

# Culture, Tradition, and Indigenous Practices Among the Dukpa Community of Buxa Hills

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## Abstract:

There are 195 countries in the world with an estimated population of just over 8 billion people. It is estimated that there are more than 370 million people, recognized as indigenous people, spread across 70 countries worldwide. The indigenous people practice their own unique traditions, from dress to festivals to food and so on. It is their unique traditional practices which make them distinct from the mainstream societies in one way or the other. These indigenous communities have their own culture and practices, their own values, morals, ideologies and belief systems. One such indigenous community is the Dukpa community. The Dukpas (or Drukpas) are one of the oldest Buddhist tribal communities. The Dukpas primarily found in the Himalayan Region, with the majority residing in Bhutan and in the Indian states of Sikkim, Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Assam and West Bengal. In West Bengal, they are mostly concentrated in the districts of Darjeeling and Alipurduar. This study explores the indigenous practices of the Dukpa community, focusing on the villages of Lepchakha, Tashigaon and Buxa, located in the Buxa Hills Region of the Alipurduar district. The researcher tries to find out various cultural aspects of the Dukpas – such as their traditional dress, festivals, indigenous medicinal knowledge, their overall lifestyle and challenges. The central goal of this study is to understand how the Dukpas maintain their cultural identity in the face of modern pressures, everyday crisis and geographic isolation. This study highlights the issues related to infrastructure, access to education and healthcare and so on. This study also aims to raise awareness about the importance of protecting indigenous knowledge systems and thus preventing such communities from being extinct from the face of the Earth. Through this Study, the researcher tries to highlight the deprived living conditions of the community who are often overlooked, and also to show the beauty of their daily life.

**Keywords:** Indigenous Communities, Dukpa Community, Cultural Identity, Indigenous Practices, Traditional Knowledge, Cultural Resilience

## Introduction:

The Dukpas are an ancient Buddhist tribal group primarily residing in Bhutan and parts of India. The word “Dukpa” comes from the Dzongkha word, the official language of Bhutan, “Drugpa” where “Drug” means “Dragon” and “Pa” means “resident”, meaning that the “Dukpa are the People of Thunder Dragon”. Dragon is also their symbol of power and spirituality. They follow Tibetan Buddhism and their religious practices are deeply connected with everyday life – from festivals and rituals to moral conduct and social ceremonies. The Dukpa community speaks Dzongkha, the official language of Bhutan, and in India many also speak Nepali and other tribal languages. Their traditional dress includes colorful woven garments,

especially during their traditional ceremonies and festivals. Men typically wear “Gho” (a robe-like outfit), while women wear “Kira” (a long woven dress worn with a belt). The Dukpas celebrate major Buddhist festivals like Losar (Tibetan New Year), Buddha Purnima, the Birthday of Guru Rimpoche, the descending day of Lord Buddha from heaven and others. Economically, they engage in subsistence agriculture, tourism-related work and livestock rearing. Socially, they live in close-knit villages with strong community values and a sense of collective responsibility.

The Dukpa can be clearly identified as an ethnic community because they fulfill the key characteristics that define ethnic groups, namely shared ancestry, culture, language, religion and a strong sense of group identity. They trace their origin to Bhutan and have a common Mongoloid ancestry, distinguishing them physically and culturally from many other communities in India. Their language, religion, cultural traditions like festivals, dress and rituals are passed down through generations. Their endogamous marriage practices, distinct religious identity and continued settlement in the hilly regions further strengthen their ethnic boundaries. The Dukpas are not merely an isolated tribal group; they embody a vibrant ethnic tradition, deeply rooted in Tibetan Buddhism and closely tied to the Himalayan ecological landscape. Despite modern changes, the Dukpas try to maintain their cultural continuity and collective memory, which reinforces their identity as an ethnic community within India’s diverse social landscape. The majority of the Dukpas originally came from Bhutan, while only a few of them migrated from the Kalimpong and Darjeeling regions in present day West Bengal. These movements happened over time due to religious, cultural and environmental factors. In Darjeeling, people commonly refer to the Bhutias, who are generally either Tibetan immigrants or are from different parts of the Himalayan region. However, the term Bhutia does not represent one single group, but it is an umbrella term that includes a variety of subgroups such as:

