

MATERIAL CULTURE

Hutton (1944) defined material culture as "the study of those objects (other than human) and all those artifacts with which man surrounds himself in his attempt to ameliorate his position in his environment".

Material life is a fair index of the general level of the knowledge and of the intellectual attainment of the people. Ecological factors play a great role in the various aspects of culture, specially in the case of material culture. Man utilises his environment to the fullest extent possible with the technology at his disposal. He adapts himself to it and exercises his control over it. As a matter of fact material life of a man is the rendezvous of external environment and socio-cultural representation, a manifestation of ecologic relation.

Settlement Pattern

Let us begin a study of the Lepcha material culture with a look at their habitation. A house plays an important role in the culture of the people. The habitations of any community at any place are largely influenced by climate and environment. The other factors which influence the habitation are the economic condition and occupational pattern.

The Lepcha villages are situated on the slopes of the hills. Houses are stationed on the top of the hillocks or on the slopes of the hills, in a most scattered way surrounded by terraced paddy fields. Normally the Lepcha houses are east facing to have the first rays of the sun.

In accordance with the regional pattern of settlement in this part of the Himalaya, the Lepcha houses are stretched over a wide area throughout the length and breadth of the hill slopes. It is very difficult to visit all the houses of a Himalayan village of Darjeeling or Sikkim within a day due to the difficult undulating terrain and scattered nature of the houses. The settlement has no pattern in terms of geography, the houses are either isolated in the fields or gathered in small groups of three or four. This grouping does not necessarily correspond to any kinship ties and full brothers may live separated by the full distance of the village. In Lingdong the highest and lowest houses in the village are separated by a distance of three kilometers and a height of about three thousand feet.

It is customary that a Lepcha should build his own house after marriage. In Lingdong and other villages of Zongu this is a trivial problem since the Lepcha are the only land owning community. In Zongu, a Lepcha after marriage gets a piece of land from his father and establishes his own house there. Out in the Darjeeling district the Lepcha now-a-days do not possess sufficient land to be distributed among the sons, where the Nepalis are emerging and in some villages have already emerged as the major land holding group. The scarcity of land disdained the Lepcha of Kalimpong from setting up new households after marriage and compelled the married sons to live with their parents in a joint family. New houses are built less in Kalimpong due to the simple reason that they have less amount of land for this purpose at their disposal.

