

Culture, Belief, and Mental Well-Being among the Lepcha Community of North Bengal

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ABSTRACT

The influence of culture, belief systems, and traditional practices on the mental well-being of the Lepcha community, one of the oldest indigenous groups of the Eastern Himalayas and North Bengal, follows a nature-oriented spirituality and community-based social norms that shape emotional experience, social interaction, and responses to psychological stress. Relatively delayed adoption of modernization within the Lepcha community, reflected in limited access to education, healthcare facilities, and mental health services, has strengthened reliance on traditional belief systems. This delay has produced a complex social situation in which cultural preservation coexists with structural marginalization. Younger generations, in particular, face tension between inherited traditions and emerging modern influences, which can create additional psychological stress. Collective rituals, customary practices, and shared beliefs generate social cohesion and offer psychological comfort during periods of uncertainty, illness, or loss. Spiritual interpretations of life events help individuals find meaning, while close engagement with the natural environment supports balance and emotional stability. Supernatural and moral frameworks often lead to a preference for ritual healing over professional care, delaying diagnosis, treatment, and awareness. An integrative approach is essential to fostering psychological flourishing while preserving the unique ethno-cultural identity of the Lepcha people.

Keywords: *Lepcha Community, Ethno-Psychology, Culture And Belief, Traditional Healing, Mental Well-Being*

“Earlier the Lepcha used to have such magical powers, now they are weak and vanishing” - Jenny Bentley

India’s cultural landscape is enriched by numerous indigenous communities whose traditions reflect a deep connection with nature and ancestral heritage. Among them are the Lepchas, regarded as the original inhabitants of the Himalayan state of Sikkim and the surrounding Himalayan regions. They refer to themselves as *Rong* or *Mutanchi Rongkup*, meaning “the beloved children of the Mother Creator,” and trace their origins to the sacred landscapes near Mount Kanchenjunga, which they consider their ancestral homeland. The Lepchas possess their own language, Rongring, and a distinctive script, and traditionally

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lived simple agrarian lives closely connected to forests, rivers, and mountains. Their social customs, clothing, food habits, and architectural styles demonstrate a harmonious relationship with the natural environment (Mangal & Sati, 2025; Aden, 2020).

At the heart of Lepcha culture lies an ancient animistic belief system commonly referred to as *Mun* or Bonism. Rather than following an organized religion in the conventional sense, the Lepchas traditionally worshipped natural forces and spirits believed to inhabit the surrounding world. Ritual specialists known as *Mun* (priestesses) and *Boongthings* (priests) perform ceremonies to protect the community from misfortune and maintain spiritual balance. Festivals and ceremonial gatherings therefore serve not only as religious observances but also as important expressions of collective identity, cultural preservation, and intergenerational continuity (Biswakarma, 2018). Through these practices, the Lepchas continue to uphold their traditional worldview despite increasing external influences. Over time, however, the Lepcha religious landscape has undergone significant transformation. The introduction of Tibetan Buddhism and later the arrival of Christianity through missionary activities during the colonial period led many Lepchas to adopt new faiths, particularly Christianity. As a result, animism, Buddhism, and Christianity coexist within the community today. While this transition has introduced new forms of belief and social organization, it has also influenced traditional practices and cultural identity. In contemporary India, such shifts can affect the psychological and emotional well-being of indigenous groups as they navigate between ancestral traditions and modern religious frameworks (Chettri, 2022; Aden, 2020). Understanding Lepcha ceremonies and festivals therefore provides valuable insight not only into their spiritual heritage but also into the broader cultural and social dynamics shaping the community today.

The study aims to examine the role of cultural beliefs, rituals, and community practices in shaping the mental well-being of the Lepcha people, and to analyze the impact of social change and modernization on their cultural belief system as well as on the mental well-being of the Lepcha community.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. How do cultural beliefs and spiritual practices influence the mental well-being of the Lepcha people?
2. How has modernization affected traditional cultural beliefs and mental well-being among the Lepcha community?
3. What role do family structure and community support play in maintaining mental well-being within Lepcha society?

RESEARCH GAP

A review of existing literature reveals important research gaps regarding the Lepcha community. Although many studies have explored their culture, history, traditions, and social structure, issues related to mental well-being remain largely underexamined. There is also limited research using case study or narrative approaches to understand personal experiences and culturally rooted interpretations of well-being. Furthermore, the psychological impact of modernization and cultural transformation on the Lepcha community has received minimal scholarly attention, leaving a significant gap in comprehensive understanding.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research methodology refers to the systematic methods and techniques used to conduct a study effectively. It enhances the research process and ensures clarity and reliability.

