



International Journal of Humanities & Social Science Studies (IJHSSS)

A Peer-Reviewed Bi-monthly Bi-lingual Research Journal

ISSN: 2349-6959 (Online), ISSN: 2349-6711 (Print)

Impact Factor: 6.8

Volume-XII, Issue-V, September 2026, Page No. 314-319

Published by Scholar Publications, Sribhumi, Assam, India, 788711

Website: <http://www.ijhsss.com>

DOI: 10.29032/ijhsss.vol.12.issue.05W.396



Landscape, Folklore and Cosmology: A Reading of Select Lepcha Oral Narratives

Manashi Bhattacharya

Research Scholar, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, India

Received: 19.09.2026; Accepted: 29.09.2026; Available online: 30.09.2026

©2026 The Author(s). Published by Scholar Publication. This is an open access article under the CC BY license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>)

Abstract

This paper examines how landscape, folklore, and cosmology are intertwined in Lepcha oral tradition through an ecocritical reading of two Lepcha folktales, "Children of the Snowy Peaks" and "The Race between Teesta and Rangeet" from Yishey Doma's volume Legends of the Lepchas: Folk Tales from Sikkim. The paper argues that landscape in these narratives is not a separate thematic element but an integral part of Lepcha cosmology. The tales connect human beginnings to the snowy peaks of Khangchendzonga, while the rivers Teesta and Rangeet carry stories of relationship, catastrophe, survival, and ritual memory. Read together, they reveal a relational understanding of existence in which human life remains closely connected to non-human and more-than-human beings. The paper therefore approaches folklore as a means through which relationships with landscape continue through generations. Its ecological significance lies in recognising the ways their cosmology already holds together the landscape, the sacred and the more-than-human world.

Keywords: Cosmology, Landscape, Folklore, Ecocriticism, Relationality

Landscape and folklore or oral tradition, are inextricably intertwined in the cosmology of Indigenous communities. The mountains, rivers, forests and stones are more than geographical features of the landscape. They carry memories of origin and ancestors that constitute their cosmology. Folklore, passed down from one generation to the next, carries and continually renews these relationships between humans and the more-than-human. As such, landscape is not just the setting in which these stories occur or take place. It becomes part of what the stories reveal about the community's own existence. This relationship between the landscape and folklore plays a significant role in Lepcha culture, where the geographical or physical elements form part of a larger cosmological understanding of creation and existence.

The Lepcha people are an Indigenous community of Sikkim and the adjoining Himalayan regions of West Bengal and Nepal. They call themselves *Mutanchi Rongkup Rumkup* which basically translates to "Beloved Children of Mother Nature and God" (Tamsang i). This self-designation itself establishes their relationship with the landscape and the more-than-human beings. Mount Kangchendzonga, or *Kongchen Kongchlo* in Lepcha, holds a central place in their cosmology and is regarded as a sacred guardian. Lyangsong Tamsang's *Lepcha*

Folklore and Folk Songs record the creation story in which the first Lepcha man and woman are created from the snows of Khangchendzonga and calls the mountain the Lepcha people's "protector, benefactor, guardian and life giver" (3-4). The Lepcha oral tradition includes myths and legends, folktales and songs. These are collectively called the *lungten sung*, and Arthur Foning describes them as "stories from our ancient mythology, legends, and other folk-lore which included stories of animals, birds, insects and the like, and fairy tales" (87). He further says that these stories are "the vehicle and the medium to fashion and shape" how a Lepcha person lives their life and navigates through or looks at the world (87). Folklore, as such, actually participates in the constitution of a worldview. The function of the oral narratives moves beyond the experience of telling and listening. They constitute the understanding of relationships between human and non-human beings, deities and the landscapes within which these relationships unfold.

This formative quality of the *lungten sung* becomes significant when these tales are considered in relation to the world they describe. If folklore helps shape attitudes and ways of understanding, then the mountains, rivers, animals, deities, and other presences that feature in these stories are not incidental elements of their narrative worlds. Their repeated appearance shows how particular places and beings are related to. These stories can be read for the relationships they sustain. An ecocritical reading brings into view the network of relationships through which landscape becomes meaningful. The ecological dimension of *lungten sung* lies in these very connections – in the ways stories keep relationships with the land and the non-human and more-than-human beings alive within the community's cultural memory. This paper reads two Lepcha folktales, "Children of the Snowy Peaks" and "The Race between Teesta and Rangeet" from Yishey Doma's volume *Legends of the Lepchas: Folk Tales from Sikkim*. Through an ecocritical reading of these two stories, the paper examines how landscape and cultural knowledge come together in Lepcha folklore, and how these connections acquire ecological significance. The first traces human beginnings to the snowy peaks of Khangchendzonga, while the second centres on the rivers Teesta and Rangeet as living presences within a larger world of non-human beings and more-than-human beings. Read together, the tales bring into focus a landscape and cosmology in which mountains, rivers, and all other beings sustain a shared, relational connectedness with human beings.

