

The Forest of Symbols Embodied in the Tholung Sacred Landscape of North Sikkim, India

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Abstract: *The paper explores the forest of symbols and the cultural politics embodied in the Tholung sacred landscape of North Sikkim, India. Representations of the Lepchas as the guardians of the sacred grove are gaining ground in the contemporary context of their cultural revival and regional ethnopolitics. To nuance these perspectives, this study furthers the socio-ecological debate on conservation, socio-religious fencing, and the mediating role of state. Sacred groves and landscapes are often perceived as an example of indigenous forest management practices and the antithesis of the sanctuary rationally managed by the forest department of the government. I emphasise that conservation is a latent consequence while the idea of a sacred site preserves the forest and keeps it inviolate. I argue that Tholung constitutes the nerve centre of Lepcha life, their identity, and embodies the nationalist practices of the former Kingdom of Sikkim. As a sanctified site, Tholung legitimised the authority of the Namgyal dynasty that ruled Sikkim until its incorporation into India in 1975. I explain how rituals performed by the Lepchas regenerate the human body, the land, the ancestral connections of the Lepchas, and their indigenous identity. The community, the forest and the state are conjoined in the locus of the sacred grove as it legitimises the power of the state and sustains the ethnic-nationalism of the Lepchas in the region.*

Keywords: community conservation, sacred groves, landscape, indigenous people, environmentalism, ethnicity, indigenous knowledge, anthropology, Sikkim, Himalayas

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Conservation and Society, Pages 55–83

Volume 4, No. 1, March 2006

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INTRODUCTION

THE CONSERVATION of biodiversity and the search for sustainable development provide the impetus for examining the role of indigenous institutions and traditional ecological knowledge as evident in practices such as sacred groves. Many scholars acknowledge the role of culture and religion in determining attitudes and behaviour towards the environment (Dwivedi and Tiwari 1987; Banwari 1992; Gottlieb 1997). Others analyse the government's commitment to conserving the environment through social forestry programmes and reviving community conservation practices such as sacred groves¹ (Gadgil 1975; Gadgil and Guha 1995; Rangarajan 1996; Kothari et al. 1998; Ramakrishnan et al. 1998). Sacred groves are often perceived as examples of folk-conservationist strategies. Forest officials regard them to be an antithesis of the government-protected reserve forest and the wildlife sanctuary, which is rationally managed by the forest department according to scientific forestry principles.² I argue that environmental conservation in the sacred groves is a latent consequence and not the manifest reason explaining the origin, perpetuation and existence of sacred groves.³ While engaging with these socio-ecological debates on indigenous conservation and sacred groves, I emphasize that the sacred groves of Sikkim affirm the ethnic-nationalist sentiment of the Lepchas, materially represent their indigenous identities, and articulate their interests in the context of ethnic competition over scarce resources. Any state conservation strategy aiming at reviving or reconstructing sacred groves to fence the forest needs to understand the religious and politico-economic aspects materially represented by the sacred grove.

In this article, I explain the forest of symbols and the cultural politics embodied in the Tholung sacred landscape of the Lepchas in Sikkim.⁴ Scholars emphasize that 'a natural space always appears as a cultural landscape, because it is culturally constructed' (Seeland 1997: 1). A landscape embodies peoples' experiences, social memory and their practices (Bourdieu 1990). For social anthropologists, the landscape mediates between the cultural and the political processes by becoming their material expression and the locus of social actions (Hirsch and O'Hanlon 1995; Stewart and Strathern 2003). The embodiment of knowledge, identity, and authority in sacred landscapes such as sacred groves is not unique to Sikkim but common in the Himalayan region and South Asia (Arora 2004). As a sacred space, Tholung is not simply a sacred forest adjacent to a Buddhist temple that serves as a museum preserving the forest and its wild-life (the environment), numerous rare Buddhist scriptures (sacred knowledge), the personal effects of Sikkim's patron saint (material artefacts), the reliquaries of Lhatsun and the *Chos-rgyal*⁵ (sacred remains of their ancestors and religious saints), since it periodically becomes the locus of Lepcha regeneration (social and agricultural) rituals. Historically, the sacred groves of Kabi⁶ and Tholung legitimised the rule of the Namgyal dynasty in the former

Buddhist kingdom of Sikkim and today these sites affirm the authority of the democratically elected state government of Sikkim in India.

