

Research article

Lepcha Indigenous Knowledge and the Sacred Relationship with Nature

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Abstract

Preferring to call themselves Mutanchi Rongkup, meaning "beloved children of mother nature," Lepchas are considered an autochthonous tribe of Mayel Lyang, which, according to their legends, comprises Darjeeling and Kalimpong, the two hill districts of West Bengal and Sikkim in North East India. They accept nature as sacred in the context of their beliefs and culture and worship it with great reverence. Their sacred connection with nature can be found and observed in their traditional customs and belief system. To them, natural elements like Mount Kanchanjunga, Teesta-Rangit Rivers and forests are divine, and they worship them in community. As per the ancient tradition, Lepchas have their own simple religion called Boongthigism and Munism, which is on the verge of becoming obscure at present due to the inroads of Buddhism and Christianity into their culture. The present work is an attempt to explore and explain the ecological knowledge support among the Lepcha tribe and their endeavour to preserve it as a sense of responsibility. The paper also sheds light on the transmission of ecological knowledge among them from down the generation. Finally, it looks at and analyses the challenges faced in modern times to sustain their indigenous knowledge system to ensure long-term harmony between humans and nature.

Keywords:

Lepcha,
Indigenous
Knowledge,
Nature,
Sacredness

Introduction

Dr. Narayan Mishra, in *Tribal Culture in India*, made a vivid description of a small tribal village named Anjan situated in the Chota Nagpur Plateau. The village lacked access to a pucca road, and a bullock cart was the only means of transport, that too during the dry season. But he also describes the beauty of this tribal village, enhanced by its natural surroundings. To quote him, "Indeed Nature has tried to keep Anjan in isolation by fencing it with hills in three directions and the Katwa River in the fourth". (Mishra, 2004, p.68) The area settled by the indigenous

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people often appears geographically isolated, but they maintain close harmony with their surrounding ecology. For tribal people, nature is not merely a source of livelihood, but they view it as a sacred entity deserving deep reverence and protection. Many tribals who are converted from their main animism to other religions become separated from their own society and gradually neglect their environment. But the environment undoubtedly has a great impact on their livelihood and freedom. Their emotional conversion and their hatred of their own religion do not allow them to isolate themselves from nature (Dutta, 2012, p. 77).

An indigenous knowledge system is the knowledge passed down from one generation to another. People, mostly tribal, interact with nature by way of their wisdom and traditional knowledge passed down from the generations. Lepchas, who are mostly settled in the Darjeeling and Kalimpong districts of West Bengal and Sikkim state, have an indigenous knowledge system that survives as a means of religious as well as cultural sanctity. To them, Mt. Kanchanjunga is their guardian deity, and they worship it with great respect. Their literature, folk tales, religion, and even songs are based on nature. Through their system of agriculture, culture, and customs, they are indeed the true protector and friends of nature. Their knowledge about nature is so in-depth that they do not require any scientific calendar to sow and harvest the crops. By observing the natural phenomenon, they cultivate their crops. Their agricultural calendar begins in February and ends in January. The twelve months of the Lepcha agricultural calendar are: *Tangbu* (February), *Nibu* (March), *Sumgu* (April), *Zibu* (May), *Nap* (June), *Tikpu* (July), *Dengbu* (August), *Gebu* (September), *Goobu* (October), *Choopu* (November), *Chuchikpu* (December), and *Chunipu* (January) (Gorer, 2025, p.94).

