

Whispering Mountains: Myth, Memory, and Identity in Lepcha and Bhutia Folklore

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Abstract

This article examines Lepcha and Bhutia folktales as repositories of cultural memory, Indigenous knowledge, and ecological ethics, asking how oral narrative sustains identity, sacred geography, and the relationship between human and non-human worlds. Using a qualitative, comparative method, it analyzes selected folktales through thematic and interpretive analysis. The folklore emerges as a cultural archive tying communities to sacred landscapes such as Mount Kangchendzonga and the Teesta and Rangeet rivers: Lepcha narratives reflect an animistic worldview in which nature carries spiritual agency, while Bhutia narratives draw on Buddhist principles of karma, compassion, and interdependence. Despite these different cosmological roots, both traditions insist on ecological responsibility, cultural continuity, and an ethical relationship with the environment, together showing how Indigenous narrative can offer alternative ecological perspectives for contemporary environmental discourse.

Keywords: Lepcha and Bhutia Folklore; Cultural Memory; Indigenous Knowledge; Ecological Identity; Himalayan Traditions

1. Introduction

The Eastern Himalayas hold onto oral traditions that carry cultural memory and ecological knowledge from one generation to the next. The Lepcha and Bhutia of Sikkim, India, have long been recognized for the depth of their storytelling and the spiritual weight it carries. Too often dismissed as mere folklore, these narratives in fact encode Indigenous epistemologies rooted in land, spirituality, memory, and ecological knowledge. This article examines Lepcha and Bhutia stories as sacred, richly imagined narratives that carry both knowledge and moral instruction. The Lepchas, native to Sikkim, call their homeland Mayel Lyang, or the “Hidden Paradise.” Their belief system is deeply rooted in animism, in which nature is imbued with a spiritual presence and agency. Rivers, clouds, and forests are regarded as spiritually significant entities in Lepcha cosmology. Mount Kangchendzonga is considered the sacred dwelling of Itbu-moo, the deity who maintains ecological and spiritual harmony across the landscape.

Bhutia folk tales are closely tied to Vajrayana Buddhist cosmology. The Bhutias were brought to Sikkim by the migration from Tibet in the 8th /9th century with religious practices and teachings of Tibetan Buddhist masters like Guru Padmasambhava, and after, institutional traditions associated with masters like the 2nd Dalai Lama. Similar to the Lepcha oral tradition, Bhutia oral

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stories depict nature as an ethical agent, not a passive background. The “mythic geography” of the Lepcha and Bhutia oral traditions is, therefore, a worldview in which landscape, memory, and spirit are all closely interwoven. In this study, Lepcha and Bhutia folktales are presented as ‘living documents’ or oral scriptures of the people whose worldview is intermingled with mountains, myths, rivers, ethics and deities, and ecology. Climate change, cultural globalization, and the destruction of sacred places compromise these sacred worldviews. The focus of the study is primarily on selected Lepcha and Bhutia folk tales performed in the cultural context of Sikkim, primarily those pertaining to sacred geography, ecological ethics, spiritual cosmology, and collective memory. This study examines oral traditions contained in the translated collections, secondary scholarly literature, and the oral traditions of community members. This study aims to comparatively examine a few selected tales, conduct a folkloristic and ecocritical study of them, and investigate the ways in which mythologies shape humankind’s way of relating to landscape and cultural histories through a close reading of selected stories.

The study is guided by two major research questions: 1) How is cultural memory and indigenous identity maintained in Lepcha and Bhutia folktales? 2) What do the parallels and differences between Lepcha and Bhutia storytelling traditions reveal about their distinct views of spirituality and environmental ethics in the Himalayas? This study examines Lepcha and Bhutia folktales as living knowledge systems: repositories of cultural memory and ecological ethics that preserve ancestral history, question dominant modes of knowledge production, and offer ecological perspectives relevant to today’s environmental debates.

2. Review of Literature

Oral tradition, as a living strand of contemporary folklore, is more than a cultural remnant: it is a process through which communities remember their histories, negotiate their identities, and pass ethical values on to the next generation. Bauman’s idea of oral performance captures this, treating folklore as a dynamic cultural process rather than a fixed text (Bauman 3). The oral histories of the Lepcha and Bhutia of Sikkim weave together mythology, spirituality, and ecological knowledge, and the Lepcha tradition in particular is among the richest in the Eastern Himalayas, carrying memories of origin, sacred landscape, supernatural beings, and the bond between people and nature. Yishey Doma’s *Legends of the Lepchas: Folktales from Sikkim* is an important work that documents Lepcha folktales. The stories in the collection are linked to rivers, mountains, spirits, nature, animals, and ancestral practices, and show the importance of nature in the cultural imagination of the Lepcha people.