Research design

The present study adopts a qualitative research design in nature. It follows a descriptive and exploratory approach to understand the relationship between cultural beliefs and mental well-being among the Lepcha community of North Bengal.

Methods of study

1. Case Study Method

The case study method is used to examine selected cases from the Lepcha community. It focuses on their cultural beliefs, ritual practices, coping mechanisms, and perceptions of mental well-being.

2. Narrative Analysis

Narrative analysis is employed to analyze personal life stories, oral histories, and experiential accounts shared by participants. This method helps in understanding how individuals construct meaning around mental well-being through cultural symbols, myths, rituals, and collective memories.

Study Area

Kolakham in Kalimpong is situated in the northern part of West Bengal, within the Eastern Himalayan region. Kolakham is a small village located near Neora Valley National Park in the Kalimpong district, at an altitude of around 1,780 meters. It lies amidst the Himalayan foothills, surrounded by dense forests and rich biodiversity, and is known for trekking, wildlife spotting, and panoramic views of the Kanchenjunga range. Kalimpong, the district headquarters, is situated on a ridge overlooking the Teesta River valley at approximately 1,250 meters above sea level. The town is characterized by steep slopes, terraced agriculture, and mixed forests, serving as a cultural and commercial hub for the diverse communities of Lepchas, Bhutias, and Nepalis. Both locations form part of the northern Himalayan region of West Bengal, marked by rugged terrain, heavy monsoon rainfall, and proximity to Bhutan, Sikkim, and Nepal, making them significant both ecologically and strategically.

Sampling technique

The study adopts purposive sampling as the sampling technique. This method deliberately selects relevant cases and sources that are rich in information regarding the cultural beliefs and mental well-being of the Lepcha community of North Bengal.

Sources of data

The study is based exclusively on secondary data sources. Secondary data have been collected from:

- Published journals
- Books

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- Research articles
- Theses and dissertations
- Newspapers

These sources provide supporting evidence and scholarly insights on the Lepcha community.

Delimitations of the study

The present study is limited to the Lepcha community residing in the North Bengal region only. The geographical scope of the study does not include Lepcha populations living in other regions such as Sikkim, Bhutan or Nepal.

Furthermore, the study is based exclusively on secondary data sources such as field surveys and interviews, and participants' observations have not been included. As a result, the study relies on existing literature, documented case studies, and previously recorded narratives for analysis.

ANALYSIS

The Lepchas are one of the oldest indigenous communities of the eastern Himalayan region, especially associated with Sikkim and nearby areas. Although the name “Lepcha” is commonly used today, it was originally given by their Nepali neighbours. Some interpretations suggest that the word referred to people whose speech was difficult to understand. However, the community identifies itself as *Rong* or *Rongpa*, meaning “people of the ravines” or “inhabitants of the mountain valleys.” They also use the expression *Mutanchi Rong Kup Rum Kup*, which reflects their belief that they are the beloved children of the Creator. In everyday expression, some Lepchas simply say “I am Mutanchi,” proudly affirming their identity.

The Lepchas consider themselves the original inhabitants of Sikkim, which was once an independent Himalayan kingdom. Their traditional homeland, known in their oral history as Mayel Lyang, is believed to be located near Mount Kanchenjunga. While scholars have connected their ancestry to Tibeto-Burman or Mongoloid groups, the Lepchas themselves rely more on their myths and legends than on migration theories. Due to their geographical isolation in mountainous terrain, much of their early history remains undocumented.

Their language, called Rongring, belongs to the Tibeto-Burman language family. A distinct script was developed several centuries ago, influenced by Tibetan writing. However, in modern times, many Lepchas speak Nepali, and the use of their traditional script has declined. In matters of faith, the Lepchas traditionally followed an animistic belief system centered on nature spirits and ancestral forces. The Mun priest played a central role in conducting rituals to maintain harmony and ward off misfortune. Later, Tibetan Buddhism influenced their religious practices, and today both belief systems coexist. Despite these changes, the Lepchas continue to maintain a deep spiritual bond with nature and are widely known for their peaceful and gentle way of life. Cultural Beliefs, Rituals, and Community Practices: Their Role in Strengthening Lepcha Life and Mental Well-Being.

