



Development of Sacred Site Tourism of the Lepchas: A Case Study of the Damsang Fort, Kalimpong, Darjeeling Himalaya

Alolika Mangal¹ ✉ and Vishwambhar Prasad Sati² ✉ 

¹Department of Geography and Resource Management, Mizoram University, Aizawl, India

²Impact and Policy Research Institute, New Delhi, India

Abstract. Faith-based sacred site tourism has developed cultural and spiritual elements across the Himalayan region. Indigenous Lepchas of the Eastern Himalayas are referred to as *Rongkup* or *Rumkup*, meaning “children of God,” distributed mainly across Sikkim, the northern part of West Bengal, Nepal, and Bhutan. They have many holy or sacred places scattered over the *Mayel Lyang*, referred to as the vast land of the Lepchas. They consider themselves the ‘children of the snowy peaks’ of Mt. Khangchendzonga and also possess oral narratives of faith and belief systems. Some events made a place historically important and culturally significant. Such a sacred place to the Lepchas is Damsang Fort, often termed Damsang Gadi/Gree. In honour of the Lepcha King and Leader, Gaeboo Achyok, the Lepcha community of Kalimpong, Darjeeling Himalaya, has developed a faith-based sacred and historical site. Arguably, the classification of sacred site tourism needs an ontological understanding. However, the study explores the reasons for the potential development of Damsang Fort as a sacred tourism site. It also addresses the motivational and faith perspectives as drivers for the Lepchas behind celebrating the sacred site each year. This qualitative purposive study employed researchers’ field observation, oral traditions of the community, photo-taking, conducting interviews with local Lepchas, and consulting cultural expertise from the community. The findings suggest the need for contextualisation of the characteristics of the host destination (Damsang) and the tourist-generating region (global). The study also refers to the understanding of the place’s historical, cultural, and spiritual significance, which determines the potentiality of the development of this place as a sacred tourism site.

Keywords: Sacred Site Tourism, The Lepchas, Damsang Fort, Kalimpong, Darjeeling Himalaya

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1. Introduction

The term sacred site constitutes a different perspective, considering different beliefs curated through practices and rituals associated with different cultural, social, and religious groups. However, indigenous sacred sites might not appear the same. A place termed as sacred and faith site can mean as spiritually alive, culturally essential, or a simple natural land deserve respect. In today’s secular world, the relationship between tourists and their beliefs plays a major role in influencing individuals’ pilgrimages to sacred sites (Raj. R, 2023). To the Western world, perhaps sacred is synonymous with sacrosanct, considered holy, but to indigenous communities, a place sacred means historically, culturally, or spiritually important. (<https://sacredland.org/>). In ancient religions like Hinduism, a temple, or in world religions like Christianity and Islam, a Church or Mosque can be a representation of sacred sites. But in the view of the Tribal community, the mountain, lake, forest, river, or a historical place of respect can be a site of sacredness. Sacred landscapes, a concept explored extensively in anthropological and religious studies, refer to those physical spaces that communities imbue with spiritual meaning, serving as arenas where cosmology, ritual,



and ecological knowledge converge (Basso, 1996; Feld & Basso, 1999). India's religious tourism has deep historical roots, cultural diversity, and spiritual notions. The sites evolved as educational, cultural, and devotion-based, based on religious acceptance (Cevallos, 2016). It is faster-paced and encourages the performance of devotion and identity (<https://www.holyland360.tours/>), for example, offering garlands and lighting candles. Whereas sacred site tourism differs from the regular notion of religious tourism. It holds that certain places are not only important from a historical perspective but carry a wide range of memories, stories, sufferings, devotion, and hope that continue to shape a region's people. In the Himalayan region, apart from visiting sacred buildings of worship, indigenous communities, being nature-centric, are drawn towards worshipping high mountain sites as places of worship (Gawlik et al., 2022). In the Eastern Himalayas, indigenous communities such as the Lepchas, who are spread over Sikkim, Darjeeling, Nepal, and Bhutan, have many sacred sites of worship, as they consider themselves *Rongkup*, meaning 'sons of the snowy peaks'. Damsang Fort/ Gree / Gadi marks the faith of the Lepchas of Kalimpong specifically, as the dispersion of Lepchas is across borders and, in this region, it happened from Sikkim to Pedong, Kalimpong, mainly due to political shifts. The Damsang Fort carries historical evidence to date. The Lepchas pay respect to their King Leader, Gaeboo Achyok, who built this fort, and the Lepchas have marked this place as a Sacred Faith Site of the Kalimpong region, Darjeeling Himalayas.