The link between the tribal, the local, the rural community and the influence of the wider polity on their beliefs, social practices, livelihood strategies and the environment is explicit in the Tholung sacred grove of North Sikkim. The community, the forest and the state are conjoined in the locus of the sacred grove as it legitimises the power of the state and sustains the ethnic-nationalism of the Lepchas in the region. The sacred landscapes and sacred groves of the Lepchas and the Bhutias reinforce their assertions of being indigenous and maintain their ethnic boundaries with the Nepali majority. The current cultural revival among the Lepchas valorises their identity as forest-dwellers, affirms their indigeneity, and transforms them into primordial environmentalists of the eastern Himalayas.

I am guided by the premise that the idea of a forest separated from the people is an illusion 'since it denies the unalienable relation of nature to man' (Rangarajan 1996: 70). I will contend that I am wary of any simplistic argument perceiving the tribal and the peasant as the encroacher and the poacher or the guardian of the sacred grove.⁷ The idea of innate environmental identities of women, the tribal and the peasant or their harmonious relationship with the environment is not sustainable empirically. The way in which groups perceive their self-interest and relate to the environment is critically shaped by socio-economic processes and political developments occurring at the state, regional and national levels.⁸ I concur with scholars cautioning against any tendency to romanticise the tribals, the locals and the rural as environmental agents/subjects since such arguments ignore the local roots of wider political processes, and the varying livelihood strategies and the self-interests of these communities (Baviskar 1995; Agarwal 2005a; Rangarajan 2006). Environmental subjectivity is contingent and influenced by the wider structures of political control although groups may cognise their relationship with the environment (Agarwal 2005a, 2005b).⁹ Livelihood and identity politics influence conservation strategies. I begin by discussing the socio-ecological debates on conservation, socio-religious fencing and the mediating role of state. These wider debates situate the cultural politics materialised and ceremonialised in sacred groves, thereby highlighting their role in ethnic movements. In the next section, I briefly discuss the ethnographic context of Sikkim and profile the Lepchas of Sikkim and the Darjeeling Hills of West Bengal. It emphasizes the critical role played by Lepcha cosmologies in providing a framework for the emergence of their political consciousness. The third section discusses the location, the origin, the ethnic basis of the management, and the strong religious beliefs associated with the Tholung sacred landscape. By discussing the socio-religious fencing of Tholung, I emphasize that conservation is a latent consequence while the idea of a sacred site is what perpetuates the sanctity and inviolate character of the forest. In the subsequent section, I discuss the rituals uniquely associated with the Tholung sacred landscape that legi-

timised kingship, nationalised the sacred treasures, and continue to rejuvenate the community and the land. Then I argue that sacred landscapes such as Tholung encompass plural meanings of the forest and reflect the changes in the wider society. Representations of the Lepchas as the guardians of the sacred grove are gaining ground in the current context of their cultural revival in the regional ethnopolitics. Such a politicisation of indigenous knowledge and sacred landscapes is discernible among the Australian Aborigines with their Dreamings and in development contexts such as implementation of hydel projects in Sikkim (India) and Canada. Ideas of indigenous conservation cannot be divorced from the context of peoples' material practices, their ethnic aspirations and relations with the state. Any state policy aiming to revive community conservation needs to recognise the cultural politics materially expressed and ritualised in the sacred grove.

The Debate: From Sacred Species and Sacred Groves to (Sacred) Landscapes

'...these community-based living repositories provide an important contribution to the conservation of biological diversity, complementing the more recent approaches to protected area management, based on scientific knowledge, and promoted by conservation groups and government agencies. Examples of what can be called local, or vernacular conservation, can be observed at different scales and levels including the protection of sacred species, sacred groves and sacred landscapes.' (Ramakrishnan 1998: 438).