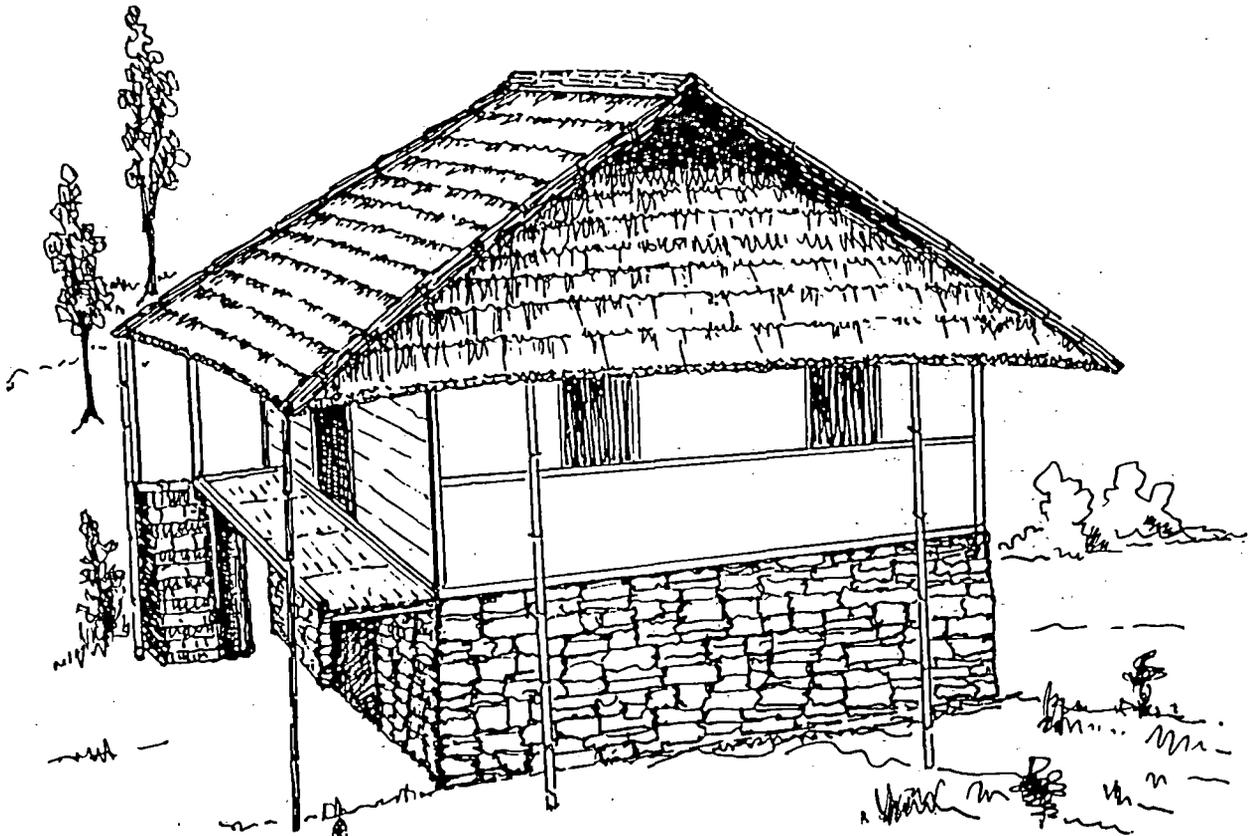


Figure 1.

Sketch of a Lepcha house

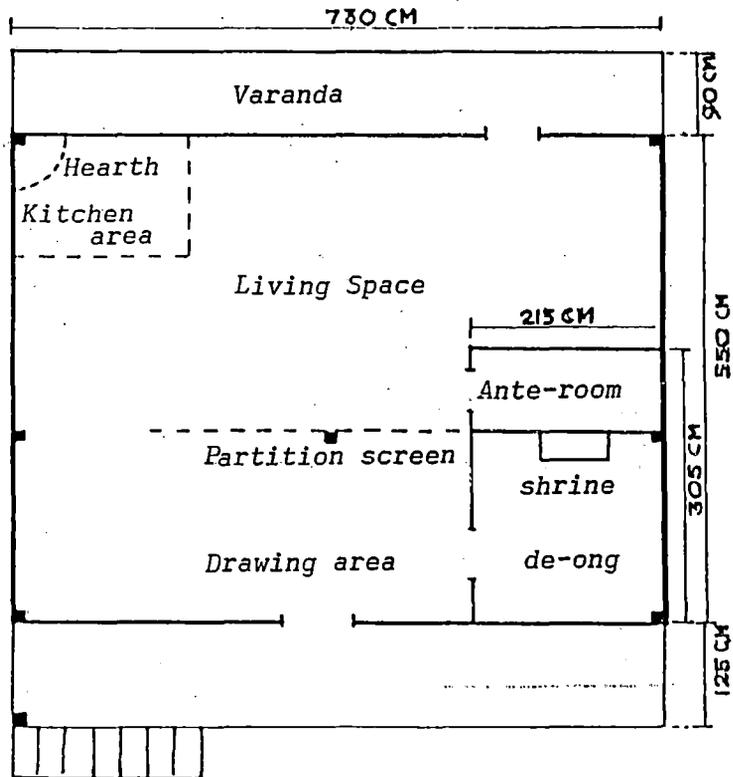


Figure 2.

Main entrance

Ground plan

A Lepcha House

Lepcha houses, in the hills where temperatures fall below 10°C are built a little above the ground on stilts stone pillars to avoid dampness and ground water falling during the rains. During construction of a house in the hills special care is taken to choose the site which is not normally observed in plains. Steep slope or precipice near the approach of the site is discarded, but a Jhora or other form of water source near the site is a must.

Suitable site for the proposed house (lingur) is selected according to the instruction given in the Lamaist book chu-datoo. The Lepcha also utilise the service of a Bonthing (a native priest of animistic religion) who purifies the land. After the house is finished a Lama comes to read litashi, the sacred book for the house making ritual. Bonthing performs a ceremony called, tashi-chene by sacrificing animals to keep the evil spirits away from the new house.

Traditional Lepcha houses are rectangular in shape and raised about four to six feet off the ground on stone boulders (chukbu) which go round three sides of the house. The east side is left open and the space underneath serves as a shelter at night for domestic animals. This is a measure developed to protect the livestock from cold and rain. (Fig. 1 & 2).

