

Cultural and Linguistic Heritage of the Lepcha Community in West Bengal: Folk Traditions, Literature, and Contemporary Initiatives

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Community Background:

The Lepcha tribe is one of the indigenous ethnic groups of West Bengal, characterized by their unique culture, language, costume, and traditional folklores. The majority of the Lepchas reside in the hill districts of the Darjeeling, Kurseong, and Kalimpong regions. Available

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historical records say that the Lepchas were the earliest settlers of the hills of West Bengal, inhabiting the region before the arrival of the other ethnic groups. From Sikkim to Siliguri, no other ethnic groups resided within this region before the Lepchas, as reflected by the available records. At the present, it is estimated that 80 percent of the Lepchas stay within the Kalimpong area, with 20 percent within the vicinity of the Darjeeling region.

Many Gazetteers of West Bengal support the fact that during the time of British entry into the hill areas, the Lepcha community was the only aboriginal community inhabiting these regions. This historical presence of the people is further supported by the naming of the local flora, fauna, and a number of geographical regions derived from the Lepcha language. Traditionally, the Lepchas are nature worshippers and like to live in proximity to natural environments, particularly in forested village areas. They have kept

themselves away from modern industrialization and urban civilization, leading a life deeply rooted in nature.

The people are very reliant on natural resources and have a belief that forests and nature contain all necessary means for their sustenance. The Lepchas have very rich knowledge of plant-based medicine. The Lepchas are very famous for their calm nature. They are very proud of their moral character of their language; their language does not contain words that may be intended for offending people. For that reason, their language is always termed *Rong Aaring*, which means 'Divine Language'.

Language and Script:

The Lepcha tribe speaks an ancient language called *Rong Ring*. Today, it is collectively called the Lepcha language. The writing script of Lepcha is called *Rong Aming* and *Rong Chyoming*. They symbolically represent

“male” and “female” notions respectively. However, over time, the use of the Lepcha script has been gradually declining due to the increasing influence of dominant regional and national languages. Moreover, it is an issue of grave concern that today there are no government schools in West Bengal where Lepcha language is taught. Consequently, although Lepchas speak *Rong Ring* in their own social setup, they are forced to speak Nepali whenever they interact with people of different tribes, particularly Nepalis. There are many settlers of Nepali origin in Lepcha-inhabited areas.

Geographical Distribution:

Geographically, the Lepcha community is mainly dispersed across Darjeeling, Kurseong, and Kalimpong districts, with the largest number being from Kalimpong. In addition to Kalimpong town, Lepchas inhabit various villages around it, such as Tasiding, Nase, Tarzong,

Bong Batta, Dongra, Sang Se, Pudung, Loleh, Kongki Bong, Nimbong, Git Beyong, Nim, Mang Zin, Long Shyol, TodeyTangta, Lingsay–Lingsekha, and Kasyam. In the Darjeeling area, Lepcha villages fall within Mane Bhanjan, SukhiaPokhri, Kulung Dung, Rimbik, Takdah, TaklingSingritam, Karmi, while a small number dwell within the Darjeeling town itself. In the Kurseong subdivision, Lepcha people fall within Sittong I, II, and III.

Oral Traditions:

Folk Song:

The Lepcha people have a very rich and varied repertoire of folk songs associated with different aspects of their socio-economic and spiritual lives. These songs are in the genre of wedding, harvesting, grass cutting, ritual praying, and fishing. Folk music occupies the pride of place in the Lepcha cultural expression and is

conventionally performed with indigenous musical instruments.

Prominent among them are the *Pongtong Palit* or flute, which is widely used in ritual prayer songs and other forms of music too; *Tung Buk* is more appropriately known as the Lepcha guitar; *Tungdar* or the drum; *Po Potek* is a percussion instrument made of bamboo; *Suthsang* is a lot like a Lepcha violin; and *Bom Puthit* is made of bamboo and is supposed to mimic the sounds of birds. It is these instruments altogether that give Lepcha folk its characteristic musical identity.

Major genres of Lepcha folk songs may be classified as follows:

- A) Numkyo Bree:** The Numkyo Bree songs are traditional songs in the Lepcha community, sung during the wedding ceremony in a bid to grant the newlywed couple a smooth and prosperous marital

relationship. The songs that come under Numkyo Bree, in the traditional setting, were sung in a way that they do not require any musical accompaniment; however, of late, musical instruments of the traditional Lepcha communities have come into play in an effort to adapt the traditional practice.