Ecocriticism and Folklore:

Ecocriticism emerged as a critical response to the limited place accorded to the natural world within literary studies. Cheryll Glotfelty defines ecocriticism, in its most fundamental form, as "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (xviii). The importance of this definition lies in the word "relationship". In an ecocritical approach, the environment is not treated as an external topic that happens to appear in a text, but as part of the larger field of relations through which meanings emerge. Glotfelty further argues that literature does not "float above the material world in some aesthetic ether" but participates in a larger system in which "energy, matter, and ideas interact" (xix). Ecocriticism thus begins with a recognition that cultural forms are situated within a material world and both implicate each other. This understanding of ecocriticism opens the field to cultural forms beyond conventional literary texts to oral narratives and folklore. P. Mary Vidya Porselvi's *Environmental Humanities in Folktales: Theory and Practice* make this connection explicit by approaching folktales as "environmental discourse" (14). For Porselvi, attention to ecological ideas within folktales "accentuates the interconnectedness and

symbiotic nature of life" and brings into view relationships among "nature, human, and the sacred" (13). Such an approach allows folklore to be approached as a form in which relationships between humans and their environments can be examined as part of their cosmological structures.

The question then is how the Lepcha community's oral narratives make visible a mode of life in which human existence is understood through its relations with mountains and rivers. Such a reading shifts attention from the identification of isolated "natural" elements within the tales to the relationships through which those elements acquire ecological and cosmological significance. What becomes important, then, is the way the *lungten sung* holds these relationships together and makes them part of the stories through which the Lepcha community understands the world. An ecocritical reading brings this relationality to the forefront. It is at this level of narrative and cosmological entanglement that the tales can be read and analysed.

Children of the Snowy Peaks:

Yishey Doma begins *Legends of the Lepchas: Folk Tales from Sikkim* with "Children of the Snowy Peaks," a creation tale that locates the beginnings of the Lepcha people within the landscape of Khangchendzonga. *Itbu-debu-rum*, the Mother Creator, first creates the mountains, including *Kongchen Kongchlo* or Mount Khangchendzonga, along with the lakes (*daa*) and rivers (*roong*). She then takes a ball of fresh snow from the summit of *Kongchen Kongchlo* and creates Fudongthing, the first man. Nazong Nyu is created as his companion. Although Mother Creator instructed them to live as brother and sister and warned them about the misery that would befall if this relation was altered, they violated the instruction, resulting in Nazong Nyu's pregnancy. Upon finding out, Itbu-moo sent them down to the foothills to live as human beings and suffer for their sins. Living their life as husband and wife, a human child was born to them. Nazong Nyu insisted on not abandoning the child and this is how the first Lepcha children were born – Nunglengnyu and Kothongfi, Numshimnyu and Numbomthing (Doma 1-4). The title, "Children of the Snowy Peaks," immediately gives the creation story a different emphasis from the more generic designation "creation myth," as the tale recounts that their very genesis is from the earth – the fresh snow of their guardian deity. The relationship between Khangchendzonga and Lepcha identity is not just one of proximity or devotion; the mountain enters the genealogy itself. Fudongthing is made from its snow, so that the material substance of the mountain becomes the substance of human ancestry and continuity.

The story's sequence reveals that the mountains, lakes, and rivers precede the appearance of human beings. The human enters an already constituted world rather than becoming the centre around which the world is subsequently organised. This order is only momentarily disrupted by because of the special status given to human beings. In Doma's extended version, the Mother Creator gives all the creatures different gifts so that "all living beings could live in the world without fearing each other," but human beings later receive *a-young*, or intelligence, which makes them "lord over all creatures – on land, sea and sky" (8). The phrase is interesting as it introduces a contradiction into the creation narrative. Human intelligence becomes a ground for hierarchy, even though the world that precedes humanity is imagined through coexistence. Further, Fudongthing and Nazong Nyu are sent from the snowy peaks to the foothills, where they begin their human life with the birth of their children. Their descent marks the transition from divine existence to human existence

through a change of place. The mountain peaks remain the site of their divine origin, and the foothills become the space of human generation. There is a temporal dimension to the landscape itself. The movement from snow to foothill traces a movement from divine creation to human continuation. The mountain becomes a kind of memory within the genealogy of the people precisely because their beginnings are materially located in it. Laurence Buell writes that human history is “implicated in natural history”, and the tale makes this implication almost literal. The history of the Lepcha people begins with the creation of the mountain and with the transformation of its snow into the first human being. The natural and human histories are conditions of one another.

The tale establishes a relational cosmology in which the human world remains continuous with the more-than-human beings from which it emerges. The human, non-human and more-than-human lives belong to the same order of creation as the first ancestors. Khangchendzonga, emerges as a point at which the histories of the landscape ancestry, and human life converge. The tale thus suggests a Lepcha understanding of existence in which belonging is never exclusively social or human; it is also a matter of one's place within a wider, living cosmological order.

