
Traditional Wisdom and Practices Involved in Bamboo Based Crafts of the Lepcha Community of North Sikkim - A Case Study from Dzongu Reserve Area

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Abstract: *The tribal crafts of India are ethnic and simple and yet colorful and vibrant. Bamboo is, perhaps, the most widely used material for tribal and folk craft. From times immemorial, bamboo has been an integral part of the lives of people in India. The Indian artisans are dexterous in creating bamboo crafts. In India, the concentration of bamboo varies from state to state depending on ecology and landscapes. The North-Eastern part of the country accounts for over 65% of the country's total bamboo resources. The vigorous bamboo craft tradition of this region gets the most creative expression through the craftsmanship of the various tribal communities. The spectacular variety and diverse range of bamboo crafts clearly exhibit the skill of the artisans. In this region, the traditional craftsmanship is perhaps the most tangible manifestation of intangible cultural heritage. Lepcha community of Sikkim has a rich cultural heritage of art and crafts. Bamboo is an indispensable part of their livelihood mostly in the form of food, shelter, household item, medicine, furniture, and ethno-religious purpose. This craft form is an integral part of the Lepcha society. The art of bamboo weaving is primarily the domain of the male folk among the Lepchas. The craftsmen design excellent patterns on the bamboo baskets which bear relic to the unique artistic skills of the artisans. This knowledge system is transmitted from older to younger generations through the intangible way. The present paper, based on empirical findings from Dzongu Reserve Area will probe into the cultural values associated with bamboo in Lepcha society. The paper will also discuss the traditional knowledge system and skill with respect to bamboo craft among the Lepchas. The paper also focuses on the present status of this craftwork.*

Keywords: Bamboo Craft, Cultural Heritage, Endangered Craft, Lepcha, North Sikkim, Dzongu Reserve Area, Traditional Knowledge System

Introduction

India has been greatly blessed by having a many-layered culturally diverse rich heritage of craft skills embedded through the ebb and flow of historical events that rest upon social practices and religious belief. Folk arts and crafts are an integral part of life in India, despite rapid social and technological changes taken place (Jaitly, 2012). Crafts and handicrafts have long being a part of India's history, and also provide a means of employment for many people. The diversity of cultures throughout India means that

there are many different crafts; each one of them is distinctive and unique. The crafts of India have their rural roots. They have originated and evolved from rural India. The rural crafts of India are the crafts of the settled villages and countryside where people's life tuned with the rhythm of nature and its laws of cyclical change. In the rural sector craft was the product of the needs of the rural folks. In this sector, the craft is the art of fair and festival, songs and performances related to harvesting, ancient migrations due to various reasons, memories of events, etc. here craft is art involved with household and fertility rituals (Jayakar, 1989).

The rural craft of India is the visual expression and technological processes of people living at several cultural, religious and sociological levels (Karolia and Sardiwai, 2014). Crafts based on archaic technological processes and skills created by artisan communities to fulfill the functional needs of village societies; processes that, until recently, had remained static for over two thousand years. India has the largest concentration of tribal people anywhere in the world except perhaps in Africa. The tribal people are the son of Indian soil. They are the children of nature and their lifestyle is conditioned by the ecosystem. India with a variety of ecosystem presents a varied tribal population throughout the length and breadth (Nithya, 2014). The tribal arts and crafts of India are very ethnic and simple and yet colorful and vibrant enough to speak volumes about the country's rich heritage (Sharma, 2015). Folk art in India apparently has great potential in abroad also. The tribal handicrafts are the production of specialized skills that are passed on from one generation to another and somewhere these handicrafts are need-based and somewhere they are the means of livelihood of the craftsmen (Planning Commission Report, 2006). Bamboo, one of the precious plant resources of the earth, plays a cardinal role in influencing the pattern of civilized life in Southern and Eastern Asian countries, where they found abundance (Ram Mohan and Tandon, 1997). Bamboo has a long history in people's lives as cultural material. India is the second richest country in the bamboo generic resources following China, ranking fast in this aspect. In India, bamboo is one of the most important forest species and has a wide distribution throughout the country and has a major contribution to the rural economy (Raizada et al., 2002). Bamboo in India is represented by 125 species belonging to 23 genera (Tewari, 1992).

In the tribal belts of India, bamboo is one of the most common and important natural items which is easily available at the local level. From times immemorial down to the present day, bamboo has been an integral part of the lives of people in India. Bamboo is a well-known plant to Indians since epic era. Lord Krishna is associated with bamboo. His flute was made of bamboo. The introduction to Mahabharata mentions about groves of bamboo. It is said that the Buddhist monks who went to Japan from India to propagate Buddhism have carried the seeds of bamboo with them (Ghosh, 2014). This account suggests that bamboos were serving many purposes in those days and that it was a necessary part of the life of the people. Bamboo crafts in India are very popular due to its eco-friendly attributes. Since ancient times, bamboo crafts had been occupying a significant position as India produces a huge amount of bamboo and

cane. The bamboo craft is associated with the cane, and had been a part of Indian crafts giving rise to the expression of tribal art and provided them a livelihood. It has been the friend of most of the tribal craftsmen. As a friendly 'wood' that offers itself to a range of uses from making houses, fences, and boats to tea strainers, fishing traps and various types of baskets. Strips of bamboo are used by artisans in almost every state of the country for making basketry. It has been observed that in India Mongoloid people are largely involved with bamboo crafts. They are specialized and mainly inhabited in the North-Eastern part of our country where they can access a large range of bamboo forests. The states of this region are inhabited by over sixty major tribal populations belonging to different groups. Inaccessibility to the areas in earlier days had influenced and preserved their lifestyle and creativity which are reflected in the tremendous diversity in material culture. In this region, bamboo forms one of the important subsistence resources of tribal folk to a greater extent. Tribal communities of this area are masters in the skillful tradition of bamboo craft.