Lepcha people are natural botanists. They possess profound knowledge in recognizing and segregating edible and poisonous plants. They easily identify medicinal herbs and serve as reliable Ayurvedic practitioners in some of the Lepcha villages. They believe that their creator has created a number of plants, fish, animals, insects, bamboos, etc., for their sustenance (Awasty, 2016, p.30). Their emotional bonding with nature is reflected in their way of worshiping nature. Mt. Kanchenjunga is their guardian deity, and their first man and woman, Fudong-thing and Nazong-Nyu, are said to have been created from the pure snow of this mountain. Every natural entity, like mountains, rivers, streams, lakes, plants, etc., is worshipped, and their preservation is a supreme duty to them. Dzongu in Sikkim is sacred and reserved for only the Lepcha community. It is reserved particularly to safeguard the vanishing Lepcha culture and to prevent economic exploitation by outsiders. Due to its long isolation from outside influence and government initiatives to protect the reserve, much of the forgotten culture of Lepcha tribes is still thriving here (Foning, 2003, p.263). Lepcha tribes originally practiced nomadic cultivation, but due to changes in policy from the colonial government to the present, they have lost their forests and other reserved areas. At present, they engage in settled cultivation, gradually abandoning their nomadic culture. But they are born naturalists, and they know the names of nearly every bird, plant, orchid, and butterfly. Due to external influence and unsympathetic policy of the government, they are disappearing with the forest they love (O'Malley, 2012, p. 44). D.C. Roy, a noted scholar of the Lepcha community, has made a valuable observation on the relationship between the Lepchas and nature in his recently published book, *Status of Women Among the Lepchas*. He describes:

They knew all the secrets of the forest and the hills. As the children of Kanchanjunga, they possessed full knowledge of the beasts, birds, trees, shrubs, flowers, fruits, fungi,

etc. of the region. Lepchas are born botanists and zoologists of the hills and possess some chemical knowledge of freeing poison from the poisonous trees. (Roy, 2017, p.182) At present, Lepchas are struggling to keep pace with their efforts to protect their natural environment. Their sacred and natural landscape is under threat due to the government's hazardous industrial policy. Their sacred landscape, Dzongu, came under threat when the state government of Sikkim proposed to build 26 hydro-power projects on the River Teesta. Development planned without consulting the Lepchas in their sacred place was perceived by the community as encroachment on the resources of their livelihood and an attempt to erase their religious and cultural spaces (Yasin, 2012, p. 111). The Lepchas of Sikkim, Darjeeling, and Kalimpong districts of West Bengal staged their vehement protest against this project. They launched satyagraha and resorted to fasting against the construction of dams in Dzongu. Lepchas and Dzongu are emotionally attached, as the latter believe that their departed soul take a journey via Dzongu to reach the dreamed Mayel Lyang (Bhattacharya-Panda, 2015, p. 61). However, the modern generation of Lepcha youths who are influenced by Western culture hardly bother about the issue of protecting and preserving their age-old indigenous knowledge system.

Objectives

This study is based upon the following three objectives:

- To understand the Lepchas as a tribe settled in the state of Sikkim and the Darjeeling and Kalimpong districts of West Bengal, with particular emphasis on their traditional knowledge of ecology and its sustenance.
- To examine the Lepchas unique socio-cultural practices and explore their interconnected relationship with nature.
- The study also tries to comprehend how Lepchas are preserving their culture and tradition of sustaining the nature they love so fondly and what challenges they face in modern times to continue their bonding with nature.

Methodology

The paper is mainly based on a qualitative and descriptive analytical approach to understand the indigenous knowledge and its relationship with nature. Secondary sources, including books, research articles, published reports, and other relevant literature, are used to understand the Lepcha society, culture, traditional beliefs, and customs. In order to identify the significant socio-cultural themes, available literature was reviewed and analyzed. The author also draws insights from personal observations and informal conversations with individuals having knowledge of Lepcha society and cultural practices.

Who are Lepchas?