The cultural life of the Lepcha community is deeply rooted in belief systems, rituals, and collective practices that shape both their social structure and psychological well-being. For generations, the Lepchas have maintained a close spiritual relationship with nature, ancestors, and the unseen world. These cultural foundations do not function merely as religious

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expressions; they serve as guiding frameworks that give meaning, stability, and emotional strength to everyday life.

One of the most significant aspects of Lepcha belief is their reverence for nature. Mountains, rivers, forests, and landscapes are considered sacred, with particular spiritual importance attached to places such as Mount Kanchenjunga. This ecological spirituality fosters a sense of belonging and interconnectedness. Living with the belief that nature is alive and protective encourages respect, balance, and responsibility. Psychologically, this worldview reduces feelings of alienation because individuals perceive themselves as part of a larger, harmonious system. The environment becomes a source of comfort and grounding, especially during times of stress or uncertainty.

Ritual practices play an equally vital role in maintaining emotional balance. Traditional ceremonies led by shamans, as well as Buddhist and Christian influences that later integrated into Lepcha life, provide structured ways of coping with life's uncertainties. Rituals marking birth, illness, marriage, harvest, and death create a sense of continuity and reassurance. During illness, for example, healing rituals combine spiritual prayer with community presence, reinforcing hope and collective care. Such practices reduce anxiety by offering symbolic explanations for suffering and by reminding individuals that they are not facing challenges alone. Festivals are another essential dimension of Lepcha community life. Celebrations such as Namsoong bring families and villages together in shared joy and remembrance. Through music, dance, storytelling, and communal feasting, these gatherings renew social bonds and cultural identity. Festivals function as emotional release points where stress is alleviated and happiness is collectively expressed. Participation strengthens a sense of pride and belonging, which are key elements of positive mental health. When individuals feel connected to their heritage and community, they are less likely to experience isolation or identity confusion.

Community practices based on cooperation and kinship further enhance well-being. Traditionally, Lepcha villages operated through collective labor and mutual assistance. Agricultural activities, house-building, and ritual events involved cooperation among families. This interdependence created strong support networks that ensured no individual was left alone in times of crisis. Emotional struggles could be shared within trusted circles of relatives and neighbors. Such social cohesion acts as a protective factor against depression, loneliness, and social anxiety. Oral traditions and storytelling also contribute significantly to psychological resilience. Myths, legends, and ancestral narratives communicate moral values and life lessons. These stories often emphasize courage, humility, respect for nature, and perseverance. By listening to elders recount these narratives, younger generations learn coping strategies embedded within cultural memory. Storytelling sessions foster intergenerational bonding, reinforcing both identity and emotional continuity. The transmission of wisdom through oral heritage ensures that individuals develop a stable sense of self grounded in collective history.

Spiritual beliefs concerning karma, ancestral guidance, and moral accountability encourage ethical living and emotional regulation. Whether influenced by indigenous spirituality, Buddhism, or Christianity, these beliefs promote compassion, forgiveness, patience, and gratitude. Such virtues directly support mental well-being by reducing conflict and promoting harmonious relationships. The act of prayer or meditation offers personal moments of reflection and calmness, helping individuals manage stress and cultivate inner peace.

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The communal structure of religious institutions monasteries, churches, or traditional ritual spaces serves as centers of emotional and social support. These spaces provide opportunities for collective worship, counseling, and mutual encouragement. In times of bereavement or hardship, community members gather to console affected families. Shared mourning rituals, for instance, help process grief collectively rather than individually, lessening emotional burden. This communal approach to healing strengthens resilience and reinforces solidarity.

Cultural identity itself is a powerful contributor to psychological health. The preservation of language, dress, music, and customs provides individuals with a strong sense of rootedness. Knowing one's heritage fosters self-esteem and confidence. In a rapidly modernizing world, maintaining cultural practices helps Lepchas navigate change without losing their sense of self. Cultural continuity acts as an anchor amid social transformation.

At the same time, adaptability within cultural practice has allowed the Lepchas to integrate new religious influences and modern elements without completely abandoning tradition. This flexibility demonstrates cultural resilience. By reinterpreting rituals and beliefs in contemporary contexts, the community ensures that traditions remain relevant and meaningful. Such adaptability reduces generational conflict and supports mental harmony between elders and youth.