Material and Method

Amidst, the endless bounty of nature in the Eastern Himalayas lays Sikkim. It is the 22nd state of the Indian Union which located in the southern mountain range of the Eastern Himalayas between northern latitudes 27°04'55" to 28°07'45" N latitude and 88°00'45" to 88° 35'15" E longitudes. It is spread between the world's third-highest mountains Khanchendzonga (8585 m), which is revered by the Sikkimese as their protective deity. Sikkim is separated by the *Singali la* range from Nepal in the west, *Cho la* range from Tibet in the north-east and the Bhutan in the south-west, Rangit and Rangpo Rivers from the borders with the Indian state of West Bengal. The geographical area of the state is 7096 sq. Km. (District Gazetteer of Sikkim, 2013). Sikkim state has four districts that are named according to their regional location and they are the- 1. North District, 2. West District, 3. South District and 4. East District. These districts are further divided into smaller administrative divisions as subdivisions Sikkim represents diverse habitats and has high variation in altitude and climate. It is bestowed with high biodiversity wealth harboring around 40% of its components that occur in the Indian subcontinent. The lower mountain slopes of the area are suitable for bamboo. In this area, different varieties of bamboo are available including the cane. From the time immemorial Sikkim is inhabited by the Lepcha community. They belong to Tibeto – Burman race living on the southern and eastern slopes of Mount Kanchendzonga. They called themselves *Rongkup* or *Mutanchi Rangkup* which translates as a mother's loved one.

Lepchas are also known as *Mongpa* by the Tibetans while the Bhutanese call them *Maris*. For the long Dzongu Reserve area of North Sikkim District has been the homeland of them. The Lepcha community is considered the original inhabitants of this land. According to the Lepcha people, the very name Lepcha with which they are now identified is not the original name of the community. It was the British people who used to call them as Lepcha. In their usage, *Lapcho* means the holy space on their wayside from where they can pay their homage to their deity Khangchendzonga. The

present study had been carried out among the Lepcha community in the Dzongu Reserve of North Sikkim district. It is located about 15 km towards the south from the district headquarter, Mangan. Six villages have been selected for the study. These villages are situated at different altitudes. The Dzongu Reserve is bounded to the south-east by Teesta river and north-east by Rongyang chu (river) and to the west by rising mountain leading to Khangchendzonga, the house of five treasures *Kingtsoom Zaongboo Choo*, Lepcha name for Mt. Khangchendzonga (3rd highest mountain in the world) meaning 'bright auspicious forehead peak' that borders the Khangchendzonga Biosphere Reserve (KBR) at north. The KBR was officially notified in the year 2000, covering 2, 61,992 hectares area; the Dzongu valley people have a traditional association with the reserve for their resources and religious affinity, and currently promoted eco-tourism by the state government.

A fairly triangular-shaped Dzongu landscape covers approximately 78 km² geographical areas extending between 27°28' – 27°38' N latitude and 88°23' – 88°38' E longitude along the 700 MSL to 6000 MSL altitude. Dzongu further extends from Sheep-Gyer in the east to Sakyong-Pentong village in the west and Kishong Cho Lake in north to Lum village in the south (Bhasin, 2011). The land used for habitation and farming by the Lepchas is located on a relatively narrow strip above the two rivers, between 1000 mt. and 2300 mt. above sea level. According to the 2011 Census, the Lepcha Reserve of Dzongu in North Sikkim has a population of 9299 heads, with 4856 males and 4,452 females in an area of 15, 845, 95 hectares. The reserve also houses a shifting (or floating) population of migratory Nepali laborers who came here drawn to the lucrative cardamom trade. The locals segregate the reserve into upper and lower Dzongu. This separation is not so much of the altitude of the habitations but on the basis of the location of the sections situated on either bank of a tributary of the Teesta named Rongyong that flows through the area.

Intensive fieldwork was carried out in the villages of Dzongu Reserve Area to study and data collection during 2019 (Figure 1). The fieldwork had been conducted in six different villages of the Dzongu Reserve area of North Sikkim. The question of sampling does not arise since all the households in those six villages were covered. During study standard anthropological methods have been used for data collection such as questionnaire method, interview method, case study method, observation method, informal conversations along with photographic documentation. Interviews were conducted at three levels: individual level, group discussion and thorough discussion with the villagers. Information was collected from all aspects of bamboo crafts of Lepcha community. Key informants helped enormously to gain an insight of the Lepcha tradition and their belief system as well as to understand the causes and implication of the changing social scenario. Visual as well as audio- visual documentation has been done to document the intangible skills of bamboo basketry of Lepchas. During fieldwork, identification of bamboo species and bamboo- based objects use by Lepchas had been done with the help of villages and the local craftsmen of the studied villages.