During the nineteen eighties, a key ingredient of the environmental conservation debate was the role played by cultural values and world-views in determining both attitudes and behaviour towards the environment (White 1967; Hargrove 1986; Dwivedi and Tiwari 1987; Park 1994; Gottlieb 1997).¹⁰ To an extent, those debates were influenced by a critique of modernity that perpetuated a romanticised perception of the tribal, the aborigine and the peasant as the custodian of the forest and the steward of the land. Theological debates on the role of Christianity in promoting an exploitative attitude towards nature and the cosmological wisdom encoded by Hinduism, Buddhism and folk religions encouraged the perception of the tribals and the peasants as the guardians of the sacred grove (Sinha 1979; Dwivedi and Tiwari 1987; Shiva 1987; Skolimowski 1991; Banwari 1992). Ethnographic studies explaining natural resource conflict and analysing environmental movements such as Chipko, Narmada Bachao Andolan and the fish workers' movement underscore the necessity of relating 'peoples' perception of nature' with their livelihood practices as are evident in struggles over resources in the development context (Guha 1989; Omvedt 1993; Gadgil and Guha 1995; Baviskar 1995).

Contemporary discourses transcend the 'nature–culture' dichotomy in treating 'nature' as being not merely a resource with use values or representing an arena of economic competition and political conflict by emphasising its symbolic value for representing identities and articulating interests at both the local and the regional levels.¹¹ Hence I argue that it is the capacity of cultured nature as expressed in the space of a sacred grove that provides a framework for political action enabling the Lepchas to subvert dominant ideologies that earlier stigmatised and dehumanised them as primitive forest-dwellers: reinventing Lepcha-ness in the sacred grove. Questions of ecology and equity continue to be paramount but the cultural production of nature and the symbolic use of nature in ethnic and social movements are acknowledged by both scholars and activists (Omvedt 1993; Gadgil and Guha 1995; Baviskar 2003; Arora 2004). The recent shift indicated the maturing of social ecological discourses and the recognition of alternative knowledge systems among the indigenous communities along with the recognition of the need to harness modern science to restore ecological balance since 'our common future lies in sustainable development' (Saberwal and Rangarajan 2003).

In the twenty-first century, the earlier battles over nature and conservation among the forest department, forest-dwellers, wildlife and the urban constituency are not only unresolved but have intensified at the local, regional and national levels (Saberwal and Rangarajan 2003). The conservationists admit the impossibility of having a forest without the forest-dweller, but argue that if the surviving forests including the pristine areas are not protected from further encroachment and development activities, then the battle over nature is already lost in India. On the other hand, the environmentalists, cultural ecologists and anthropologists emphasise the necessity of decentralising environmental governance by involving locals and tribals and making them partners of conservation with the forest department and the government. The 'guns and fences' approach has undermined conservation itself by creating arenas of conflict when the forest-dependent and forest-dweller communities were forcibly evicted or denied their usufruct rights. The recognition and legitimisation of the forest-dwellers rights in the forest will transform them into stakeholders and ensure their participation in conservation. Mander forcefully argues that decentralisation in conservation is desirable, but it cannot mean the abdication of state responsibility towards conservation. What is needed is an alteration of the role of the state as one of a facilitator of decentralised community action (Mander 2000). Ultimately, conservation strategies have to respond to local contexts and mobilise local cultural perceptions of nature by taking account of their appropriation, the use and the abuse of nature. The appropriateness of community-based conservation will depend on five factors: nature of community participation, objectives of conservation, incentives for conservation, community structures, historical and cultural linkages of the adopted conservation strategies (Kothari et al. 1996; Singh et al. 2000). Any policy aiming to harness or revive community-conservation practices will need

to address five interrelated questions: Who is the local community and what are the livelihood needs? What are their local practices and indigenous knowledge? What is the current relevance of their local environmental knowledge? Who is to conserve what and for whom? Who are the other stakeholders in this landscape? The contemporary need is to decentralise governance and creatively make conservation participatory and protect the forest from the poacher by involving the forest-dweller and forest-dependent communities. It is the dynamics of this state, conservation and society debate that has renewed interest in community-conservation strategies such as sacred groves and guided the formulation of the Scheduled Tribe (Recognition of Forest Dwellers' Rights) Bill 2005.