Buddhism, Christianity, and Modernization Shaping Cultural Beliefs and Mental Well-Being

The cultural life of the Lepcha community has developed through the interaction of indigenous traditions, organized religions, and modernization, each shaping their identity and mental well-being. When Tibetan Buddhism spread into Sikkim during the seventeenth century, it blended with the Lepchas' traditional animistic beliefs rather than replacing them. Sacred elements of nature such as forests, rivers, ancestral spirits, and Mount Kanchenjunga remained spiritually significant, while local deities were incorporated into Buddhist symbolism and traditional shamans continued to work alongside monks. This synthesis strengthened values such as respect for nature, cooperation, and spiritual unity, while Buddhist teachings on compassion, karma, mindfulness, and impermanence supported emotional balance and resilience.

Christianity later became influential, especially in parts of Sikkim and West Bengal, where it blended with indigenous customs and reinforced moral values such as love, humility, and forgiveness. Church activities, worship, and festivals like Christmas and Easter strengthen social bonds and provide emotional support, hope, and stability. Alongside these religious influences, modernization has transformed Lepcha society through education, new employment opportunities, migration, and changing lifestyles. While improved healthcare, communication, and economic opportunities have enhanced living standards and confidence, they have also weakened traditional village bonds, reduced everyday use of the Lepcha language, and created challenges related to identity, cultural continuity, and stress. Consequently, the Lepcha community today navigates a balance between tradition and change, relying on cultural practices, religious values, and community networks to maintain social cohesion and psychological resilience. This study therefore focuses on understanding the social, cultural, and traditional aspects of the Lepcha community in the northern part of West Bengal through one-on-one discussions.

The Role of Mun and the Lungchung Festival in Kolakham Village, Kalimpong, West Bengal

In the Lepcha community, traditional priests known as *Mun* play an important role in spiritual and cultural life. They perform rituals, prayers, healing ceremonies, and offerings to maintain harmony between people and spirits. Even after the spread of Tibetan Buddhism, the *Mun* continued their practices alongside Buddhist lamas known as *Yook-Mun*, creating a blend of indigenous and Buddhist traditions that helps preserve Lepcha culture and support emotional stability and community identity.

The Lepcha village of Kolakham celebrates the Lungchung Festival during the last ten days of December. It is one of the most important cultural events, combining rituals, community participation, and a strong connection with nature. The festival honors ancestors, seeks protection from spirits, and strengthens social bonds, providing both spiritual and emotional support to villagers.

Tenshiring Lepcha, a respected member of the village, describes Lungchung as a source of pride and mental strength. The festival begins with prayers and the recitation of sacred texts led by the *Mun*, along with offerings of forest grains, fruits, and natural items. These rituals express gratitude to nature and give villagers a sense of security and emotional balance.

After the rituals, villagers take part in traditional dances, songs, and storytelling. Elders share myths, legends, and ancestral stories that teach values such as courage, humility, and respect for nature. These activities strengthen cultural identity, emotional resilience, and connections between generations. Food also has symbolic importance during the festival. Meals prepared from forest-gathered items reflect sustainable living and community cooperation. Sharing food together strengthens unity, belonging, and joy within the village. Overall, the Lungchung Festival shows how Lepcha cultural beliefs, rituals, and community practices are closely linked to emotional and psychological well-being. For villagers of Kolakham, it serves as a spiritual anchor and a source of collective strength, helping preserve cultural identity and social harmony.

CONCLUSION

The history and cultural journey of the Lepcha community reflect a story of continuity, adaptation, and resilience. Known as *Rong* or *Mutanchi*, the Lepchas maintain a deep spiritual and emotional connection with their land, traditions, and collective memory. Their indigenous belief systems, later influenced by Buddhism and Christianity, have blended with traditional practices to create a layered cultural identity rather than replacing their original worldview. Cultural beliefs, rituals, storytelling, festivals, and communal practices continue to strengthen social cohesion and provide a sense of belonging, purpose, and emotional security, all of which support mental well-being. While modernization has brought new opportunities in education, employment, and healthcare, it has also created challenges related to identity and cultural continuity. Ultimately, the well-being of the Lepcha community depends on maintaining a balance between embracing progress and preserving their cultural roots, as their deep respect for nature, spirituality, and community solidarity remains central to their resilience in a changing world.

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Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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