Indigenous Knowledge Studies can be used to interpret the ecological aspects of Lepcha Folklore. Fikret Berkes suggests that indigenous ecological knowledge is created through long-term interactions between people and the environment, leading to a set of ethical relationships and responsibilities with the land and non-human life (Berkes 8). In the past, the study of Bhutia folklore has been approached mainly in the context of Tibetan Buddhism’s overall culture. Jash Raj Subba’s *Mythology of the People of Sikkim* offers ample documentation of myths, legends and mythological stories of the Sikkimese communities. According to Tibetan Buddhist traditions, people’s lives are seen as interrelated with human beings, society, nature, and spiritual forces (Samuel 138).

Collective memory and folklore have been extensively studied in memory studies. Jan Assmann makes a distinction between cultural memory and individual memory, focusing on the collective aspect of cultural memory. With respect to identity, Assmann argues that societies transmit their identity through symbolic narratives, rituals, and cultural practices that link the present with the past (Assmann 37). Pierre Nora’s notion of lieux de mémoire (sites of memory) also accounts for the way that physical spaces carry collective memory (Nora 19). According to

Sikkimese folklore, mountains like Mount Kangchendzonga, Rivers like Teesta and Rangeet, and sacred places are cultural memory spaces. Folklore, then, is not simply storytelling; it is how communities recall their origins, their beliefs, and their ties to the land.

Ecocriticism offers a framework for reading human–nature relationships in these texts. Glotfelty defines the field as the study of literature and the physical environment (xviii), while Arne Naess’s deep ecology holds that all living things have intrinsic value and that humans are simply one part of a wider ecological system (Naess 29). Analysed through this lens, Lepcha and Bhutia folktales present rivers, mountains, forests, and nonhuman beings not as scenery but as active participants in a shared ecological world.

3. Research Gap

Most existing scholarship treats Lepcha and Bhutia traditions separately, with little attention to how their cosmologies overlap and speak to one another. Both communities tell stories with clear ecological dimensions, yet these have rarely been analysed critically for what they reveal about environmental consciousness, and memory-based approaches remain underused in this area of cultural research.

3. Methodology and Theoretical Frameworks

This study takes a qualitative, interdisciplinary approach, drawing on folkloristics, memory studies, ecocriticism, and Indigenous studies. It combines textual and interpretive cultural analysis to examine what Lepcha and Bhutia folktales do and mean in relation to sacred geography, cultural identity, and the ecological knowledge systems of the two communities. Landscape features such as Kangchendzonga and the Teesta River serve as lieux de mémoire (sites of memory), and the cultural meaning is continually created and reactivated in an oral form. Ecocriticism, in turn, is the lens used to analyse human–nature relationships in Lepcha and Bhutia narratives.

The study also draws on Smith’s (1999) Indigenous theoretical framework, in which folklore becomes a vehicle of epistemic resistance, unsettling dominant historical narratives and affirming Indigenous knowledge systems. These views focus on ethical research conduct, namely, that of narrators and oral traditions as legitimate and autonomous sources of knowledge.

4. Folklore and Myth: Analysis of some important Lepcha and Bhutia Folktales

The selected stories illustrate how mountains, rivers, forests, animals, and sacred objects function as carriers of collective memory and ecological ethics. Lepcha narratives reflect an animistic relationship with nature, whereas Bhutia stories are based on Buddhist concepts of karma, compassion, and spiritual discipline.

Lepcha Folklore: Nature, Memory, and Sacred Geography

4.1.1. “The Race Between Teesta and Rangeet”: Rivers as Living Entities

The story of “The Race Between Teesta and Rangeet” is one of the most important ecological imaginations in the oral history of Himalayas. Two ‘big’ rivers, namely, Teesta and Rangeet, in Sikkim are given flesh, emotions, personalities, and an agency of their own in the narrative. Rivers Teesta and Rangeet roam across mountains and across valleys, and they form a mythic geography where the geography of the mountains and valleys is a repository for memory of the ancestors. Rivers are not just conduits through Lepcha land but also help define their concept of place, belonging, and history.

