

Article

Lepchas of Darjeeling Himalaya: A Brief View on Native People of Kalimpong

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Introduction

Lepchas are born naturalists who live in relative isolation from the outside world with their own traditional practices and beliefs. They are mainly found in the Eastern Himalayan Region namely Sikkim, West Bengal, Nepal and in some pockets of Bhutan. They often called themselves as *Rong or Rongkup* as children of God. The Lepchas migrated from Sikkim to Darjeeling region under religious influence. The Darjeeling Hills initially was under Sikkim and later under British rule came under West Bengal. The neighboring Hindus never considered Lepchas as their own community as from racial, social, cultural, geographical they are different. Unstable political situation, lack of infrastructural facilities, absence of basic services as well as cultural mixing, acculturation process has created a threat to this Lepcha community and considerably they are termed as ‘vanishing people’. The Kalimpong region of Darjeeling Himalaya suffered mostly from politically volatile situations and infrastructural development and community protection from state and local level. The Lepchas have their own social, cultural and environmental realms. The study focuses on these aspects of Lepcha tribes of Kalimpong, Darjeeling Himalaya and how their unique and individual traits will help to promote sustainable livelihood. From the available census data (2011,2021) for West Bengal. It is known that there are three types of indigenous people living in this region namely Lepcha, Bhutia and Gorkha.

Study Area

Darjeeling Himalaya belongs to the Eastern Himalayan range and also a part of Lesser Himalaya. The Darjeeling district (26°31' to 27°13' N and 87°59' to 88°59' E) except Siliguri Subdivision and the Kalimpong District (26°51' N to 27°12' N and 88°24' E to 88°53' E) come under this region. (Fig.1.). The two main rivers of this region are the Teesta and the great Rangit. As per census 2011, total Lepcha population in Sikkim is 42909 and the northern part of West Bengal (Darjeeling and Kalimpong districts) is 76,871. From the available census data (2011,2021) for Kalimpong, Darjeeling Districts, West Bengal it is known Kalimpong municipality comprises of 23 wards and Tehsils like Kalimpong I, Kalimpong II, Lava, Pedong and Gorubathan with 42 village panchayats covering 128 villages. Kalimpong is termed as ‘Land of Lepchas’.

Methodology

An extensive form of web search has given information about the Lepchas of this region. Existing literature on this domain has been studied to understand various social, cultural and environmental aspects of Lepcha people. Information has been collected from secondary sources like journals, published articles, published reports on Lepchas. The study attempts to synthesize various aspects of Lepchas and conclusions are made on the basis of information available to represent a general view of Lepcha eco-centric living.

