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## Chi: The Revered Beverage of The Lepchas of Sikkim, India

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**Abstract:** Just like every society Lepchas also has their traditional drink called “Chi”. This drink is very famous among Lepcha people and is used in almost every socio-cultural and religious activity. Chi is a type of sweet beer made by fermentation of millet grains. With this study we will find the importance of this drink and how it is made.

**Key words:** Lepcha, Traditional, Beer, Socio-Cultural, Fermentation.

### Introduction

Lepchas are the natives of Sikkim. They are the mongoloid tribe constituting a part of tribal population of different North Eastern regions like Sikkim, West Bengal, Bhutan and Nepal. Some anthropologist traces their origins to Mongolia or Tibet. However, the Lepchas themselves have no such history of migration in their traditional knowledge. They believe themselves to be the natives of the Sikkim and even consider Mt. Kanchenjunga as the abode of their ancestors. The term ‘Lepcha’ was originally given to them by the Nepalese. In the Parbatiya dialect of the Nepalese ‘Lep’ means ‘speech’ and ‘cha’ means ‘unintelligible’ hence what Nepalese actually meant them to be was “unintelligible speakers” as language spoken by them was not understood by Nepalese and they denied using their dialect for communication. That’s how the Lepcha term came into existence and has widely been popularised and used. The Lepchas call themselves Rong or Rongpa. The term Rongpa means the peak dwellers.

### Objectives

- To know about the process involved in the preparation of Chi
- To know about the socio-religious importance of Chi among Lepchas

### Research Methodology

A fieldwork was conducted in the Ranka Village of Gangtok in East Sikkim. The techniques of observation, interview and schedule was employed for the purpose of data collection. Five key informant along with 60 other informants were interviewed who were selected by purposive and accidental sampling method.

### The Chi

Chi is the traditional drink of Lepchas of Sikkim. It is an alcoholic beverage made with millet grains (Black millet grains). Millet is a hardy plant, and is easily grown. It is first husked, cleaned and washed. And then it is cooked in a large metal container. Till the water is absorbed by grains, it is continuously stirred with a bamboo paddle. After it is cooked the millet is spread on a large plastic sheet or bamboo mat, then powdered with yeast for fermentation, after that the grains are transferred into a bucket(bamboo basket or any big container), the bucket top is then covered air tight and it is kept aside untouched for three to four days for fermentation process to take place properly. After the fermentation the liquid stay as the water absorbed in grains are extracted, this juice is called Chi. It is a soft beer, the longer it is kept untouched the stronger it tastes. For the Chi extraction all the grains are put into a piece of clothes and then it is dipped into a semi hot water and after that pressure is applied on the clothes from outside and only the juice is filtered through clothes and juice is collected in one container, and can be consumed directly.

## Socio-Religious Importance of Chi

Chi is culturally valued among Lepchas. They believe that Itbu Deboo Rum, the creator of all god and goddess accept the offering of chi. This drink is offered in almost every worship of god and goddess, for example in 'pong rum fat' 'peek sat' 'lyaang rum fat' 'Li rum fat' etc. People before drinking also offer a small portion of "Chi" to their god and ancestors and after that only they consume drink. Importance of chi In birth and death of a person. The reverence that Lepchas have for their traditional drink is obvious from its frequent use. It can be called as the sacred drink as it is used in all religious ceremonies of Lepcha. From birth of a new born and till its death this drink is used whenever Lepchas need to celebrate or grieve. Like during cleansing and Naming ceremony 'Tungbaong Fat' a new born baby is fed few drops of Chi by Bongthing a Lepcha priest. Before the birth a "chi" is prepared specially for the Birth ceremony and it is fed to everybody came to that ceremony and even to the mother so that she can gain her strength. This drink is also used in the death rituals where after the burial Ceremony the Bongthing put a container of chi on the grave of the death to show the respect to the soul and offer them this drink so that they don't go thirsty on their afterlife. Lepchas offer chi to their ancestors every single time before taking the first sip.

## Conclusion

Chi is a revered beverage among Lepchas. This manually made alcoholic drink is valued in every stage and phase of life. It has both cultural and medicinal value. But with benefits comes the harms too. As Chi is frequently used in every other occasion hence it is in a way encouraging the drinking habit among Lepchas. At the end Chi is also a home brewed alcoholic liquor whose excess consumption can cause harm like any other alcoholic beverage. Despite all these points, The Anthropological connotation for Chi lies in the fact that it's not just an alcoholic beverage for the Lepchas. It's called a traditional drink because the traditional life of Lepchas is unimaginable without Chi. It is undoubtedly a sacred drink for them which acts as a catalyst which fuels the emotions of Lepchas according to the need of the situation.

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