

**AN ANALYSIS OF THE TRANSFORMATION OF INDIGENOUS LEPCHA
IDENTITY THROUGH THE MYTH ‘THE RACE BETWEEN TEESTA
AND RANGEET’**

Olive Anand¹

Research Scholar, Department of English, Erode Arts and Science College,
Erode

Dr. K Saravanan²

Associate Professor, Department of English, Erode Arts and Science College,
Erode

Article Received: 27/06/2026

Article Accepted: 30/07/2026

Published Online: 31/07/2026

DOI: 10.47311/IJOES.2026.8.07.592

Abstract

Cultural Identity of a community is constantly being transformed. Stuart Hall posits that cultural identity is not just static or in a state of being but is constantly being changed and evolving or in state of becoming. Cultural Identity is transformed because of factors which includes colonisation, assimilation, migration, loss, separation, globalisation and modernisation. Cultural Identity is shaped by shared history, collective memory and shared cultural codes. The purpose of this paper is to analyse how indigenous Lepcha identity has transformed as a result of modernity. The Lepchas are an indigenous group of people residing in the state of Sikkim. Lepcha narratives represent their cultural identity. The paper seeks to analyse the transformation of cultural identity and the shift in cultural codes as result of modern influences through the popular Lepcha myth ‘The Race Between the Teesta and Rangeet’.

Keywords: Modernity, Traditional, Transformation, Cultural Identity.

Introduction

Stuart Hall states that identity of members of a particular community does not remain the same. The identity of a community is constantly affected by external factors such as colonization, assimilation, modernisation and globalisation. Hall states that identities:

are subject to the continuous 'play' of history, culture and power. Far from being grounded in a mere 'recovery' of the past, which is waiting to be found, and which, when found, will secure our sense of ourselves into eternity, identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past. (Hall, 225)

Hall states that identity consists of 'what we are' and 'what we have become'. Identity is constantly being produced. Identity is not fixed and does not remain in a state of being but rather identity is dynamic in nature and is in a state of 'becoming'. This state of being takes on the essentialist view where identity is rooted in the 'true' state or self of members within a specific community. However, cultural identity is always changing and goes through transformation. Hall states that "identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past" (Hall, 225).

Halls' view on cultural identity as being and becoming can be applied to understand how cultural identity within indigenous communities were subject to transformation and are constantly in the state of 'becoming' due to external factors such as colonisation by dominant cultures, assimilation, modernisation and globalisation. Indigenous literary narratives may remain part of the community's collective memory and remind them of their shared history. However, the shared cultural codes of these narratives change over time as a result of outside forces that bring about a change and transformation within the community.

Indigenous Lepcha Community and Lepcha Narratives

The Lepchas are an indigenous community native to the state of Sikkim in India. The present state of Sikkim is the remains of what was once a vast kingdom that stretched from the southern regions of Tibet, the eastern parts of Nepal, western parts of Bhutan and the entire region of modern-day Sikkim, Darjeeling and Kalimpong. The Lepchas occupied the entire region and were much larger in number before they were colonised by outsiders or assimilated with other tribal communities that reside within these regions and also within

other neighbouring communities such as Nepal and Bhutan as a result of new political boundaries put into place. Lepcha narratives consisted of myths, legends and folktales. These narratives were in the oral tradition. They were passed down from one generation by the Elders of the community for the sole reason of protecting their community from ‘vanishing’ as A.R Foning described. These myths consist of religious stories that dwelt on themes such as the origin of their sacred land, the creation of the first humans, the first marriage, and other didactic tales that describe how traditions, customs, rules and regulations came into place and were implemented within the community.

However, the Lepchas in the thirteenth century were colonised by the Tibetans with the arrival of Khye Bumsa. His descendant was established as the first Chogyal or king of Sikkim. By this time many Buddhist monks, the most popular and revered monk was Guru Padmasambhava, sought to convert the people of this land. Many Lepchas accepted Buddhist teachings and honoured these legends Khye Bumsa and Guru Padmasambhava because of their ancestor who agreed upon the Treaty of Blood Brotherhood. Lepcha narratives, as a result of this, includes stories of the legend Khye Bumsa’s arrival to their land. The narratives include stories of Guru Padmasambhava’s victories over evil demons and stories include the origin of certain natural landscapes that are sacred to the Buddhist. By acknowledging these stories as part of their myths, the Lepchas have assimilated with the Buddhist traditions and have incorporated their teachings with their own. They have equated Khye Bumsa and Guru Padmasambhava as one among their respected mythical and legendary figures.

The Lepchas were then colonised by Bhutan and Nepal. Bhutan attacked the Lepchas and fought with the then King Gaeboo Achyok. However, the Dalai Lama then interfered and Bhutan returned from Sikkim but continued to occupy Kalimpong. The Lepchas of the region were assimilated with the Bhutanese people residing in the area. The Lepchas then acknowledged that Gaeboo Achyok was also a legend for saving the community and its land from Bhutan. Nepal attacked the western regions of the Kingdom of Sikkim. These regions are now a part of Nepal and Lepchas still reside in the region but have assimilated with the people of Nepal.

