

## **Lepcha Dress: A Marker of Cultural Identity**

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*The unique and typical Lepcha dress is one of the important markers of their cultural identity. The pattern or design of Lepcha dress is sober and elegant. The length and style are gentle and weather friendly. The accessories are simple and need based. All materials and accessories of Lepcha dress are locally available and eco-friendly. Weaving and dying are done most systematically and scientifically. Lepcha women are good weavers and they acquire the skill of weaving all parts of both male and female dress as part of their socialization.*

**Keywords:** Male dress, female dress, hat, knife, bag, bow and arrow, scarf, ornaments, colour, design.

### ***Introduction***

The Lepchas of Darjeeling hills have their unique dress, which they have been using for generations. Their dress is colorful, comfy, soothing, relaxing but attractive, gorgeous and elegant and at the same time without being flashy or showy. Lepcha dress is unique in its style and has no similarities with any other dress. They have developed their dress over long time as per their need with the materials available locally. It is a one of the important markers of Lepcha identity and represents high sense of Lepcha wisdom and culture. The dress of the Lepchas is typical to the community and all materials used in it are collected from the resources found in the forests and local areas.

### ***Male dress***

Lepcha male dress is known as *Dum-praa*. Although *Dum-praa* is only one part of a complete male dress the word is generally used to mean the Lepcha male dress in its completeness. Like the

medieval dress of the Romans and the Greeks the length of Lepcha male dress reaches between knee and ankle. *Dum-praa* is a long flat blanket or shawl which is woven domestically. It is about three and a half feet in width and four to four and a half feet in length. Two pieces cut out of this cloth are joined together width wise to wrap the whole upper portion of the body. It has a dual role; it is used as garment during day time and as blanket at night.

L. S. Tamsang (1998) has mentioned about three types of *Dum-praa* on the basis of varying patterns or designs. They are: (1) *Tagaap*, the oldest design which is woven with floral design, (2) *Khemchu*, a scissors design of inverted and upright V's and (3) *Tamblyoak*, a butterfly design. On the basis of materials used there are another three types of *Dum-praa*: (1) *Koojoo Vaadoah*, the oldest dress made from *Koojoo*, a nettle plant. It is light, soft and of natural plain dark cream colour without any dye or embroidery. It is costly, scarce in supply and thus rarely used. (2) *Thokroah*, stripes on thin and soft fiber with black and white colour without any embroidery. It is multi coloured with typical Lepcha design. (3) *Menchhyo*, a multi-coloured dress with a lavish splash of embroidery at the top from where the *Dum-praa* drops down. The typical Lepcha pattern has vertical lines of varying thickness and colours. After wearing the patterns beautifully drop from the shoulder covering the chest.

Tom Tshering Lepcha and Tar Tshering Lepcha (2010) have mentioned nine types of *Dum-praa* on the basis of their differential patterns. They are: (1) *Tsulot-tyet*, (2) *Tungbrik*, (3) *Tungblyok*, (4) *Poo-chak*, (5) *Sumok*, (6) *Samok* or *Sabok*, (7) *Tungtoksor*, (8) *Aa-shyer* and (9) *Aa-thyap-alyot*. *Tsulot-tyet* is a pattern that carries arrow tips. Bow and arrow are the traditional community weapons, which are widely used in the hunting and fishing. The tips of arrow are poisoned with substances obtained from the poisonous shrubs found in the locality. The tips of the arrow appear as one of the patterns of the Lepcha male dress, *Dum-praa*. *Tungbrik* and *Tungblyok* are the patterns showing the stylist insects and butterfly. Lepchas are traditionally dwellers of forest which is rich in bio-diversity. They live among the insects and butterflies which have become their constant company. The pattern *Poo-chak* shows close association of the Lepchas with bamboo. Their love for bamboo and its multipurpose use are reflected in the bamboo knot

pattern of their dress. *Samok* or *Sabok* is the symbolic representation of traditional arms. When this pattern is used in Lepcha headgear, it is called *Samok Thyaaktuk*. *Tungtoksor* is a design of fern which the Lepchas use in their day to day life as food item. Use of fern as pattern in Lepcha dress shows close association of the community with nature. *Aa-shyer* is a pattern of thin strips of different colours. It has no significance other than the love of the community for colourful dress. *Aa-thyap-alyot* is a design where the ends of the cloth are left with frill of threads.