The story reflects Lepcha cosmology, in which rivers, forests, mountains, and spirits are interconnected (Yishey Doma 31). The rivers represent cultural memory and embody what Kimmerer describes as an Indigenous relationship with nature based on reciprocity and

responsibility (Kimmerer, 20). The story thus examines anthropocentric understandings, introducing nature as a subject, memory, and moral values. Such representation is a sign of ecological awareness in which the destruction of the environment is a cultural and ethical wrong.

From an ecocritical perspective, the story questions the nature/human dichotomy. From an ecocritical perspective, the narrative challenges the human–nature divide by presenting rivers as active participants in ecological relationships. (Glottfelty xviii). The Lepcha story does so by bringing rivers to life with feelings, wishes, and meaning. The ecological thinking that flows through the story is in line with Arne Naess' definition of deep ecology (Naess 29). Jan Assmann argues that a community's cultural memory helps to keep its collective identity alive by tying the current state of the community together with the remembered one, "by means of symbolic stories that link the present to the past" (Assmann 37). Teesta and Rangeet are in this sense memory spaces, akin to Pierre Nora's lieux de mémoire, which are geographical spaces that are charged with historical and cultural significance (Nora 7).

The re-tellings reset the community's interaction with the landscape and bring a new generation of people to the same place to know rivers as physical objects and as sacred relatives. The story embodies Indigenous ecological ethics of reciprocity, respect, and co-existence, the sacred relationship between them and the natural world, and the preservation of Lepcha cultural memory.

4.1.2. "The Sacred Drum": Sound, Ritual, and Ancestral Memory

The Lepcha folktale "The Sacred Drum" shows how a material object can carry cultural memory, spiritual authority, and collective identity. The drum is not merely a musical instrument; it is a sacred object whose significance runs deeper than its physical form, becoming a medium that stores and transmits ancestral knowledge, spiritual communication, and community values across generations. The narrative of the drum evokes the idea of the drum as a thing that has to do with the responsibility of ritual and harmony in the community. The sound and the ritual performance have always been important part of Lepcha cultural practices that have maintained the relationship among human beings, ancestors and spiritual forces.

The connection between sound and memory in the story is also in tune with Jan Assmann's idea of cultural memory. Communities keep their collective identity alive through symbolic forms that convey common meaning from one generation to the next (Assmann 37). Another link to Richard Bauman's concept of "oral tradition as performance" can be seen in the performative nature of the drum itself.

Oral stories are not a text that is read and interpreted by the reader, but an event in which the reader and the audience perform together (3). Similarly, the significance of the sacred drum is conjured up in the process of participation. "The Sacred Drum" also embodies Indigenous ecological ethics as the artifact is part of a wider ecosystem of relationships between humans, spirits and nature. Respect for materials, landscapes, and cultural practices is necessary to create and preserve sacred objects. Fikret Berkes' understanding of Indigenous knowledge systems is rooted in human-environmental relationships, which are characterized by responsibility and respect and produce sustainability (Berkes 14). The story illustrates how the Lepcha communities preserve ancestral memory and ecological knowledge through ritual performances.

4.1.3 "Jhampi Moong: The Abominable Snowwoman": Encounter with the Unknown

The Lepcha story 'Jhampi Moong: The Abominable Snowwoman' is a complicated dialogue between humans and the enigmatic non-human beings that are thought to inhabit the Himalayan area. The Snowwoman figures the unknown in nature, a reminder that parts of the natural world

remain genuinely other than human. This encounter is not about humans versus something outside of them, but it is about coexistence between the human and non-human world, which is the Indigenous experience.

Jhampi Moong's figure is that of the "more-than-human" world, which challenges the notion that humans are at the top of the ecological structure. The narrative reflects the Indigenous understanding of humans as part of a larger ecological community. Similarly, Jhampi Moong serves as a reminder that the mountain landscape has agency and spirituality.

The story is also a critique of the anthropocentric notion of wilderness as a blank space that must be populated. The narrative of the story is set in the Himalayan mountain environment, which is alive and filled with visible and invisible beings. Jhampi Moong's respect is indicative of the cultural orientation that the community has towards sacred and unfamiliar areas for which they need to take responsibility. The connection between fear and respect is a significant aspect of Indigenous environmental ethics, as it de-escalates the unnecessary use and overuse of natural areas.

