

Indigenous Knowledge of Food Habits Reflecting the Cultural Identity of the Lepchas in Sikkim

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Abstract

Indigenous knowledge is regarded as the knowledge and art of the indigenous communities who have preserved their skills, art, techniques etc. and shared among themselves orally and through demonstration. Likewise, the indigenous knowledge of the food habits of the Lepchas resembles a unique trait of identity among the Lepchas in Sikkim. The Lepchas share indigenous knowledge of collecting and identifying wild edible products. Also, the Lepchas consumed food by hunting wild animals and preparing 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 Lepchas. As they were known to be primitive in nature, the gradual shift from consuming wild edible products to cooked food whether collected from the forests or through cultivation (slash and burning cultivation) is seen as natural which reflects their cultural identity in a society. The indigenous knowledge remains unchanged but the food habits of the Lepchas have gradually changed with the process of modernisation. However, the indigenous knowledge of food habits reflects the cultural identity of the Lepchas however the situation and the era of modernisation and globalisation, there is no change in the fact that *khurikhu* and *mong khu* is

categorised as the indigenous food of the Lepchas which marks the culture and tradition of the Lepchas in Sikkim.

Keywords: Lepchas, indigenous, food habits, nature, culture, identity.

Introduction

Over the years, different studies have been conducted on the Indigenous Knowledge of the Indigenous communities of the world. The important area of study lies in the indigenous knowledge of food habits with the nutritional and medicinal value of the foods prepared and consumed by them. Food has been an inseparable part of human culture and there are diverse food habits among different communities in different parts of the world.¹ Indigenous people of North East India are known to have a unique trait of origin and history. It is often known that there is a cultural connection among different tribes in North East India through the food system. Likewise, the Lepchas have their own story and myth associated with their origin. On the other hand, knowledge is studied in a socio-cultural practice passed down through generations and is known to represent the identity of the indigenous Lepchas of Sikkim. Similarly, the indigenous knowledge of food habits is constructed socially and represents the cultural identity of the Lepchas. Thus, the indigeneity of the Lepchas in food habits shares the value and culture of their social group. The indigenous food habits have changed among the Lepchas over time. With the growing population and presence of different communities in Sikkim during the early seventeenth century, the production and consumption of indigenous food habits changed but the indigenous knowledge remains the same as passed down orally, Lepchas residing in remote rural areas carry on with the practices of consuming the indigenous food which is gathered from the wild forests. Moreover, the indigenous food habits reflect the cultural identity of the Lepchas even though the food habits have changed continuously with the change in their lifestyles but the indigenous knowledge of food habits

among the Lepchas remains unchanged. With the understanding of food as a cultural identity, the paper will reflect the indigenous knowledge of the food habits of the Lepchas in Sikkim.

About the Lepchas in Sikkim

The Lepchas inhabit all regions of Sikkim covering 10 to 14 per cent of the total population in Sikkim which is one of the North Eastern States of India. Sikkim is a Himalayan region covering an area of a total of 7,096 sq.km. Historically, Sikkim was ruled by the Namgyal Monarchical rule from 1642-1975. Presently, the Lepchas are categorised as Schedule Tribes under the Indian Constitution and hold the Primitive Tribe Status in the state recognized in the year 2006 which draws many provisions for the Lepchas in Sikkim. Historically, the Lepchas are known as the original inhabitants of Sikkim and through folklore and oral history, the Lepchas are said to be created by the Mother Creator, *ItbuDebu Rum* and were sent to *MayelLyang* under the Guardianship of Mount Kanchendzonga whom they worship as their Guardian Deity. The Lepchas call themselves *Rongs/Rongkup/Rumkup* and were later known as *Lapchay* by the Nepalese settlers which meant a pejorative speaker as the dialect and the language they spoke was Rong language and they were not clear in speaking the Nepali language. The Nepali term, '*Lapchay*' was again anglicized with the term, '*Lepcha*'. Many European writers who visited the Himalayan region of Sikkim have given their theories of their origin mostly based on their physical appearance. However, the Lepchas are considered the indigenous people of India as they are known to be nature worshippers and have connectivity with nature. For them, nature is everything be it food, shelter, medicine etc. Such indigenous people still do reside in rural areas of Sikkim mostly in Dzongu, North Sikkim and making it an important point, Dzongu is a region preserved only for the Lepchas since the year 1958 with the Royal Proclamation of the Chogyal. The Lepchas of Dzongu are known to follow and practice the same indigenous lifestyle even though modernisation has

affected society. With the acceptance of the rapid process of modernisation, the Lepchas do possess huge indigenous knowledge on various areas and one of the important areas is the indigenous food habits in the Lepcha society.