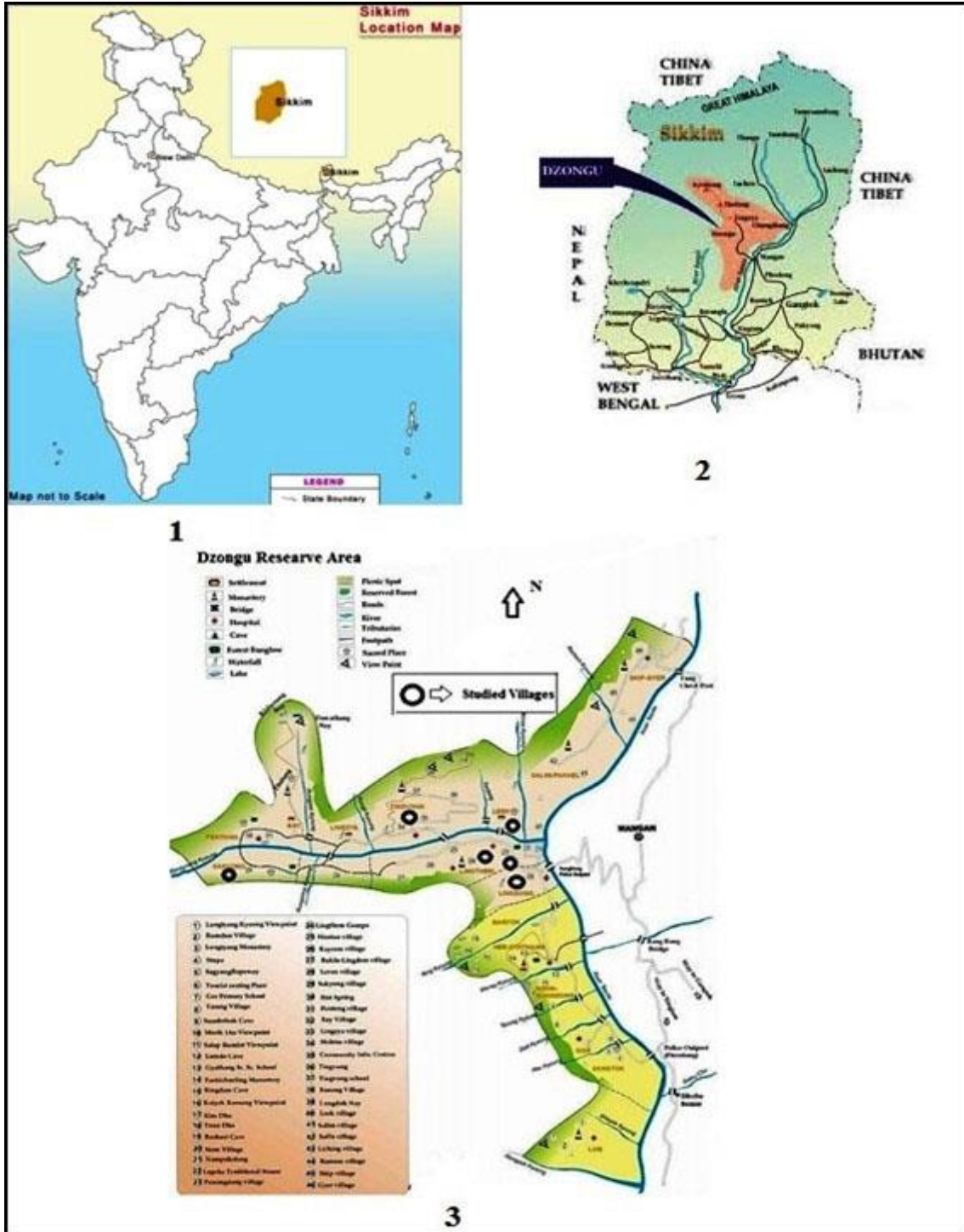


Figure 1: (1) Location of Sikkim state in the Indian Map (2) Sikkim state showing the Dzongu Reserve Area (3) Map of Dzongu Reserve Area showing the studied villages (black circles)

Results

Bamboo Crafts of Lepcha: Lepcha livelihood is totally dependent on their natural surroundings. They live in nature with harmony and accommodated themselves in

nature by using and preserving it. The material culture of the Lepchas is nature-based. The abundant availability of bamboo has made them heavily dependent on it for their survival. Bamboo is an essential resource for them. The bond between bamboo and Lepcha is strong. They born with bamboo and die with bamboo. They believe that they are the younger brother of bamboo. Throughout their life bamboo plays a very important role. In the Dzongu Reserve Area; there are few specialized craftsmen who are engaged with bamboo crafts for a long time. The use of bamboo is also mentioned in their myth. There are various types of bamboo crafts produce by Lepcha. These vary according to their size and shape. Their pattern of weaving also varies. Among the Lepcha, this craftwork is ideally supposed to be the men's work. They have a rich tradition of bamboo craft. Locally available bamboo is the raw material for their craftwork. There are various types of bamboo species found in Sikkim (Table 1).

Table 1: Name of the Bamboo species in Sikkim

| Sl. No. | Scientific Names | Local Names | Distribution in Sikkim | Altitude |
|---------|---|--|--------------------------------|-------------|
| 1 | <i>Arundinaria recemosa</i> | Sanu maling(Nepali), Phyum, Miknu (Lepcha), & Pheong, mheem (Bhutia) | North , West and East district | 2600-3600m |
| 2 | <i>Bambusa multiplex</i> | Chinese bans | East district | 600-1200m |
| 3 | <i>Bambusa nutans</i> | Mala bans(Nepali), Mahlu (Lepcha) & Jiu (Bhutia) | Common up to 1600m | 300 – 1600m |
| 4 | <i>Bambusa Pallida</i> | Deo bans (Nepali), Pshi/pashipo (Lepcha) and Bongshing (Bhutia) | East district | 350-900m |
| 5 | <i>Bambusa tulda</i> | Sigray bans (Nepali), Paoshiding ying (Lepcha) | Common up to 1500m | 400-1500m |
| 6 | <i>Bambusa vulgaris var. vittata</i> | Telai bans | East district | 300-15000m |
| 7 | <i>Bambusa vulgaris var. waminii</i> | Lota bans | East district | 300-1500m |
| 8 | <i>Dendrocalamus asper</i> | Sweet bamboo (English) | East district | 800-1800m |
| 9 | <i>Dendrocalamus giganteus</i> | Dhungre bans (Nepali), Giant bamboo (Nepali) | East and South district | 600-1200m |
| 10 | <i>Dendrocalamus hamiltonii var. hamiltonii</i> | Choya bans, Tama(Nepali), (Lepcha), Pashing (Bhutia) | Common up to 1500m | 300-1500m |
| 11 | <i>Dendrocalamus hamiltonii var. edulis</i> | Guliyo tama bans | Common up to 1500m | 300-1500m |
| 12 | <i>Dendrocalamus</i> | Tili bans(Nepali), Patu | North, South and | 900- |

