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Tendong Lho Rum Faat of the Lepchas of Sikkim: Religious Belief to a State Event

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Abstract

Sikkim, an Indian northeastern state, boasts a vibrant cultural tapestry, significantly enriched by the Lepcha community. Indigenous to Sikkim, Darjeeling, Kalimpong, and parts of Bhutan and Nepal, the Lepchas are central to the region's heritage. Historically nature worshipers, the Lepchas adopted Buddhism under Bhutia rule, leading to a unique blend of both traditions in their contemporary religious practices. A prime example is *Tendong Lho Rum Faat*, a pivotal religious festival. Rooted in Lepcha mythology, its honors Mount Tendong, believed to have saved them from a great flood.

Traditionally observed in July-August, *Tendong Lho Rum Faat* gained state recognition and is now celebrated annually on August 8th. The festival features sacred rituals led by Bongthings and Muns, embodying the Lepchas' deep reverence for nature, ancestral spirituality, and cultural identity. This paper explores *Tendong Lho Rum Faat*'s religious and cultural significance, examining its evolution into a dynamic identity marker. It fosters Lepcha pride, ensures intergenerational knowledge transfer, and positions Sikkim as a proponent of indigenous culture and ecological wisdom, especially given the government's role in its transition from a religious observance to a state-wide cultural event.

Keywords: Cultural heritage, Lepchas of Sikkim, Religious and Folk belief, Ritual and Festival, Sikkim government

Introduction

The Lepchas, often referred to as the "Rongpa" (the people of the peaks) or "Mutanchi Rongkup" (Mother's beloved people), are the indigenous community of Sikkim, a land nestled in the eastern Himalayas. Their history in the region is ancient, predating the arrival of the Bhutias and Nepalis, and their culture is deeply intertwined with the pristine natural environment of the mountains, forests, and rivers that define their homeland. At present-day majority of Lepchas of Sikkim are adherers of Buddhism, while a part of them are adherers of Christianity. However, traditionally nature worshipers, the Lepchas possess a profound reverence for nature, believing spirits inhabit every element of their surroundings – from towering peaks to gurgling streams. Their traditional settlements are often found in the higher reaches of valleys, reflecting a lifestyle closely connected to the rhythm of the ecological system (Foning, 1987) ^[4]. The Lepcha society is characterized by a strong sense of community, respect for elders, and a rich oral tradition of storytelling, folklore, and spiritual narratives. Their traditional attire, cuisine, music, and intricate handicrafts further highlight the uniqueness of their cultural identity, which they have diligently strived to preserve amidst the influences of neighboring communities and modernization.

Lepcha religious activities are deeply rooted in their animistic beliefs, where the spiritual and natural worlds are inextricably linked. Before the advent of Buddhism and Christianity, the Lepchas practiced Bongthingism or Munism, an indigenous belief system centered on the worship of nature spirits and ancestors (Foning, 1987; Nebesky-Wojkowitz, 1956) ^[4]. They believe in a pantheon of benevolent and malevolent deities residing in mountains, rivers, caves, and forests. Sacred groves are common, designated as abodes for specific spirits and often protected from human interference.

Rituals and ceremonies are frequently performed to appease these spirits, seek their blessings, or ward off misfortune. These practices are typically led by traditional shamans or priests, known as "Bongthings" or "Muns," who act as intermediaries between the human and spirit worlds. Their rituals often involve chanting, offerings of local produce, incense, all aimed at maintaining harmony with nature and ensuring the well-being of the community. Even with the widespread adoption of Buddhism (primarily Nyingma school) and Christianity over centuries, many traditional Munistic practices and beliefs continue to be observed, often blending seamlessly with newer religious forms, underscoring the enduring power of their ancestral faith and their profound respect for the natural world as a divine entity (Subba, 1999) ^[11].