Lepcha shirt is known as *Tago*. It is loose with high neck at the back side and slightly open in the front. Major part of *Tago*, barring the sleeves and the neck, is covered with *Dum-praa*. *Tago* has a rigid collar which runs around the neck and opens up at the throat in a small V towards the chest. It is made of thick cotton fibre and is mostly white or cream in colour.

The top corners of each end of *Dum-praa* is most scientifically tied with *Zet*, a safety pin made of sharpened bamboo split or with iron or bronze or silver, preferably on the left shoulder of the shirt so as to allow free movement of the other shoulder and both the arms. Lepchas leave one arm, generally the right, arm free.

*Dum-praa* is gathered around the body at the hip and is fastened by a scarf or belt known as *Naamrek*. It is a waist belt made of cotton cloth to tie and hold the upper dress items of the Lepchas.

The Lepcha trouser is known as *Tomoo*. It is three quarter in size and can reach between knee and ankle. It is made of thick cotton fibre and is mostly white or cream in colour. The short size of *Tomoo* helps the Lepchas to work in waterlogged fields and leech infested jungles.

Lepcha shawl is known as *Yaanglo*. It is usually maroon or white in colour. It has no pattern or design. It covers the chest area of the Lepcha men. Lepchas use *Yaanlo* during winter. It is also worn during marriage, rituals, festival, and other social functions. The *Yaanglo* is made gorgeous with embroidery work at both ends.

Lepcha shoe is known as *Dyaang Hlaom* or simply *Hlaom*. But the Lepchas have no tradition of wearing shoes or any other kind of footwear. Even today they remain barefooted in the villages but

while in town they wear the normal shoes available in the market. Lepchas call socks as *Dyaang Syuk*.

*Tanggyip*, a long-handled bag hanging across the shoulder, is a typical marker of Lepcha identity. *Tanggyip* is also known as *Takvyoal*. It has spot marks all over which is known as *Taak Tik*. Lepchas carry all basic support items inside the *Tanggyip*. It is a very useful dress item and remains across the body of the male Lepchas when they move in the village or town during agricultural operation, forest, fishing, hunting, marketing, and so on.

*Thyaaktuk*, the Lepcha hat, marks the uniqueness of the Lepchas. Depending upon the shape and size, Lepcha hat has different names like *Samok Thaaktuk*, *Paapree Thaaktuk*, *Auanaok Thaaktuk*, *Syeraaboo Thaaktuk* and *Soring Thaaktuk*. *Samok Thaaktuk* is an example of fine Lepcha craft. It is unique and takes a lot of time and skill in preparing it. Lepchas use *Ru* or cane and sturdy but small bamboo in preparing *Samok Thaaktuk*. The Lepcha hat is decorated with bird's feathers or tails. *Noombong Pho Takseem*, rocket-shape Drongo's tail is used to decorate hat on special occasions.

*Ban*, a short knife, which is kept at the waist hanging in wood or bamboo sheathe, is another typical dress ornament of the Lepcha male. It is sharp at one edge and blunt at the other side. There are three types of *Ban*: *Ban-pok*, *Ban-mok* and *Ban-Payook*. *Ban-pok* is about a foot and a half to two feet long from the tip to the handle and two to two and a half inches broad. It is slightly curved at the top. *Ban-mok* is gently curved on both sides of the knife at the tip and in earlier days it was used against the enemies. Now it is used as ceremonial knife. *Ban-Payook* is a Lepcha sword, which was used during war earlier. It is not sharply pointed but gently curved at the top front-end side only. The Lepcha *Ban* is of typical shape and has no similarity with any of the weapons of the neighbouring communities. *Ban-pok* is commonly used as dress item by the Lepchas. It has multipurpose use. Lepchas use it for cutting forest, making utensils, constructing house, and agricultural operations. It is also used for protecting themselves from the attack of wild animals or strangers. *Ban-pok* is thus the source of self-confidence and strength. J. D. Hooker has admired the use of *Ban-pok* saying: 'with the simple resource of a plain knife he makes his house and