- The Ladakhi Bhutias from Ladakh
- The Arunachali Bhutias from Arunachal Pradesh
- The Bhutanese Bhutias, which include the Dukpas
- The Sikkimese Bhutias, often called Denzongpas, and
- Tibetan refugees, especially those who came in large numbers after 1959

Migration of Bhutias into the regions of Darjeeling and Sikkim began somewhere around the 13th century. It is believed that the Dukpas also started to settle in the Darjeeling area during the same time period. Later in 1950, through a Presidential Notification, the government of India officially recognized certain ethnic groups as Scheduled Tribes in the state of West Bengal. This included the Lepchas, Bhutias (which includes the Dukpas), Sherpas, Yolmo/Kagatay and the Totos. Despite this recognition, the Dukpas in Darjeeling are still very less in number compared to other tribal communities. They are primarily settled in areas such as Lamahatta, Ghoom, Jorebuglow, and more isolated places like Reshihart and Barbatey. In North Bengal, especially in the Alipurduar district, the Dukpa community resides in hilly, forest covered areas. These include the high altitude villages of Buxaduar, Chunabhati, Tashigaon, Lepchakha and Adma.

### **Dukpas in West Bengal**

In North Bengal, the Dukpa Community is found in two main regions: the Darjeeling hilly areas and the Buxa area of Alipurduar district. In the Darjeeling districts (Lamahatta, Ghoom, etc), the Dukpas have better access to education, healthcare, transportation and connectivity with the low lands. But the situation in Buxa area is not at all similar to that of Darjeeling. The areas of Buxa, Lepchakha, Tashigaon, etc are far more remote, situated in the hilly areas. All of these fall under the Buxa Forest Reserve, which is a

geographically isolated land, with very poor infrastructure of every kind, no proper transportation facility, water scarcity, electricity issues, lack of primary education or medical facilities – the list goes on. Although tourism is growing in the Buxa region, there is no visible profit to the majority of the Dukpa community. They mostly serve as local guides, porters, homestay owners, cultivators, etc. Since this area falls under the jurisdiction of the Forest Department, this adds to complexity to the flexibility of the Dukpas, about what the community can do with their own lands. Speaking of the Dukpa community of the Buxaduar area, especially of the villages of Lepchakha, Tashigaon and nearby areas of the Buxa Fort, it is worth mentioning that the people are very closely connected to nature. Their indigenous practices and traditions are much unique – their dress, festivals, food, religious education, indigenous medicine are far more different than the ones in the Darjeeling area or even the low lands.

### **Literature Review:**

Rai and Nath describe the role of ethnic groups in conserving the biodiversity in and around the areas of their habitat in their work “The Role of Ethnic and Indigenous People of India and their Culture in the Conservation of Biodiversity”. They explain how plants are conserved in the natural habitat by the tribes as home of Gods and Goddesses. For example, Arjun tree is believed to be the home of Lord Brahma by many tribes in Central India. They also preserve plants as source of food and herbs as antidote of snake bite and scorpion sting used by tribal healers. At the end, they conclude by saying that efforts for conservation have to be made due to rapid industrialization. Conservation of diversity, sustainable management and preservation of flora and fauna are a desperate need of this century.

Roy (2015) in her work “History of Presence of Dukpa Tribe in Buxa” has conducted a detailed study on the history and origin of the Dukpa community. She also elaborates the history of Lepchakha village. In her work, she concludes that the indigenous communities, their traditional values and cultural systems are “at the door of abolition”. Globalization is one of the leading factors behind continuous changes and modifications. She says there is a need to address and value the tribal cultures in order to protect our environment.

Roy (2019) in his work “DUKPA, the vanishing TRIBE”, has mainly focused on the challenges faced by the Dukpa community. Though he has included the community as a whole, his primary focus remains on those living in the remote, hard to reach areas. He mentions about the inaccessibility of basic needs like education, sanitation, health assistance, pure drinking water, hospitals and other medical facilities. Roy also states that how this community is “politically and demographically attached to India... isolated from mainstream society and culture of nation.” He urges that the central government, state governments, and other authorities to take adequate steps to uplift the socioeconomic condition of this community.