Lepchas, who call themselves Mutanchi Rong-Kup, mean the beloved children of Mother Nature or children of god. As an autochthonous tribe, they have been settled mostly in Kalimpong and Darjeeling districts of West Bengal, with headquarters in Kalimpong. Historian Sailen Debnath traces their origin to Burma and compared their physical affinities with Khasi tribes of the Khasi and Jaintia hills of the North East. They had their own kings and dynasty in the historical era. Lepcha folklore makes us believe that Lepcha king Poharthak Panu had helped Mauryan emperor Chandragupta Maurya during the latter's war with the Greeks

(Debnath, p. 141). However, this fact is mentioned in the pages of history, and further analysis is needed. According to A.R. Foning's genealogical account, Lepcha tribes believe that they have come from the Ney Mayal Lyang. According to Lepcha belief, Ney Mayal Lyang is a land of paradise and plenty, and is compared to the Garden of Eden created by Itbu-moo, the mother creator (Foning, p.2). According to the place of origin, Lepchas have four clans such as Renjoangmoo, Ilamoo, Tamsangmoo and Promoo scattered across two hill districts of West Bengal, Sikkim state, Nepal and Bhutan. Until the 13th century, the Lepcha language developed independently without external influence, maintaining its simplicity and purity (Tamsang, p. 14). The significance of the Lepcha language can be proven by the fact of drafting 1835's Grant of Deed documents were drafted in both English and Lepcha scripts.

Lepchas consider Mount Kanchanjunga as their guardian deity, where departed souls return to meet their ancestors after death. Apart from it, they worship other natural elements like rivers, streams, lakes, trees, stones, etc. Lepcha Bongthing and Mun (Lepchas' traditional priest and priestess) utter the names of these elements while offering prayers during the religious festivals. Lepchas possess a sound knowledge of nature, which is reflected in their invocation in different Faats, meaning prayers.

Lepchas follow a casteless social structure, making no difference between male and female. Though patriarchy exists in theory, it promotes equality in practice. The Lepcha life cycle is based on the idea of belongingness. According to Tapan Chattopadhyay,

This idea of belonging to the community rather than a singular family is so ingrained in the mind of Rong since early childhood that the person ceases to be merely a son or a daughter unto the parents and looks upon the entire community as kith and kin. (Chattopadhyay, p. 39)

Indigenous Knowledge System among Lepchas

Over generations, the Lepchas possess unique knowledge through their direct interaction with their natural and social environment. The deeply rooted indigenous knowledge of the community can be reflected through their traditional knowledge of worship, agriculture, and ecological management. Their collective experience has taught them to develop a caring and pragmatic attitude towards the environment in which they live and worship. They believe strongly that the environment is of great spiritual significance and that everything belongs to the ecosystem. Their emotional bond with nature is also reflected in the belief system that Na Zong Nyu, the supreme goddess, created everything in nature. This emotional bond with nature further pushes them to realize that natural objects like mountains, forests, rivers, animals, birds, etc. share a symbiotic relationship of mutual obligation and trust. Lepchas' life cycle depends upon nature's flora and fauna. They are expert in practicing herbal medicine. Mr. Danish Lepcha of the remote village Suruk Khasmahal in Kalimpong district of West Bengal has practiced traditional herbal medicine for treating diseases in both humans and animals for many years. He is uneducated but remains a trusted figure among the villagers and has earned the epithet of healer.

The traditional taboo restricts them from killing female animals while hunting. Even the male animals are spared from hunting under certain conditions. The scientifically proven time period for breeding in fish is from July to October. Hence, fishing is prohibited during these periods. Therefore, it will not be an exaggeration to observe that the Lepcha tribe builds and possesses sustainable societies. The profound respect for the ecosystem and ability to survive

off the land's resources can be found in the Sim-Anyu-Mun of Lepcha tradition based on food security. They develop the ways and means to remove the toxic contents of wild, poisonous plants and animals and convert them into harmless edible food. But this knowledge is believed to be highly specialized, and it requires a profound technique that is owned only by Lepcha traditional Mun and Bongthing. Lepchas' commitment to ecological balance and conservation is reflected in the customary environmental ethic called Buk-Chung. A person cutting a tree is required to compensate for it by planting and nurturing multiple saplings. For every single tree cut, eight saplings have to be planted and cared for mandatorily, and if any of them die, it must be immediately replaced by a new one. It mandates the regeneration of forests through tree planting and protection. To the Lepchas, all plants have value and are tended to preserve and protect as future resources. Children are educated by the elders not to harm or wound any tree unnecessarily. They never cut down certain trees available at nearby streams and rivers, as they play a significant role in preserving the water. Forests near rivers and streams are considered sacred, and they never try to harm their surroundings.