From the deep ecology perspective, animals and plants are not only valuable but have value without needing the human population. The story also illustrates the sacredness of mountains to the Lepcha. Mountains are not only geographic locations but also cultural places that carry memories, have roots of ancestors, and hold spiritual significance. Indigenous knowledge systems are, in this sense, inseparable from land, identity, and collective memory (Smith 74), and the story of Jhampi Moong carries them forward. Passed down orally, it keeps ecological knowledge alive; it is not simply entertainment but a teaching story whose ethics guide how people ought to behave toward the natural world.

Bhutia Folklore: Buddhist Ethics, Sacred Geography, and Spiritual Ecology

Bhutia folklore carries Tibetan Buddhist philosophy, sacred geography, and an ethical stance toward nature. The three stories examined here — "The Yeti's Secret," "The Tale of the Magic Stone," and "The Origin of Kangchendzonga" — together show Buddhist ethics, ecological consciousness, and cultural memory at work in Bhutia oral tradition.

4.2.1. "The Yeti's Secret": The Mountain Guardian and Ecological Responsibility

The Bhutia story reframes the Yeti: not the fearsome monster or curiosity of popular imagination, but a guardian of mountain ecology who reminds people that entering the natural world carries responsibilities of humility and restraint. This resonates with Indigenous ecological notions of interrelatedness, casting nature as an interconnected community rather than a resource to exploit — an ethic the Yeti embodies as a symbol of the nonhuman world's own agency.

Buddhist ecological ethics run through the story as well. Bhutia cultural tradition is grounded in Vajrayana Buddhism, with its emphasis on compassion, interdependence, and karmic responsibility in the relations between beings. Thus, the Yeti, as a mountain guardian, symbolizes the Buddhist concept that moral conduct towards nature is linked to spiritual development. The moral of the story shows the connection between an action and its consequences. This imbalance is caused by the exploitation of sacred spaces, and harmony is regained through respect and compassion. This is the same as the Buddhist concept of karma: actions create their own reactions, which have a ripple effect beyond the individual. 'The Yeti's Secret' interrogates the boundaries between wilderness and culture from an ecocritical point of view. From an ecocritical perspective, the story challenges the separation of wilderness and human culture.

The story also helps keep the tradition alive in the cultural memory of the Bhutia people by providing them with a traditional understanding of the topography of the Himalayas. Oral stories continue to build inter-community and inter-environmental relationships. Jan Assmann

describes the cultural memory as “a capacity of societies to maintain their identity by means of symbolic stories which link the present and past communities with inherited traditions” (37). It is an ecological and ethical story that places the Yeti in the role of a protector of the sacred wilderness. The story questions anthropocentric views of nature and encourages a philosophy of coexistence based on Buddhist Principles of compassion, Indigenous ecological knowledge, and respect for more-than-human beings.

4.2.2. “The Tale of the Magic Stone”: Desire, Karma, and Moral Transformation

The folktale ‘The Tale of the Magic Stone’ is a Bhutia story telling the tale of human needs, materialism, moral duty and spiritual change. The story introduces the stone as a moral test and a means of discovering the ethics of the person who carries it. The precious stone, norbu, serves as a material thing, but it is more than that. It is a human expression of the desire for wealth, power, and control of resources. As such, the stone represents the Buddhist principle that attachment and desire are sources of suffering.

The narrative is of a moral type that is typical of Buddhist and Himalayan folklore. A character from the human world is presented with a seemingly incredible object and is tempted to use it to the detriment of his or her core values. The magical stone then becomes a means of communication of the social group’s values of restraint, wisdom, and responsibility. This theme is in line with the Buddhist philosophies of karma and attachment. The story reflects Buddhist ideas of karma, where actions produce consequences that affect both individuals and communities (Samuel 142). The themes and morals of the story are that greed creates imbalance and good actions bring back balance.

Excessive desire disrupts social and ecological harmony. In this respect, the magic stone is a metaphor for natural resources. Resources – when taken in terms of greed and exploitation – bring conflict; when taken in terms of respect and moderation – they bring collective well-being. Indigenous environmental ethics can be used to understand the story’s ecological aspects. Reciprocity, responsibility, and sustainable relationships with the natural world are often hallmarks of Indigenous knowledge systems. Fikret Berkes suggests that Indigenous ecological knowledge can only be developed in an ethical manner between people and their environment, with respect as the basis for living (Berkes 8). ‘The Tale of the Magic Stone’ teaches exactly this — restraint and caution against excess in desire and consumption.