| | | | | |
|----|-----------------------------------|---|-----------------------------------|----------------|
| | <i>hookeri</i> | (Lepcha) | East district | 1800m |
| 13 | <i>Dendrocalamus patellaris</i> | Neba bans(Nepali), Pagjiok (Lepcha) | Common between 800 – 1500m | 800- 1500m |
| 14 | <i>Dendrocalamus sikkimensis</i> | Bhalu bans(Nepali), Pagriang (Lepcha) | North , West and East district | 1000- 1800m |
| 15 | <i>Dendrocalamus strictus</i> | Latthi bans (Nepali) | East district | 300 – 1000m |
| 16 | <i>Melocanna baccifera</i> | Lahure bans (Nepali) | East and West district | 900- 1500m |
| 17 | <i>Phyllostachys aurea</i> | Kata bans (Nepali) | East and West district | 600- 1200m |
| 18 | <i>Phyllostachys nigra</i> | Kalo nigalo (Nepali) | East district | 800- 1400m |
| 19 | <i>Schizostachyum capitatum</i> | Gobia, Gope (Nepali), Payong (Lepcha) | North, West and East district | 1000- 2400m |
| 20 | <i>Schizostachyum dulloa</i> | Tokre bans (Nepali), Pogslo, Puksalu (Lepcha) | East district | 600- 1500m |
| 21 | <i>Schizostachyum fuchsianum</i> | Palom(Lepcha) | North district | 900 – 1600m |
| 22 | <i>Schizostachyum polymorphum</i> | Pheling bans (Nepali), Parhoik (Lepcha) | East and North district | 600- 1200m |
| 23 | <i>Schizostachyum sharmae</i> | Palom(Lepcha) | North district | 900- 1700m |
| 24 | <i>Sinarundinaria hookeriana</i> | Parang, Singhani (Nepali), Prong(Lepcha) | Common between 800-2000m | 800- 2000m |
| 25 | <i>Sinarundinaria intermedia</i> | Titay nigalo(Nepali), Parmoik(Lepcha) | East and North district | 1200- 3000m |
| 26 | <i>Sinarundinaria maling</i> | Malingo (Nepali), Phum (Bhutia) aand Phuem miknu (Lepcha) | All district above 1800m-3600m | 1700- 3600m |
| 27 | <i>Sinarundinaria microphylla</i> | Deonigalo (Nepali) | East and West district | 1800- 3300m |
| 28 | <i>Sinarundinaria pantlingii</i> | Rani malingo (Nepali) | East district | 1800- 3000m |
| 29 | <i>Sinarundinaria falconeri</i> | Pummon(Lepcha) | North district | 1000- 1800m |
| 30 | <i>Thamnocalamus aristatus</i> | Rato nigalo (Nepali) | West and East district | 2200- 3600m |
| 31 | <i>Phyllostachyus pubescens</i> | Gyansi bans | All district | 900 – 3500m |

All the species which have been mentioned in the list are not good for bamboo crafts. Lepchas use *Bambusa nutans* (local name - *Mahlu*), *Bambusa Pallida* (local name - *Pshi/*

pashipo/Podiyang), *Bambusa tulda* (local name - *Paoshiding ying*), *Dendrocalamus hamiltonii* var (local name - *Poh*). *Cephalostachyum capitatum* (local name - *Payong*), *Schizostachyum capitatum* (local name - *Palom*), *Schizostachyum fuchsianum*(local name - *Prong*), *Sinarundinaria hookeriana* (local name - *Parmoik*) and *Phyllostachyus pubescens* (local name - *Gyansi*) for their bamboo crafts (Figure 2).



Figure 2: Some of the Bamboo varieties in Dzongu Reserve Area (Local name- a. *Podiyang*, b. *Poh*, c. *Prong*, d. *Porphok*, e. *Pryong*, f. *Rikvoid*, g. *Mahlu*, h. *Gaysi*)



Figure 3: Bamboo Polls are used for carrying the death body

The Lepcha people make only those things from bamboos that are required in their day-to-day life. One cannot imagine the cultural life of the people of this region without bamboo and their products. In Lepcha society bamboo plants are related to a person's life, in one way or another even in death. They use a bamboo structure to carry the dead body (Figure 3) and keep a bamboo container full of *Chi*, the holy drink on the structure along with the corpse. They have some selective places from where only they are to collect bamboo for the rituals related to death.



Figure 4: Construction of different structures by the bamboo in studied localities

There can be no end to the uses and utility of bamboo. In their society, the utility of bamboo extends over a much wider range. Bamboo is used in every possible way such as construction of the house and other structures (Figure 4), water transportation (Figure 5), making household items for day to day use like various types of baskets (Figure 6), containers, cooking utensils, making of musical instruments (Figure 7), making of agricultural and hunting implements, making of fishing gears (Figure 8), etc. Bamboo is also used as food. It is used as cookware as well. They make food in the bamboo also. They use the bamboo extensively during their rituals and ceremonies (Figure 9).