As a socio-religious practice, sacred groves are forests dedicated by local communities to their ancestral spirits or deities. The general definition of a sacred grove is that it ranges from a clump of trees¹² to a patch of forest allowing various levels of interference and resource use. These sacred groves may consist of multi-species, multi-tier primary forest or a clump of trees and the wild life therein. Both ecologists and social anthropologists distinguish the phenomenon of religious forests and sacred groves from nature worship of certain 'keystone' plant and animal species that are both ecologically and socially significant¹³ (Gadgil 1975; Jain 1981; Gadgil and Subhashchandran 1992; Freeman 1994; Ramakrishnan et al. 1998). It is stated that the sacred groves are protected by local communities, usually through customary taboos and sanctions that have cultural and ecological implications (Malhotra et al. 2001). Freeman (1994) based on his studies of *kavus* (sacred groves of Kerala) defines them to be a piece of garden or forest, but culturally what defines them is their dedication to the use of some specific deities. As an institution, the idea of sacred groves is associated with specific rules, belief systems, organisation and management by a certain community or group in a set of otherwise contingent and variable forms the grove may take.

Currently, there is immense concern with respect to the decline of sacred groves in India, which is attributed to many factors such as sanskritisation leading to the construction of temples inside the groves, the devaluation of indigenous knowledge, bureaucratic apathy, implementation of development projects, poverty, urbanisation, population increase which are aggravating resource-conflicts, etc. (Roy Burman 1995, 1997; Khurana 1998; Kothari et al. 1998; Ramakrishnan et al. 1998). In sharp contrast to other parts of India, the idea of sacred landscapes is gaining importance in Sikkim and the Darjeeling Hills in the context of cultural revivalism and ethnic nationalism. My study of Tholung sacred grove contends that the existence of temples and their associated rituals may heighten the sacrality of the sacred grove and not undermine their sanctity and existence. I found the earlier definitions and explanations of sacred groves inadequate for my research, hence my preference for using 'landscape' over 'grove', as this grasps the variable forms that a sacred grove may take by including temples or shrines and sacred water bodies such as lakes,

waterfalls and springs. Increasingly sacred groves are being perceived as political institutions suffering from the politics of an economic logic (*Down to Earth* 2003). Further, I am not restricted by the ecologist's conception of landscape that while incorporating humans as an integral component of the ecosystem reduce 'sacred landscape' to be a set of inter-connected systems (Ramakrishnan et al. 1998: xv, 445–446). The ecologists underplay or completely ignore the role of power and competing discourses in framing environmental discourses while their analysis disregards the inequities of control and the stratification present in the community. Nevertheless, I found the ecologists' proposition regarding 'limited human perturbations' to be ethnographically valid and it can serve as a useful tool for formulating any policy of conservation and sustainable land-management (Ramakrishnan et al. 1998: 445–448).

The idea of sacred grove has been often mistaken to imply the exclusion of humans from the landscape. Voluntary or forced exclusion may lead to severe conflicts over resources between groups in a situation of resource scarcity in multi-ethnic contexts (Kothari et al. 1998). There cannot be a sacred grove or a forest without the forest-dweller and his beliefs and practices. The sacred groves are extremely humanised landscapes. Neither is the state an exogenous entity nor distinct from and located at a distance from the forest, the forest-dwellers and the forest-dependent communities. My study of the Tholung contends that the sacred landscape performs a critical function in legitimating temporal authority while the analysis of the Rathongchu movement indicates their transformation into faultlines (Arora 2003, 2004, 2006a). Ideas of sacredness evoke powerful emotions and their capacity to mobilise people cannot be underrated. Sacred groves can become spaces for expressing discontent and dissent with the state in India (see Hembram 1988).