B) Jo Maal: Jo Maal is one of the typical Lepcha agricultural folk songs, which are sung while ploughing paddy fields, mainly dry ones. It takes place in the month of May and June. These songs are sung collectively by both men and women during their agricultural activities that will help to dissipate physical tiredness and maintain rhythm and coordination while working in the field. Traditionally, Jo Maal is sung without instruments in

the open field; nowadays, it has also performed on the stage during cultural programs, and traditional musical instruments are used for it.

C) Religious: Nature-worshipping tribes like the Lepcha have various folk songs of a religious nature, which are full of reverence towards nature or nature symbols. Such folk songs are a significant genre of folk music of the Lepcha, being closely associated with rituals and seasons. There are various types of religious folk songs, which are as follows:

1. **Chyoo Rum Faat:** The songs are showcased as an act of worship and reverence for the mountain, Kanchenjunga, which is a greatly revered spiritual center in the Lepcha faith. The natives feel that there is an invisible spiritual or dreamland referred to as *Nimaayel Kyoung* inside

the Kanchenjunga from where all the Lepcha songs have originated. It is celebrated in the month of November as an act of gratitude to the mountain deity through the performance of the 'Chyoo Rum Faat'.

2. **Muk Zik Ding:** This genre of songs is sung by the Lepcha people in worship of Mother Nature. These are the songs performed in the months of February and March and happen to reflect the Lepcha worldview of harmony between man and the natural environment.
3. **Layng Rum Faat:** These songs are associated with the adoration of Mother Earth or the ancestral land. Generally, Layng Rum Faat is observed during April and May of each year, as it coincides with agricultural cycles and seasonal transitions.

4. **Tungrong Rum Faat:** This genre consists of songs in praise and worship of Tendong Hill, which is associated with a mythological story among the Lepcha community about a flood that occurred due to the Teesta and Rangeet rivers. The ritual ceremony takes place in the month of January to remember divine protection and survival.
5. **Sakyoo Rum Faat:** These songs are devoted to the worship of the Himalayan range and are performed in the month of November, emphasizing the spiritual importance of the mountains in Lepcha cosmology.

In the Lepcha religious vocabulary, the name *Rum* represents ‘God’, and *Faat* is identified as ‘Offering’.

- D) **Naamaal Naambun Naamsung:** This genre of music encompasses those associated with

NaamaalNaambunNaamsung, which are New Year celebrations among the Lepcha tribe. NaambunNaamsung is celebrated within the month of December, though it differs depending on when its *tithi* actually falls, that is, whether it is early, in the middle, or towards the latter part of December. This genre of music is significant in creating awareness of transition as well as functioning as a social glue among the inhabitants of the Lepcha tribe.

E) Apraya Vom: AprayaVom is the practice of composing songs spontaneously for any given topic or situation. As far as the Lepcha nomenclature is concerned, *Vam* is ‘song.’ For example, composing songs at any given time and place such as ceremonies, weddings, and religious functions (*puja*) can be denoted as *Lee Aapraya Vam*, as *Lee* means ‘house,’ (songs composed during housewarming ceremonies),

Bree Aapraya Vam for songs written during the wedding ceremony, as *Bree* means ‘wedding’.

A distinctive feature of *Aapraya Vam* is that it is performed without instrumental accompaniment and is composed and transmitted orally rather than in written form. It is an example of how the creative abilities of the Lepcha community in terms of improvisation are recognized and how oral transmission is valued in the preservation and passing on of their music and language.

F) Reyon Ong Beyop: These are traditional Lepcha fishing songs sung while working at fishing, using a fishing net. These songs are sung in a group while fishing together and also function as a cultural practice for coordinating labor or strengthening social bonding. Being part of the folk tradition, *Reyon Ong Beyop* reflects upon the special rapport between the Lepcha

community and the natural environment, especially rivers and the aquatic resources within them.