Among the numerous festivals observed by the Lepchas, the Tendong Lho Rum Faat festival stands out as one of the most significant and spiritually charged. This annual festival, typically celebrated in August 8 every year, is a powerful reaffirmation of the Lepcha people's history, their connection to their sacred geography, and their deep gratitude for survival (Sikkim Tourism, n.d.). The name itself, "Tendong Lho Rum Faat," roughly translates to "the prayer of the Tendong Mountain." At the heart of the festival is the veneration of Mount Tendong, a majestic peak located in Namchi district of southern Sikkim, which holds an unparalleled place in Lepcha mythology.

According to ancient Lepcha folklore, a catastrophic flood once threatened to engulf the entire world. It was during this cataclysmic event that their ancestors sought refuge on the summit of Mount Tendong. The mountain miraculously rose, extending its peak above the surging waters, thus saving the Lepcha people from extinction (Foning, 1987; Subba, 1999) ^{[4][11]}. The Tendong Lho Rum Faat festival commemorates this divine act of salvation, serving as an annual expression of thanksgiving to the mountain for its protective power and benevolence.

The celebrations involve elaborate rituals performed by Bongthings and Muns, who lead the community in prayers and offerings at sacred sites, including the Tendong Hill itself. Traditional songs and dances, unique to the Lepcha community, are performed, narrating their history, myths, legends and reverence for nature. The festival is also a time for community gathering, feasting, and the reaffirmation of cultural identity (Sikkim Tourism, n.d.). It is not merely a religious observance but a cultural spectacle that reinforces the collective memory of the Lepcha people, ensuring that the ancient stories and the profound significance of Mount Tendong are passed down through generations. Through the *Tendong Lho Rum Faat* festival, the Lepchas not only honor their past but also reiterate their commitment to preserving their unique heritage and their sacred bond with the natural world.

Objectives

1. To study the religious and cultural significance of the festival.
2. To explore government initiatives in relation to the festival's celebration by promoting the community's identity as well as the geographical identity.

This paper is an attempt to understand the Tendong Lho Rumfaat festival of the Lepchas of Sikkim as a whole and the relevance of its celebration in present day's context.

Materials and Methods

This research is based on primary as well as secondary data. To collect the primary data, an extended ethnography was conducted in the state of Sikkim between May 2025 and August 2025. During this time Lepcha populated areas of Mangan and Dozngu in northern Sikkim, and Dhenjung and Namchi in southern Sikkim were visited to interview experts and community members to understand the religious and cultural significance of the festival through historical time and at present-day. Further, the most significant religious site Tendong in Namchi district was visited by the first author on the day of the festival this year that is on 8th August'25. Secondary data are collected from the government sources (digital and manual), related books, journal articles, popular media and World Wide Web sources relevant to the region, community and celebration of the festival.

Result and discussion

Religiously, *Tendong Lho Rum Faat* is primarily an act of deep reverence and gratitude. The festival reenacts the ancient Lepcha myth of the great deluge, during which their ancestors found refuge on Mount Tendong as it miraculously rose from the flood waters, saving humanity from extinction (Foning, 1987) ^[4]. This foundational myth establishes Mount Tendong not merely as a geographical feature, but as a divine protector and a source of life. The festival's rituals, led by indigenous priests (Bongthings and Muns), are animistic in nature, focusing on appeasing the mountain deities and other nature spirits, and seeking their continued blessings for prosperity, good harvest, and protection from calamities (Subba, 1999) ^[11]. It is a public reaffirmation of their ancient faith, which posits an animated universe where spirits reside in all natural phenomena, and harmony with these spirits is paramount for human well-being. The offerings, prayers, and ceremonial dances are direct spiritual communications, ensuring the spiritual balance between the human and natural worlds. This makes Tendong Lho Rum Faat a vital continuity of Lepcha spiritual heritage, keeping their indigenous belief system alive amidst the influences of Buddhism and Christianity (Nebesky-Wojkowitz, 1956). Culturally, the festival is a powerful vehicle for the transmission of Lepcha traditions, language, and social values. It serves as an annual gathering that reinforces community bonds, allowing generations to reconnect and collectively engage with their shared heritage. The distinctive traditional attire worn during the celebrations, the preparation of indigenous foods and beverages, and the display of traditional handicrafts and performance of traditional songs and dances all contribute to a rich cultural tapestry that is both educational and celebratory. Furthermore, the festival's focus on nature's bounty and protection underscores core Lepcha values of environmental stewardship and sustainable living, reflecting their intrinsic understanding of ecological interconnectedness (Foning, 1987) ^[4].