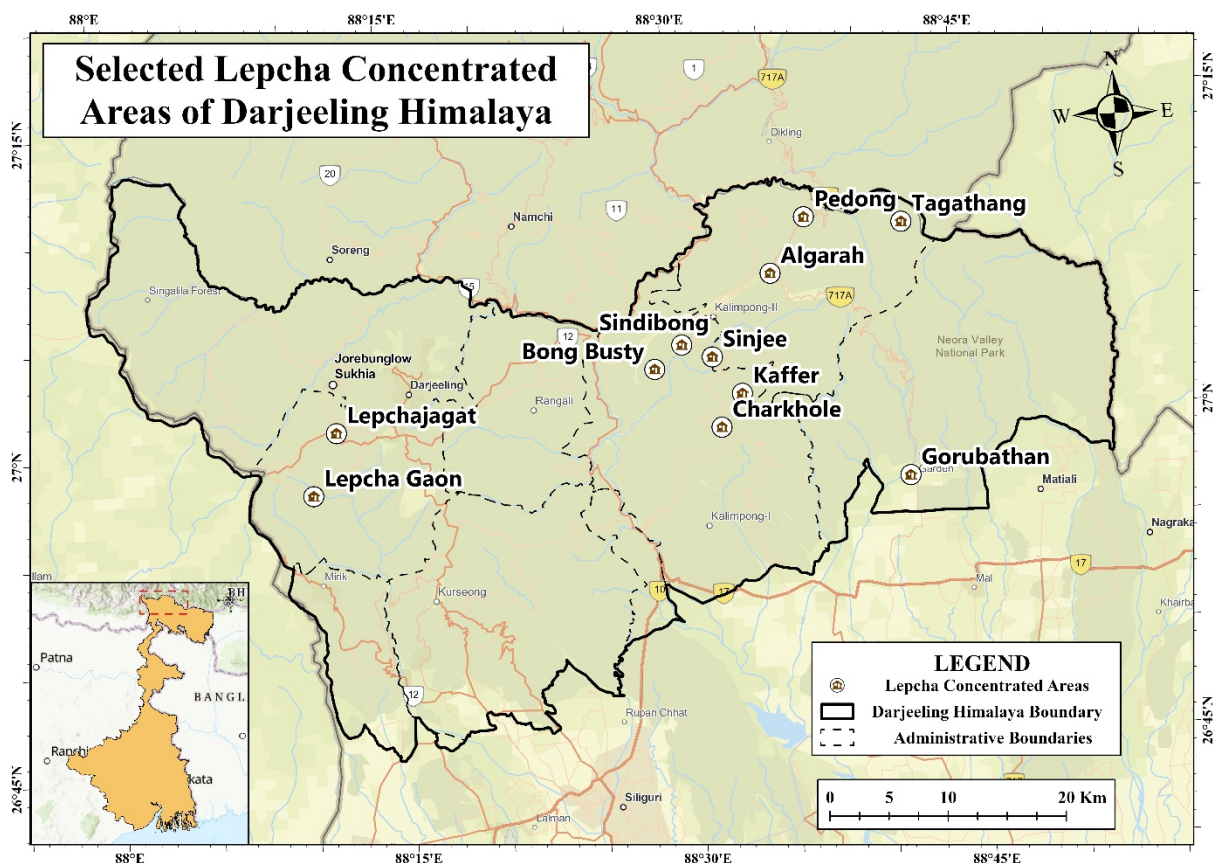


Fig. 1. Selected Lepcha Concentrated Areas of Darjeeling Himalaya

Results

Social Conditions

Among the hill-settlements, in Kalimpong Districts, minority Lepchas are virtually unnoticed and they have started living in the outskirts of the towns creating small hamlets in the valleys and gorges, protected by the forests and the mountains faced with a bleak and uncertain future. The members of the community who belong to the urban areas have almost lost their Lepcha identity. Their society was organized on the basis of sharing and equality. Living with other groups they still follow some of their traditional rituals as they consider themselves as descendants of Kanchenjunga, as their guardian deity. Their social aspects are an integral part of this region fostering the growth of this region with sustainable livelihood approaches. All the domains of social demographic aspects are covered under six parameters: family, income, education, health, households and population.

Cultural Aspects

This domain sheds light on the traditional foods and food habits of the Lepcha community. It highlights the cultural importance of the traditional drink (chi), prepared from finger millet which is a part of every ritual and ceremony. Chi is not only a delicious and nutritious or ceremonial drink but proper marketing will give economic benefit to the community. The recent trend of shifting to Buddhism and Christianity is an important aspect of changing Lepcha identity. However, from a linguistic perspective this community is losing all its individuality by shifting to different languages instead of rooted to their native language. Sharma & Karolia (2024) stated that it is believed the Lepchas are nature worshippers, adhering

to the traditional polytheistic, animistic and syncretic religion centred around *Mun* and *Bongthing* (Fig.2.). The various cultural traits are known through cultural economy, heritage, language, religion gender specific participation and social cohesion. These are reflections of their present situation and need some protective measures.



Fig.2. Lepcha Male Priests named as Bongthings

Environmental Perspectives

It is primarily addressed through bioresource utilisation by the Lepcha community in their day-to-day lives. It is known for agricultural and horticultural crops cultivation commonly grown by the community. All Lepcha folk literatures, including folklores and proverbs mention the bio-resources such as trees, flowers, fruits, climbers, wild edibles, various types of bamboo, etc. (Jana & Chauhan, 2000). Furthermore, the study explains traditional conservation practices of nature and natural entities. It covers preserving water bodies, rocks, forests, and forest patches as abodes of deities and mentions related legends and folklore. Lepchas believe to protect cultural and ecological purity (Purkayastha, 2013) cultural values and practices need to be protected. The idea of ethics and morality, agricultural wisdom, livelihood, ethno-habitat helps to understand the present situation of Lepchas of Kalimpong, Darjeeling Himalaya.

Table 1. Various Aspects to understand Lepchas present situation in Kalimpong Region

Aspects	Indicators
Social	Family Conditions, Occupation, Education, Health, Households, Population Composition
Cultural	Cultural Economy, Heritage, Language, Religion, Gender Specific Participation, Social Cohesion

Environmental

Idea of Ethics and Morality, Agricultural wisdom, Livelihood, Ethno-habitat

Discussion and Conclusions

Lepcha traditional knowledge is environment based and all aspects of their lives are surrounded by the natural environment and natural entity. The knowledge, culture, traditions are transmitted from older generation to younger generation. As they worship nature and follow traditional Buddhism all Lepcha scripts are the identity of Lepcha culture. Lepcha society follows substantive bamboo-based economy and its part of their cultural identity too. Lepcha festivals are also celebrated to respect natural elements and their contributions towards Lepcha living. Lepcha live within nature and they believe protecting nature is essential to preserve Lepcha identity. However, acknowledging the Lepcha view of the environment is essential to address all climate related changes and changes due to modernization in Darjeeling region. Due to the impact of modernisation and continuous influx of people in Kalimpong Darjeeling the Lepchas are facing threats to preserve their identity. Younger generations are influenced by the acculturation process and traditional knowledge are not properly transmitted to them. Lack of infrastructural facilities, absence of basic services as well as cultural mixing has created a threat to this Lepcha community and considerably, they are called as vanishing people. To improve the Lepcha community's socio-economic status and to protect cultural traits from vanishing sustainable livelihood practices, cultural revival is needed in this part of Himalayan region.

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