Figure 5: Bamboo used for water transportation



Figure 6: Different Kinds of Bamboo basketry made and used by Lepcha community. a. *Tongdyong* (basket used for carrying of daily items from market), b. *Tungjung* (basket used for both carrying and storing purpose), c. *Tangzyang* (basket used for carrying purpose), d. *Tangku* (basket used for storing grains), e. *Tangjyang* (Basket used for carrying purpose), f. *Tungzuang* (basket used for carrying purpose), g. *Phentok* (basket used for shoring millet), h. *Tangku* (basket used for storage grains/storage vegetables), i. *Tungzuang* (basket used for storage purpose), j. *Chaw chok* (tea strainer/country liquor strainer), k. *Doka* (basket used for storing and carrying purpose), l. *Nang ka mo* (basket used for storing agricultural products at agricultural field), m. *Rongthung* (basket used for carrying purpose), n. *Sumok thyoktuk* (traditional Lepcha hat- it signifies their identity), o. *Tangar* (basket used for storage grains), p. *Dalo* (basket used for storage grains/vegetables).



Figure 7: Musical instruments made of bamboo (a. *Bam patik*, b. *Tung diu*, c. *Pumtong pullet*)

Bamboo was traditionally used in architecture among the Lepchas. During modern days they have switched over to other modern materials but still some houses made of bamboo are found in the Dzongu. Because of its easy availability, workability and low cost, bamboo is employed for columns as well as walling and roofing. Cane is generally used for keeping the joints together. When the floor of the house is much higher than the ground, a ladder made of bamboo is placed at the intervening space between the floor of the house and the ground as the staircase. They also make sheds out of bamboos for cow and pigs. Mainly *Podiyang (Bambusa Pallida)* bamboo is used for pole and *Mahlu (Bambusa nutans)* bamboo is used for the structure. The bamboo rhizome, culm or combination of culm and rhizome are mostly used by Lepcha people

as handles for small hoes, axes, sickles, *daos* etc. They use bamboo basketry for collecting the agricultural products from fields. Like other tribal communities Lepchas also make rain shades for their heads when they work in agricultural field mostly in the rainy season. These shades are made of bamboo strips. The inner portion of the shade is covered with leaves. Since it is to be placed on the head, it does not have any handle like an umbrella.



Figure 8: Traditional fishing gear made of bamboo strips

The Lepchas were hunters previously. So that they have an age old association with hunting implements such as bow and arrow. Nowadays due to settled agriculture, hunting is ceremonial for them. They also use a bow and arrow for rituals. They prepare a bow and arrow from the bamboo. *Poh* variety (*Dendrocalamus hamiltonii var*) is basically used for making the hunting implements. The bow is prepared after cutting the bamboo from top. The arrow is made of the branches of *Poh*. The tip of the arrow is made of iron. The arrow container (Sulu) is also made of hollow bamboo tube. The Lepchas are very fond of music and song. They use various musical instruments for various occasions. Bamboo is used for making musical instruments that make their songs and dance more attractive. They have a wide range of wind instruments made of bamboo. Among them the most common and important one is the flute. This instrument has different sizes and holes on it vary 3 to 6 in numbers. They make various types of fishing equipments from bamboo strips. These are closely woven and

the weaving patterns are varied. Most of the fishing equipments are made for running water fishing (Figure 6). Baskets of varied shape and size have been in use for fishing in the streams as well as in flowing rivers since time immemorial.



Figure 9: Bamboo based objects used in rituals and ceremonies

The baskets used for fishing purposes can be broadly classified into two groups – (1) baskets with which fishes are caught and (2) Baskets that are used to keep the catch. They also use bamboo rods for fishing in stagnant water. The baskets used for containing the fish usually have an elongated neck and narrow mouth. This type of baskets is generally single woven. For putting the fencing around their houses and their kitchen gardens as well as the stairs side in monastery, they use mainly bamboo. *Gaysi* bamboo (*Phyllostachyus pubescens*) is mainly used for this purpose. *Podiyang* bamboo is specially used as a pipe for rainwater collection from the rooftop as well as for collecting water from waterfalls or small river channels. Hollow bamboo tubes are used for it. Bamboo has an important role in various textile operations in Sikkim. Among Lepchas, many of the parts of their handloom are made of bamboo. During weaving for design purpose they use bamboo made sticks of different sizes (*Achung Puting*). Their spinning wheel is made of bamboo along with wood.

Lepchas perform various ceremonial and ritual occasions. The Bongthings and Muns (traditional priests) perform these ceremonies and rituals. In these ceremonies, bamboo plays an important role. There are many small bamboo baskets used on these occasions. According to an old Lepcha person, “for the ritual purpose *Poh* variety is used. It is the most important bamboo variety because from the time of Lepcha creation it is with Lepcha culture. For each and every ritual related to Mother Nature, we use *Poh* bamboo. If the *Poh* is not available we use *Puthu bamboo* (a subtype of *Poh*)”. In the *Cherim* ceremony, a large bamboo basket half-filled with soil and covered with banana leaf is placed by the side of the altar. The basket contains some symbolic articles like a few bamboo sticks representing demon’s walking sticks (*Kir Patang*) decorated with flowers of marigold and chrysanthemum (*Chandramallika*). Two colors, yellow and white are auspicious to them and therefore they use yellow marigold and white chrysanthemum for decoration. Associated articles include a bamboo container (made of *Podiyang* bamboo) full water, milk, chi (brewed country liquor), fresh egg, boiled meat, grain, dried bird, dried fish, ginger, flower (*Tuknil Rip*) and bamboo lamp.