Sacred Landscape and Beliefs

As nature worshippers, every natural object is respected and worshipped by the Lepchas. Natural objects like rivers, streams, forests, mountains, etc are deeply cared for and valued. The snow-clad mountains are considered a supreme deity, and its name is invoked in every prayer related to different rituals and festivals. They believe that every mountain peak has a deity residing there to protect the community from illness and ill fate. Actually, the Lepcha clan associates itself with a particular mountain peak. Rivers originating and flowing through the mountain are regarded as sacred. It is believed that Da-Mik means River God, resides near the catchment and nearby forest and is well protected. Dzongu in North Sikkim is considered a holy land by Lepchas everywhere. They believe that their race was created by Mother Nature in Dzongu. Dzongu is excessively precipitous triangular land bounded by the Teesta River on the south-east, the Talung on the north-east, and on the third side by mountains south of Kanchenjunga. It is ecologically rich and diverse land and was declared a Lepcha reserve by the Maharaja of Sikkim, Tashi Namgyal. Dzongu is a Mayel Lyang, a hidden paradise for the Lepchas. It is the place where trees and animals are carefully protected, and wild orchids sprout abundantly from the tops of the trees. To the nature-friendly Lepchas, natural objects are the abode of deities. For instance, Laksom Partaam lake, situated at Dzongu in North Sikkim, is a sacred place of abode where fertility resides to bless the newly married couple and those trying to have a newborn. The sanctity and emotional attachment to this lake can be seen in the instances of visits by newly married Lepcha couples who pray for early pregnancy. According to Geoffrey Gorer in his book *The Lepchas of Sikkim*, "The old widow, a nun, who told me about this land had performed her complete rite with her husband, but unsuccessfully". (Gorer, p.79)

Lepchas' bonding with nature can be observed in the celebration of their festivals like Mukjikding Rumfaat. In this sacred moment, they worship the sprouting of grass as a symbol of a new beginning and also as a gesture of thanksgiving to Mother Nature. While performing the prayer, the priest utters the names of various deities as a mark of paying gratitude for creating a number of species on earth as a gift to them. They believe that every object on this earth, including plants, medicinal herbs, rivers, streams, and aquatic species, is gifted by their

mother Itbu-moo, the mother goddess. Hence, they consider it their statutory duty to protect the cosmic order (Roy, 2011).

Every year, Lepchas of Kalimpong and Darjeeling gather at the confluence of the Teesta and Rangit rivers, locally called Tribeni, situated a few kilometers from the main town of Kalimpong. This festival is called Choo-Loh-Rumfaat. Large numbers of Lepcha people congregate at the juncture, irrespective of sex, from the nook and cranny of the Lepcha-dominated villages. The prayer is performed by Lepcha Mun and Bongthing to please the river spirits. This reflects the deep interconnected ties with nature. The significance of this festival is found in folklore related to the Lepchas. For reference, we may follow the book *Legends of the Lepchas* by Yishey Doma, illustrated by Pankaj Thapa. Relying on the oral tradition, the river Rangit stands as a male spirit with violent and spirited and never wants to compromise with his lover. Whereas Teestaa is compared to a female spirit with a calm, resilient, and compromising nature (Doma, p. 50). The Teesta and Rangit rivers for Lepchas are not only picturesque but also rivers of religious sanctity. They pay utmost reverence to keep these rivers' deity calm to avoid any form of natural calamities in the adjacent regions.

Lepcha festivals and rituals related to ecology

Rituals and festivals are part of life for every community. But to the Lepchas, these are all emotionally connected to natural phenomena. They worship different peaks and Himalayan ranges, and mythologically, they are their guardians from which they were born. The three events of Lepcha life are: *tungboang*, *bree*, and *sanglyoan*, meaning naming ceremony, marriage ceremony, and death ceremony, respectively. The *bongthing* plays a very important role in performing all these rituals. From birth to death in the Lepcha community, *bongthing* and mun act as mediators between the human soul and their god (Tamsang, p. 40).