furnishes yours, with a speed, alacrity, and ingenuity that wile away that well-known long hour when the weary pilgrim frets for his couch' (Hooker 1855). L. S. Tamsang has narrated the unique character of *Ban-pok* observing: 'it is stuck, unlike other knives of the world, the other way around in the scabbard; the blunt part of the Baan faces the front and the sharp cutting edge of the knife is kept, always, towards the back. When a Baan is taken out or unsheathed, the blunt of the knife initially confronts the proposed target' (Tamsang 1998). *Ban-pok* is a part of the ordinary Lepcha dress item and is always kept hanging at the left side of their waist.

*Salee-Taong*, i.e., the bow and arrow are typical items of Lepcha dress. On his way to hunting, Lepcha men carry *Salee*, hanging on shoulder and the quiver containing *Taong*, or arrows on their back. Earlier, Lepchas depended completely on forest for food and the *Salee-Taong* comprised an integral part of Lepcha dress. *Salee*, or bow, is usually made with split bamboo dried and hardened by keeping them in the smoking area. The strings of forest creepers or animal veins are firmly notched at both ends of the bow. The bow is flattened at the middle to withstand the tension from the bend and tapers towards both ends. *Taong*, or arrows, are made with matured dry split bamboos or canes. The *Taong nyak*, or arrow head, is made pointed with iron tip while *Taong gro*, the arrow feather end, is made by tightening the bird's feather in round shaped four different equal parts. Bird's feather is used to confuse the animals or birds during hunting. The *Taong nyak* or the tips of the arrow are made poisonous by collecting poison from the roots of the poisonous plants available locally. Bamboo or cane is used to make the *Taong Saloo*, quiver for resting the arrows at the back of the hunter. *Salee and Taong* are considered as accessory dress items of the Lepchas and compulsory items for the hunters.

A group of moving Lepcha men with their traditional dress comprising of *Dum-praa* with *Zet*, a safety pin; *Naamrek*, a waist belt; *Tago*, the loose shirt; *Tomoo*, Lepcha trouser; *Yaanglo*, Lepcha shawl; *Dyaang Hlaom*, ordinary shoe; *Tanggyip*, long handled bag; *Thyaaktuk*, Lepcha hat; *Ban-pok*, Lepcha knife; *Salee-Taong*, bow and arrow is exceedingly picturesque, elegant and graceful.

### *Female dress*

Lepcha female dress is known as *Dum-dem* or *Dum-bun*. The traditional *Tamaan-dam* is a coarse silk dress and cream in colour. *Dum-dem* or *Dum-bun* or *Tamaan-dam* is worn by covering the body criss-crossing just below neck. It is a long dress which covers the whole body up to feet. Lepcha females do not use colourful dress; they use simple, sober dress and most natural colour. The *Dum-dem* is a flowing dress brightly coloured and smooth as the cloth was derived from cocoons of caterpillars from the forest. The coarse silk threads are dyed and woven into this simple flowing dress.

Females use *Tago*, long sleeved loose blouse, inside the *Dum-dem*. Both *Dum-dem* and *Tago*, the blouse, are plain in colour. *Dum-dem* is normally of light colour while *Tago* is red. Females do not use multi-coloured dress like the ones used by the males.

A married Lepcha lady uses *Jyoordong Tago*, a flowering long sleeve gown over her *Dum-dem* or *Dum-bun* or *Tamaan-dam*. *Jyoordong Tago* is used symbolically to indicate that she is married. Lepchas use either black or blue velvet for *Jyoordong Tago*.

*Dum-dem* or *Dum-bun* or *Tamaan-dam* is tied with *Zet*, a safety pin made of sharpened bamboo split or iron or bronze or silver on both the shoulders with their *Tago* or *Jyoordong Tago*. The *Zet* keeps all the weight of *Dum-dem* or *Dum-bun* or *Tamaan-dam* allowing free movement of both the shoulders and arms.

