Traditional *Lepcha* craft *Sumok-thyaktuk* (*Lepcha* Hat) and its conservation in Dzongu Tribal Reserved Area (DTRA), Sikkim, India

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The *Sumok thyaktuk* or Lepcha traditional hat is an oldest form of craft, unique and exclusive to the Lepcha tribe living in the Dzongu Tribal Reserve Area (DTRA) of Sikkim. The hat is intricately woven with the *Ru* or cane (*Calamus acanthospathus*), *Po-young* – local bamboo (*Cephalostachyum capitatum*). Each part of the hat and its artistic design hold its own traditional meaning and significance. The hat formed the headgear of the royal soldiers later on Sikkim Guard during the regime of Chogyal dynasty in Sikkim. Wearing the head gear in marriage ceremony, worships and other festivals is mandatory in the tribe. With the advent of other modern day’s trendy outfits in the locality, these traditional head gear is now facing serious threat and is actually in the verge of extinction. Therefore, the present study is an attempt to study the detail work of art and to document them systematically for the conservation of this dying art.

**Keywords:** Sumok-thyaktuk, Lepcha, Dzongu, Chogyal

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With the geographical area of ca 78 sq km the DTRA looks almost a ‘T’ shaped strip of hilly terrain area bounded to the South-east by Teesta river and North-east by Tholung river (Fig. 1.) and to the West by rising mountain leading to Khangchendzonga, the house of 5 treasures ‘Kingtsoom Zaongboo Choo’, *Lepcha* name for Mt Kanchenjunga (3rd highest mountain in the world) meaning bright auspicious forehead peak that borders the Kanchenjunga Biosphere Reserve (KBR) at north Sikkim¹.

The altitude of the Dzongu varies from 728 to 2700 m amsl. The climate is comparatively wet with high rainfall between the months of June to September. The entire area is divided into two part upper Dzongu and lower Dzongu. Way back to the Chogyal’s regime, the Dzongu was treated as a separate estate and was administered by one *Kazis* (regional heads) comprising of 12 villages with each Mandal at its top².

The DTRA is a home of the *Lepchas* or *Rong*, an indigenous tribe of Sikkim Himalaya. With the approximate population of 50,000, the *Lepchas* are living in the foot hills of Himalaya on the southern and eastern slopes of Mount Kanchenjunga and are aboriginal inhabitants of Sikkim³. Sikkim was closed to the outside world for centuries. The *Lepcha* tribe with no contact with outside world remained in primitive stage for centuries⁴. This trait remains to a great extent to this day. Having seen this ground reality, the government of Sikkim, in the 2005, granted the status of “Primitive tribe” to the *Lepcha* community, officially also.

The practice of using bamboo and cane for the household artifacts is as old as the tribe exists in the foot hills of Himalaya. They believe that keeping the cane and bamboo artifacts at their home keep them away from ill effects of evil spirit. Apart from that, bamboo and cane is also an indispensable part of their livelihoods mostly in the form of food, roofing, ceiling, bows, traps, ornaments, fishing rod, traditional suspension bridge, etc. Therefore, the tribe believes that the domestication of bamboos near by their home is mandatory for its sustainable use. *Lepcha* handlooms, cane & bamboo products are famous for their artistic design⁵. Where as the canes are mostly collected from the wild forest that enforces serious threat on its wild population in the vicinity of DTRA (Figs 2-13).

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The Sumok thyaktuk or Lepcha traditional hat (Figs 2 & 3) is unique and exclusive to the Lepcha tribe is known one of the oldest form of handmade craft. Having being the craft confine to the DTRA, no extensive study is being made so far except the present attempt. The reason is being due to difficult landscape and restricted accessibility. Therefore, the relevant information being published in any form is untraceable in the moment. Where as, the hat formed the headgear of the royal soldiers later on ‘Sikkim Gaurds’ during the regime of Chogyal dynasty in Sikkim. Wearing the head gear by the tribe in marriage ceremony, Namsoog or Namsung (Lepcha tribal festival) and also during the offering ceremony of guardian deities like Mt Kanchenjunga, Mt Tendong seems customary. In the present scenario, the Lepcha women play a significant role in traditional weave.

Methodology
The study is being done with the financial support of Sikkim Lepcha Association, Gangtok, Sikkim. Series of an extensive survey was conducted from July 2008-June 2010. During the survey some difficult areas of DTRA, viz. Tingvong, Lingdong, Hee- Gyathang, Ravong, Breng-Katam Passongdang, etc. were thoroughly surveyed and consulted with existing Lepcha craftsman at regular interval. The field interviews and the documentation are being done with various craftsman based on our prepared standard questionners. The audio-visual documentation of the entire interviewees conducted in the field is also consecutively done. Some other parts of the Sikkim and Darjeeling district of West Bengal were also surveyed for the cross reference study. The Directorate of Handloom & Handicraft (DHH), situated at Gangtok under Sikkim state Government was also frequently visited. The final report along with other reference materials including photograph on the hat collected during the study is submitted to the office of the Sikkim Lepcha Association, Development Area, Gangtok, Sikkim on 13th June 2010.