The sacred specialist sits under a bamboo made small shed decorated with flowers and leaves which gives an elegant look. The shed is constructed four bamboo poles called ‘rip-dong’ (more or less 4 ft. in height). The offering is made through chant to invoke the spirit (*Rum*). In this ‘rip-dong’ there are few small bamboo baskets that are used for offering. A rounder flat bamboo basket (*Tukbar Taliyung*) full of offering items is placed in front of the Bongthing. The ritual is supposed to be performed by Bongthing. Their other ceremony called *Tсандонг* where they use bamboo made containers for offerings. During *Mardrum* ceremony a patch of earth is cleared of undergrowth, where a small structure is erected on four bamboo poles with thatched roof made of bamboo splits and leaves adorned with flowers. A small quantity of each rice, ginger, fish, duck, millet, and *chebuk* (traditional intoxicant drink) is given as offerings to the deity. Bongthing chants prayers and ritualistic couplets devoted to *Mardrum* who is believed to be an aid for fights, headaches, madness, and outbursts of temper. During the *Pang Lhabsol* festival, they also use bamboo basketry. This festival is unique to Sikkim and commemorates the consecration of Mount Khanchendzonga as the guardian deity of Sikkim.

It is believed that the mountain god played an active role in introducing Buddhism into this former kingdom. In this festival, they make and use various tiny bamboo baskets (*Tungdyong*) for offering to Mount Khanchendzonga. They make a bamboo structure with seven bamboo sticks (*Puchug Pake*) which represent Mount Khanchendzonga and her sacred peaks. These sticks are also designed with the help of *banmok* knife. These are their traditional designs and all dedicated to Mount Khanchendzonga to appease. In the birth ceremony also Lepchas use bamboo and bamboo articles. The ritual begins with the erection of a small loft-like structure standing on bamboo poles and thatched with bamboo splits and leaves, followed by tying of threads of five colors around the newborn baby’s arm. Then, three stones are placed in a box open from the top to resemble the traditional *lapcho*, the place for

worship of their guardian deity. Out of the three stones, the middle one represents Khangchendzonga and the other two stones represent the presiding deities of the region. After this, the Bongthing commences the ritual with the omnipresent chi and rice and establishes communication with the spirit of the child. After the birth ceremony, the parents of the baby keep a hen's feather into a small bamboo basket and place it into their room. It is for the long life of the newborn.



Figure 10: Craftsmen of Lingthem and Passingdong Villages, Dzongu Reserve Area, North Sikkim

Traditional Knowledge System

Various bamboo craft traditions of the community get the most creative expression through craftsmanship (Figure 10). Their traditional hat recognized as one of their oldest craft forms is exclusive to them. The spectacular variety and diverse range of the bamboo craft clearly exhibits the skill as well as the traditional knowledge of the craftsmen. This knowledge is essentially community-specific and restricted within the community and is accumulated through long interaction with the environment. Such a knowledge system is preserved, maintained and transmitted over generations. It forms the cultural heritage of the Lepcha people (Figure 11).

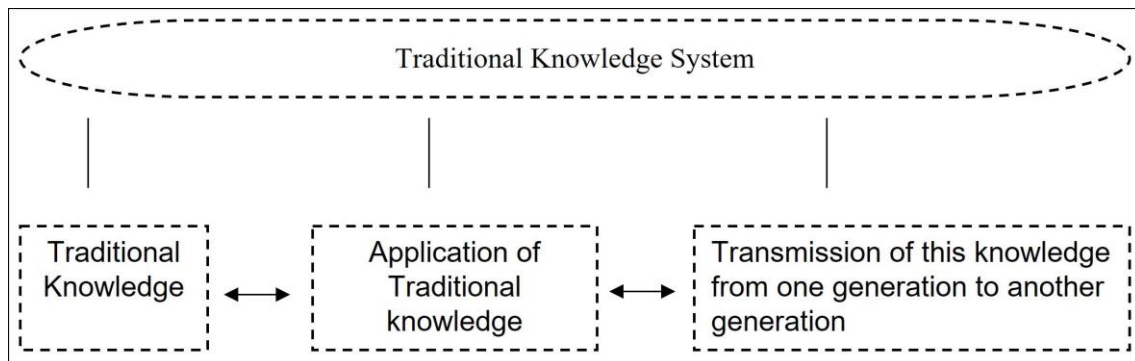


Figure 11: The chart shows the schematic diagram of Traditional Knowledge related to bamboo based crafts of Lepcha

Among the Lepchas, all the traditional knowledge and wisdom related to bamboo ultimately flow from practice. It is preserved; passed and improved almost entirely in the course of applying it in practice, and therefore, is highly sensitive. Bamboo is deeply rooted in the culture and tradition of Lepchas. The knowledge regarding bamboo craft is highly skillful. Lepchas believe that mother nature especially has given this skill to some of the people and they are specialized for this work due to the blessings of Mother Nature. According to Chapel Lepcha (one of the craftsmen of Dzongu), *I get knowledge from my father. He was a specialized craftsman. He knew to make every type of bamboo basket. Still, now no one in Dzongu can make all the types of bamboo basketry even I am also unable to do all. It requires special talent and my father had that talent.* According to Jeje Lepcha, *Grandfather transmits his knowledge to father and father transmits his knowledge to son. Knowledge of bamboo handicraft is not being transferred to the daughter. It is the male's domain. Male learns how to make baskets from their father, grandfather. But it is not like that in a craftsman family where father is a specialized craftsman; his son should be a craftsman. Any male member can learn.* The young generation or the interested persons gather the knowledge of weaving as well as regarding the bamboo basketry through learning.