At the waist, the females use *Naamrek*, a waist belt made of cotton cloth, to tie and hold the upper dress items.

Lepcha females use the hanging portion of the front side of *Naamrek* as bag known as *Dam-pyoom*. It is used to collect fruits, vegetables etc. *Dam-pyoom* is traditionally used by the Lepcha females to greet a person. While greeting a fellow Lepcha the females hold the *Dam-pyoom* with two hands and say *Khaamree*.

A scarf known as *Tarao* is used around the head of the Lepcha females. It is small in size and normally white in colour. *Tarao* is the female counterpart of *Thyaaktuk*, the male hat. It protects the females from cold and dust.

*Ban-hoor*, a small knife is kept at the back of the *Naamrek*. It is used to protect them from animals and enemies. This is the female counterpart of the *Ban-pok*. *Ban-hoor* is used in searching roots,

edibles in the forest and also to cut grass, vegetables, fruits, fire-woods and also used as tool in agricultural operation. Girls are given the *Ban-hoor*, the sickle, when they reach eight or ten, both as a piece of ornament and as a weapon to protect themselves from animals and enemies.

Lepcha females are the lovers of *Pansaan-palan*, jewellery and ornaments. '*Zet*, a pair of silver safety pins to hold *Dam-bun* on both sides of the shoulders; *Kakyoop*, a ring, *Kaawo*, an amulet with *Panzin*, silver chains hooked to the amulet, and especially *Sambraang Boor*, silver chains with a *Sambraang* flower design, fastened by the side of her right waist; *Kakel*, a bangle, and *Takvil Lyaak*, a necklace, made of fine, intricate cane splits, designs, and patterns enhance her charm, beauty, and personality' (Tamsang 1998).

Both the males and females keep long hair but the style of plait distinguishes the sex. The male's plait their hair in single braid while the females plait double braids. Unmarried women's double plaited hair style is called *Chohem Chombi* while the married women's hair style is called *Gi Pamoal Chom Phy oak*. The *Chohem Chombi* is compared with hair crest or *Spangled Drongo* bird's tail while *Gi Pamoal Chom Phy oak* is compared with the black shiny cobra.

A group of Lepcha female with their traditional dress comprising of *Dum-dem* or *Dum-bun* or *Tamaan-dam* with *Tago* or *Jyoordong* *Tago*, loose blouse; *Zet*, a safety pin; *Naamrek*, a waist belt; *Dampyoom*, a pocket; *Tarooa*, a scarf; *Ban-hoor*, Lepcha sickle; *Pansaan-palan*, jewellery and ornaments; *Gi Pamoal Chom Phy oak*, double plaited hair style is exceedingly picturesque, beautiful, gorgeous, polite, elegant, attractive, pretty, cute and charming.

### *Materials used*

Lepchas are the great naturalists of the eastern Himalayan region. They not only know the details of the fauna and flora of the region but use them in their day to day life. All materials used in Lepcha dress are collected and processed from the raw materials available in the local forest. The forest not only supplies fruit, root and other food items but also supplies tough fibers and sinews for weaving

coarse blanket like cloths which the Lepchas use in their upper part of the body. 'They dwelt in pretty cottages, around which they cultivated their plot of ground ...cotton, from which they spun their cloth' (Mainwaring 1876: ix). They collect silk from forest caterpillars for weaving cloths. The various trees, flowers, shrubs, roots, leaves are used for dyeing their cloths. They not only use descent color but the colors are enduring. Roots and leaves of two types of *Syam Rik*, *Rubia Manjith* are mixed with cold water to make red color. This gives permanent red colour for Lepcha *Dum-praa*. Maize is first roasted until it turns black and then the maize is grounded into powder. Black colour is made by mixing the powder with cold water and solution of tender leaves of *Takmel*, a type of forest shrub. This black colour is also used as black ink to write Lepcha manuscripts particularly the *Naamthoo Naamthaar*, the holy manuscripts of the Lepchas. Blue colour is made by mixing the ground matured seeds of *Gyabukhanak*, *Dichroa febriguga*, a shrub, with cold water. Thus, all the three important colors - red, blue and black are made of the natural materials which are locally available. The art of making colours is an integral part of Lepcha culture which is transferred from one generation to another

Lepchas have different types of hats or headgears like *Samok Thaaktuk*, *Paapree Thaaktuk*, *Aanaok Thaaktuk*, *Syeraaboo Thaaktuk* and *Soring Thaaktuk*. These hats are normally made from fine canes, bamboos, straws and leaves and fine velvet cloth.