The building itself is made of wood, plaster, bamboo and thatch. The walls (tangdup) are coloured white with a clay dye brought from a considerable distance. The windows, doors (tingvin)

and porch are made out of wood and are quite pleasantly carved in stylistic geometrical patterns.

The first step of construction is to erect upright supports one in the centre and one at each corner. The pillars are called dhokhiyamu and are very strong to withstand the weight of the building. The floor (ligong) is made of smoothed planks (antoo) and rested on a wooden frame (sulin). The walls (chakbu) are of bamboo (molo) covered with plaster. Sometimes by the side of the house hangs a balcony of plaited bamboo. The roof (lichap) is made of reeds hung over bamboos that rest on a wooden frame. But in Kalimpong the roof is thatched with straw. The scarcity of bamboos due to the decline of forest forced them to adapt to this new style which proved to be more expensive in the long run. The two opposite sides of the roof cover the whole space between the roof tree and the top of the wall, but the other two opposite sides are inserted at a slightly lower angle, so that there is an open triangle which is meant to provide ventilation and an escape for the smoke. Below the roof there is a ceiling (Palong).

The most interesting character of the construction of a Lepcha house is that they hardly use any kind of nails or screws to fix the poles. The big wooden beams meant for the support of the roof are generally inserted through one another in a criss-cross way. This non use of iron pegs in house construction is adopted because iron becomes rusty due to excessive rains and shortens the life of the house. There is a difference in the construction of walls between the Lepcha of Kalimpong and Zongu. In Sikkim the Lepcha build thicker

walls than Kalimpong which serves the purpose of keeping the occupants warm in the cold climate of Sikkim.

The majority of the Lepcha houses consist of two rooms and an ante room (buchung). The first room is separated by a bamboo partition into a drawing room (ligong) and living room (bo). The kitchen (thopsong) is situated in the living room, the hearth (pukum) is at the corner of the living room. The second room is called de-ong, it is little used in day to day activities and have a private lamaist household temple. It is more or less a ceremonial room where household rituals are performed and distinguished guests are received. The special purpose of this room is particularly evident in Lingdong. Kalimpong Lepchas have almost forgotten the speciality of this room under the strong Nepali Hindu and Christian influence. The ante-room is mostly used as a store. In Kalimpong most of the Lepcha houses have latrine but in Sikkim only a few houses of rich people have separate latrine.

There has been a great deal of reciprocal behaviour found in house building. When people know that a house is being built or repaired they come to help voluntarily. They are given no wages in cash or kind except a meal at the end of the day, but they know that they in their turn, will receive help when they would need it. This mutually exchangeable system of labour is called 'lobo' in Sikkim and 'parma' in Kalimpong, which is probably an adoption of Nepali word. In Zongu the Lepcha usually do not require the help of a specialised craftsman at the time of housebuilding but in Kalimpong a carpenter is employed for building a house at the rate of Rs.20/- per

day. In each Lepcha house, is a field fenced with bamboo, which serves as their kitchen garden (sing), where they raise those vegetables and root crops which are consumed by the members of the household.

House Types : Traditional and Modern

Now a days whenever a Lepcha builds his house he tries to make it a modern house, if he is not very poor. The main difference between the two types of house is the roof. In a modern house the thatched roof has been replaced by corrugated tin sheets. Due to its geographical proximity to Kalimpong town Nassey houses are of modern European bungalow type. The scarcity of raw materials (mainly wood) also contribute towards this change. Stone slabs and bricks are used in the base. In Nassey only a few poor Lepcha live in the traditional type of house. But in Pagang there are more traditional houses. As it is near to the forest areas from where plenty of wood is available, the Lepcha of this village construct their houses with wooden planks and thatched roof. But the picture is somewhat ambiguous in the Zongu where despite easy availability of wood and other raw materials the Lepcha prefer to have a house with corrugated tin roof. The Lepcha of Zongu though a bit traditional in all other aspects of their socio-cultural and religious life prefer non traditional type of house. In Zongu the number of traditional houses are even less than in Kalimpong. The enormous cash-cropping of cardamom has made the Zongu Lepcha quite affluent in comparison to their Kalimpong kinsmen. So they can easily afford the costly modern houses. Moreover the corrugated sheet of galvanised tin sheets can

withstand the prolonged monsoon of Sikkim better. Due to the wet climate of Sikkim the roofs are overhanging, which often projects as much as fifteen feet in front of the walls. It is a feature of all Zongu houses for keeping the walls dry throughout the rainy season. The surrounding natural resources which are available at the disposal of a community shape its material culture to a considerable extent. This has been found to be true in the two Kalimpong villages. But there are exceptions where some other exogenous factors which may be strong and influential enough to alter the nature of traditional material life of the people. In Zongu though nature provides with ample raw materials from the neighbouring forest to build a house the Lepcha here, excepting a few poor ones, mostly has opted for modern houses with corrugated tin roofs.

