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Understanding the use of Lepcha Ethnomedicine in Sikkim and Kalimpong

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This paper deals with the complexity of caregiving and health-seeking behavior among the indigenous Lepcha people. Indigenous societies are viewed as a homogenous entity but the case of the Lepchas has been very different as historical factors have divided the community along territorial and religious lines. This division in the community has led to complexity in health-seeking behavior which provides me with a platform to understand how the model of dominative medical system functions in a Lepcha society. Hence, the study will be seen against a background of medical pluralism and a time when the Lepchas are dealing with political mayhems which are steered by the demand for an ethnic homeland by the immigrant Nepalis, that they are super-imposing on the Lepcha land, and has today, left the Lepchas to an insignificant minority. My aim is not to undertake a polarised study- whether the traditional medicine works or not, but to understand the empirical reality of the complex health-seeking behavior. To comprehend how traditional medicine survives and how the title of the 'great-ethnobotanical practitioners' is upheld by the community. One of the key aims of this study is to understand the role and knowledge of medicine men and how they position themselves in a medically pluralistic society. Known to possess rich ethnobotanical knowledge of the flora and fauna found in the eastern Himalayan belt, the Lepchas have in the recent years been termed as a 'Vanishing tribe'. Now reduced to the status of a minority in terms of population, the number of local medicine men to have been steadily declining. However, the 'Vanishing' status has alarmed many leaders, political as well as social elites, who today are taking steps to promote and revive the age-old practice. Steps are also being taken to bridge the differences that are existent within the community spread over two different states of West Bengal and Sikkim in North East India to establish a pan Lepcha identity. Nevertheless, the penetration of developmental activities in towns and villages have posted many new challenges in keeping up with traditional practices especially in the health sector. I have approached this study from the perspective of medical anthropology, a subfield of anthropology, by using anthropological theories and methods to questions about health, illness and healing. Ethnomedicine the study of traditional practices that uses ethnography of health and healing behaviour in the Lepcha society forms a major component of this study.

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