The narrative’s ecological ethics rest on moderation and respect for the natural world, tying human good fortune to moral conduct toward one’s surroundings. The quest for the magic stone stands in for materialism and material gain, and the story ultimately values compassion, knowledge, and balance over that pursuit. As a piece of cultural memory, it is passed on orally, carrying the Bhutia community’s norms of desire, responsibility, and harmony forward. According to Jan Assmann, a community’s cultural memory helps it preserve its identity through symbolization and tradition, values that are shared from generation to generation (Assmann 37). A philosophical story of desire, karmic actions, ecological duty, and moral connections to the world.

4.2.3. “The Origin of Kangchendzonga”: Sacred Mountain and Cultural Identity

The narrative of Kangchendzonga establishes a relationship between landscape, spirituality, and collective identity. The story tells of the sacred origin and importance of Kangchendzonga, elevating it to a place where sacred and divine power resides and protects. In the story, the mountain is not isolated from human life but is involved with human life in keeping the balance between the visible and invisible worlds. Kangchendzonga is a symbol of the sense of belonging and continuity to the Bhutia community. The mountain becomes a symbolic forebear

and a bridge between generations, past and present, and the mountain's spiritual legacy. Smith's Indigenous framework helps explain the relationship between Bhutia identity and sacred landscapes (Smith 74). This Indigenous geographical view is evident in the relationship between the Bhutia people and Kangchendzonga. The mountain retains historical, cultural, and spiritual memories, beliefs, and values that constitute the identity of the community. Pierre Nora's notion of 'lieux de mémoire' helps to explain the symbolic importance of Kangchendzonga. When communities give historical, cultural, and other emotional elements to a place, it becomes a place of memory, according to Nora (19). Kangchendzonga is a site of memory because it retains collective memories and traditions in the form of spirituality.

The storytelling is also an example of how sacred geography is passed on orally. The stories of Kangchendzonga are shared repeatedly, leading to the knowledge of the younger generations. The oral storytelling technology makes the mountain a dynamic text, in which ecological values, religious beliefs and historical consciousness are maintained. Each retelling strengthens the bond between community and sacred landscape, and the story's Buddhist dimension deepens the mountain's spiritual weight. Within Himalayan Buddhist tradition, mountains are commonly held sacred, places where enlightenment, the presence of the divine, and spiritual practice converge.

Kangchendzonga thus carries a double significance, ecological and spiritual at once. It is not simply part of the natural world but part of a larger moral order of respect and interconnectedness, consistent with a Buddhist outlook that stresses the interdependence of all living beings — humans included, as one strand in a network of relationships rather than something set apart from it. Its sacred status keeps people mindful of how they use nature and discourages exploitation. Analyzed through Indigenous environmental ethics, the narrative's reverence and reciprocity toward the mountain (Berkes 8) capture the Bhutia relationship with Kangchendzonga.

Kangchendzonga becomes, in this way, a repository of Bhutia memories of origin, spirituality, and collective belonging. "The Origin of Kangchendzonga" is not merely a myth explaining the mountain's existence; it is a story of sacred geography and collective identity, one that shows how Bhutia mythology sustains environmental value, spiritual awareness of the land, and cultural identity together.

5. Comparative Analysis: Converging Cosmologies and Cultural Identities

Despite their different spiritual and historical origins, Lepcha and Bhutia traditions both produce narratives of sacred landscape, ethical relations with nature, and collective memory. Cultural Memory and Sacred Landscapes

The role of folklore as cultural memory unites the Bhutia and Lepcha traditions. Folktales function as alternative archives, keeping communities connected to landscape, people, and belief. Lepcha stories preserve ecological memory through rivers, forests, spirits, and sacred objects: 'The Race Between Teesta and Rangeet' carries cultural memory through rivers, while 'The Sacred Drum' preserves ancestral knowledge through ritual. Bhutia narratives do similar work through sacred mountains, Buddhist symbols, and moral teaching — 'The Origin of Kangchendzonga' expresses ancestral belonging, and 'The Tale of the Magic Stone' conveys lessons on desire and responsibility. Here the notion of lieux de mémoire is useful: sacred landscapes such as Teesta, Rangeet, and Kangchendzonga become sites of memory where communities hold onto history, belief, and identity (Nora 19).