The Lepcha have a higher standard of living in comparison to other communities living in the village. To some extent most of the people possess copper and brass utensils and glass tumbler, cups, plates and ceramic tea sets. Well to do Lepcha also have furniture like chair, table etc. They prefer to live comfortably rather than to save money to buy other properties.

Bamboo is the most common material used by the Lepcha for making baskets of various shapes and sizes. Bamboo grows in abundance in this part of the Himalayas. The cost is less and containers made of bamboos are convenient in this cold region. But due to the decline of forest in Kalimpong the use of bamboo in the day to day life has become gradually less. Now-a-days the Lepcha use cooking pots of aluminium and stainless steel obtained

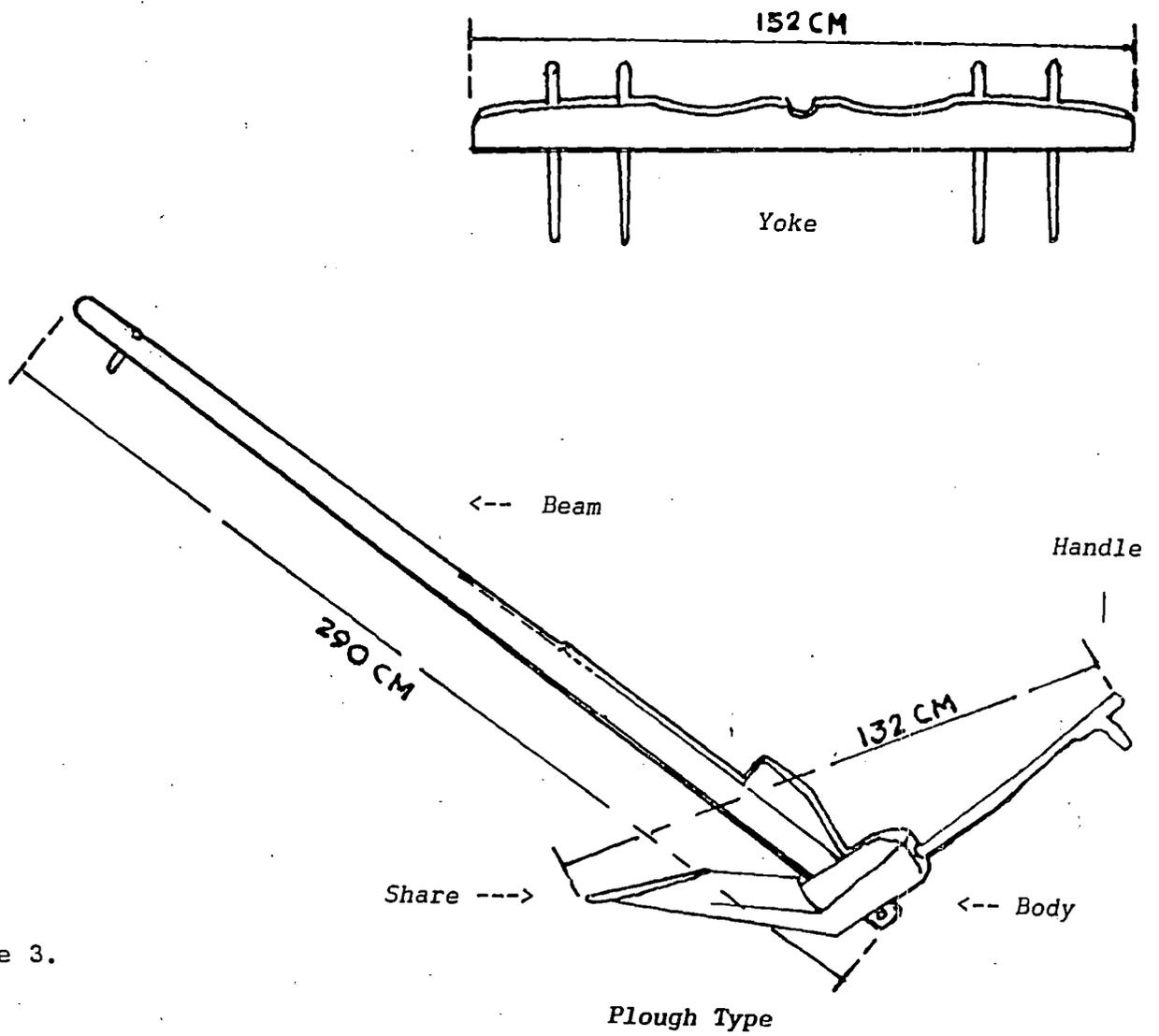


Figure 3.

from local markets. These metallic vessels are brought from the plain and are found in the urban centre of Kalimpong. But the Lepcha in the interior villages of Zongu still depend on bamboo baskets and earthen pots.

Agricultural Tools

In a subsequent chapter devoted to Lepcha economy I have shown that Lepcha agriculture is still primitive. So is their agricultural tools and implements.

The agricultural implements used by the Lepcha are simple, crudely made and few in number. It consist of the following :-

Plough (longkung or halkung) drawn by a pair of oxen or bullocks is the most important one. Due to the hardness of the soils they use a plough much heavier than the one used in the plains of West Bengal. The angle formed in the body of the plough is much more obtuse than that of the ploughs used in the plains. The plough consists of a horn shaped piece of wood (kung), which is tipped by the iron share (Pansing). The wooden beam goes up from the centre and above is the plough handle (acham) to steer the plough. The beam (pathing) is fixed to the wooden yoke (thokbiyal) which is drawn by a pair of animal. The average plough weighs 17 to 18 kilograms and is heavier than that is used in the plains. The beam is tied to the yoke by a leather thong (rope).

Other important agricultural implements are spade (thakchu), pointed hoe (kakthu), sickle (behur), ridge making implement (kanta), levellor (fauri) and mortar and pestle (dhokiamu).

In Zongu area of Sikkim every adult Lepcha man carries a long knife (bumfock), sheathed in a leather case tied to the waist. This typical Lepcha knife, unlike a Napali kukri, is straight and not a curved one. The whole of one side is a cutting edge, the tip is square, not pointed. Which is functionally more like a chopper.