The study is an attempt to make aware of the indigenous Lepchas' sacred site for the development of the place from the sacred tourism aspect to promote the Indigenous Lepcha oral traditions and history as one of the oldest in the Eastern Himalaya. It also describes the sacred site from an indigenous belief system, as in India it's mostly an Eastern religious belief system based on sacred buildings and architecture. The study also attempts the appraisal of Damsang Fort, a potential place for sacred tourism with an environmentally conscious approach.

2. Literature Review

From the work of Gorer (1938) and Awasthy (1999) it is known that Lepcha beliefs are influenced by Lamaistic Buddhism and Christianity. They also practice "*Mun-bongthingism*," which is kind of similar to Zoroastrian monotheism. So, they have places of religious importance that are forms of religious tourism. However, King Pano Gaeboo Achyok, the Lepcha cultural hero who resisted and safeguarded the Lepcha community from Bhutanese aggression, recurrent political turmoil, and existential crisis, holds tremendous faith and is worshipped by the Lepchas of Kalimpong particularly, since the 17th century (Aris, 1979; Roy et al. al, 1998; Ardussi, 2011). Hence, the development of Damsang Fort as a potential Sacred Faith Site and a place for sacred tourism, along with a heritage site, holds importance to the Lepcha community across regions.

Gaeboo Achyok or Gyalpo Ajok, a Lepcha chieftain of Damsang, Kalimpong, faced threats from Bhutan as Bhutanese Lamas began to exert pressure on the Lepchas of this region, which was aided by their regional fortress, Daling, Kalimpong (Ardussi, 2014). Bhutanese people and their culture remained a common thread between Lepchas of Sikkim and Kalimpong, and they attacked both the territory and the Lepcha ruler *Pano Gayboo Achyok* at his Dalim fort in Kalimpong; after repeated attacks, the Bhutanese managed to take it over again in 1710 (Mandal, 2018). With the intervention of the Dalai Lama, Bhutan left Sikkim, but *Damsang Lyang* and Kalimpong were under them. As Achyok formed an alliance with Tibet, several wars occurred until he was captured at Daling and executed. To celebrate Achyok, his birthday-allegedly on 20th December is commemorated by the Lepchas of Kalimpong, Darjeeling and nearby Sikkim (Dhukpa, 2020). Even after the West Bengal Government's enlistment of Damsang Fort as a Heritage Site (2018), the faith of the Lepchas in the King makes it a place of sacred importance and is acknowledged by the Lepcha people as their sacred site.

3. Research gap

Irrespective of being one of the oldest inhabitants of the Eastern Himalayas and having nature-centric religious practices, the Lepchas' oral traditional knowledge system (TKS) is not recognised as it should be. Their faith-based practices over sacred heritage sites can make them sacred tourist sites for global tourists across the Kalimpong-Darjeeling Himalaya. Thus, the study asks: To what extent can Damsang Fort- a Lepcha heritage place can be considered and developed as a sacred tourist site while maintaining indigenous Lepchas' cultural identity and environmental consciousness?

4. Study Area

Damsang Fort is situated at an elevation of 1920m and at a distance of 7km from Pedong on the Kalimpong-Rishi Road. It is a place of strategic importance situated in the Sillery Gaon area of Pedong, a Lepcha area in Kalimpong, Darjeeling Himalaya (Fig.1). It is 16km away from the main Kalimpong city and was used as a bridlway earlier. It is maintained by the Lepcha local village organisation, *Sheezoom*, and is historically holy and sacred for the Lepchas of Kalimpong particularly and across other Lepcha regions (Roy, 2011). Most of the Lepchas believe that Damsang was the main and the only palace of Gaeboo Achyok. Kalimpong in earlier days was known as Damsang, which was an independent country ruled by Pano Gaeboo Achyok and his forefathers (Foning, 1987). After his death, it was annexed by Bhutan until 1865 and later annexed by the British.