Over time, the Tendong Lho Rum Faat festival has transcended its original scope as a purely religious event to become a potent identity marker, not just for the Lepcha community but for the entire Sikkim region. This evolution is driven by several factors, including the increasing awareness of indigenous rights, cultural revitalization movements, and strategic governmental

promotion.

For the Lepcha community, the festival is arguably their most prominent and unifying cultural expression. In a multicultural state like Sikkim, where Lepchas are a minority, representing only 7.94%, alongside Bhutias and Nepalis, Tendong Lho Rum Faat provides a crucial platform to assert and celebrate their distinct ethno-linguistic identity (Subba, 1999) [11]. It fosters a collective sense of belonging and pride, particularly among younger generations who might otherwise be drawn away from traditional practices. The annual observance of the festival reinforces historical memory, reaffirms ancestral connections to the land, and symbolizes the resilience of Lepcha culture in the face of modernization. It is a declaration of who they are – the original inhabitants, deeply connected to the land and its ancient stories. The ritual ascent to Tendong Hill, often involving community members from various villages, physically and symbolically unites the community, making the mountain a literal and metaphorical anchor of their shared identity. For the Sikkim region, the festival is increasingly recognized as a unique cultural asset that contributes significantly to the state's diverse heritage. As Sikkim positions itself as a destination for cultural and eco-tourism, festivals like Tendong Lho Rum Faat offer an authentic glimpse into its indigenous roots. The government's initiatives to declare it a state holiday and promote it through tourism channels elevate its status beyond a community event to a regional landmark (Sikkim Tourism, n.d.). By showcasing the festival, Sikkim highlights its commitment to preserving and celebrating its indigenous populations, thereby distinguishing itself from other Himalayan regions. It becomes a testament to Sikkim's policy of "unity in diversity," where the unique

cultural expressions of each community are valued and promoted as integral components of the state's overall identity. In this sense, Tendong Lho Rum Faat serves as a powerful symbol of Sikkim's pluralistic cultural landscape and its rich, living traditions, drawing attention to the state's deep connection to nature and its enduring indigenous legacies.

In its contemporary manifestation, the Tendong Lho Rum Faat festival has undergone a fascinating evolution, transitioning from an exclusively religious and ethno-specific event to a broader community celebration, albeit with its spiritual core meticulously preserved. While the fundamental rituals and reverence for Mount Tendong remain central, the festival's public profile and participation have expanded significantly, reflecting both the changing socio-cultural landscape of Sikkim and strategic governmental efforts towards cultural preservation and promotion.

Today, the Tendong Lho Rum Faat festival is celebrated with a blend of ancient rites and modern outreach. The traditional religious ceremonies, led by the Bongthangs and Muns, continue to take place. Religiously, the sacred Tendong Hill in Namchi district situated in southern Sikkim is the central place of rituals and rites. The Lepcha community show utmost dedication for this festival, proved by the fact that to reach the site of ritualistic activity, one has to trek three hours through dense forest. This track becomes more challenging due to heavy rainfall in the area during this time, making the way slippery. Getting lost from leaches during this track is a common event. Despite these challenges, a huge number of Lepchas, not only from Sikkim but also from Kalingpong and other areas take part in this pilgrimage track every year.