Tendong Lho Rum Faat: As Lepchas believe in natural spirits, they always try to appease these spirits through their mediator mun and *bongthing*. As the legend goes, they say and believe that Sikkim was almost drowned due to the fury of the river god. After repeated prayers and offerings, with repentance to their god Itbu-Debu-Rumdaar, it was finally saved from complete submergence. To commemorate and acknowledge this fact, Lepchas celebrate Tendong Lho Rumfaat on August 8 of every year. They pray for the well-being of the community and all creatures of the region by offering varieties of seasonal fruits and *chee* (traditional fermented millet beer) (Doma, p. 53).

Mook Zyok Ding Rum Faat: As the Christian community offers the first and best produce of their gardens in church, similarly, Lepchas also follow the tradition of offering their first seasonal harvest annually in the month of February. To please Mother Nature, they offer different fruits, vegetables, etc. from their kitchen garden or orchards. In a simple way, it is a festival celebrated during the sprouting of plants. They pray for favourable weather for crop production and to avert natural calamities like floods, landslides, drought, and famine throughout the year.

Lyaang-Rum-Faat: Lepcha tribes always show their communal bonding to celebrate and offer prayers during festivals. They believe that natural phenomena on this earth are controlled by their nature god, and good or poor yield also depends upon their mercy. This is proven during

the celebration of Lyaang Rumfaat in the month of April. They gather in community and pray to the god of nature for abundant and timely rainfall. It is celebrated like a community feast where items like hen, egg, cheese, fruits, and cash are collected from individual households. These offerings are made by the traditional priest called *bongthing*, and they enjoy their day to the fullest after it.

Chu Lho Rum Faat: Lepchas believe themselves to be the pure race originating from Mt. Kanchenjunga. Every year, in the month of January, they celebrate Chu Lho Rum Faat, offering prayers to their guardian deity, Mt. Kanchenjunga. They celebrate this festival when the fresh snow starts falling on the Himalayan Mountains. It is the collective festival of Lepchas. They believe that the first man on Earth, *Fudonthing*, was created by Itbu-moo, the goddess of creation was created from the fresh snow from the summit of Kongchen Kongchlo, i.e., Mountain Kanchenjunga. For them, Kanchenjunga is their guardian deity, protector, and giver of life for generations. Two idols representing Kanchenjunga and Mt. Pandim are made of moulded rice and placed on a raised bamboo platform outside the house facing the Himalayas. Bongthing chants prayers as a thanksgiving gesture to Kanchenjunga. Through this festival, they pay respect and gratitude to Mother Nature and ancestors for their existence, protection, and life.

Sakyo-Rum Faat: This is the festival accompanied by essential dancing and singing, celebrated during October to November after the harvest season. It is a festival celebrated based on the legends of the immortal couple of Mayel Lyang or the Hidden Village. Lepchas, in this festival, offer prayers to the Mayel Lyang to express their gratitude. Lepchas believe that a particular spirit looks after and guards their grains stored in the house and also protects their kitchen garden orchards from the harm of animals and human beings. No outsiders dare to enter or steal from the unfenced garden out of fear of such a spirit. It is believed that anyone who attempts to steal anything from the Lepcha's garden will have his or her hand or even the entire body frozen. All kinds of food, grains, and vegetables accompanied by cheese are offered with prayer.