Every Lepcha know a little bit of carpentry. So for making agricultural implements, which do not require fine craftsmanship, the Lepcha usually make their own implements.

Role of Forest ✓

Forest Plays an important part in the material life of the Lepcha. Fruit trees present in the forest are of great help to them. Bamboo groves of different types are found in abundance in the Himalayan forests and are of great importance in the life of the Lepcha. It is required in almost every sphere of the material life of the Lepcha, starting from raw materials for house building to hunting implements, domestic baskets and containers, furniture, agricultural tools etc. High altitude areas in the forest are used as pasture where the cattle graze. The Lepcha children, mainly in Zongu become familiar with the forest ecology from their childhood as they spend most of their time in the forest grazing the cattle. They come to know the edible fruits and roots, indentify the medicinal herbs. They collect yeast used for fermentation of millet from the forest. This has been an important forest produce of the Lepcha of Zongu. In Kalimpong they buy it from the market. The Lepcha living in the high hilly villages of Zongu go for hunting in the forest. The forest

provides shelter for their games. They collect honey and firewood from the forest. It was observed that the Lepcha of Zongu because of easy access to the forest fully utilise its resources to supplement their economy, whereas the Lepcha of Kalimpong suffer from the restrictions imposed on the use of forest resource because of the reservation of forest and the rapid depletion of its resources. Handicapped by these factors they are unable to supplement their economy with minor forest produces. Only the Lepcha of Pagang village are partially able to use the forest resources.

Food and Drinks ✓

For the Lepcha the most important subject in their lives is perhaps food, which also has an important place in their emotional lives. Love, whether between spouses, friends or parents and children, is considered to be the result of mutual benefits and foremost among these mutual benefits is the production and preparation of food. In comparison to the neighbouring communities like the Nepalis and Bhotias, the Lepcha consume more meat, food and drink more. In every social and religious feast the Lepcha consume large quantity of food and drinks.