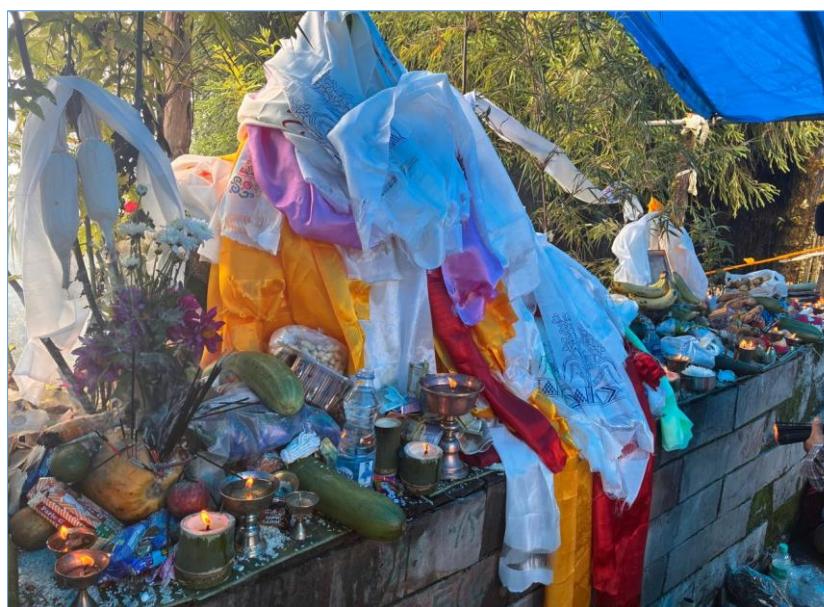


Fig 1: Offering at the central place of worship of Tendong Lho Rum Faat during the Festival, Tendong, Namchi district, Sikkim.
Image Courtesy: Dr Ajanta Das.

The central place of worship is situated at the top of the hill (figure 1), which is a stone slab, regarded as the witness of the event when the community was saved by the mountain Tendong. All the ritualistic activities are conducted in front of this slab by the Bongthangs and Muns, that involve prayers, offerings of local grains,

flowers, food, brews, and holy water, and the recitation of ancient chants invoking the mountain's protection and blessings for the community and the state (Sikkim Express, 2023). Devotes also pay respect to another longitudinal stone pillar placed few feet away from the stone slab. These sacred acts maintain the festival's

spiritual authenticity and its deep connection to Lepcha ancestral beliefs (Foning, 1987) [4].

However, the contemporary scenario also sees the festival transform into a vibrant public spectacle.

Beyond the sacred sites, organized events now take place in various towns and villages, particularly in the Namchi district where Tendong is situated and in Gangtok, capital of Sikkim (figure 2). These public celebrations feature a rich display of Lepcha cultural heritage, including traditional dances like the *Zo Mal Bok* and the Tendong Paat dance, performed by community members in vibrant traditional attire (Sikkim Tourism, n.d.). Traditional Lepcha music, often accompanied by indigenous

instruments, fills the air, and stalls showcasing traditional Lepcha handicrafts, cuisine, and local brews like Tongba and Chang are common, creating a festive atmosphere that invites participation from both Lepchas and non-Lepchas alike. This year a grand celebration was held in Manan Kendra, Gangtok in the presence of the Chief Minister of Sikkim on the day of the festival. Community members from all over Sikkim gathered one day in advance for this celebration. The festival has become an opportunity for the community to showcase its unique identity, educate younger generations about their heritage, and foster a sense of collective pride.



Fig 2: Community member gathered in Namchi in traditional attire before their journey to Gangtok for government's event, Namchi, Sikkim. Image Courtesy. Dr. Ajanta Das.

The shift towards a broader community celebration has been significantly bolstered by the proactive intervention and initiatives of the Government of Sikkim. Recognizing the immense cultural and historical importance of Tendong Lho Rum Faat, the state government has taken several steps to preserve, promote, and elevate the festival's status.

Firstly, the government has officially declared Tendong Lho Rum Faat a state holiday on 8th of August, allowing for wider participation and recognition (Government of Sikkim, n.d.). This declaration not only facilitates attendance but also underscores the festival's significance within the broader Sikkimese cultural calendar.

