



AN EXPOSITION OF ECOLOGICAL AND SPIRITUAL RELATIONSHIPS IN THE SACRED LANDSCAPES OF LEPCHA FOLKTALES

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ABSTRACT

The state of Sikkim is home to the Lepcha tribe, the original inhabitants of the region. The Lepchas, who originally referred to themselves as ‘Rongs,’ meaning ‘God’s Chosen People,’ have historically occupied regions in Nepal, Bhutan, Arunachal Pradesh, and Tripura. Today, they primarily reside in the Dzongu Valley, a region of deep cultural and spiritual significance to their community. The Lepchas share a philosophical bond with their land, considering themselves the ‘children of Kanchenjunga.’ The geographical features of their homeland—its mountains, rivers, and forests—are deeply woven into their identity, shaping their traditions, lifestyle, and worldview. This connection is also reflected in their folktales, which not only serve as a means of storytelling but also convey moral lessons and spiritual wisdom to younger generations.

Through these narratives, the Lepcha people express their reverence for nature, emphasizing their cultural heritage and ecological wisdom. This paper aims to analyse Lepcha folktales, particularly those inspired by the mystical powers of nature and the spirits believed to inhabit the landscapes of Sikkim.

Keywords: Folktales, nature, ecological wisdom, spirituality

Introduction

Sikkim is the 8th state of the northeastern part of India. The Lepchas, an indigenous group of people were the original inhabitants of the land. Initially, they were spread across modern-day Nepal, Bhutan, Sikkim, western regions of Darjeeling, parts of Arunachal Pradesh and Tripura. According to Lepcha mythology, Khye Bumsa a Tibetan prince had a divine revelation and invaded Sikkim. His descendant Phuntsong Bumsa later estab-

lished a kingdom in Sikkim. Due to the Gurka war fought in 1814 between Sikkim and Nepal, the Lepchas predominantly settled in Dzongu Valley, Sikkim and continue to do so even today. The name Lepcha is the anglicised word of the Nepalese word 'lepche' which means 'vile speakers'. Tapan Chattopadhyay in his book 'Lepchas and Their Heritage' states the term was associated with them:

...by Nepalis when they marauded their lush valleys in Renzong(Sikkim) in the eighteenth century and have since been accepted...without so much a second thought...are denied the three things they have sought most for the ages: honour, peace, and identity. (Chattopadhyay, 4)

The Lepchas originally called themselves 'Rongs' which means 'God's chosen people'. They also like to refer to themselves as 'Mutanchi' meaning 'mother's loved one'. The Lepchas are classified as a Scheduled Tribe under the Indian Constitution. As a tribe, they are small in number. They divide themselves into four main groups. 'Tmsangmu' are the Lepchas living in Kurseong, Mirik and Darjeeling. The ones living in Sikkim are called 'renjongmu', the ones living in the Ilam district of Nepal call themselves 'ilamm' and those living in Bhutan call themselves 'promu'. They are in danger of losing their cultural identity through cultural assimilation and intermarriage. In recent years, their sacred land has been trespassed upon for an attempt to modernise the state for tourism.

The geographical features of this state are of great significance to the Lepchas. This is because like all indigenous communities they have a deep connection to their land and rely heavily on it to safeguard their interests. Sikkim is at an elevation of 750 meters. The state is surrounded by snow-covered mountains and is home to the tallest mountain peak in India i.e. Kanchenjunga. The Teesta and Rongit river flows through this region cutting deep valleys in the mountain ranges. The Kanchenjunga Mountain is sacred to the Lepchas because it hides within their sacred land 'Mayel Lang'. The two rivers Teesta and Rongit also called 'Rongnyu' are sacred rivers in Lepcha mythology.

Lepcha Traditions and Story-telling

As a community, they do not believe in the concept of individualism. They conform to their customs and practices as a whole. They consider the entire community a family. Children are considered to be little adults. They are never neglected from participating in community endeavours. They believe in appeasing the evil spirits to avoid an attack from the evil one. They perform sacred dances that portray nature in its varied aspects. They imitate the actions of animals and enact historical events from their tribal history.

Lepcha folktales are also called 'lungten sung'. These stories are told in the evening by the fireside. AR Foning stated that these stories dictated their attitudes and these folktales are very important to the Lepchas. Lepcha narratives are tales that are aimed at preserving and protecting their community and the traditional values and attitudes that dictate their lifestyle. These stories are passed down from generation to generation by the Elders of the community. Lepcha story-telling is characterized by 'precision and vividness' and is considered to be very integral in the story-telling process. Therefore, good speakers are highly regarded and elegant vocabulary is considered essential.