Dukpa (2021) has evaluated the present situation of the Dukpa Community in the Darjeeling hills and Buxaduar region, their social customs and practices. In his work, he has mainly focused on the history of the Dukpas and their social customs and practices. In his analysis, he concluded that there is a “potential threat or danger to the Dukpa community especially in the Buxaduar region”. He also says if necessary steps are not taken, this community might even face extinction, in spite of having rich cultural heritage and traditions.

Kumar in his study (2024) “Problems and Challenges of Tribal Community in India” discusses the problems faced by the tribal communities in India. He says that these tribes face problems like land alienation, poverty, literacy and loss of cultural identity. The study points out that while tribal groups are constitutionally protected as Scheduled Tribes, they continue to suffer from economic exploitation,

inadequate health services and limited educational access. He also emphasizes that migration, unemployment, alcohol addiction etc. are modern challenges that these tribal communities face. He concludes by saying that proper health plans, organic farming and educational facilities will help uplift the deprived condition of these marginal communities.

Choudhury and Pandey (2025) in their work “Indian Indigenous Knowledge and Sustainable Practices: A Pathway to Ecological Balance and Environmental Sustainability” have tried to focus on how Indian Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IIKS) works on managing natural resources and ecological balance. These knowledge systems offer sustainable practices that promote harmony between human societies and the environment. This also focuses on how agriculture, water management, biodiversity conservation and community based programs can actually be sustainable and environment friendly.

### **Objective of the Study**

1. To explore the indigenous practices of the Dukpa community in the particular area.
2. To know the impact of modernization, tourism and migration on the traditional lifestyles and youth within the Dukpa community.
3. To analyze the challenges faced by the Dukpa community in terms of education, infrastructure and access to information.

### **Area of Study**

The present study is conducted in 3 small villages named Lepchakha, Tashigaon and Buxa Village. These villages are situated in the hilltop of Buxa Tiger Reserve. Among these three villages, Lepchakha shares the nearest proximity with the international borders of India and Bhutan, just 2 to 3 km away. Lepchakha is situated at an approximate altitude of 3500 ft., meanwhile the altitude of Tashigaon and Buxa Village are 4500 ft. and 2844 ft. respectively. The total geographical area of Lepchakha, Tashigaon and Buxa Village are 3.5 km<sup>2</sup>, 0.04 km<sup>2</sup> and 0.15 km<sup>2</sup>. All these villages are situated in the Buxa Hills region, Alipurduar District of West Bengal. Situated at an approximate distance of 35 km from Alipurduar town, the district headquarters, these 3 villages fall under Rajabhatkhawa Gram Panchayat. These marginal villages are inhabited by Dukpa Community, who are the main focus of this study.

### **Methodology of the study**

The samples for this study comprise of 30 respondents of the Dukpa community. Out of the entire population of Lepchakha, Tashigaon and Buxa Village, the researcher has selected 10 samples from each villages. The selection is done through Simple Random Sampling method. Researcher conducted in depth interviews with respondents from and those interviews were semi structured in nature, allowing the respondents to freely express their thoughts while also focusing on the direction of research. With prior permission, photographs were taken to document dress patterns, rituals, housing structures, monasteries, games equipment, village landscapes etc. to support the visual aspect of the research.

### **Major findings of the study**

The researcher has presented the findings based on the above mentioned three objectives of the study-

- **Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Practices**

Agricultural practices in Lepchakha are very limited because of its topography. Small plots owned by the locals are cultivated mainly for maize, ginger and rice. According to the locals, this region once thrived

with orange cultivation, which was one of the major cultivations grown in this area. But this was devastated by the 1993 flood and later restricted by the government policies. The locals still question this decision of the government since neither answer nor compensations were provided by the government. Since, they cannot grow all their food, they go down to the plains to buy basic items. However, they still preserve their traditional foods like dried spinach, mushrooms etc. which they store for the harsh weather conditions. Other than these, they even store meat and local liquor. For health and healing, earlier generations used herbal medicines made from local herbs like teetepati (for headache and fever), swarnalata (jaundice), Kalajhar (cuts and wounds), Chaa (roots of this herb is used for the treatment of epilepsy), chorup jhe (cold and jaundice) etc. But with time, the usage of these herbal medicines is lessening because of the accessibility of allopathic medicines. Even though change is happening, many Dukpas still try to follow their traditional ways in daily life. They are open to new things but also try to stay connected to their roots.