Another major coloniser of the region were the Britishers. The East India Company brought missionaries to civilise the Lepchas. The Britishers according to A.R Foning:

came with religion, and converted a huge chunk of Lepchas to Christianity. Secondly, they brought with them Western education. They brought in a lot of

workers from Nepal, so that population grew significantly... so we always had a cultural mix but migration tipped the scales... (Foning, 45).

The Lepcha narratives saw a shift in themes and storytelling. The Britishers introduced the printing press so the stories were no longer passed down in oral traditions. The Britishers introduced English and dismissed the use of the Lepcha language. The literary texts published during this time focused on anthropological and sociological accounts of the Lepchas by the British. The stories of the Lepchas focused on themes like oppression, loss of their sacred landscapes, loss of traditions and language. Many writers like A.R Foning retells the traditional stories in an attempt to preserve the stories from ‘vanishing’. After the end of the British rule in India, Sikkim remained a princely state for three decades until 1975 when it became the twenty-second state of India. As a result of this union, the Lepchas were no longer the rulers of the land and came under the broader classification of Sikkim’s many tribal communities. The Lepcha narratives are no longer unique to the region but are a part of the broader Sikkimese literature. The land that they hold sacred are subject to projects that promote modernisation and their home is reduced to a small reserve in Dzongu, Sikkim. Traditional Lepcha narratives are no longer central to their lives but are remembered during special occasions by many who by now have either converted to Buddhism or Christianity or other religions.

Lepcha Myth- The Race Between the Teesta and Rangeet

According to this Lepcha myth the Creator It-bu-Moo created two river spirits Teesta a woman and Rangeet a man. These two spirits loved each other very deeply. They would always meet in the mountains of Kanchenjunga. However, they decided to leave and go to a faraway land when everyone in the land came to know of their love. The two decided to take a guide to lead and guide them through their journey. Rangeet was always competitive in nature and choose a bird to guide him to the plains. He chooses the bird because it was fast. Rongnyu or Teesta was mild and pleasant and choose a snake. The bird was swift but was easily distracted. The snake went on a straight path and reached the plains faster. Rangeet saw that Teesta had reached ahead of him, he tried to race faster dragging huge chunks of mud along with him upon seeing Rongnyu he shouted ‘thi-see-tha’ meaning when did you come? This is how Rongnyu came to be called Teesta. Upset he came in second, he decided to flow back to the Himalayas flooding the area. Teesta warned him and told him not to recede higher but he did not listen and decided to flow higher up causing more destruction. Rongnyu followed him and the water levels began to rise. The people of the valley believed that the rivers were flooding because It-Bu-Moo the Creator allowed it because they were

not loyal enough to her. A mountain Tungong Lho a mountain in south Sikkim rose higher and higher to save the people. The people and all the other creatures took refuge in these mountains. The Lepcha children prayed to the Creator and a partridge offered to fly to Kanchenjunga to offer mongbree as a sacrifice. It-Bu-Moo the Creator took pity and forced the floods to recede. The male spirit was wooed by his female partner and they were never separated again. They flowed towards the plain where they were united. The newly married Lepcha couples are taken to this place and people wish them a prosperous marriage and offer sacrifices.

Transformation of Lepcha Identity

In the traditional context the myth of ‘The Race Between the Teesta and Rangeet’ highlights their cultural identity. The myth forms a part of the Lepcha shared history. The Lepchas living throughout the regions and other places will acknowledge that these rivers form a part of their identity. These personified rivers are scared. They are spirits that were created and loved by the Creator herself. The love between the two river spirits for each other were qualities that were greatly admired by the deities and the people then. The author Dishey Yoma notes that they were never separated. These rivers represented life, peace and are also a representation of the Creators loved ones as well. To exist peacefully in the region meant to protect these rivers to not anger these spirits and honor the Creator. These rivers represent qualities that are essential for the survival of the community.

Firstly, the two river spirits are devoted to one another. This is not to say that the spirits did not have their weaknesses. Rangeet was competitive and wanted to win over his partner. Unlike Teesta who just wanted to be united with her partner. Upon reaching second, Rangeet was angry and caused the areas to flood. Rangeet receding upwards caused Rongnyu to follow him because of her love for them. This act shows that anger can be destructive and is not a quality that is encouraged within members of the community. The union between the two rivers are examples the Lepchas are expected to exemplify in their unions. The story led to the tradition of offering sacrifices to the river spirits by newlywed Lepcha couples. The union between two people leads to prosperity and harmony. These qualities ensure the survival of a community. When Rangeet was angry Rongnyu was sad and this caused fear and destruction among the people. However, when they were united there was happiness and peace. Competition, led to jealousy which led to anger and disappointment and destruction. These are qualities that are not encouraged among members of the community. This story thereby established a moral code of conduct for members of the community.