The debate on environmental conservation due to the socio-religious fencing of the forest/landscape, and the political roles and cultural meanings of the sacred grove have yielded a rich literature that I have grouped into three strands for analytical reasons. The contestations and overlaps among these three perspectives cannot be ignored as these have shaped state conservation strategies.

First, ecologists and environmentalists argue that sacred groves epitomise traditional community conservationist practices and encode traditional environmental knowledge (Gadgil 1975; Vartak and Gadgil 1990; Gadgil and Subhashchandra 1992; Ramakrishnan 1996, 1998; Ramakrishnan et al. 1998). Social ecologists such as Guha (1989) argue that the peoples' dependence on forest resources was institutionalised through a variety of social and cultural mechanisms such as sacred groves. Religion, folklore and tradition formed a protective ring around the forest to conserve it.

Secondly, Indologists and Buddhist philosophers emphasise that they represent the transmission of ecological wisdom of indigenous religions, Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism. They contrast these cosmologies to the Judaeo-Christian

tradition emphasizing man's mastery over nature¹⁴ (White 1967; Dwivedi and Tiwari 1987; Banwari 1992; Gottlieb 1997; Tucker and Williams 1997). These textual interpretations completely ignore peoples' situated practices and their contingent continual struggle to secure their livelihood. These indologists are severely critiqued as their environmental ideology has limited practical relevance and is ethnographically unsustainable (Tomalin 2004).

On the whole, both the ecologists and indologists romanticised the idea of sacred groves and the symbiotic link between the forest-dweller or the tribal and their forest. It is doubtful that sacred groves were established or are primarily oriented towards conservation or the preservation of the forest and its wild life. These two perspectives largely ignore the politic-economic conflict in control and use of resources between competing groups in the context of economic development (Freeman 1994; Arora 2004; Tomalin 2004).

Thirdly, social anthropologists and ethno-historians argue that sacred groves indicate the group's perception and attitudes to the environment while simultaneously affirming their identity. These studies emphasise their critical role in edifying ethnic and regional identities (Apffel-Marglin and Mishra 1990; Xaxa 1991; Roy Burman 1997). The eminent anthropologist, Verrier Elwin pioneered the study of sacred groves in India. His ethnographies on the Maria, Muria, Bondo, Baiga and the Pradhan tribals discuss their rituals and the role of the sacred shrine in the forest or the sacred forest towards maintaining tribal identity, conserving the forest and gendering roles (Elwin 1943, 1946, 1947, 1950, 1986 *reprint*). In a study of sacred groves in Maharashtra, Roy Burman (1997) emphasises political-economic legitimation of resource use over their conservation functions. In another study in Orissa, sacred groves are perceived to be the locus of the regeneration of the body, the land and the peasant community (Apffel-Marglin and Mishra 1990; Apffel-Marglin 1998). Rituals performed in these sacred groves periodically rejuvenate the community, the land, and their interconnections with the gods and protective deities ensuring their well-being (Gold and Gujar 1989; Apffel-Marglin and Mishra 1990; Xaxa 1991; Fernandes 1993; Freeman 1994; Rodgers 1994; Roy Burman 1995, 1997; Apffel-Marglin 1998; Kalam 1998). These studies indicate that there is great variability in the veneration of aspects of the environment, the performance of rituals and religious beliefs associated with sacred groves. What is undeniable is that sacred groves are political entities affirming identity and legitimating control over resource-use among social groups. In fact, during the eighties, in areas of Ranchi and Jamshedpur in Bihar sacred groves (*sarna*) became rallying points for mobilising people under the rubric of *sarna dharma* to pressurise the government to modify its forest policies (Hembram 1988). The Mundas of Bihar mobilised themselves to save the forested areas and protest against the Koel-Karo project by pointing to the existence of their sacred groves in the project area (Mitra and Pal 1994).