**Images of Medicinal Herbs**

- **Daily life and Livelihood Patterns**

Daily life in Lepchakha begins early, often amidst fog or rainfall. Men are commonly seen carrying bamboo baskets on their backs, descending the mountains to collect or buy essential goods. The community heavily depends on stream water and maintains storage practices for daily use. Occupationally, many are engaged in daily wage labor, homestay operations, small shops and food preparation for tourists. Rice has now become a staple food due to accessibility, replacing earlier grain patterns. Traditional food items such as dried bamboo shoots, dried spinach, radish, radish, wild mushrooms and homemade cheese are still prevalent. The traditional butter tea also remains a key part of their diet. Despite economic challenges, the people maintain a humble, composed and respectful body language in their interactions, reflecting cultural resilience and a strong community spirit.



**Food serving utensil (Bangchung)**

- **Festivals, Rituals and Community Life**

Festivals are a big part of Dukpa culture. The most important festival celebrated is Losar, which is the Tibetan New Year. This festival is celebrated in the month of February. On this day, everyone goes to the monastery early in the morning to pray. After that, the whole village enjoys together. They play games like Da Dhanu (archery), Khuru (darts), Dego (a game of stones), Pungdo (Shot-put), Thonju (long jump) etc. Food is prepared in large amounts and women play a major role in cooking and serving. Everyone eats, sings and dances together – like one big family.



**Da Dhanu (archery)**



**Khuru (darts)**



They also celebrate Buddha Purnima and the birthday of Guru Padmasambhava (popularly known as Guru Rimpoche). The celebration of Buddha Purnima doesn't happen at a particular monastery each year, instead they are being celebrated at different monasteries in rotation. During Buddha Purnima, the monks narrate various religious scriptures in continuation, just like a reading marathon. After that, they conduct some kind of procession which blesses the whole village. These festivals are not just religious; they help keep the community united. Even those who have migrated, come back home during these events to be with their families. The Dukpa marriage ceremony is very simple. It usually happens in a monastery where the priest blesses the newlywed couple. Instead of flower garlands, the bride and groom exchange a white cloth, much similar to that of "Kamney". The whole community blesses the couple. In contrast, death rituals are quite detailed. When someone dies, their body is kept at home. At home, if there is no door on that wall, they'd have to break the wall to carry the body. Monks are called to chant prayers for the departed soul. A head priest fixes the date for cremation. After death, the family cooks and feeds the whole village

for 21 days, then on the 49th day and on the 1st death anniversary. All these rituals show how much the Dukpas respect nature and value togetherness. Their festivals are calm and environment-friendly, unlike the noisy celebrations we often see elsewhere.

- **Education**

The village of Lepchakha has an only primary school which did not seem operational at the moment. In the village the population of children and teenagers was very low. Most of them were sent by their parents to study at different city. And the ones, who could not afford this expense, sent their kids to the local monastery for informal education. Based on the study, it is observed that all of the married women have attained education up to either 8th class to 10th class. Those who wanted to pursue higher education have migrated to other places. The married husbands have either studied up to 5th class and others have not attained any form of formal education.

- **Dress**

Like other indigenous communities, the Dukpa community of Lepchakha also has their own traditional dress. Their dresses share a deep identity with their Tibetan Buddhist heritage. Because they are inhabitants of a much colder region, their clothes are relatively warmer. The men wear traditional dress called “Gho”. The women wear long robe like dress called “Kira”. “Kira” is worn with a blouse like dress called “Tigo”. And all these are to be worn by wearing a belt called “Tego”. They have different silver jewelries and accessories. Men have traditional shoes called “Lham”. The officers and even the men and women drape a shawl like cloth over their attire called “Kamney”, which is a mandatory for official and monastery business. These handmade traditional dresses of both and women can cost up to even Rs. 1 lakh. Woven with precision and fine artistry, these dresses are made with the wool of Yak and Sheep, called Yatha and Matha respectively.

But with changing time, the significance of these traditional dresses is fading away. People wear them only at the times of functions and ceremonies. Other than that, they mostly wear casual clothes. Because they have to do a regular trek of 5 km one way, they are more comfortable in casual clothes.

