

# The Kanchendzonga Sacred Landscape: Nature-Culture Linkages and Local Associations with Place

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## Abstract

*This paper looks at cultural landscapes, including settlements and agro-ecological systems, which lie beyond the domain of the protected natural core of the Kanchenjunga National Park (a World Heritage site and Biosphere Reserve). These landscapes have evolved, over time, through a long history of interactions between culture and nature, with the assimilation and coexistence of diverse traditions, belief systems, and rituals related to land. This makes them a repository of biological and cultural diversity. Dominant discourses about the environment and heritage often tend to commodify nature or culture, undermining the multiplicity of values, meanings, and practices in these multi-layered, multi ethnic and contested terrains. There is a need for a paradigm shift, towards an alternative conservation praxis, that acknowledges and explores nature-culture linkages in landscapes and the local perception of heritage while affirming the stewardship role of communities and their engagement in decisions concerning their land, forests, and waters.*

**KEY WORDS:** sacred landscape, nature-culture, intangible heritage, indigenous rights

## 1. Introduction

Over the years, the global conservation discourse has experienced a gradual, but significant, shift from monument-centric and expert-oriented to community-based and people-centric approaches. Yet in practice, conservation continues to be a top-down process, as typical conventional approaches lead to the isolation of nature from culture. For instance, the natural area that immediately surrounds Mount Kanchendzonga is designated as a National Park and was recently inscribed as a World Heritage site under the Mixed Cultural and Natural Heritage category; but, the human inhabited agricultural landscapes and settlements, which constitute a part of the larger sacred geography, have been excluded from the core area of the designated heritage site. The Kanchendzonga sacred landscape, a

notional landscape, can be described as a confluence of place and mythology. There are multiple interpretations of this mythical landscape, which broadly encompasses Mount Kanchendzonga and its adjacencies, but does not have any definitive boundaries. This paper attempts to understand nature-culture



**Figure 1.** The sacred landscape: a confluence of place and mythology; Prayer Flags at Dzongri in West Sikkim (image courtesy: Hussain Indorewala)



**Figure 2.** Natural and Human Inhabited landscapes belonging to the Kanchenjunga Biosphere reserve (pictures in the left); the map in the right shows the core (yellow), buffer (red) and transition zones (white) of the Biosphere reserve and World Heritage site (boundaries shown with a red line); images: Shweta Wagh, Map sourced from the Dossier for the Nomination of Khangchendzonga National Park for Inscription on the World Heritage List

linkages and local perceptions of nature in semi-natural and human inhabited landscapes that lie beyond the domain of the protected natural core, broadly coinciding with the buffer and transition zones of the inscribed World Heritage site or the Kanchenjunga<sup>1</sup> Biosphere Reserve (Figure 2).

### 1.1 Overview of the heritage site

Mount Kanchendzonga, the sacred summit, is revered by local communities as their guardian deity. Shamanic worldviews persist among the indigenous inhabitants, such as the Lepchas, who have a cosmology intricately interwoven with the land. They trace their lineage to sacred mountains and peaks, believed to be places where life originates and where the souls of their ancestors reside. Their conception of Máyel Lyáng is as a hidden paradise, inhabited by immortal beings that cater to their needs and well-being. With the establishment of the Buddhist Kingdom in the seventeenth century, indigenous conceptions of the landscape were assimilated into a “Buddhist rendition of Sikkim’s sacred geography as a beyul (sbas yul) or sacred hidden land” (Balikci 2008). The mythical geography of the landscape thus seems to have emerged out of these two distinct hidden land narrative constructs. Over the years, there is evidence of an interchange between these diverse cultures and, today, the region has a mixture of religious and ethnic identities.

The physical landscape of the

Biosphere Reserve spans across four altitudinal regions, including the trans-himalayan, alpine, temperate, and subtropical. It consists of a diversity of habitats ranging from snowfields, glacial lakes, alpine forests, and meadows to temperate broadleaved, evergreen, and sub-tropical valley forests. Deep gorges and steep, densely vegetated, valleys contain the tributaries and basins of the Rangit and Teesta rivers, fed by melting glacial snows and torrential monsoon rains. At lower elevations, agrarian and pastoral landscapes are interspersed with natural habitats. The landscape, dotted with settlements, monasteries, and symbolic relics, contains a multitude of sacred natural sites (Figure 3).



