother (*Nyukung*), and she, in turn, shared it with me. I believed this healing practice is part of the culture and tradition of the Lepcha indigenous community. It was a way of connecting with ancestral wisdom and nature, a practice that has been handed down as a form of healing that blends both spiritual and natural elements.

4. Reflection of Traditional Knowledge in preserving Lepcha Culture

Traditional knowledge plays a crucial role in preserving Lepcha culture, an indigenous community primarily found in the eastern Himalayas. Here are some key aspects of how this knowledge contribute to cultural preservation. And different tribe has different indigenous knowledge. In Lepcha there found lots of traditional knowledge, but the relentless march of globalization, coupled with the factors like urbanization and the dominance of major world word languages has pushed many indigenous languages are in danger of being lost.

“Indigenous languages are integral to the cultural identity of the respective communities”, (Indigenous language revival in post-colonial societies, sept.24,2023). These languages encapsulate traditional ecological knowledge, which is essential for sustainable practices and the preservation of biodiversity. Indigenous language are also linked to healing practices and spiritual wellbeing. Like many communities Lepcha community also believe that their language contains the power to heal and connect individuals to their ancestors and the natural world, without the language to convey these practices, they risk being forgotten.

4.1 Mun and Boongthing

In Lepcha indigenous community Mun and Boongthing are considered as their leaders. They are also called the *abong sa athing* or the lord of the mouth, as they perform orally and they didn't have a written text to orate the things. Still in village whenever someone in the community falls ill, they traditionally first seek the help of either Mun or Boongthing for treatment. The community follows their advice and guidance in matters of health and healing. As they perform all the rituals, the Mun and Boongthing are often referred to as the “encyclopedia” of the Lepcha community, as they possess vast knowledge of traditions, healing practices, and spiritual matters. In the Lepcha community, no ceremony or festival begins without the presence of the Mun and Boongthing. For example, during the *Namsoong festival*¹, before the program starts, the Boongthing would perform the rumfaat ritual, explaining the significance behind the celebration. Only after this would the program commence. Similarly, in a Lepcha marriage, without the involvement of the Boongthing and the *Sunkyo faat*² or taking *Sunkyo chi*, the marriage is not considered legally binding within the community. Like from cradle to grave, the Mun and Boongthing perform all the important rituals in the Lepcha community.

4.2 Oral Story

Oral story a vital part of Indigenous knowledge, passed down from generation to generation. In today's modern world, to protect Lepcha oral traditions, the community of Dzongu (North Sikkim) organized a workshop focused on the clan story of the Lepcha people. During the workshop they gathered the origin stories of respective clans and documented them in written form, using a grassroot comic style. The main goal of the workshop was to bridge the gap between the elders and the younger generation. One of the organizers, Renue Mayalmit Lepcha³, shared that they initially aimed to collect stories from 30 clans. However, due to various challenges, they were only able to gather 15 clan stories. She expressed her desires to contribute something meaningful to the community and future generation, especially as many young people in the village are leaving in search of new opportunities. At the same time, they are becoming disconnected from their origins and the valuable knowledge of their ancestors.

¹ Namsoong- New Year festival of the lepchis, and its an important festival of the community

² Sunkyo Faat/Sunkyo Chi- a promise made to the bride and groom in the Lepcha Community. After taking the sunkyo chi a ‘fermented liquor’, a sacred oath given by Boongthing that it signifies that they will live together forever like river Teesta and Rangeet(sacred river of the community),bound by the community.

³ Lepcha,Renue mayalmit- President SILTA(Sikkim Indigenous Lepcha Tribal Association).

4.3 Traditional Food

Food has been an inseparable part of human culture and there are diverse food habits among different communities in different parts of the world. Likewise, Lepchas have their indigenous knowledge of food habits which represents their cultural identity. “The lepchas share indigenous knowledge of collecting and identifying wild edible products. Also, the lepchas consumed food by hunting wild animals and prepared food out of it. There is an amazing diversity of indigenous food habits among the lepchas which shares the connection with nature and culture. The transformation of wild products into cooked food among the lepchas which is influenced by the environment regards the food habits of the lepchas⁴”. The indigenous food habits of Lepcha especially if we look for wild foods it include Pusheen, Tuntuk bee, Dor bee, Kunsel bee, surong bee and many moreAmong these food habits I have more focused on Kunsel bee.

Kunsel bee

Kunsel bee is a wild plant found in wet, shady areas or near streams. It is considered a traditional food of the Lepcha community. According to Renue Dawa Doma Lepcha⁵, during marriage ceremonies, our elders would prepare a dish make with rice and kunsel bee mixing them together(*Chyunyuk*) as part of the tradition. They also make *Khuri Khu*⁶ with kunsel bee. This plant is not available from February to March, as it turns brown during this period.

To identify whether the kunsel bee is edible, one can rely on its distinct smell, which resembles that of cucumber. However, those unfamiliar with might confuse it with another variety called ‘Kunsyol Bee’, which is used as animal feed and is not suitable for human consumption, when it tasted it is bitter in taste. The edible Kunsel bee, when mature, also produces a flower.



Fig 1: Kunsel Bee



Fig 2: Kunsyol Bee

⁴ Lepcha, Dr.Anira Phipon. Lepcha mayalmit-Indigenous Knowledge of Food habits reflecting cultural identity of the Lepchas, UGC CARE Listed(Group-I)Journal Vil 11,ISS 12,2022

⁵ Lepcha, Renue Dawa Doma-A village elder woman and a mother from lingee village, South Sikkim

⁶ Khuri Khu- It is a traditional bread made with buckwheat flour. The dough is rolled, and inside it Kunsel bee is placed, similar to how a modern roll is made. This unique preparation is a part of Lepcha community’s culinary tradition.