Gadgil and Guha (1995) stress the ecological basis of ethnic conflict in India and my research on Sikkim demonstrates the critical function performed by sacred land-

scapes including sacred groves in mobilising ethnic-nationalist sentiments and structuring ethnic conflict in the Himalayan region (Arora 2004, 2006a). According to a WWF study, there are 56 sacred groves in Sikkim and many of these are attached to Buddhist monasteries.¹⁵ I argue that these sacred groves do not represent primordial environmental wisdom. Traditional environmental conservation practices cannot be presumed *per se*, as they could be a latent consequence of certain cultural practices whose manifest purpose may be entirely different. This is evident in my research of the Tholung sacred landscape wherein the sacred landscape reflects the power dynamics in a multi-ethnic society and the former nation of Sikkim and the ethnopolitics of contemporary Sikkim.

The Ethnographic Context of Sikkim and the Lepchas

Sikkim is the former Buddhist kingdom, which was ruled by the Namgyal dynasty until its incorporation into India in 1975.¹⁶ The Chinese annexation of Tibet in 1959, the Sino-Indian war on Sikkim's border in 1962–63, the democratic aspirations of the population agitating against the oppressive rule of Sikkim's feudal oligarchy, and the breakdown of internal law and order are cited as reasons for holding the 1975 referendum that culminated in the inclusion of Sikkim in India in 1975. Ethnically Sikkim is a Himalayan melting pot comprising 22 Indo-Tibetan and Indo-Aryan linguistic groups. These diverse ethnic groups are classified into three broad categories: the Lepchas, the Bhutias and the Nepalis.¹⁷ The population of Sikkim is predominantly Hindu (68 per cent), and the Buddhists comprise a large majority (27 per cent), while the Christians comprise a small component of the population (3 per cent) and Muslims in insignificant numbers (Lama 2001: 7). Out of this total population of half a million persons (540493) about 20.6 per cent are Scheduled Tribes¹⁸ while the Scheduled Castes (exclusively of Nepali origin) comprise about 5 per cent of the population (Census of India 2001).

The major ethnic boundary is between the indigenous minority comprising the Lepcha-Bhutia groups¹⁹ and the migrant Nepali groups who constitute the numerical and political majority of Sikkim. The Lepchas and the Bhutias constituted the ruling elites during the rule of the Namgyal dynasty who are marginalised by the socio-economic and political mobility of the Nepalis in democratic Sikkim. Ethnic competition over resource entitlements is intense which is aggravating ethnic tensions in Sikkim. The boundaries between the indigenous Lepcha–Bhutia and the perceived Nepali migrant are being reinforced by religious differences and affirmed by their differing attitudes towards the landscape (Arora 2004, 2006b). The state government is faced with the challenging task of balancing the aspirations of these diverse ethnic groups while implementing development projects and modernising Sikkim's economy.²⁰

The state of Sikkim has an Ecclesiastical Minister and a Department responsible for managing approximately 83 Buddhist monasteries and a large number of village temples, and preserving Sikkim's Buddhist cultural heritage.²¹ Additionally, it is unique in having a legislative assembly seat reserved for a Buddhist monk and a non-Buddhist or non-Sikkimese cannot contest elections for this seat (Arora 2006d). In the former Kingdom of Sikkim once ruled by the Namgyal dynasty, the lamas and the shamans played a central role in legitimising the authority of the *Chos-rgyal*. Admittedly, democratic governance since 1975 has undermined the political role and dominance of the religious functionaries (the lamas and the shamans) yet not completely displaced their political influence. Under the special provisions of Article 371f of the Indian Constitution, the Buddhist lamas (the *sangha*) elect a member of the Sikkim legislative assembly. To a large extent, the contemporary significance of Sikkim's sacred groves is explained by these unique cultural and political factors. These unique aspects do not undermine the comparative significance of Tholung sacred grove in furthering contemporary debates on conservation, state and society.