**Figure 3.** The landscape is dotted with settlements, symbolic relics and sacred natural sites: The sacred river Rongyong (left), Buddhist Chortens (centre), a village in Dzongu-the Indigenous Lepcha reserve in West Sikkim (right) ©Shweta Wagh

### 1.2 Description of the agricultural landscape

A wide range of landscape types are sustained through the practices of the local communities

<sup>1</sup> The site is referred to by various names as per local or regional dialects, for e.g. Kanchendzonga, Kanchenjunga or Khangchendzonga. In this paper I have used these names interchangeably, as applicable or according to how the site has been referred to as part of various national/international frameworks or designations.

and their intimate relationship with nature. The buffer and transition zones of the National Park consist of agro-ecological systems (Figure 4) and land use practices that have evolved over 600 years, in response to the terrain and climate, through a series of innovations and adaptations (Ramakrishan 2008; Subba 2008; Bhasin 2011). The landscape is the result of a cumulative process of accretion of successive layers and the continuous shaping and reshaping of nature by the region's inhabitants. Earlier systems of shifting cultivation were supplemented with sedentary farming. Over the years, a mixed mountain garden-based farming system has emerged, which consists of a range of practices including agroforestry, forestry, livestock, and agricultural land (Subba 2008). There are different kinds of fields at different elevations, which include dry fields, orchards, agroforestry, house gardens, and terraced paddy fields.

The upper slopes of the hills and lands, where irrigation is not possible, are used for the temporary dry cultivation of grain such as millet, buckwheat, and dry rice. At lower elevations, there are terraced rice fields, irrigated by bamboo channels. The bunds of the fields are often planted with legumes, fruit and fodder trees, and bamboo. Hill slopes are planted with tapioca, grain, vegetables, cardamom based agro-forests, or orange plantations intercropped with legumes. The house gardens use intensive multi-cropping with cereals, legumes, vegetables, tubers, medicinal herbs, spices, and aromatic plants (Subba 2008; Bhasin 2011). Fields are interspersed with forests, natural or semi-natural landscapes, and are often governed by customary rights. Agriculture is supplemented with livestock farming, fishing, and foraging for non-timber forest resources. The local

communities collect bamboo, firewood, fodder, medicinal and edible plants, such as mushrooms, ferns, and tubers, from the forests and groves in the settlements vicinity. These practices constitute the traditional ecological knowledge of the local communities which makes the region a repository of bio-cultural diversity (Ramakrishnan 2008).

## ■ 2. Intangible values and linkages between culture and nature.

Buddhist and shamanic worldviews, deeply ingrained in the local belief systems, have their basis in a mystical reverence for nature and they place several restrictions, and taboos, on the inhabitants of the landscape. Natural sites, such as hills, peaks, glaciers, rivers, forests, trees, groves, rocks, caves, lakes, and springs, are believed to be sacred and inhabited by malevolent or benevolent supernatural beings (Figure 5). It is feared that any kind of pollution or defilement of these areas would release the destructive entities that the land had subdued or invoke the wrath of local deities, manifesting as epidemics, famines, disputes, and natural calamities (Scheid 2014). The Lepchas believe that ritual appeasement and pacification is required to ensure the deities' benevolence, which will guarantee their fertility, health, prosperity, and security (Bentley 2014). Similarly, rituals of the land, common among the Lhopos [Bhutias], are an expression of a well rooted relationship with the sacred land and its harvests (Balikci 2008). The Lepcha tribe believes that the loss of their traditional way of life, language, and ritual practices will sever their connection with Mayel Lyang. Similarly, the Lhopos people believe that only those who can purify their own minds can experience the secret beyul, which also implies an inner state



**Figure 4.** Agro-ecological systems in the region of Dzongu include farmlands interspersed with forests, bamboo plantations (left), orchards and house gardens (centre), and natural forests (right) ©Shweta Wagh



*Figure 5. Sacred relics and natural sites: The sacred river Rongyong in Dzongu (left), Sacred stones in Dzongu- the indigenous Lepcha reserve (centre) and a sacred grove attached to a monastery (right) ©Shweta Wagh*

of transcendence (Scheid 2014). Customary practices, that involve the dedication of sacred groves and landscapes to ancestral spirits, embody their culture and indigenous identities (Arora 2006).

### ■ 3. Current state of conservation and challenges for continuity

State policies and development schemes in the region are geared towards sustainable development; however, they tend to adopt conventional approaches which isolate nature from culture. In recent years, agrarian and pastoral landscapes, which lie beyond protected area networks, have experienced cultural and demographic changes and an onslaught of development pressures. With scientific or biodiversity values prioritized over cultural values, the role of the local communities as custodians of the sacred sites and landscapes has been undermined.