Dzongu, a Holy Land gifted by Nature

Dzongu is a triangular-shaped protected cultural landscape located in North Sikkim. It is bordered by forests, rivers, and mountains. The reflection of the pure indigenous culture of the Lepcha tribes can be experienced here. According to Lepcha legends, Dzongu is said to be the bridge to Mayel Lyang, a hidden Lepcha paradise, a place of origin of the Lepchas and where the departed soul returns. Dr. Pemu Tshering Lepcha has extensively explained the concept of Mayel Lyang in her recently published journal titled *The Hidden Ancestral Land of the Lepchas*. A.R. Foning, in his book *Lepcha My Vanishing Tribe*, says: "Jongu is of the same type as the Navajo Indian Reserve in the United States of America, or the like of the 'confine' of the aborigines of Australia, and other such areas elsewhere" (Foning, p.265). During the colonial era, this land was preserved and protected in order to uplift the economic condition of the Lepcha community, who were living in abject poverty due to their isolated nature. Nandini Bhattacharya-Panda referred to the place as a sanctuary, quoting other foreign writers like Geoffrey and Haifdan Siiger. (Bhattacharya-Panda, p. 11)

Tapan Chattopadhyay described Dzongu as Lepchaland, a traditional Lepcha village. (Chattopadhyay, p.21) As a protected reserve, outsiders do not dare to enter the area, and Lepchas living there hardly have to face any external influence. A great number of mountain stream running down from the snows to the rivers is found in plenty to keep the forest moisture-laden. Lepchas of Dzongu use bamboo as the main product in their day-to-day activities. Geoffrey Gorer remarks, “Far and away the most and single material for the Lepchas is the bamboo, or rather the numerous varieties of different bamboos they grow and recognize” (Gorer, p. 67). As Lepchas are skilled in bamboo crafts, they use bamboo in various day-to-day purposes like drawing water from the streams in place of a pipe, making floor mats, water carriers, as a roof, and mainly for making patyut, a bamboo jar for drinking millet beer with a bamboo straw. Village people use bamboo for making different musical instruments, hunting instruments, and also for making temporary sheds when they migrate temporarily towards the forest along with their cattle during the dry summer seasons.

Even in today’s modern times, Lepchas extensively depend on their mun and bongthing for common sicknesses like cold and cough, skin diseases, indigestion, etc. Modern medical facilities have yet to reach the poor Lepchas of the remote villages. (Roy, 2011). Lepchas’ traditional healing practices can be accounted for here from my own experience of a family incident. My father was bitten by a snake while he was hunting in the forest during the rainy season, probably in 1998. The snake had bitten him in three different places on his leg. However, instead of visiting a doctor, he insisted on herbal practice in which he himself was an expert. It took him more than a month to heal completely. This account reflects the indigenous healing knowledge among the Lepcha tribes and their deep connection with nature. A similar knowledge system is also possessed by the Lepchas of Sikkim. They use herbs to treat snakebite. In Dzongu, the government has put restrictions on rampant hunting, logging, and other activities which disturbs the harmony of nature. By maintaining the purity and serenity of Dzongu, Lepchas are still passing down knowledge about nature to the next generation and ultimately helping the community to live in nature in harmony.

Challenges in modern times

The notion of sacred land is a keystone in shaping and moulding the definition of the relationship between man and nature. When this relationship gets disturbed by external forces, reactions emerge as an instinct in the form of movement. The unplanned and ill-conceived development policies of the so-called liberal government forced the tribal communities to think that their livelihood, lifestyle, and identities are under a great threat. Muhammad Yasin, in his book *Politics, Society and Development*, says:

The basis of their cultural ethos, their system of meaning has faced the collective onslaught of the disruptive impact of models of economic development which have been conceived without their participation and implemented without their consent. (Yasin, p. 112)

Lepchas of Sikkim, Darjeeling and Kalimpong districts of West Bengal are not exempt from the adverse impact of the poorly planned and forceful development project. The indigenous Lepchas of these regions regard their land and the rivers Teesta and Rangeet as sacred and hold emotional, mythological beliefs attached to them. Lepchas of Darjeeling, and especially the Kalimpong region, observe several Rum Faat, i.e., offering prayers at the confluence of the Teesta and Rangeet rivers a few kilometers from the main town of Kalimpong. This place