- G) Lenchyovom:** Lenchyovom is a traditional Lepcha genre of songs related to love, expressing feelings and relations between people within the community. These songs are an integral part of the Lepcha oral tradition and are performed without instrumental accompaniment.
- H) Beeknak Vom:** These are songs that are sung during grazing and can be sung by men as well as women. They are songs that do not relate to any particular time and can be sung at any time during the year.
- I) Ong Chyok Vom:** Ong ChyokVom are songs which are normally sung while drawing water in bamboo vessels. These are normally sung by women but are not associated with a specific season. They are part of the routine labor songs.

- J) Byok Teoit Vom:** This consists of cutting songs that are sung while taking part in the process of cutting grass. The songs play a role in coordinating actions and keeping a rhythmic connection with farming.
- K) Jo Dyang Vom:** Jo Dyang Vom is the name given to the songs sung during the harvesting of rice. These songs help to coordinate the harvesting of rice, thus emphasizing the strong link between the Lepchas and the natural resources they utilize.
- L) Chyaapmong Fo Vom:** Chyaapmong Fo Vom is a traditional folk song sung by the Lepcha community. This folk song revolves around the theme of a river bird. The song is derived from a story or a tale that is very much known to the community of Lepchas.

Folk Tale:

Apart from the rich tradition of the Lepcha folk songs, the community has a rich tradition of folk tales. Some of these folk tales are **SuthongTkruk** (The Tiger and the Toad), **Ryot Kup Sung** (The Tale of an Orphan), and **Rolong Mung An Kundung Put** (The Tale of a Ghost). So far, over 25 Lepcha folk tales have been documented. In addition to this, numerous others are currently being recorded and preserved. The stories are very important to the community because they can be considered part of the oral literary tradition.

Print and Media Presence:

The Lepcha community in the state of West Bengal has made significant contributions to literary preservation through a number of magazines and literary works. Some of the magazines include a quarterly magazine called *Achuley*, while others include *Panu*

GaybooAchyok, *Aathing K. P. Tamsang*, *Thikung G. B. General Manwaring*, which come out on a yearly basis. All these magazines appear to be bilingual in nature; that is, they appear in both English and Lepcha. In regard to literary preservation through written form, a number of poetry books or storybooks have been produced in the Lepcha language, reflecting a sustained effort to document and transmit their cultural heritage through written media.

Notable Scholars and Writers:

There have been a number of distinguished scholars and writers who have played a crucial role in preserving and promoting the culture of the Lepcha people of West Bengal. They include K. P. Tamsang, Dr. B. C. Roy, G. B. General Manwaring, Dr. R. K. Sprig, L. S. Tamsang, A. K. Fonning, and Patrick Sada. All these scholars and writers have played a very crucial role in recording the

language, stories passed from one generation to another, folk literature, and practices of the Lepcha people.

Preservation Efforts:

The Lepcha community has developed a tradition of **Night Schools** wherein senior members of society impart their knowledge to young generations regarding Lepcha language, script, culture, and oral traditions. This is not just done in educational institutions; in fact, it continues in many households as well, wherein elders pass their language and culture to young ones. At present, there are around 40 Night Schools functioning in some corner of Darjeeling and Kalimpong. This tendency was prevalent right from the inception of the Lepcha settlement in small group settings of these regions.

Although there are no schools in West Bengal at which Lepcha language is currently taught officially,

recent developments have been undertaken since 2025 by Lepcha language and culture experts to educate the young generation in some areas of Gorkhaland Territorial Administration (GTA). The Lepcha community hopes that these initiatives would bring positive results, but they are finding it difficult due to some constraints, especially in terms of funding, as these are currently self-supported initiatives. In fact, while there is support from the state government in terms of an entity such as the *West Bengal Mayel Lyang Lepcha Development Board* to ensure Lepcha welfare, it is believed that it requires more efficient and dedicated members to undertake initiatives like maintenance of Lepcha language and culture.

Recognition and Future:

In order to receive greater recognition and support in West Bengal among the Lepcha community, an apparent

requirement is to create awareness among other communities about the culture and heritage of the Lepcha people. Creating awareness among the other communities will help in developing a joint approach to ensure support for all efforts toward maintaining the linguistic and traditional identity among the Lepcha community in West Bengal.

*Based on a personal interview with Abhik Sarkar,
conducted on 14 Jan. 2026 in Kolkata.*