### **Colors used**

In Lepcha tradition, earlier, only white and blue colours were used in *Dam-praa*. But in recent time, beside white and blue, Lepchas also use red, green, orange and black colours in *Dam-praa*. In Lepcha culture, white colour is a symbol of purity and perfection; blue symbolizes wisdom and progress; red stands for strength and energy; green is used for nature, peace and harmony; orange symbolizes material wealth and black stands for vibration of dignity.

*Dum-dem*, Lepcha female dress, is simple, sober and natural in colour. *Tago*, the blouse, is also plain in colour. Sometimes *Dum-dem* is light in colour while *Tago* is red. Females do not use multi-colored dress like the males.



### *Lepcha dress in the eyes of Western scholars*

One can draw an understanding of different aspects of Lepcha dress from the existing literature, written primarily by the Western scholars, on the community. A. Campbell, for example, describes the Lepcha dress as thus: 'The Lepcha dress is simple and graceful. It consists of a robe of striped red and white cotton cloth crossed over the breast and shoulders, and descending to the calf of the legs, leaving the arms bare; a loose jacket of red cotton cloth is worn over the robe by those who can afford it, and both are bound round the waist by a red girdle; some strings of coloured beads round the neck, silver and coral earrings, a bamboo-bow and quiver of iron-pointed arrows, and a long knife complete the dress of the men. The knife, called "ban" by the Lepchas, and "chipsa" by the Bootias, is constantly worn by the males of all ages and ranks; it hangs on the right side suspended from the left shoulder, and is used for all purposes. With the "ban" the Lepcha clears a space in the forest for his house and cultivation; it is the only tool used by him in building; with it the skins of the animals that fall a prey to his snares and arrows; it is his sword in battle, his table knife, his hoe, spade, and nail pare. Without the "ban" he is helpless to move in the jungle; with it, he is a man of all work: the expertness with which it is used by the boys of a few years' old even is the astonishment of strangers. The women are less neatly dressed than the men: a piece of plain unbleached cotton cloth, or the cloth of the castor oil insectâ •" the Indi â•" rolled round to form a sort of petticoat, with a loose red gown of the same, and a profusion of mock coral and coloured bead necklaces, form their entire wardrobe' (Campbell 1840).

J. D. Hooker spent some lines on the *Dum-dem* and discussed about some important aspects female dress. He wrote: 'When in full dress, the woman's costume is extremely ornamental and picturesque; besides the shirt and petticoat she wears a small sleeveless woolen cloak, of gay pattern, usually covered with crosses, and fastened in front by a girdle of silver chains. Her neck is loaded with silver chains, amber necklaces, etc., and her head adorned with a coronet of scarlet cloth, studded with seed-pearls, jewels, glass beads, etc. The common dress is a long robe of indi, a cloth of coarse silk, spun from the cocoon of a large caterpillar

that is found wild at the foot of the hills, and is also cultivated: it feeds on many different leaves, Sal (Shorea), castor oil etc.'. Hooker also discussed about the hair style of the Lepchas of both males and females as thus: In these decorations, and in their hair, they take some pride, the ladies frequently dressing the latter for the gentlemen: thus, one may often see, the last thing at night, a damsel of discreet port, demurely go behind a young man, unplait his pig-tail, tease the hair, thin it of some of its lively inmates, braid it up for him, and retire. The women always wear two braided pig-tails, and it is by this they are most readily distinguished from their effeminate-looking partners, who wear only one' (Hooker 1855).