is famously known as Tribeni by the locals. These rituals are deeply rooted in the Lepchas' religious belief in animism and have a profound connection with nature. These celebrations are part of the Lepcha cultural calendar, where they honor the environment, rivers, mountains, etc. However, over the years, the unplanned economic developments of both the state and central government without their consent have been an onslaught on their ecological sustenance. The areas once considered sacred and holy are now being continuously penetrated by outsiders in the name of development. The protest movement launched by the Lepchas is seen as a battle for the community and failed to draw the attention of other communities as a whole. Nandini Bhattacharya is of the opinion that Mayal Lyang is lost to the Lepcha people. The community must take a vow to protect rivers, mountains and lakes. (Bhattacharya-Panda, p.68)

The hydroelectric projects have mushroomed along the Teesta and Rangit rivers, making their flow difficult and subsequently compelling them to change course. Due to obstruction in their regular flow, these rivers express their wrath by bringing catastrophic floods almost every year, especially in the hill regions of Darjeeling-Kalimpong and the Jalpaiguri plains. (Das, 2023) The recent flash floods that hit hard in Sikkim and Kalimpong are the result of these hydroelectric power projects. The construction of these dams has extensively caused the loss of a number of species and impacted the ecological balance. For the Lepchas, the projects negatively impacted their socio-religious and cultural aspects. Lepchas of Sikkim, Darjeeling and Kalimpong launched a number of peaceful protests against the construction of these dams. The movement was started under the aegis of the Lepcha Movement. They raised their voice against the building of hydro projects and demanded to save the fragile topography of the regions. The Lepcha Movement against the projects gave birth to Affected Citizens of Tista, which raised the voice of the community in distress. They warned about the negative repercussions of these projects in the future in respect of both hill and plains people. As a result of this protest movement, the Government of Sikkim was compelled to stop the construction of four planned projects in the Dzongu region. To the Lepchas, Dzongu is a sacred land and an embodiment of their cultural and religious heritage. The loss of Dzongu means the disappearance of their rich cultural heritage deeply rooted in their ancestral connections. Dzongu is a Lepcha reserve with pure Lepcha culture without outside interference. In the case of project construction in Dzongu, a large number of workers from outside will flock to the region with different cultures, customs, and beliefs, which may endanger the pure Lepcha culture over time. Therefore, Lepchas of Sikkim, Darjeeling, and Kalimpong staged a protest movement to save their original culture from the influx of foreign culture and to balance their sacred ecology in the name of the Lepcha Movement.

The trend of modernization among the present youth generation of Lepcha society is proving detrimental with respect to environmental practices and sustainability. The hyper active western educated youth belonging to the present generation are least bothered about the preservation and continuation of the traditional system of maintaining a sacred relationship with nature. The impacts of urbanization, formal education, migration, and social media push the modern generation to different lifestyles, neglecting their original culture. As a result of this, traditional ecological knowledge once passed down through the generations is becoming weaker and struggling for its survival. However, there are many Lepcha youths who remain deeply concerned about protecting ecological entities like rivers, forests, sacred groves, and other significant cultural landscapes.

Conclusion

For any tribe, nature is the sole provider of the life support system. The close and intimate relation between nature and the tribe can be assessed from their traditional way of interaction to it. Lepchas can be considered pure botanists, zoologists, and environmentalists. Along with the use of nature, they also accommodate it. The intimate relation of the Lepcha community with nature can be proved from their intense knowledge of nature, such as plant cultivation, wild edible foods, fish poisoning, paper making, firewood for light production, hunting devices, etc. Lepchas are continuously voicing their demand to protect their land and to save their culture connected to nature from extinction. They have to be politically united and culturally conscious in order to sustain their rich tradition of human-nature relationship. The lackadaisical nature of the present generation of Lepchas has called into question their integrity regarding the preservation and continuation of their rich culture. Nevertheless, the inborn talent acquired by the Lepchas in maintaining their relationship with ecology is a very significant lesson one has to learn from them. The policymakers must follow an inclusive developmental policy while framing the policy so that one's sustained culture is not compromised.

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