The most staple food of the Lepcha is rice. Beside rice they also eat maize (makai), millet (Kudu or marwa), wheat and buck-wheat (phaper). Green vegetables and pulses are also eaten in addition and are regarded as delicacies. Rice and roti (made of makai or kudu and atta of wheat) are eaten every day with vegetable curry, pulses (dal) or meat. They also eat boiled wheat and makai. Roti made of phaper (buck-wheat) is predominantly eaten

by the Lepcha of Zongu because buck-wheat is grown exclusively in this area.

The Lepcha are very fond of drinking chi, a home brewed beer made from fermented millet (*eleusine coracana*). Most of the millet cultivated by the Lepcha are used in making chi. There is hardly any Lepcha who does not have any land under millet cultivation. After fermentation and extracting of the beer the by-product is used as an animal fodder. Perhaps this is the only usefulness of the habit of drinking chi. Even it is seen that the Lepcha grow millet in the land under paddy cultivation. To prepare chi the grain is first separated from the husks and then put in a basket and well washed in a stream. A copper vessel is also well washed. The grain is put in the copper vessel and boiled until all the water is absorbed, stirring the grain all the time with a wooden spoon. The cooked grain then is spread over a mat and mixed with powdered yeast (called marcha) and put into a basket covered with cloth for two or three days; when the smell of fermentation becomes noticeable it is ready for use. The drink is palatable and mild and have a soothing effect. The fermented grain is put into a bamboo container (tungba), then warm water is poured into it and is drunk through a bamboo straw called pipsi.

The chi (millet beer) has little usefulness in the material life of an individual except it controls hunger effectively for some time. Nevertheless, it has a great value in the socio-religious life of the Lepcha. It is needed for making offerings to the super naturals as well as in the monastic and other festivals. A Bonthing (Lepcha

priest) can not think of any ritual or sacrifice without the use of chi. On the occasion of birth, marriage and death ceremonies chi is freely shared and enjoyed. In all sorts of social gatherings the tungbas (bamboo container) filled with fermented millets are exchanged among the participants. The free use of chi has become somewhat a status symbol among the Lepcha and those who want to go up in the estimation of the villagers produce and store millet for such religious and social events. At times they even cultivate millet in the lands where paddy could have been easily grown.

Dress and Ornaments ✓

Until the beginning of this century the Lepcha of Zongu used to weave their own cloth. The Lepcha of Kalimpong had quit weaving even much earlier. Traditional Lepcha dresses were more or less similar both for male and female. It consisted of a cotton vesture called thakradam, which is loosely thrown round the body, leaving one or both arms free. It reaches to the knee and is gathered round the waist. In the case of female it is slightly longer and hence called damvum. Its fabric is close and ornamented with longitudinal blue stripes prettily worked with red and white geometrical designs. But actually since long ago women have completely given up the indigenous type of dress in favour of a Tibetan costume called bakhu which consist of a coloured long sleeved under bodice, and a dark sleeveless over dress, reaching halfway down the calves and fastened with buttons. At present the Lepcha men of Lingdong and Zongu wear a three quarter pyjama and over it a long baggy shirt. Tibetan bakhu still continues to be the favourite dress of Lepcha women in Zongu and Kalimpong. The

Lepcha of Kalimpong especially the Christian, usually wear western type of trousers. They also wear shorts, shirts and footwears. In Kalimpong the daily dress of Lepcha women is not much different from Nepali adult women. A cotton blouse known as tugo, provides the upper garment of Lepcha women while the lower garment called daindyam is an unsewn peice of cotton cloth, worn round the waist like a petticoat.

Lepcha hat (rongchambu) is broad and flat with a small hemispherical crown. It is made of leaves and bamboo strips and looks heavy and clumsy. This is used in the rainy weather. In dry season a small conical hat is worn (runchambu). It is made of cane or plaited strips of bamboo. The former type is used in Zongu and the latter is used in Kalimpong. This is due to the differences in the rainfall.

Lepcha women are very fond of ornaments. Lepcha women of Zongu wear necklaces (feruliak) of cornelian, amber and turquoise brought by the clandenstine traders from Tibet. Kalimpong Lepcha wear silver and gold necklaces or armlets and rings.

In earlier days the ancient Lepcha used to move bare foot, but now they use cheap slippers or shoes available from the Bhotia and Behari traders in the weekly market. Now the Lepcha are completely dependent on market for their woolens and warm clothes, which they buy in cash. But in olden days they used to get it in exchange of agricultural and forest produces from Tibetan traders.