DAMSANG FORT

- A SACRED SITE OF THE LEPCHAS OF KALIMPONG, DARJEELING HIMALAYA

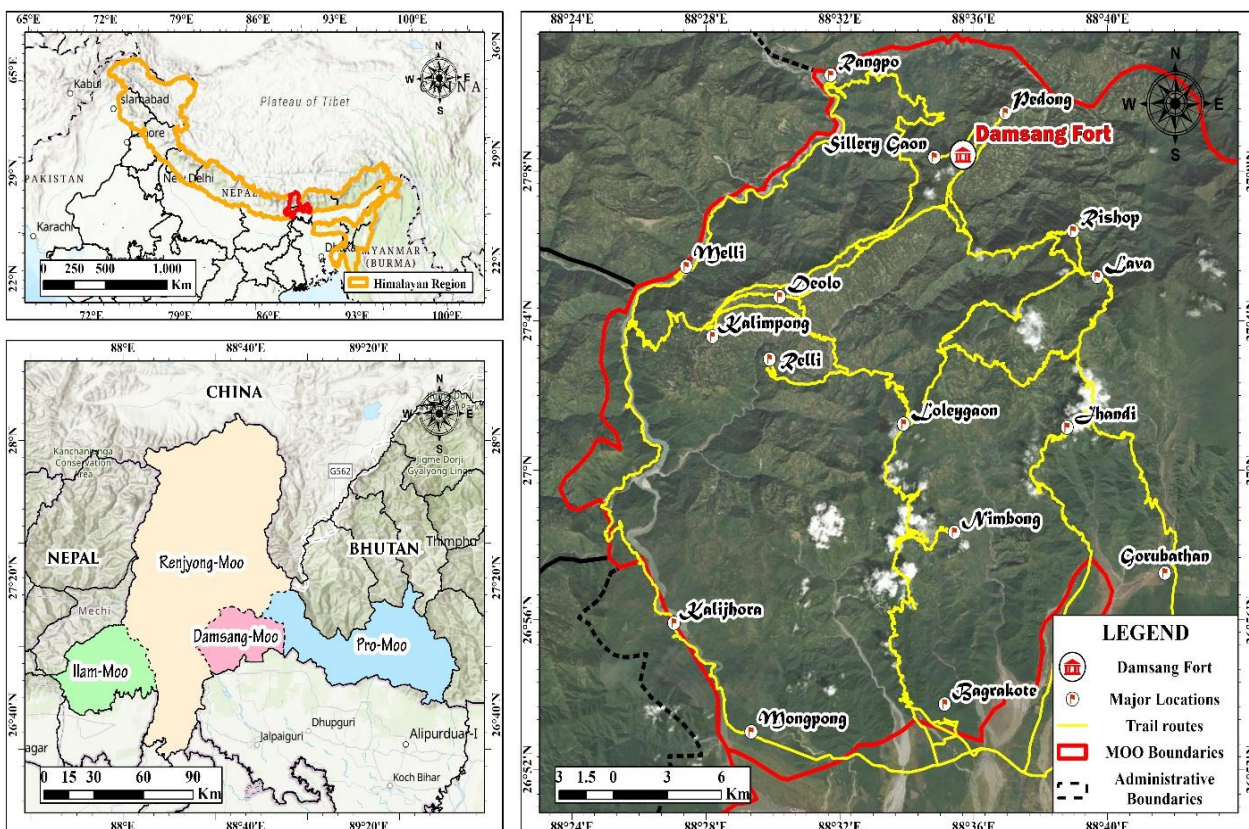


Figure.1. Location of the study area. Information sources: Open Street Map, Survey of India, Google Earth Pro and Roy, D.C. (2011)



5. Materials & Methods

The study was conducted in March and June 2026 and was purposive in nature. The information was collected using unstructured questionnaires by meeting local Lepcha villagers and recording information from the cultural experts of the community, such as O. Tshering Lepcha (Bongthing), Indigenous Lepcha Tribal Association President, and Mr. Dorji. Informal interviews are also conducted among the Lepchas of the Kalimpong main city region, homestay owners of the Sillery gaon and Damsang Gadi/Gree regions, and young Lepchas of the Lepcha villages who are an integral part in treasuring this sacred site by celebrating their Leader King and protecting Lepcha indigenous culture.

The study is based on field observations, oral traditions, and a pertinent literature review. Ethnographic observations audio recordings' transcription verbatim are used to unravel the complex interplay between eco-centric rituals, faith, and celebrating age-old history. It synthesizes qualitative evidence on the aspect of development of Damsang Fort as a sacred tourism site in Kalimpong, Darjeeling Himalaya in terms of heritage, location, and the Lepchas various ways of safeguarding cultural identity. It also proposes some recommendations for the development of the sacred site as a sacred tourist place from indigenous conservation and sustainable perspectives in the Darjeeling Himalaya.