Secondly, financial and logistical support is often provided for organizing the various events associated with the festival. This includes funding for cultural troupes, setting up public stages, and ensuring infrastructure for attendees (Sikkim Express, 2023). These initiatives help to professionalize the public aspects of the celebration, making them more accessible and appealing to a wider audience, including tourists.

Furthermore, governmental bodies, often in conjunction with Lepcha cultural organizations, actively engage in documenting and promoting the festival. This includes the production of informational materials, media coverage, and the integration of the festival into Sikkim's tourism promotion campaigns (Sikkim Tourism, n.d.). By projecting *Tendong Lho Rum Faat* as a unique cultural attraction, the government aims to draw national and international attention, thereby contributing to local

economies through tourism and reinforcing the festival's significance. This strategic promotion helps in the transition of the festival from an internal community event to an outwardly visible cultural landmark, fostering inter-community understanding and appreciation for Sikkim's diverse heritage. The continued support ensures that while the sacred essence of the festival remains untouched, its reach and impact as a celebration of Lepcha identity and Sikkimese unity continue to grow.

It is worth mentioning here that the fourth edition of the Tendong Knowledge Series, a precursor to the Tendong Lho Rum Faat 2025 celebrations, on 3rd August'25 commenced at Chintan Bhawan, Gangtok, under the theme "Sikkim@50: Indigenous Wisdom and Heritage as Guides to Sustainable and Resilient Futures" (www.sikkim.gov.in). Organized by the Tendong Lho Rum Faat Celebration Committee-2025 (TLRFCC-2025), the event brought together scholars, cultural custodians, and government officials, including Minister NB Dahal (Chairman, TLRFCC-2025) and Minister Pintso Namgyal Lepcha (President, TLRFCC-2025). The session began with a traditional ritual offering by Bongthing Nim Tshering Lepcha, followed by a cultural performance, a tribute to Padma Shri GS Lama, and welcoming remarks. Speakers elaborated on the festival's significance and the series' role in showcasing Lepcha scholarship. Minister Pintso Namgyal Lepcha emphasized intergenerational knowledge sharing, urged students to engage in deeper academic inquiry, and assured full government support for preserving identity. He also

announced upcoming events like cultural showcases, literary tributes, and interfaith prayers for global peace, along with plans to honor literary figures. Academic presentations covered topics such as landslide prevention using indigenous plants, Lepcha fertility and mortality rates, and Sikkim's tangible and intangible heritage. The event also saw the introduction of the Renjyong Mutanchi Rong Tarjum (RMRT) and the Sikkim Lepcha Association's achievements. A major highlight was the launch of the Rong Learning Mobile App for Lepcha language preservation and a children's book, "Eetdeysa Noor," promoting indigenous narratives. The event was attended by numerous dignitaries, reflecting broad support for the initiative.

The Tendong Knowledge Series, as described, offers a fascinating lens through which to critically examine the evolving nature of the Tendong Lho Rum Faat festival, particularly concerning the influence of government strategy, its historical trajectory, and its potent role in shaping community and regional identity.

The direct involvement of high-ranking government ministers (NB Dahal, Pintso Namgyal Lepcha) as Chair and President of the TLRFCC–2025 clearly signifies a deliberate and comprehensive government strategy towards the Tendong Lho Rum Faat festival. This is no longer merely a community-led observance; it is a state-supported cultural initiative (Sikkim Tourism, n.d.). The theme "Sikkim@50: Indigenous Wisdom and Heritage as Guides to Sustainable and Resilient Futures" is particularly telling. It reframes the festival's inherent indigenous wisdom from a localized cultural practice into a resource for addressing contemporary, global challenges like sustainability and resilience. This move is significant as it elevates the perceived value of Lepcha indigenous knowledge beyond mere heritage preservation to a practical utility in modern governance and development (Carvalho, 2021) [2].