Eco-Criticism in Lepcha and Bhutia Folktales

Cheryll Glotfelty defines ecocriticism as "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (Glotfelty xviii). From an Indigenous perspective, nature is not

background scenery but an active presence with its own agency, memory, and moral weight. Lepcha and Bhutia folktales push against anthropocentric readings by treating rivers, mountains, forests, and nonhuman beings as participants — not objects — in ecological relationships. Lepcha narratives carry an animistic understanding of the natural world: ‘The Race Between Teesta and Rangeet’ casts rivers as living beings that hold both ecological balance and cultural memory, while ‘Jhampi Moong’ and ‘The Sacred Drum’ emphasize respect for non-human existence and the preservation of ancestral knowledge. Bhutia narratives, in turn, work through Buddhist ideas of interdependence, compassion, and responsibility: ‘The Origin of Kangchendzonga,’ ‘The Yeti’s Secret,’ and ‘The Tale of the Magic Stone’ each take up sacred geography, ecological guardianship, and the costs of unchecked desire. As Smith argues, Indigenous narratives constitute intellectual traditions that preserve alternative knowledge systems and push back against dominant modes of knowledge production (Smith 99). Lepcha and Bhutia folktales, then, function as living ecological philosophies — nature as a sacred, relational presence, and an alternative way of thinking about sustainability.

Similarities and Differences in Ethical Frameworks

Both traditions insist on ecological responsibility, even though their philosophical foundations differ.

Aspect	Lepcha Tradition	Bhutia Tradition
Philosophical foundation	Animism and relational ecology	Vajrayana Buddhist cosmology
Nature	Living spiritual presence with agency	Sacred manifestation of interconnected existence
Human-nature relationship	Reciprocity with rivers, forests, spirits, and ancestors	Compassion, karma, and ethical responsibility
Sacred landscape	Rivers, forests, Mountains, Kangchendzonga	Sacred mountains, monasteries, spiritual landscapes
Moral principle	Maintaining harmony with natural beings	Avoiding attachment and maintaining karmic balance
Symbols	Teesta-Rangeet rivers, Sacred Drum, Jhampi Moong	Kangchendzonga, Yeti, Norbu/Magic Stone
Ecological lesson	Respect nature because it is spiritually alive	Respect nature because all beings are interconnected
Narrative purpose	Maintaining ecological harmony and ancestral relationships	Teaching moral discipline and spiritual awareness

Folklore, Identity, and Indigenous Knowledge

This analysis suggests that Lepcha and Bhutia folktales are themselves manifestations of these communities’ knowledge systems, a means of holding onto ecological knowledge, spiritual belief, and cultural identity amid rapid modernization and cultural change. Linda Tuhiwai Smith argues that Indigenous peoples’ knowledge needs to be recognized as knowledge, not merely observed as culture (70), and the folktales examined here bear this out, revealing sophisticated

understanding of ecology, ethics, spirituality, and human relationships.

These stories also demonstrate cultural resilience. ‘The Sacred Drum’ preserves Lepcha ritual memory, while ‘The Origin of Kangchendzonga’ sustains Bhutia ancestral identity through sacred geography — both showing how deeply place is bound up with Indigenous identity. To conserve Lepcha and Bhutia folklore, then, is to conserve a form of knowledge about the natural world, about memory, and about an alternative way of understanding humanity’s relationship with nature.

Conclusion

This study has argued that Lepcha and Bhutia folktales function as repositories of cultural memory, Indigenous knowledge, ecological values, and collective identity, connecting communities to sacred landscapes, ancestral histories, and spiritual practice. Through narratives tied to Kangchendzonga, the Teesta and Rangeet rivers, sacred drums, and other cultural symbols, these traditions carry ecological wisdom across generations.

The comparative analysis shows that, despite their different cosmological foundations, Lepcha and Bhutia narratives share ethical principles grounded in humility, reciprocity, restraint, and respect for the more-than-human world. Lepcha folklore reflects an animistic worldview in which nature possesses agency; Bhutia narratives emphasize the Buddhist values of karma, compassion, and interdependence. Both traditions, in their own ways, challenge anthropocentric understandings of nature, treating landscape as a sacred space of memory, identity, and ecological consciousness.

An ecocritical reading of these narratives finds nature an active presence in the text, with its own voice, agency, and moral weight. The stories communicate ecological ethics through balance, reciprocity, and responsible relationships between humans and their environment, and through myth, ritual, and sacred geography, these communities preserve Indigenous ways of knowing even as they contend with language decline, migration, modernization, and changing cultural practice. Lepcha and Bhutia folktales, then, are not remnants of the past but living expressions of Indigenous knowledge systems — and the “whispering mountains” of Sikkim are not merely geographical features but living archives of mythology, memory, spirituality, and ecological wisdom.

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