Indigenous Knowledge of Food Habits Reflecting Cultural Identity of the Lepchas

Indigenous Knowledge refers to the local traditional knowledge shared among any indigenous communities of the world and is known to be evolutionary in nature. In the case of the Lepchas, Indigenous Knowledge is the primitive knowledge passed down from their ancestors orally and through demonstration. They are known to have indigenous knowledge of collecting edible wild products and incorporating them into food habits. It has been noted that the food of the Lepchas is known to be plain and simple, consisting chiefly of rice, yams of several moist and delicate species, and roots, which on high occasions consisted of meat of fowl, a kid or pig.ⁱⁱ Food habits mainly refer to the adapted behaviour and pattern of consumption of food prepared which is influenced by the environment. However, the Lepchas when asked about their food habits, are known to have indigenous knowledge of consuming wild products from the forests either edible fruits or roots or by hunting wild animals. They knew wild products, which are collected during a particular season and preserved for the near future. The Lepchas find various things to eat in the forests in the shape of fruits, leaves, piths of stems, roots and flower buds. They also consume a different variety of fungi which are often categorised as enormous mushrooms and often known that when they are mistaken in collecting and consuming, the whole family gets poisoned.ⁱⁱⁱ The unique feature of the indigenous knowledge of food habits was the knowledge of collecting wild roots and leaves for medicinal purposes and also the techniques of hunting wild animals and preparing food out of it for the family and the entire unit. The indigenous knowledge of the food habits of the Lepchas is mainly the availability of wild foods in the forests and the patience in collecting it

and further processing it to make proper edible food, which is nutritious. The indigenous food habits of the Lepchas also include hunting techniques to hunt the wild and preparing a portion of food for the family. The wild foods include wild *dor bee*, *tuntok bee*, *ru dong*, *purfek bee*, *suhrong bee*, etc.

Dor bee is considered a type of fungi which is found in the stem of *Castanopsis* commonly known as *chinquapin*. It is known by the name *kattusey cheow* in Nepali. *Dor bee* is categorised under the family of mushrooms but it is wild in nature and is found rarely during the rainy season. The Lepchas believe that enormous and wild *dor bee* evolves when thundering occurs at night and in the early dawn, they visit the nearby field or forest to collect *dor bee*. It is often practised that one should not make noise when going to collect *dor bee*, or else it will disappear. The *Tuntok bee* (*diplazium esculentum*) is a wild fern collected from the forest which has different shapes and sizes. It occurs during the monsoon season from the month of May till July. Some *tuntok bee* known as *niyuro* (Nepali term) and fiddlehead (English term) tastes bitter so the Lepchas prefer to boil and cook to remove the bitter taste. *Ru dong* is mainly the cane shoots similar to bamboo shoots but *ru dong* is bitter in taste and turns brownish in colour while cutting which is why it is soaked in water to keep its original colour. *Purfek bee* known as *Tupista Nutans* scientifically is a wildflower which is seen during the end month of July till September. It is bitter in taste and the Lepchas normally prefer consuming the original taste. *Suhrong bee* (*Urtica dioica*) also known as *Sisnu* (Nepali term) is a nettle leaf collected from nearby forests and is prepared by the Lepchas during important occasions. All the wild foods collected from the forests have their medicinal value with Vitamins present and are used to cure many illnesses like joint pain, High Blood Pressure etc. All these wild foods are collected from the nearby forests and are prepared to be cooked and consumed by the Lepchas. Moreover, these wild foods in terms of cooking are categorised within the collection of raw-to-cook food with a process marking the

transformation of raw to cooked food within the aspect of culture as it incorporates indigenous knowledge of the Lepchas. Such transformation of wild foods is known in terms of culture and nature which helps in understanding how the knowledge of food and sense of taste are passed down from the ancestors among the Lepchas and the practice of cooking evolved in their society. Moreover, the Lepchas were not familiar with agriculture, but historically they started to practice slash-and-burn cultivation with the slow adaptation to the new livelihood and started growing crops, which was later, replaced by terrace farming.^{iv} As the Lepchas moved from one place to another dwelling in the forests, they used a piece of forest land to make their resting place and land to cultivate. Slash and burn cultivation was practised in regions of Dzungu where the field was left barren for a long time. The land was used to cultivate different edible seeds of Quinoa, finger millet also known as Ragi and other indigenous millets were cultivated along with yams known as *singti*.^v However, the knowledge of cultivating other crops like maize, beans, barley, wheat etc. among the Lepchas was known to be shared by the Tibetan traders and their presence in Sikkim since the seventeenth century and due to the lack of written records, such reference is shared orally by the Lepchas who have the knowledge passed on by their ancestors.^{vi} It was during the early nineteenth century, Nepali immigrants brought with them the culture of terrace farming in Sikkim and the Lepchas gradually adapted to the modern ways of collecting and consuming food. Far and away the greatest part of their lives was centred around getting food indigenously and gradually became uneventful and nearly received far less attention than it deserved with the changing time and with the influences of other communities residing in Sikkim, they were introduced to the edible qualities of the crops like maize, rice, pulses etc. For the Lepchas and almost all primitive people, by far the most important subject in their lives became food since they started practising agriculture, subsiding hunting, which became a recreational activity.

