

Lepcha



Population:

71,500 (2000)
83,800 (2010)
98,300 (2020)

Countries: India, Bhutan, Nepal

Buddhism: Tibetan

Christians: 18,000

Approximately 70,000 Lepcha people are found across the three South Asian nations of India, Bhutan and Nepal. The majority live in the Dzongu District of the north Indian state of Sikkim (24,952 in the 1981 census) and the Darjeeling District of West Bengal (23,409 in 1981). There is one village with 106 Lepcha people in Tripura State in north-east India. Smaller numbers live in the valleys of south-west Bhutan¹ (2,000 people in 1991), while approximately 2,000 more inhabit the Ilam District of Mechi Zone in eastern Nepal.²

The Lepcha language has been the subject of much discussion since Colonel George Mainwaring first surveyed it in 1876.³

The Lepcha, who call themselves *Rong* and their language *Rong ring*, have lived in Sikkim since long before the arrival of Buddhism in the area. They are considered the original inhabitants of Sikkim. The botanist Dr Joseph Hooker, who visited in 1854, wrote, 'The Lepchas possess a tradition of the flood, during which a couple escaped to the top of a mountain (Tendong) near Darjeeling [Darjeeling]. The earliest traditions which they have of their history date no further back than some three hundred years, when they describe themselves as having been long-haired, half-clad savages. At about that time they were visited by Tibetans, who introduced

Overview of the Lepcha

Other Names: Rongkup, Rong, Rongke, Rongpa, Nunpa, Mutanchi Rongkup, Lap-cha

Population Sources:

66,649 in India (2001, India Missions Association)
2,000 in Bhutan (2001, G van Driem [1991 figure])
1,272 in Nepal (1961 census)

Language: Sino-Tibetan, Tibeto-Burman, Himalayish, Tibeto-Kanauri, Lepcha

Dialects: 3 (Ilammu, Tamsangmu, Rengjongmu)

Professing Buddhists: 65%

Practising Buddhists: 50%

Christians: 25.1%

Scripture: New Testament 1989

Jesus film: available

Gospel Recordings: Lepcha

Christian Broadcasting: none

ROPAL code: LEP

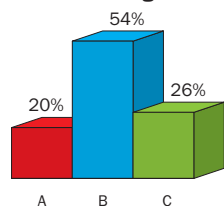


Mainwaring wrote the following wonderful comment: 'Of the language I cannot speak too highly. The simple and primitive state in which the Lepchas lived is admirably shown by it. It has no primary words (beyond the words for gold and silver) to express money, merchants or merchandise, fairs or markets. Their gentle and peaceful character is evinced by their numerous terms of tenderness and compassion, and by the fact that not one word of abuse exists in their language. . . . It admits of a flow and power of speech which is wonderful, and which renders it capable of giving expression to the highest degree of eloquence. The language also attests the astonishing knowledge possessed by the Lepchas. . . . It is impossible that a people, with a language so comprehensive; with a manner, though primitive, so superior, as to entitle them to rank high among civilized nations, could be engendered amidst the wilds and fastnesses of the Himalayas.'⁴

Boodh [Buddhist] worship . . .⁵

The Lepcha have been zealous Buddhists since the early 1700s.⁶ A unique Lepcha script was invented at that time to help the expansion of Buddhist teaching. The script is still used today. The 1981 Indian census returned 89.3 per cent of the Lepcha living in Sikkim as Buddhists, 8.05 per cent as Christians and 2.65 per cent as Hindus. Among the Lepcha of West Bengal, however, only 57.12 per cent were Buddhists and 35.7 per cent Christians. The West Bengal town of Darjeeling has been a hub of missionary activity for almost 200 years, and today it is one of the most evangelized areas in India. The Lepcha New Testament was translated in 1989 and is widely used among the more than 18,000 Lepcha Christians.⁷ The Jesus film has also been produced in Lepcha. Despite the exciting Christian growth, the majority of Lepcha people in all three countries they inhabit remain believers in Tibetan Buddhism.

Status of Evangelization



A = Have never heard the gospel
B = Have heard the gospel but have not become Christians
C = Are adherents to some form of Christianity