L. A. Waddel has discussed about *Dum-dem*, the female dress, hair style, scarf and jewelry. He writes: 'the indoor dress of the women is a close-fitting gown without sleeves, and this was probably their full dress originally. But now, for out of doors, they wear over all a long, loose, wrapper like white cotton gown with long wide sleeves turned up in Tibetan fashion at the cuffs to show the red lining—a dress which effectually masks the figure and has little grace in its drapery. Their hair is parted in the middle and done up into two pig-tails which are usually gathered in a knot on the crown and secured with a silver pin. And over the head is thrown a gaudy silk handkerchief, drooping negligently over the neck, somewhat in the fashion of a Spanish peasant-girl's. Around the neck they wear as much jewelry as they can afford. Their stocking less foot is unshod'. In another place, he writes about *Dum-dem*, the female dress, hair style, scarf and jewelry as thus: 'the indoor dress of the women is a close-fitting gown without sleeves, and this was probably their full dress originally. But now, for out of doors, they wear over all a long, loose, wrapper like white cotton gown with long wide sleeves turned up in Tibetan fashion at the cuffs to show the red lining—a dress which effectually masks the figure and has little grace in its drapery. Their hair is parted in the middle and done up into two pig-tails which are usually gathered in a knot on the crown and secured with a silver pin. And over the head is thrown a gaudy silk handkerchief, drooping negligently over the neck, somewhat in the fashion of a Spanish peasant-girl's. Around the neck they wear as much jewellery as they can afford. Their stocking less foot is unshod' (Waddel 1899).

Lepchas, particularly the females, are expert in weaving both Dum - praa, their men's dress; *Tunggip*, a long-handled bag; *Thyaaktuk*, the Lepcha hat etc. for the male members of the family. Almost all houses have their weaving apparatus and the females weave during their leisure time and it is a part of their household task. 'The women weave at the looms their grandmothers used, and, if they will only keep to the good stuffs and dyes of the old weavers, produced excellent work. A weaving school in Sikkim, and a few European looms and spinning wheels, introduced by missionaries throughout the district, have only affected the few at present. The ordinary Lepcha and Bhutia woman and her Nepali sister are quite content to work in the old ways, and spend months over a gaudy Lepcha chadar or a Nepali cloth, which will certainly, at least in lasting wear, repay the long time spent on it' (O'Malley 1907).

Fred Pinn has noted down the material used, the colour, length of shirt, belt, safety pin and other details of Lepcha dress. He has observed that the Lepcha dress 'is nearly the same for male and female, except that the latter wear it rather larger in the skirt; its material is of thick cotton or woolen, generally of its natural colour, but occasionally dyed blue; it consists of a kind of tunic reaching to the knees, and fastened on each shoulder by a metal skewer, sometimes of silver, leaving the turn of the shoulders and the arms bare and confined by a belt round the waist; to this, such as can afford it, add a kind of jacket, or short shirt with loose sleeves' (Pinn 1986).

### *Conclusion*

Lepcha dress is unique, significantly different even from its neighbouring communities, and is, therefore, one of the identifying markers of the community culture. Dress represents the culture of any community. The pattern or design of Lepcha dress is sober and elegant. The color used is typical for the community and is eye soothing. The length and style are gentle and weather friendly. The accessories are simple and need based. Weaving and dying are done most systematically and scientifically. Materials used are eco-friendly and locally available. All materials and accessories of Lepcha dress are available and collected from the local areas.

Forest provides them cotton, dye and everything they need for weaving the dress at home. Lepcha women are the good weavers and they acquire the skill of weaving all parts of both male and female dress. Lepchas do not depend on the market for the supply of any item of their dress. This not only establishes close association of the Lepchas with the forest but also shows the knowledge of the community about the forest. This supports that the Lepchas are the original inhabitants of the place.

Three concluding observations are: (1) Lepcha dress marks the distinctiveness of the community; looking at the dress one can make out the person is Lepcha; (2) the technology of dress making is pristine and completely indigenous and the Lepchas have kept it unaffected by the modern market forces; and (3) the collection of materials from the nature around marks their symbiosis with nature.

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