However, it has been known that the indigenous foods of the Lepchas are *khurikhu*, and *mong khu*^{vii} prepared along with green leafy vegetables known as *kunsel bee* and butter which are made in the form of rolled chapati also known by the name buckwheat, mainly a product of millet. *Khurikhu* is referred to as buckwheat in most of the Northeast region where there are major tribal settlements. *Khurikhu* also known as *phaphar ko roti* in the Nepali language is common in Sikkim but the indigeneity of the food they prepared delivers their ethnicity in Sikkim. On the other hand, *mong khu*, known as *kodo ko roti* (Nepali term) is prepared in the same way as *Khurikhu* but the only difference is the product as it is prepared from millet powder. The indigenous food habits including *khurikhu* and *mong khu* mark the indigenous way of preparing food which has nutritious value prepared along with the green leafy vegetable which can be found in the forests, known as *kunshel bee* to add more nutrition. In regards to the Indigenous food habits, the Lepchas have always categorised themselves as having a bond with nature and the forest provided them with everything including the knowledge of edible and non-edible plants. The identification of *khurikhu* and *mong khu* as indigenous food marks the cultural identity of the Lepchas in Sikkim as for them both culture and nature exist together in which the raw collected food is found in the forests(natural) or either cultivated. Likewise, *khurikhu* and *mong khu* which are cooked and prepared has the shared indigenous knowledge of the Lepchas where the products like millet, buckwheat and *kunshel bee* are either cultivated or collected from the wild at first, then it is prepared as food. Such identification of wild food from nature requires knowledge and such indigenous knowledge in categorising edible and non-edible food was a unique trait of the Lepchas. Some of the foods collected from the wild have cultural and historical significance based on the process of preparation as it is known since time immemorial with its taste and nutritional value. For instance, wild yam is collected from the forests and is kept in the flowing stream for one night so that the poison(if any) could be washed away before consuming it. Also, the

Lepchas perform a ritual before digging up the wild yam so that the indigenous way of collecting the yam is fruitful and also seek permission from the deities present in the forests. Some wild foods are stored for consumption after drying in the sun like *dor bee*, *purfek bee*, *purfek dong* etc. Such indigenous food habits of the Lepchas are culturally constructed and have their taste, memory and feelings reflecting their cultural identity. To the Lepchas, of all festivals, *TendongHlo Rum Faat* and *Namsoong* are the most significant as it mark the celebration of new life and new year which offers homage and harvest to the Mother Creator, *ItbuDeu Rum*. The festivals offer sacrifices to God with different indigenous food prepared for the Mother Creator associated with Culture, Nature and Food. The context of festivals related to food habits has its connection between nature and food, transforming into culture and reflecting the cultural identity of the Lepchas in Sikkim. Indigenous Knowledge of food habits is passed down from generation orally or through demonstration with the physical activity of collection from the forests or through cultivation. Nature provided almost everything to them and their ancestors survived through indigenous knowledge such as hunting and gathering, foraging etc. for food marks the relation between nature culture and food.

Conclusion

Food is not only about consumption but it is more than resembling the true identity of a community. Similarly, the indigenous food habits of the Lepchas which are known to be primitive have transformed gradually adopting modern ways of consuming food. However, the indigenous knowledge remains unchanged as the Lepchas share the knowledge among them and still practice the indigenous collection of wild products in most of the rural regions of Sikkim, especially Dzongu. The indigenous food habits of the Lepchas include knowledge and cultural identity in a society and if the essence of indigenous food habits is lost then it is

seen as the biggest threat of losing its identity. The loss is much visible with the process of modernisation and globalisation of the food culture of the Lepchas which has brought changes not only in food habits but also in the relationship between the indigenous Lepchas and the environment which is why there is a need to preserve the indigenous knowledge which has become a global need. Today the indigenous food habits of the Lepchas are associated with culture and it is prepared and consumed during special occasions and festivals. Whatever the notion of food habits but there is no denying fact that *khurikhu* and *mongkhu* represents a distinct cultural identity of the Lepchas in present and has shaped an indigenous knowledge of sharing and consuming nutritious food in society.



Pic 1.1 *Tuntok bee*(*diplazium esculentum*) and Pic 1.2 *Ru dong bee*.



Pic. 1.3 *khuri khu* and Pic 1.4 wild edible mushroom.



Pic. 1.4. edible *suhrong bee*(*Urtica dioica*) (stingy nettle plant).

ⁱ Singh, A.B and Teron, R. (2017). Ethnic Food Habits of the Angami Nagas of Nagaland State, India, International Food Research Journal, 24(3). p.1061.

ⁱⁱ Fred Pinn. (1986) '*The Roads of Destiny*' Darjeeling Letters 1839. Oxford University Press. Calcutta. p.83.

ⁱⁱⁱ HH Risley. (1894). '*The Gazetteer of Sikkim*'. Bengal Secretariat Press. Calcutta. p.93.

^{iv} *Tinvong: A Lepcha Village in Sikkim*. Sikkim Ritual Video Archive Project, Namgyal Institute of Technology. Gangtok. 2005.

^v Interviewed Mr. Tshering Gyatso Lepcha, an Organic and Progressive Millet Grower, Dzongu.

^{vi} Oral Narration/ Interviewed Mrs. Sambret Lepcha, 83 years old, Nung, Tinvong, Dzongu.

^{vii} A Indigenous Cuisine of the Lepchas, similar to chapati or bread made out of millet powder and buckwheat.