The older generation as well as specialized craftsmen teach them and show them how to make baskets, how to make the strips the thickness, the length of the strips - all the things they learn. They also learn how to select and cut the bamboo. Through observation, they learn which types of bamboo are to be selected and in this way the

traditional knowledge gets transferred from one generation to another generation orally. Another important knowledge is time. The older generation knows which should be the ideal time for cutting bamboos for basket making. They also transmit this knowledge to the younger generation as well as to interested persons. They believe that if they cut bamboo in the wrong time or on a wrong day then the durability of the bamboo baskets will be hampered and they will not last long. It will be eaten by the pests. The basket makers have a particular time in a day for weaving.

Myths and Beliefs

There are some myths and beliefs associated with the bamboo crafts of Lepcha community. According to Lepcha creation myth, the bongthings prayed to Mother Nature for the bamboo and they collected the bamboo from a mythical place called "*Youngmin Youngsun*". According to a Lepcha person, "*Pudongthing and Nujung niyong*, the first male and female of Lepcha community were sent to Mayel Lyang by the Mother creator and during their staying at Mayel Lyang they used bamboo items (Poh variety) such as loom and hunting implements". Bamboo has been used to make the bridge. According to another Lepcha myth, Lepchas started to use bamboo with the making of bamboo-cane bridge. The Lepcha people believe that the nodes of the 'Poh bamboo' signify their clans and that is why they have a number of clans. In their creation myth it is also said that after the creation of insects, one insect collected the bamboo seeds from the mythical forest and spread those seeds in and around of Mayel Lyang. In this way different bamboo varieties have been spread at different altitudes. Before starting to make baskets, the craftsmen must pray to the Mother Nature for good weaving as well as for good quality of baskets. According to a Lepcha person, *During marriage the older generation gives blessings to newly married couple and tell them that like bamboo, your family will grow quickly*. It is because the growth of the bamboo is very quick and in this way the family will increase due to the birth of a child. Here in their perception bamboo is equated with fertility. During pregnancy of a woman, the husband of that woman is not allowed to cut the bamboo shoot because they believe that if husband cut the shoot then it will affect on the birth of the baby.

Process of Making Bamboo Baskets

Basket among the Lepchas is delicate work. They are experts in making different shapes and sizes of artifacts, in several models like oval, square, flat structure, etc. The bamboo basketry is one of the oldest crafts form among the Lepcha. The weaving of bamboo basket is done manually by craftsmen. The craftsmen require bamboos one to two years old. Before coming out the branches from the body of the bamboo, it has to be selected for basketry weaving because after the branching of the bamboo, it is not considered good for making basketry. They collect the bamboo from their local area generally. The selected bamboos are cut with the *barmok* (long knife – a multipurpose tool). The bamboo is cut in such a way that the lower portion has no nodes. While splitting, the purpose for which the splints are put into is also taken into account. As for example, in the case of mats, the splints are made out of one internode only, for the

baskets two internodes are splinted together according to the size of the baskets. They cut up whole bamboo poles into several pieces, usually about a meter long, according to the necessary requirements. The next step is of cutting off the bigger splints into conveniently smaller ones with the help of a knife. The split halves are again split vertically to get the strips. The strips are made thinner by peeling the top layer. This process is done with the *barmok*. The cutting edge of the *barmok* is kept pressed against the strips with an angle of 30° - 45° . This is repeated several times on both sides and at both ends of the strips. While the bamboo is wet, the hard outer layer of the skin is removed by scraping. Craftsmen arrange the strips in a circular manner to make the base of the basket. Strips of the bamboo are weaved alternatively and run through the arranged strips. Once the base is completed, the strips are bent slightly to weave the side walls. Bamboo strips are continuously added and weaved until the required size of bamboo is acquired. For the rim portion, the craftsmen sometimes use a cane to bind the rim portion of baskets (Figure 12).