The Lepchas are defined as the autochthones of Sikkim and the Darjeeling Hills.²² Currently they are concentrated in the Lepcha reserve of North Sikkim, and scattered in other parts of Sikkim, the Darjeeling Hills of West Bengal, Illam district of Nepal and in parts of west Bhutan. Linguistically they belong to the Tibeto-Burman group and they have their own distinctive language, script and literature. The Lepchas use patrilineal descent to determine corporate membership and inheritance but rely on matrilineal descent to strengthen their alliances and networks of support. They practise monogamy, polygyny and polyandry forms of marriage although residence is usually patrilocal. Traditionally they were hunters and gatherers and practised shifting cultivation. Currently they are predominantly agriculturists (rice and cardamom cultivation) although many are employed in government service and the Indian army.

Today the Lepchas are sub-divided by religious affiliation into followers of Buddhism, Shamanism and Christianity.²³ In the fourteenth century, the majority of the Lepchas became Buddhists after the migration and settlement of the Bhutias into Sikkim. However, the majority continue to practise Shamanism²⁴ (which is their indigenous religion) along with Buddhism. Among the Lepchas, the shaman or the *mun* is an exorciser and singing priest who performs rituals and sacrifice for the entire community. The *mun* mediates between the human, supernatural and the natural world. The lama and the shaman do not contradict each other but co-exist as religious specialists²⁵ due to a division of labour in their roles towards the individual, the family, the community and the polity. The local spirits are appeased and offered sacrifices by the shaman while the lama offers prayers to the Buddhist divinities and propitiates the protective deities of the land. In the nineteenth century, a Lepcha minority was converted into Christianity after the arrival of Christian

missionaries in the region. In the contemporary period, the severe contradictions between the teachings and practices of Christianity on one hand and Shamanism and Buddhism on the other are responsible for dividing the Lepcha community. The recent revival of Lepcha culture, festivals and the Lepcha language in Sikkim and Darjeeling aim at uniting the Lepchas divided by religion, class and region. Their strategies involve a reconstitution of their ethnic identity by valorising the indigenous environmental knowledge of the Lepchas and asserting their indigeneity in the region.

The Lepchas (and the Bhutias) argue that sacred landscapes such as Kabi and Tholung sacred groves embody their culture and indigenous knowledge systems (Arora 2004, 2006a). In the words of Athup Lepcha, the Lepcha ideologue: ‘to be Lepcha means to belong to a place. The word Lepcha originates from the union of two Lepcha words *lep* and *tsa* which means to belong to a place...’ The Lepchas term themselves *Rong* (a Lepcha word meaning ravinefolk or the dwellers of the valley) and they define themselves by their association with the sacred mountain Kanchenjunga that is regarded the source of their knowledge, culture, religion, wealth, resources and place of their origin. The Lepchas trace their social origins and the birth of their lineage ancestors to specific (sacred) sites such as the five peaks of Kanchenjunga, the other sacred mountains, lakes, caves and sites in Sikkim and the Darjeeling Hills. The Lepchas perform annual rituals to ensure the continuity of their lineages and regenerate their land. These diverse rituals are performed in accordance with a calendar that transforms Sikkim into a sacred landscape (Arora 2004). The rituals of the (agricultural) land and the sacred landscape such as sacred groves represent the socio-cultural belonging of the Lepchas and affirm their political rights in the region. These symbolic dimensions of identity accentuate the politico-economic foundations of the ethnic identity and indigeneity of the Lepchas in the region. The idea of sacred landscape lies at the core of Lepcha cosmological attitudes towards their environment and frames their self-identity and indigeneity.