Secondly the two river spirits are devoted to the Creator. According to the myth there is a truth to be acknowledged that Rangeet's anger was caused because of the Creator's anger due to the lack of devotion towards her by her children, the Lepcha children. Devotion to the Creator is essential for survival. Offering sacrifices and acknowledging the Creator ensures survival of the community. The Lepchas could not survive on their own. The Lepchas did not return to their Creator immediately when the floods rose, instead first they fled to the mountain. Unable to escape the floods, they remembered their Creator. The story is a reminder that to protect themselves from trouble, it was important to be devoted to the Creator always and maybe the Creator would not have allowed the flood to happen in the first place. The relationship between the Creator and humans is necessary. Humans are not endowed with powers to control everything. Similarly with other elements of nature. All creatures and elements are under the control of the Creator and therefore the relationship is vital for their existence.

In the modern context the myth generates a new meaning to the Lepchas. The Lepcha history is not just limited to colonisation by various countries and assimilation with different ethnic groups and adoption of different religious groups. The Lepchas were also subject to modernisation and globalisation. In recent times the Lepchas have been fighting against the Hydro Electric Project. These projects are greatly opposed by the Lepchas because the river Teesta will eventually dry up. The protest against this project is directly linked to the myth. The survival of the community as seen in the myth is directly linked to existence of this river. The river forms a part of their shared history. This river represented their cultural identity and in the modern context it represents a site whose identity is bargained and whose worth to the community is reconstructed by an outsider. This could potentially reduce their cultural identity to 'vanishing tribe' as put by A.R Foning.

The tale in the modern context is a warning against the dangers of ruining a sacred element of nature. The story in the traditional context focused on the love story of the two river spirits and how they reunited and how marriage customs were developed as a result of it. However, the floods caused as a result of lack of devotion to their Creator would result in destruction of their sacred lands. With development projects in place as a result of modernisation and globalisation the Lepchas are bound to lose their sacred lands. As a result of colonisation, the Lepchas have already lost their sacred lands. With further development related projects, the Lepchas stand to lose the very land they consider life-giving and supporting. When the sacred deities are enraged as seen in the myth the rivers bring about

great amounts of mud which can also be considered a landslide and also could result in floods. The Lepchas consider themselves to have a sacred relationship with these lands and rivers and other natural beings. If they lose this relationship they are headed for destruction. Therefore, it must be acknowledged that in the modern context Lepcha myths serve as a cautionary reminder of the dangers that will be inflicted upon the members of the community if they fail to uphold the truths that are hidden within these tales and could lead to them disappearing altogether.

Conclusion

Lepcha narratives are a representation of the cultural identity of the Lepcha community. They are a part of their shared history, their collective memory and hide within them their cultural codes that the Lepchas are expected to follow. However, the meaning and interpretation of these narratives shift over time. The story in the traditional sense meant embodying the values of the two rivers by being devoted to their god and to each other. In doing so they are not angering their God. However, in modern times, the story is a reminder to fight against the forces, such as modernisation and globalisation, that are restricting them from their devotion to their God. They are forced to recall the dangers that affected their people during that time and fight against those forces to avoid losing their sacred lands and vanishing forever. Their cultural identity is rooted in these stories and in the modern context it serves as a cautionary tale rather than a traditional tale of love and devotion.

Works Cited

- Foning, A. R. "*Lepcha, My Vanishing Tribe.*" 1987, ci.nii.ac.jp/ncid/BA10334130.
"Friends From Sikkim: Blood Pheasant." *Tales of Twisted Fibers*, 13 Feb. 2022, talesoftwistedfibers.wordpress.com/2022/02/13/friends-from-sikkim-blood-pheasant. Accessed 29 Aug. 2026.
Hall, Stuart. *Cultural Identity and Diaspora: Identity: community, culture, difference*. 1990.
History, Brown. "The Slow Disintegration of Lepchas, Indigenous Settlers of Sikkim." *Brown History*, 8 Dec. 2022, brownhistory.substack.com/p/the-slow-disintegration-of-lepchas.
Jeancamille, and Jeancamille. "Myths and Legends." AIF, 19 July 2017, aif.org/myths-and-legends. Accessed 29 Aug. 2026.
Lepcha, Mayalmit. "The Lepcha Community's Bid to Protect Sikkim's Rivers | IDR." *India Development Review*, 3 Sept. 2025, idronline.org/ground-up-stories/the-lepcha-communitys-bid-to-protect-sikkims-rivers. Accessed 29 Aug. 2026.

-
- “The Lores of Water: Rivers and Lakes of Sikkim | *Sahapedia*.” Sahapedia, www.sahapedia.org/lores-water-rivers-and-lakes-sikkim. Accessed 29 Aug. 2026.
- Roy, D. C. Lepchas, Past and Present. 2012.
- Thatal, Aakriti. “Teesta Matters to Us: A People’s March to Save the Waters | IDR.” *India Development Review*, 6 Aug. 2026, idronline.org/article/environment/teesta-matters-to-us-a-peoples-march-to-save-the-waters. Accessed 29 Aug. 2026.
- Yishey, Doma. *Legends of the Lepchas: Folk Tales From Sikkim*. 2010,dspace.cus.ac.in/jspui/bitstream/1/175/1/Legends%20of%20the%20Lepchas.pdf.