The Race between Teesta and Rangeet:

“The Race between Teesta and Rangeet” tells of two water spirits, *Rongnyoo* and *Rungnyit*, who fall in love and decide to leave their home in the mountains and travel towards the plains. They agree to make the journey a race, with each choosing a guide. *Rungnyit* chooses *Tut Fo*, a bird, while *Rongnyoo* chooses *Paril Bu*, a snake. *Tut Fo* is swift but repeatedly stops to look at the flowers and other attractions along the way, leading *Rungnyit* through a winding course. *Paril Bu* continues steadily, and *Rongnyoo* reaches the agreed meeting place first. When *Rungnyit* arrives and finds her already there, he exclaims, “*Thee sutha?*”, meaning, “When did you arrive?” This is how the river *Rongnyoo* came to be known as river Teesta. *Rungnyit*, unable to accept his defeat, turns back towards the mountains, and his retreat brings a great flood upon the Lepcha land. The people, together with animals, birds, and insects, seek refuge on Mount Tendong. After prayers to *Ithu Debu*, a hill partridge intervenes, and the waters eventually recede. The two rivers reconcile and continue towards the plains to finally meet at their confluence (Doma 50–53).

The relationship between the two rivers is at the heart of the tale but their relationship is inseparable from the physical character of the landscape. The winding course associated with *Rungnyit* emerges from the journey with *Tut Fo*, while *Rongnyoo*, guided by *Paril Bu*, takes a more direct route. The movement of the rivers emerges through the beings encountered along their course. What might otherwise be understood simply as the geographical character of two rivers finds significance in the oral tradition of the community. A geographical feature is remembered through a relationship, and that relationship becomes part of the vocabulary through which the landscape is known and understood. Further, the reconciliation of *Rongnyoo* and *Rungnyit* culminates in their meeting, and the place where the rivers come together acquires a cosmological and spiritual significance. Doma records that newly married couples are taken to the meeting place of the two rivers to offer prayers, wishing for a happy and prosperous life (53). The confluence of the rivers enters human life without losing its own place within the cosmology. Landscape, folklore and social practice are held together through the same story. What emerges from the tale is the understanding of landscape as inherited relationship. Teesta is remembered through the encounter that

gives it its name. Rangeet carries the history of its winding journey. Mount Tendong remains connected with the survival of all beings during the flood. And finally, the confluence of the rivers becomes a place associated with union and continuity. The landscape is thus transmitted together with the stories and the place of humans, non-humans and more-than-human beings within it.

Landscape as Cosmological Memory:

The two narratives considered here reveal a world in which the human is never entirely detached from the nonhuman. Mountains give birth to people and lakes are sites of origin while a partridge participates in the restoration of life after catastrophe. The non-human beings belong to a network of relationships through which the events of the stories unfold. The world of the narrative is relational at its most basic level. In the second tale, Tendong is the mountain to which everyone retreats during the flood. As such, its significance comes from an ancestral event of collective survival. The mountain is remembered something happened there that continues to matter. This explains why landscape in Lepcha folklore often carries a density of meaning that cannot be reduced to mere physical description. A mountain may simultaneously be a geographical feature and a sacred presence.

The folklore does not need to articulate an environmental ethic in modern terms for these relationships to have ecological significance. Its significance lies in the fact that the categories through which contemporary environmental discourse often separates nature, culture, religion, and community are not so easily separated within these narratives. The ecological is therefore embedded within the cosmological. In this context, folklore preserves a way of locating human life in a world whose other inhabitants possess histories of their own. An ecocritical reading draws attention to these relationships and reveals how deeply landscape is woven into the cultural memory and cosmological imagination of the community.

Conclusion:

The reading of these tales suggests that Lepcha folklore cannot be understood when landscape is treated as a separate thematic category within cultural tradition. What the tales reveal is a mode of knowing in which a place is already charged with history, ancestry, sacredness, and collective memory. Their continued value does not depend upon translating them into contemporary environmental arguments. Rather, such a translation may diminish their specificity by making them speak in a vocabulary external to their own cosmological world. The ecological force of these narratives lies in the persistence of a relationship to landscape that has been carried through generations in the forms of story and rituals. The *lungten sung* moves beyond a repository of inherited narratives and emerges as a means through which a community continues to remember their history and ancestry, and what constitutes their world. An ecocritical reading attends to that continuity without imposing an environmental consciousness upon it. The value of these tales lies in the fact that they do not separate the history of a people from the places through which that history has been lived and remembered.

Work Cited:

1. Doma, Yishey. *Legends of the Lepchas: Folk Tales from Sikkim*. Tranquebar, 2010.
2. Foning, A. R. *Lepcha, My Vanishing Tribe*. Sterling Publishers, 1987.
3. Glotfelty, Cheryll, and Harold Fromm, editors. *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*. University of Georgia Press, 1996.
4. Porselvi, P. Mary Vidya. *Environmental Humanities in Folktales: Theory and Practice*. Routledge, 2023. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003406686>.
5. Tamsang, Lyangsong. *Lepcha Folklore and Folk Songs*. Sahitya Akademi, 2008.