The announcement of a series of events including cultural showcases, literary tributes, and interfaith prayers demonstrates a conscious effort to broaden the festival's appeal and inclusivity. Interfaith prayers, especially for global peace, expand the festival's scope beyond its ethnic and animistic roots, aligning it with universal humanitarian values. This might be seen as a way to integrate the festival into the broader multicultural fabric of Sikkim and India, appealing to a wider demographic while retaining a connection to its core message. However, it also raises questions about whether this expansion risks diluting the festival's unique indigenous spiritual essence by universalizing its message. While fostering inclusivity is laudable, the balance between preserving the specificity of religious practice and promoting broader cultural appreciation is a delicate one.

The full government support for students and the emphasis on academic inquiry into traditional and modern disciplines, as articulated by Minister Pintso Namgyal Lepcha, reflects a strategic investment in the intellectual capital of the Lepcha community. This encourages formalized study and documentation of indigenous knowledge, moving it from oral tradition to academic discourse (Battiste, 2002) [1]. The launch of the Rong Learning Mobile App and the children's book "Eetdeysa Noor" further underscore a proactive, tech-savvy government approach to language and cultural

preservation, aiming for intergenerational knowledge transfer in a contemporary format.

Historically, Tendong Lho Rum Faat emerged from deep-rooted animistic beliefs and a foundational myth of survival (Foning, 1987) [4]. Its journey has been from a localized, spiritually intense rite of thanksgiving to a more publicly celebrated, government-endorsed cultural event. However, this evolution is observed in many other indigenous festivals globally which has experienced such transitions as states recognize their cultural and economic value (Smith, 2009). The current "Knowledge Series" adds another layer, transforming the festival's preparatory phase into an intellectual and academic forum. This intellectualization allows indigenous wisdom to be analyzed, validated, and disseminated through modern academic frameworks, potentially increasing its influence beyond traditional circles.

For the Lepcha community, the festival, augmented by initiatives like the Knowledge Series, is becoming an increasingly powerful identity marker. In a multi-ethnic state, having their unique festival publicly acknowledged, supported, and even intellectualized by the government reinforces their sense of cultural distinctiveness and pride (Subba, 1999) [11]. The emphasis on "Indigenous Wisdom and Heritage" directly validates their traditional knowledge systems, counteracting any historical marginalization. The involvement of Lepcha scholars (Dr. Laydong Lepcha, Dr. Mongfing Lepcha, Mr. Rimp Dorjee Lepcha) in academic presentations elevates community members as experts, fostering intellectual leadership from within.

Moreover, the initiatives like the Rong Learning Mobile App (RMRT) and children's books directly address the vital issue of language and cultural continuity, which are fundamental to identity (Fishman, 1991) [3]. By providing digital tools and educational resources, the government and affiliated organizations are empowering the community to proactively preserve and transmit its identity to future generations in a way that resonates with contemporary life. The celebration of literary stalwarts and the achievements of organizations like RMRT further cement a positive, forward-looking narrative of Lepcha identity, blending respect for the past with aspirations for the future. In essence, Tendong Lho Rum Faat is evolving into a multifaceted symbol: a reminder of ancient origins, a celebration of present vitality, and a beacon for future cultural continuity for the Lepcha people.

Conclusion

Although historically, Tendong Lho Rum Faat emerged from deep-rooted nature worshiping beliefs and a foundational myth of survival of the Lepchas, it is taking a turn and becoming the most popular festival celebrated in the region by the community. Sikkim government has taking initiative on promoting the festival which eventually has led to the promotion of the rich cultural heritage of the Lepchas. In an addition to it, the government is found focusing on the environment's role in human survival stressing the importance of protecting Sikkim's natural heritage. The Tendong Lho Rum Faat Celebration Committee (TLRFCC) is very much active in this regard, which provides a platform to discuss and bring together scholars, cultural custodians, and government representatives to deliberate on the contemporary

relevance of indigenous knowledge and heritage. In today's context, the festival is reflecting an acknowledgement to the bond between human and nature highlighting its spiritual, ecological and cultural importance.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest. Verbal consent has been taken from all the participants to include their names and other information.

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