Archaeological sites and monuments are protected but agricultural landscapes with vernacular heritage are rarely acknowledged. The processes for heritage identification is driven by dominant discourses, with little consideration, or emphasis, on the intangible or local values. For instance, the Sacred Spaces Special Provisions Act recognizes sacred natural sites of Buddhist worship and includes peaks, caves, rocks, lakes, chortens, and hot springs, but intangible values, associated with sacred rivers and other sites of local significance, are not protected under this act. Nature and culture are also packaged, or commodified, for the growing tourism industry. These development programs are often in conflict with local needs or priorities. For example, in the region of Dzongu, as part of an ecotourism initiative, an ancient grove of

trees, which sheltered a sacred spring, was cut down in order to construct public bathhouses for tourists. Another example of insensitive development is the Chief Minister's Rural Housing Mission, which aimed to achieve a Kutcha House Free State in the year 2013; it proposed to replace all traditional houses with model prototypes in reinforced concrete. There were serious concerns that the scheme would erase the diversity of the vernacular heritage of Sikkim.

No culture is static or devoid of contemporary realities; academics have critiqued tendencies to idealize or romanticize indigenous or traditional associations with nature (Arora 2006). On one hand, modernization, education, and external influences have led to an erosion of culture; conversely, the threat of destruction, the commodification of nature brought on by these development forces, and the increasing marginalization faced by these communities, has resulted in the revival of the notion of the sacred landscape, its reification acts as a form of resistance to unsustainable development. This revival of beliefs was evident when the residents attributed cases of sickness and death in the community to the destruction of trees and rocks during a road construction project in Tashiding, which was considered to be one of the most sacred sites in the region (Scheid 2014). Similarly, a hydroelectric project proposed on the Sacred Rathong Chu River, in west Sikkim, and several other such projects across Sikkim were opposed as they threatened to divert the course of rivers, considered sacred by the local communities, by channelizing them underground.

An increasing awareness of the contemporary significance of traditional values has made local inhabitants assume

simultaneous roles as “keepers of their tradition and culture” while also being promoters of change and modernity (Bentley 2011). In this context, intangible associations with the landscape, in the forms of ancient religious beliefs, stories, and myths, carry a renewed ecological relevance. The inhabitants of the contested and precarious landscape resort to a reassertion of their mythical association with the landscape, and their identities as the original inhabitants of the region, in order to establish territorial claims over natural resources and ecological commons, such as mountains, rivers, and forests that they revere as sacred. Even today, the notion of the sacred landscape is alive and continues to be reinforced in public memory through a constant juxtaposition and interplay of local and regional narratives.

#### ■ 4. Bridging the nature-culture divide: a paradigm shift in conservation praxis

In recent years, there is an increasing awareness that “areas in which people live, work, forage, and worship... play an important role in biodiversity conservation” (Sharma 2008). This has resulted in a move away from “protectionist” exclusionary approaches to “livelihood-linked” inclusive landscape approaches (Ibid). A few initiatives in this direction include the State Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan, Joint Forest Management (JFM), and the Kanchenjunga Landscape Conservation Initiative, which advocates an integrated trans-boundary landscape approach with the identification of potential conservation corridors that provides landscape connectivity between Protected Areas (ICIMOD 2008). The limitation, however, is a lack of adequate institutional and legislative support. The presence of categories such as “Cultural Landscapes” and “Mixed Cultural and Natural Heritage Sites” in the World Heritage Convention can be seen as significant attempts in bridging the nature-culture divide; however, there are gaps in their application. This was apparent in recent studies, which showed that these typological categories had been under-represented in previous Tentative lists for World Heritage sites in India. In response to this, in 2012 an extensive participatory stakeholder consultation process was initiated by the Advisory Committee on World Heritage Matters (ACWHM) for the revision of the Tentative list.

The Kanchendzonga National Park had earlier been nominated, under the Natural Heritage category, a proposal which undermined its tangible and intangible cultural values. Local communities collectively decided to influence the revision of the nomination by presenting a more comprehensive alternative and argued for the inclusion of the buffer and transition zones as part of the core zone. Upon reviewing their suggestion, the ACWHM

recommended that the site be renamed as the “Kanchendzonga Sacred Landscape” and nominated under the Mixed Cultural and Natural Heritage category, with an extension of boundaries to include its buffer and transition zones. Although the final nomination did not incorporate these suggestions, the category was changed from a Natural to a Mixed Site. Human inhabited, agricultural landscapes and settlements thus remain excluded from the core area of the World Heritage site.

This raises some critical questions regarding current conservation praxis that necessitate a paradigm shift. Conservation needs to be re-conceptualized with an emphasis on landscape frameworks, the incorporation of nature-culture linkages, and an understanding of local perceptions and values in the documentation or identification of heritage. The recent inscription of their sacred landscape as a World Heritage site has raised both hopes and apprehensions amongst the local communities. While their future lies uncertain, they would like to see an inclusive approach aimed towards a participatory management of change. A pluralistic view of heritage with an emphasis on people-centred approaches, biocultural rights, community stewardship, and democratic control could be a few significant steps in that direction.

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