These folktales dwell on themes that highlight the origin of the Lepchas, life, death and the afterlife. Many of these stories also dwell on spiritual themes and explain the different facets of spirituality and religious teachings. These teachings include the roles and duties of their gods and goddesses. Other stories also include the history of the Lepcha community, their philosophy and traditional Lepcha communities such as marriage, family and so on. These stories are narrated in their vernacular. They are simple and easy to understand narrated with precision. Story-telling is a spiritual act among Lepcha traditions.

Lepcha Folktales and Sacred Landscapes

Lepcha folktales rely on the abundance of nature and the lessons it has to offer to enable children to understand the significance of nature and the land. The origin story entitled 'Children of the Snowy Peaks' details the relationship between the Lepchas and the sacred 'snowy peak' of Kanchenjunga. As the title of the story suggests, this story reiterates the origin of the Lepchas. According to the story, the creator 'Itbu-Moo' created

the sacred peak and the lands and everything in it. However, she found her creation empty and “something appeared to be empty”(Doma, 1). So, to fill the land she took “a ball of fresh snow from the summit of Kongchen Kongchlo”(Doma, 2) and created the first man Fudongthing, ‘the mighty one’. She was still not satisfied and created a companion Nazong Nyu, ‘the ever-fortunate one’ for him. The devotion of these two to their creator impressed ‘Itbu-Moo’. They became the ancestors of the Lepchas. It is because of this the Lepchas continue to worship the Kanchenjunga Mountain. The mountain is home to their sacred land Mayel Lang and believed to be the residence of their Creator. The Lepchas have taken to preserve their land and continue to offer prayers to the mountain because they consider themselves to be children of Kanchenjunga.

The Teesta and Rongit (previously known as Rangeet) rivers flow through the Dzongu Valley. These two rivers are sacred in Lepcha folktales. The story ‘The Race Between the Teesta and Rangeet’ narrates why they are sacred to the Lepchas. Teesta was a gentle river spirit resembling a woman while Rangeet resembles an ambitious man. The Teesta flows in a straight path while the Rangeet meanders before they two meet at Pozok. These two spirits were beloved by everyone, even the mother creator. The two spirits one day decided that they wanted to go to a secluded place away from everyone. They decided to make the journey a race and each chose a guide to take them to their destinations. Rangeet chose a bird and Teesta chose a snake. The snake slid in a straight path and Teesta reached Pozok ahead of Rangeet who was stuck with a bird that meandered all along the way as it was distracted. Rangeet was very upset as he wanted to be the head of his partner. His anger caused him to flood the plains of the people as he began to retreat. Teesta began to chase him causing the floods to increase. Rangeet on seeing Teesta cry begged for forgiveness for his stubbornness. The two lovers went to Itbu-Moo. Touched by their story Itbu-moo “accepted their relationship and blessed the couple saying people would remember and revere their love for generations to come” (Doma, 53). As a result of this, to this day, the Lepchas respect the two rivers as deities. Many marriage traditions within the Lepcha community were created based on this story. When a Lepcha bride and bridegroom are married, they are taken to the place where the Teesta and the Rangeet meet and “people wish the newlywed couple a happy and prosperous life

like the two river spirits” (Doma,53). The story of the spirits teaches the Lepchas the importance of patience, understanding and balance in relationships.

The Story of the ‘Stairway to Heaven’ details another sacred landscape in Lepcha folktales. This story highlights a stairway the Lepchas made to meet their god in heaven. They decided to build this stairway using pots. As the stairways soared above the trees and were touching the clouds people were finding it hard to communicate with those at the bottom of the stairway. One day a man at the top wanted a hook to measure the distance left to reach heaven. He sent word looking at the people below him to send word for a hook. By the time it reached the man at the bottom, it became “smash it down”. The men at the bottom began to break the pots using their axes. As a result of this miscommunication, the tower was smashed down. The men’s aspiration to reach god was a dream. This land is called Thallom Purtam. It still reminds the Lepchas that ambition when not guided by the Spirits will not lead to fruition but end up in confusion. It is believed that the ones who did crash could not speak the same language and left the place. The story is a reminder that faithfulness is always rewarded and that the sacred land must be respected.

Conclusion

Lepchas do not just perform rituals out of respect for the sacred landscapes. As children of these sacred landscapes, they establish a relationship with these landscapes. They maintain cordial relationships with everything that encompasses these landscapes. This is because they believe that every living thing in their spaces is sacred. Lepcha folktales tell us that, unlike the rest of the world, sacred landscapes are not mere geographical features. To the Lepchas, they are vital to their very existence. Lepcha folktales depict a spiritual link between the sacred land and the people living in it. Prosperity and protection depend on the preservation of the sacred landscapes of the Lepchas and this is only accomplished when the Lepchas maintain reverence for the land. In doing so, the Lepchas are preserving their sacred traditions, customs, lifestyles and culture. Tampering with their values leads to disaster and endangers their communities even resulting in death. These

folktales are a bridge between the past and the present in this way they remain connected to their ancestors who continue to guide them and preserve their everyday lifestyle.

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