5. Impact of Modernization on the Lepcha Cultural Knowledge and language

How modernization, technology and changing lifestyles are leading to the loss of cultural knowledge, traditions, and languages within the communities especially among the younger generation. With the advent of modernization and the growing demands of the contemporary world, a noticeable gap has emerged between the generations. The need for jobs and the lifestyles changes that come with development have altered the way we live. Today, with technological advancements, we have access to everything with a single touch, but at the same time, the valuable knowledge passed down by our ancestors is gradually fading away.

If we look in the Lepcha Community known as indigenous community with no history of migration. Mainwaring (1876) wrote “having no written or authentic traditional records regarding their migration into this country, I have not yet been able to discover the exact point at which they arrived”⁷. Lepcha, Indigenous community who used to live within the nature and have got many knowledge about the natural resources available in the jungle and in order to survive and eradicate from poverty and hunger they access more to the resources. “Some scholars have also demonstrated how indigenous food knowledge can be important constituent of community empowerment through action involvement of rural and tribal male and female youths., who are vital to promoting and conserving indigenous knowledge and ensuring a community’s future food security associated with food production and consumption”⁸. The informal knowledge of the indigenous communities are considered indigenous knowledge in the sense that is a unique to a specific cultural context and is transmitted from the ancestors to the future generations.

In the past, we spent time in the fields and on the land our livelihood depended on it. But now, these once fertile lands are turning barren, and many edible plants are disappearing. I recall a moment when my (*azyo*)grandfather was naming various plants and birds in our native Lepcha language, almost as if he were reminiscing about the old days. I felt a deep sense of regret as I realized how disconnected I had become from the traditions that once defined my community. Although I was born in the village, I was unfamiliar with much of the knowledge that shaped our identity.

In today’s world, children are learning more languages than their own mother tongue. They speak Hindi or Nepali, often imitating the language of the cartoon characters they watch. As a result, their own language has become foreign to them, and they even use it less at home with their parents. This shift is a consequence of the changing times and the rapid advancement of technology.

For the youth, the search for new opportunities and job has led many to leave their villages, abandoning the wisdom and traditions passed down by their grandparents. They adopt modern lifestyles leaving behind the simpler, traditional way of life that once brought them closer to the land and the wisdom of their elders.

⁷ Mainwaring, G.B., A Grammar of Rong (Lepcha)language as it exists in the Dorjeling hills, Calcutta, 1876,pxx.

⁸ Gartaula, Hom., patel, Kirti., Shukla, Shailesh., Devkota., Rachana, Indigenous knowledge of traditional foods and food literacy among youth: insights from rural Nepal, Journal of rural studies 73(2020)7786

Each plant and each bird that my grandfather named carried a story that shaped the way we saw the world. Losing these connections feels like losing a part of ourselves, a part of who we are as a community. Many of the plants and birds that once thrived in our village are now gone. I remember how, after the arrival of a group of birds called *Kurknok*⁹, we would immediately sow cucumber and pumpkin seeds. According to our elders and we also believed that if we planted them after the birds arrived, the seeds would grow healthy and abundant, and the harvest would multiply. But now, the sight of those birds is rare, and with it, the tradition of planting at the right time has faded.

Similarly, many edible plants have disappeared, we've become so caught up in our busy lives that we've forgotten the ways of the past, the ways that once helped our community thrive. The plants that used to grow in abundance are now left unattended. We no longer find the time to harvest them, and in the absence of care, they wither and vanish, without the community's concern and effort, these plants no longer bear fruit as the once did. Just like tree that isn't pruned, these plants too need attention to thrive. Without it, they dry up and disappear, leaving only memories of what once was.

Keeping our traditions, knowledge, and culture alive is crucial because it not only provides shelter, food and clothing for individuals within a community but also gives the community an identity to pass on to future generations. Reconnecting with these traditions, practices, and cultural values in today's world is more important than ever. If we don't preserve our knowledge in documented form, future generations will lose touch with the very identity that shaped their community. Elders should play a central role in teaching their mother tongue to the younger generation, and families should take the time to walk with them through the land, identifying plants and sharing stories about their uses and significance. This will help ensure that the wisdom of the past is not forgotten but continues to guide future generations.

Conclusion

Language is the vehicle of knowledge, with a cultural resource of a community. And this Indigenous Lepcha language which called as 'Rong Aring', plays an important role in Lepcha community. As this Rong Aring, not only gives an identity to the Lepcha community but also plays an important role in passing the traditional knowledge from elders to the future generation which contributes to cultural preservation. Through traditional practice like Mun and Boongthing, oral histories are passed down from elders to younger generations. Additionally, the process of transforming wild products into meals further strengthens this connection to heritage and cultural continuity.

The indigenous knowledge remains unchanged, but with the process of modernization and globalization are causing it to fade. As the younger generation seeks new opportunities, they often become disconnected from this valuable knowledge. However, some revitalization efforts within the community are striving to bridge the gap. By documenting oral histories and sharing knowledge through traditional language, these efforts aim to preserve and strengthen both cultural identity and traditional knowledge.

⁹ Kurknok- name of a bird which flew in a group and in Rong Aring we called as a kurnok

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