6. Findings and Discussion

6.1. Damsang Fort as a faith-based Sacred Site

In the Eastern Himalayas, most of the Lepcha sacred places are related to Lepcha mythology, while few have historical origins. Most legendary sacred places are located in and around Sikkim, like Dzaongoo, Khecheopalri Lake, Tendong Hill, etc. But there are places where treaties were signed, and battles were fought. Those Lepcha historical places are considered sacred sites, like Kabi Longtsok in Sikkim. In Kalimpong, such a place is Damsang-Daling, dedicated to the last Lepcha king and leader Pano Gaebook Achyok. Damsang region has multiple connotations from a historical perspective that need further evidence-based studies. But researchers unanimously agreed on the Damsang Fort's presence, as Achyok's land was Pano of the Damsang area. Daling was another fort built to protect Lepcha people from invaders, and where Gaeboo Achyok lost his life during the Bhutan war in 1676, irrespective of the 1669 treaty. Bhutan's southwest border fortress Daling, as well as the entire Damsang area, were under the realm of the Bhutanese (Roy, 2014). Relics of Damsang fort are still present, and it's a reminder to the Lepcha community of the Eastern Himalayas of their very existential fight in their own land. One can find rooms for the royals, the horse stable, the mouth of the spring, room for royal guards. The natural dry state of the spring is believed to have been used by the queen. Using simple technology and Lepcha nature-centric knowledge, the fort was built with mud and rocks, which can be seen today. The location at a higher altitude of the fort was favorable then to resist frequent attacks from foreigners. As a tradition to date, symbolic bows, arrows, and stones are kept at the ruined fort site, as these were earlier weapons (Figure 2) used by the Lepchas during attacks. The remnants are a representation of Lepcha architecture, history, tradition, culture in the Darjeeling Himalaya (Tamsang, 1983).



Figure 2. a) Damsang fort marked as a heritage site by the Govt. of West Bengal, b) Prayers offered at the ruined site, c) Dried-up source of the spring, d) Stacked stones as relics, e) Bow and arrow as a symbol of weapons. Source: Author(s).

6.2. Faith-based traditions and rituals of the sacred site

Chi Faat

The celebration starts early in the morning with a 2-hour trail through the woods that is taken to reach the top of the ruined fort. Communities gather there wearing traditional attire: for men, *Dumpra* and for women, *Dumdyam*. The ritual is performed by the Lepcha male priest *Bongthing* and female priest *Mun* as part of the Mun-Bongthism religion. They offer the traditional drink *Chi* in the name of the soul of Gaeboo Achyok, the leader, last king, and Pundee Nalimit, the queen. Traditional drink *Chi* (Fig.3.a), made with fermented millet, is offered as part of a custom which is considered a sacred offering for the Lepchas on every important occasion. As Lepcha traditions are eco-centric, it includes local millets, rice, and utensils, containers made of bamboo, clay, and banana leaves. Mainly on this occasion, *Bongthing* performs the ritual atop a hill.

Communal Prayers

The Lepchas have unique ways to offer communal prayers. Men and Women stand opposite each other in groups. The tales of the bravery and the king's assassination are narrated to the community. The mun and bongthing, wearing their white dresses, express their gratitude towards the king for saving the community from repeated foreign attacks. *Bongthing P.T. Lepcha*, *Bongthing O.T. Lepcha* (Figure 3.b), and *Bongthing Gaeboo Lepcha* are some of the prominent Lepcha priestesses and priests who perform the role of offerings (Roy,2011). Lepcha traditional rituals and customs are orally transferred, which are not documented properly and are a major hindrance to their cultural preservation and acceptance by the greater world.



Figure.3. a) The offerings mainly Chi, b) Interview with O. Tshering Lepcha, Lepcha cultural expert, and Bongthing, Maney Gumpa, Kalimpong, May 2026. Source: Author(s).

Ethnic gatherings of the Lepchas

It is known from local residents and claimed by cultural experts that the birthday celebration of the King is the largest Lepcha gathering each year where Lepchas from Nepal, Bhutan, Sikkim, and Darjeeling Himalaya assemble. After the invocations and prayers, the day is marked by a typical Lepcha ethnic cultural celebration in Kalimpong. It's an initiative by the Indigenous Lepcha Tribal Association (ILTA) along with other people. A bilingual Lepcha magazine in the name of the Lepcha supreme leader is also published each year to follow his legacy. Damsang is considered as holy, sacred place for the Lepchas like Hindu, Islam communities consider Varanasi and Mecca sacred places. From the scattered historical evidence, limited research articles, and folklore, the bravery tales of Gaeboo Achyuk's contribution to the fight against foreigners for the Lepcha land of the Kalimpong region are known to the people. All Lepchas, irrespective of their age, sex, and place of residence, eagerly await throughout the year to pay a visit to Damsang and get blessings from the divine soul of Pano Gaeboo Achyuk, the saviour of the community (Roy, 2005). Though there are several claims of the presence of other forts made by Achyuk (Tamsang, 2005) still need further clarification. Lepchas of Kalimpong identified themselves as Damsang-moo (clans), i.e., inhabitants of Damsang. As per the name of the fort and the region, the Lepchas residing in this region even today are known as Damsang Moo (Table 1). The other Moos or clans are named as per the areas of Lepcha inhabitants. Where Sikkim, Darjeeling, Kurseong, and Siliguri Lepchas fall under the same moo/ clan, concurrently cross-border Lepchas are termed as Ilam Moo for Nepal and Promu for Bhutan.