Results
The hat is made up of Ru or cane (Calamus acanthospathus) and Po-young or small bamboo (Cephalostachyum capitatum). It required skill of craftsman and not less than a month with quantum of patience to complete single hat. The larger amount of time is actually being consumed in preparation of thread like strings / poli of cane or bamboo, finish into rounded shapes of about 4mm thickness to weave the hat and making it fine and flexible string. Some locally made natural dye, extracted from a common climber ‘Rubia manjith’ is being used in further beautification of the hat along with locally available mica stone.

The hat consists of 4 different layers, which is clearly identical and that appeared in outer part. The representing each complex layer signifies its own meaning and traditional values. Out of the 4 parts of the hat, the upper most section is called Sungdyong song meaning spider’s web.

Sungdyong song; the uppermost part
Out of the 4 parts of the hat the upper most section is called Sungdyong song meaning spider’s web (Figs 4 & 5). It is a protective cover made in the shape of spider’s web, the saviour (Mungkung- Mungla) which is being believed to protect the tribe from evil spirits and also brings good luck. The section of the hat is divided into 8 divisions,with the finely prepared cane strings replacing the gossamer like threads of spider.

Ee-mik; the second section
The second section of the uppermost part of the hat is called Ee-Mik in Lepcha, meaning the eye of the tiny local wasp Trigona irridipennis (Putka), a mountain bee that produces honey of high medicinal value (Figs. 8 & 9). The surface of this part gives a
Figs 2-13–(2) Lepcha traditional hat; (3) A Lepcha man in traditional outfit; (4) Uppermost part of the hat; (5) Spider’s web; (6) Hexagonal hole seen interior of hat; (7) Sutshuk lavo (Symbol of sun and moon); (8) Second section below the upper part; (9) Ee-mik; (10) The third layer; (11) Sumok-Tsum; (12) Lowest end of the hat & (13) Greenish dye of Rubia plant.
look of numerous eyes of bees placed side by side close to each other. It needs rare craftsmanship to produce this pattern out of the cane strings. It is coloured red or green with dye extracted from *Rubia manjith* (*Vyem-L*) and have a strong belief to repel harmful pests.

**Sumok tsum; the third layer**

The third layer downward is called ‘*Sumok Tsum*’, means ‘design of armour’ (Figs 10 & 11). It comprises of pattern similar to other artifacts of Lepcha tribe. It is woven out of finely shredded bamboo or cane strips. Horizontal strings are interwoven with vertically moving strings to give triangular pattern of the ordinarily woven cloth. This pattern is considered to be auspicious for the tribe and also have a strong belief in combating against any evil contemplation.

**Afyel; the basal part**

Afyel is the lowest or basal part of the hat and looks like the orchid available in the Himalayan region ‘*Sumok Reep*’ (*Venustum* sp.) (Figs 12 & 13). It comprises of mountain shaped or slightly triangular or other pattern. The two ends of the string are attached to the bottom rim of the hat so that the string made out of cane placed below the chin holds the hat firmly on the head.

**Nongsa tchum; Interior part**

The interior layer of the hat is very much distinct from the outer part. It is also woven with patterns of numerous small hexagonal holes in the shape just fit to outer layer (Fig. 6). The dried leaves of *tuklop* (*Maranta sp.*) or rarely *Kaferlop* (*Canna edulis*) are being placed in between the interior and the outer layer, which is kept secured so that they do not move even slightly from their place.

**Sutshuk Lavo; Symbol of the sun & the moon**

A small wooden or rarely a metal piece, carved into the shaped of the sun and the moon, with an arrangement therein to hold tail of holy bird *Nubong Ong Fo* (The Raket tailed Drongo), such that the feather remains erect on the head gear just above the forehead of the wearer, which signify the symbol of love and blessing and mostly seen wearing while attending the festival of joyous. The other reason being the bird find the important places in the legends of the tribe. Also, the birds announce the arrival of different seasons. Whereas, the tail of peacock is also rarely being used, in unavailability of Drongo’s tail. The tribe also believes that attached symbols of sun and the moon thwarts away the ill effect of the eclipse and also do keeps protected from evil spirits (Fig.7).

**Discussion**

*Sumok thyaktuk* is unique and an oldest craft form of the Lepcha tribe. This hat is a symbol of hard work and the skill of the craftsmanship. Each designed and the specifications of the hat hold its own traditional meaning and significance. DTRA apart of being a place of its origin, with time the art of weaving ‘*Sumok Thyaktuk*’ has now also spread to other parts of Sikkim and also to some parts of Darjeeling district of West Bengal. With the advent of the modern outfits, the tribal of the Sikkim hills tend to loose their own traditional dress including the hat. Therefore, these indigenous craft is facing a threat of its extinction. In the present juncture, no prominent industry is being found in the vicinity that takes up for production of hat in larger scale. Also the unsystematic collection of cane from its wild habitat has enforced an enormous pressure on its natural habitat, which deserves an immediate attention and to look out for possibilities to rejuvenate for the conservation and also for its sustainable use. Needless to mention, the effort from all individuals, Government departments, NGOs and other line organization is inevitable in the present scenario to take up every possible step for the conservation of this dying craft. Directorate of Handloom & Handicraft (DHH) has played a significant role for the conservation of traditional crafts being made out of cane and bamboo through providing various training to the rural folks. Apart from that, being one of the unique craft, it possesses immense potential for filing of Geographical Indication (GI) registration under Intellectual Property Right for the benefit of the craftsmen of DTRA, who still holds the authority of this beautiful craft.

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References