- **Youth and Cultural Transformation**

The entire population of Lepchakha lacks young people in the village. Most of them have moved out for education or work purpose. Some study in schools in Alipurduar or even outside the district. Others work in different states or abroad, doing jobs in companies or factories. The few young people who still live in Lepchakha usually work as daily wage laborers or help in running grocery shops or homestays. Many of them said they would like to move out too but financial problems stop them from doing so. When asked about their views on culture, some young people said they wanted to protect Dukpa traditions. But it seemed that many of them were less emotionally attached to their culture. They said people who leave the village rarely return and those who live in cities are getting used to an easier life compared to the hard life in the hills. Most young people said they would prefer living in the plains like Alipurduar or Siliguri because of better schools, hospitals, road connectivity and job options. Poor mobile networks, no internet and long travel times make village life rough. They feel modernization and city life offer them more comfort and future security. This clearly shows how modern lifestyle and capitalism are slowly pulling the youth away from the traditional village life.

- **Culture and Modernity**



Tourism has brought many changes to Lepchakha. Because many tourists visit the place, the locals have started adjusting to their needs. For example, even though they have their own food culture, during lunch they serve tourists Bengali Thalies. This shows that they are ready to change certain things for income and survival. The homestay business has given many families a source of earning. At the same time, it has also brought mobile phones, new clothes and outside habits into the village. Children now watch videos and listen to songs from other cultures, slowly drifting away from their own. Still the Dukpa community tries to balance tradition with change. While young people are drawn to modern life, elders in the village are doing their best to pass on stories, songs and rituals to the next generation. Their lifestyle shows that while they are open to change, they have not fully let go of their cultural values. Lepchakha is a perfect example of a community that is slowly modernizing but is also holding on to its indigenous soul.

- **Challenges faced by the locals**

The entire village has no banks or any equivalent economic institution. There is only a single post office, that too in Buxa Village, near the Buxa Fort. As per education, there is a single primary school, which was closed during that time. In case of primary health care centre, there was only one at the Buxa village and that too was non-operational. Transportation facilities end at Zero Point, from there the only way up is through steep trekking. The distance from Zero Point to Lepchakha is approximately 5 km, which takes 2 hours and 30 minutes for an average human to climb. In case of any medical emergency, people are carried in carriages up to Zero Point and the nearest operational primary health centre is at Suntala Bari, which takes almost 20 minutes on a vehicle to reach. The area of Lepchakha, Tashigaon and Buxa lacks any sorts of network connectivity; even the electricity connections are unreliable. For backup power usage, some of the households have installed solar panels. Other than this, they face immense problems related to water. The entire village population is based upon stream water, the source of which is 25 km away from the village deep into the jungles. If any problem occurs, the water facilities cut off for the entire village. The water is transported through channel systems, where the water first gets stored into bigger tanks and then collected into personal water tanks using water motors.

### **Conclusion**

This study explored the indigenous practices and everyday life of the Dukpa Community living in the remote villages of Lepchakha, Tashigaon and Buxa in the Buxa Hills of Alipurduar District, West Bengal. The objectives of the study was to know about the indigenous practices of the Dukpa community; impact of modernization, tourism and migration on the traditional lifestyle and the challenges faced by the Dukpa community in terms of education and basic infrastructure. Through fieldwork, interviews and direct observation, researcher has tried to fulfill his objectives. The research revealed that indigenous knowledge systems, such as herbal medicine, food preservation techniques and traditional clothing, still exist but are

increasingly being replaced due to the influence of modernization, migration and tourism. Despite the fact that this community tried to resist such changes, the younger members of the community were either less connected to their roots or have migrated to urban areas in search of better education, employment and infrastructural amenities. The festivals, rituals and community lifestyle reflected a strong sense of social solidarity. However, there was a visible absence of basic infrastructure like water connection, proper healthcare, education, transportation and internet connectivity. This made the daily life increasingly difficult, highlighting the neglect of these borderland communities in mainstream development. Tourism industry brought significant economic opportunities in the Buxa Hills region. Traditional practices are slowly being replaced by tourist-friendly adaptations. But, it is worth mentioning that the Dukpa tried their best to maintain a balance between preserving their traditions and adapting to modern demands. The villages situated in this region are prime examples of a community that is trying to hold on to its indigenous soul while navigating the changing world around it.

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