Table 1. Lepcha Moo's classification as per the area of Lepcha residence. Source: Modified after Roy, D.C. (2011).

Name of the Moo	Area of residence	Country
Damsang-Moo	Kalimpong	India
Renjyong Moo	Sikkim, Darjeeling, Kurseong, Siliguri	India
Ilam Moo	Ilam	Nepal
Pro Moo/ Promu	Samtse, Chukha	Bhutan

6.3. Indigenous conservation and sustainable sacred tourism

Over the years, the Himalayas have gradually developed into a massive tourism hub and place of attractions for serene landscapes and spiritual sanctuaries as well as adventure opportunities (Kumar, 2024). Indian secular pilgrimage tourism and sacred site tourism are widely spread across Himalayan states like Uttarakhand and Himachal Pradesh. In these regions, community-led indigenous tourism is popularized from spiritual and sustainability perspectives. Environmental education was rendered through oral

traditions and traditional knowledge on biodiversity alongside man's role in its conservation (Singh, 2026). Moreover, in a resource-rich environment, indigenous people's knowledge of their habitat encourages scientific innovations that can be useful for the wellbeing of the community from humanity ground (Pandey, 1998). Damsang fort is not only bears the history and heritage of indigenous Lepchas, but initiation from the community has made this place a holy, sacred site for the Lepchas across borders. The presence of this sacred site reflects a relationship of outward and inward journeys of one's humility, responsibility, and experience. It also differs from religious tourism in certain aspects, like supporting locals instead of extracting from them. The major aspect of this site is to hold space for grief, respect, and listening to the perspectives of the community's existence in oral forms, engaging the entire Lepcha society. Lepchas worship Achyok as the God, the king, and the saviour. In Mun's (Lepcha female priest) temple, in museums, in magazines, in literary works, in general places, Achyok is worshipped each day by the Lepchas (Fig.4). Thus, it remains a place of sacredness, not only as Heritage. Conservation efforts are taken by the government as a heritage place. But it's the Lepcha community's effort, the Indigenous Lepcha Tribal Association (ILTA), Mayel Lyang Lepcha Development Board, to give this place the honour of faith and respect towards their Leader King through various initiatives. Thus, this place deserves further recognition. Not only as an indigenous heritage conservation place but also as a well-acclaimed sacred place for the Lepchas across the globe. As the Lepchas are worshippers of natural elements, in this sacred place their rituals are also performed, including local available resources to celebrate the special occasion. Their environmental education of respecting the forest (trail to reach mountain top), honouring spring water, and performing rituals without destroying natural objects reflects a sustainable perspective for the development of tourism.



Figure.4. a) Gaeboo Achyok worshipped by Lepcha Mun (female priest), b) Magazine published in the name of King Achyok, c) Information is displayed at the Lepcha Museum, Bongbusty, Kalimpong, Darjeeling Himalaya. Source: Author(s)

7. Conclusion

The study is an attempt to draw attention across regions to show a sacred, faith-based place of indigenous communities like Lepchas, amidst thick alpine woods. It not only documented the indigenous belief system, but also highlighted the prospects of developing this place, Damsang Fort, as a Sacred Site for the Lepchas, along with sustainable sacred-faith-based tourism. The ruins of Damsang Fort stand as a testament to indigenous rights to live and protect their homelands. However, broader academic engagement is needed to reimagine this place as a Sacred Site and also from a tourism perspective. Lepcha folk tales and limited historical oral narratives claim that Damsang was constructed by the Lepcha king Gaeboo Achyok; but the Europeans' narratives have different versions of Bhutanese origin. The absence of scientific study is creating many more anomalies in constructing evidence-based documentation in Lepcha/ Rong Language. The study suggests an archaeological survey across this region to formulate Lepcha indigenous knowledge. Both the characteristics of Damsang (host region) and the tourist-generating region(globe) need to be studied through historical, archaeological evidence and economic growth and impact studies. However, for



remote Lepcha villagers, development of Damsang as a Sacred Faith-Based Tourism site with respect and honouring Lepcha culture can be beneficial from an economic point of view. It can be two-dimensional, safeguarding and acknowledging Indigenous Lepcha culture along with uplifting their economic situation.

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