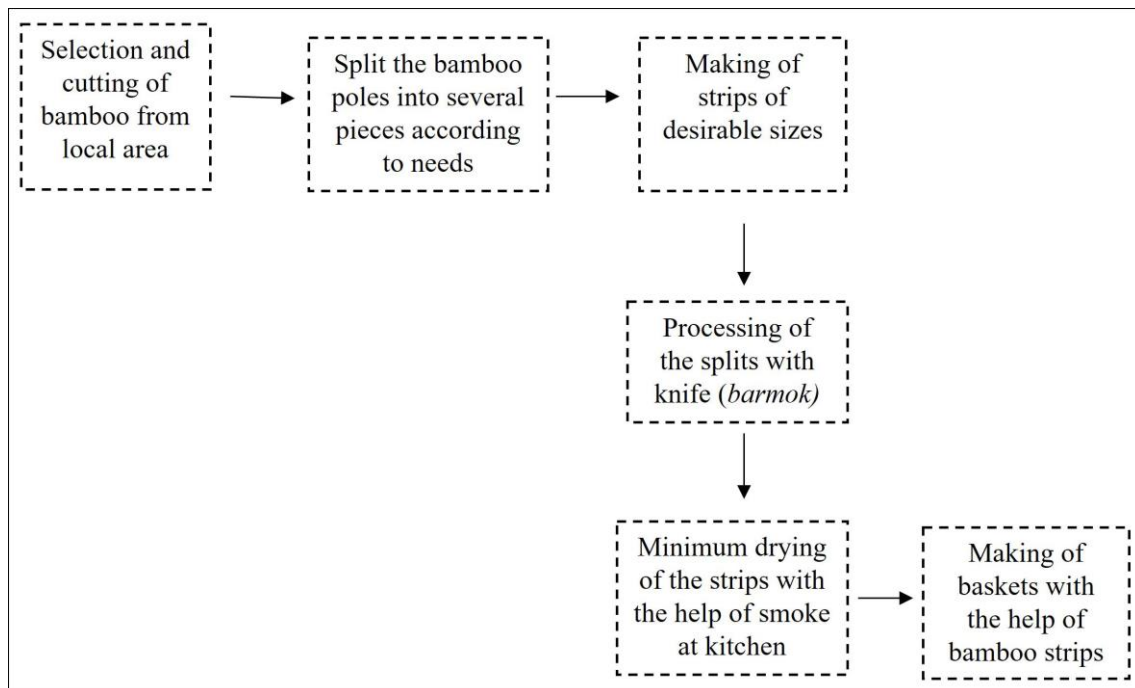


Figure 12: Process of making bamboo basketry by Lepcha Community

Weaving Patterns

There are two general patterns in their basketry such as closely woven baskets and loosely woven baskets. In the loosely woven baskets, there are also two types of patterns. One is with 'big eyes' (hole) and the other is with the 'little close eyes' (hole). Even more 'closer eyes' types of pattern have been used during basket making. The most 'closer eyes' type of patterns are being used in the bamboo mats which is used for drying up of their things, mainly the grains. The winnowing trays are also closely woven. The pattern used in the winnowing tray and the pattern used in the close-woven baskets are different. Even among the carrying baskets, there are also

differences in patterns. *Sumok Subok* is the earliest bamboo basketry pattern. It is derived from their traditional hat *Sumok –thyaktuk*. *Sumok* is male and *Subok* is female. There is another pattern that is ‘*Sumocup*’. They believe that *Sumocup* is the baby of *Sumok Subok*. Other patterns are *Emik*, *Rungpung*, *Thasip* and *Mikliyong* (Figure 13). According to Lepchas, *Sumok Subok* pattern was the first time made by the bongthings. This pattern is quite common when they make the design in their traditional dress as well as it is also used during the rituals when bongthings make designs on bamboo. They believe that bongthings use this pattern on bamboo to protect them from evil spirits.



Figure 13: Different types of pattern used in bamboo basketry weaving (a. *Mikliyong* Pattern, b. *Rungpung* Pattern, c. *Sumok* Pattern, d. *Thasip* Pattern)

Concluding Observations

The Lepchas of North Sikkim have a rich cultural heritage in bamboo crafts. They have mastered the art of bamboo weaving to make baskets. Their bamboo craft portrays the artistic caliber and creative imagination of the local craftsmen. Lepchas take pride in their tradition of basket weaving. The best part is that basket weaving is considered an intrinsic part of their lives. It has been observed that nowadays certain changes have taken place in the field of traditional bamboo crafts of the Lepchas. It is almost losing its real meaning to the new generation. Due to modernization as well as industrialization, this craftwork is in the verge of extinction. In most of the Lepcha households, they use the aluminum utensils as well as Chinese crockery instead of using their own ethnic items. According to the local people, “the modern things are more comfortable in terms of cleaning and washing and thus hygienic too. Bamboo items cannot be cleaned properly; say the bamboo cups, it bears the stain of tea even after washing and due to regular use there will be a clearly visible black coating which is not hygienic at all. But in the case of Chinese crockery, you won’t find such things”.

Another point is that the modern utensils are easy to use and cheap for buying. According to Sonam Lepcha, “basketry making is time-consuming; these things are purely need-based. These are not for consumerism. So the craftsmen get nominal money from their neighborhood when they are requested to make basketry for them. But they are to invest a lot of time and energy. If they use this time and energy in other work then can earn some money.” It is also observed that religious conversion into Lamaism has greatly replaced their bamboo handicrafts. Because there is very limited bamboo works in Buddhism. It is important to note that the young generation is losing interest in the indigenous knowledge pertaining to the properties, utilization aspects of natural resources. According to Ugden Lepcha, “Young generation is engaged with modern amenities as well as modern gadgets such as mobile, laptop, etc. They may see the bamboo crafts in their house but they don’t know how to make it. Even very few of them are aware of the bamboo types in this area. They do not feel pride in their traditional cultural attributes. They don’t feel pride in their own ethnic values also. All of them are running after modernity. It is the reality here.” According to Namgyal Lepcha, “most of the children go to Mangan (North district city of Sikkim) or Gangtok for schooling and stay there at boarding hostels. After school, they join college. There is a gap between the child and the village environment.” So for these reasons the specific knowledge regarding the bamboo craft is restricted to a few specialized craftsmen only.

At present in the Dzongu Reserve Area, there are not more than ten specialized craftsmen. It has been observed that the use of local bamboo species by the Lepchas ensures the continuity of indigenous knowledge associated with the species which are found in different altitudes. According to Jeje Lepcha, “our traditional things are already faded. We have lost the knowledge system also. But now we are trying to bring all those things back either by giving training to the young generation or either by creating some awareness regarding our age old cultural heritage. Thinking to this point

two years ago we have planned to organize some handcraft training programs where we involved the people who have the traditional knowledge and also involved the young people to learn about the making or weaving the bamboo baskets, bamboo mats and all. We have done it successfully and now few of them can weave. We feel that we should make some professionals who can make the baskets regularly so that it can bring some economic sustainability to the particular craftsmen. On the one hand, they will earn and on the other hand they will help to keep our culture alive.” According to Omkit Lepcha, “we should have to move along with modernization, but at the same time, we have to carry forward our traditional culture. Even though we have some modern amenities at the same time we have to keep our traditional knowledge alive and that should bring back into the practice.” This is the high time to protect this traditional knowledge system. There is an urgent need to properly document this knowledge system and integrated it with modern scientific values before it is lost forever. Also, the preservation of vast knowledge – reservoir demands an essential belief in indigenous people’s lifestyle and culture. There need to plan to revive their cultural heritage and they also need governmental help to protect it.

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