The Sacred Landscape of Tholung of North Sikkim

The sacred landscape of Tholung constitutes the nerve centre of Lepcha social life and epitomises Sikkimese Buddhism of nationalist practice.²⁶ It comprises an uninhabited human tract of mountainous forests adjacent to the wishfulfilling pilgrimage site of the Tholung temple that preserves the sacred treasures of the former Buddhist Kingdom of Sikkim. This sacred landscape is located at the end of a 15 km arduous trek from Lingzar village²⁷ in the extremely restricted access area of Dzongu in North Sikkim.²⁸ The word Tholung is derived by combining two Lepcha words *atho* and *lung* that mean ‘a high rocky place’.²⁹ The landscape comprises a *dgon-pa* (a Buddhist temple), a sacred grove, a sacred hot spring, and some sacred caves that are used by monks to meditate in seclusion. Tholung is located at the altitude of

8500 feet and considered to be the second highest Buddhist temple of Sikkim after Lachen (8700 feet). The sacred grove roughly comprises about 14 km² of this mountainous landscape and falls on an ancient trade route to Tibet.³⁰ Impregnable mountains bound the Tholung sacred grove and the temple on all sides. Beyond Tholung, there are some sacred caves and sacred springs where it is believed that Padmasambhava meditated and hid some sacred treasures for discovery in the future.

The Tholung temple was founded by Lhatsun Chenpo³¹ in the late eighteenth century in order to give sanctuary to many sacred Buddhist and national relics of Sikkim during the period of the infamous Gorkha invasions that not only plundered Sikkim but razed Rabdantse, the second capital of Sikkim (Dolma and Namgyal 1908; Pradhan 1991; Rinpoche 2000). The relics of the Lhatsun Chenpo's sixth reincarnate Jetsun Kunga Chonyid are kept in a reliquary on the first floor while the relics of *Chos-rgyal* Tsugphud Namgyal who passed in 1864 are placed in a reliquary on the ground floor of this temple (Rinpoche 2000: 32). As a sanctified site, Tholung actively legitimised the authority of the former Namgyal dynasty that ruled Sikkim from 1641 to 1975, i.e. until Sikkim's incorporation into India.³² Until 1975, Tholung was a private estate of the Namgyal dynasty where Lepcha lamas and shamans performed special rituals to ensure the continuity of the royal lineage and to propitiate Mt. Kanchenjunga who is regarded to be the guardian deity of the Lepchas and the kingdom of Sikkim.³³ Only a few select Lepcha lamas who are entrusted with the daily responsibility of worshipping the protective deities of Tholung reside permanently in houses near this temple. These select Lepcha lamas additionally serve as the caretakers of the sacred treasures preserved at Tholung.

The Tholung clan are *Nang-pa* (Tib.: special wizard) of Tibetan origin, and the only exceptions permitted to reside in this exclusive Lepcha reserve. The head of the Tholung clan used to be the head of all the Lepcha *mandol's*³⁴ of the other villages of this Lepcha reserve³⁵ and enjoyed the title of 'Tholung Pipon'. They continue to be the largest landowners in this Lepcha reserve. This family is entrusted with the spiritual responsibility of ensuring the safety and preserving the sanctity of the Tholung treasures.³⁶ As Agya Jetha, the present head of this Tholung clan explained to me,

'[...] for the past seven generations, the eldest son of the family or someone who was spiritually inclined used to become a lama of the Tholung *dgon-pa* and he discharged our family responsibility of preserving the sanctity of these sacred treasures...the story of Tholung is incomplete without us. Our family was chosen and brought from Tibet as caretakers of these treasures. A black crow guided us to Tholung *dgon-pa*.'

As we approached the boundary of this Tholung sacred grove, Chumsay Nangpa³⁷ instructed me to assure the Tholung protective spirits³⁸ about my honest and good intentions to undertake research on this sacred landscape and seek their blessings, 'reiterate the purity of your thoughts, your intentions, and your actions'. She instructed me to pluck some leaves, offer a silk scarf, place sweets and money upon a sacred shrine (a *lun cuk*)³⁹ that is considered the residence of the protective spirits of Tholung. The chief injunction to all Tholung pilgrims is 'not to disturb the vegetation and cause harm to the animal life in this sacred forest'. Resources of this grove can only be used for worshipping the protective deities of Tholung. Peoples' belief in the sanctity of this area is such that:

'[...] not a single leaf or a pebble can be taken away from this sacred area. Pilgrims are instructed to even dust their clothes and shoes for any loose leaves and twigs, as otherwise the Tholung spirits would get angry and make them sick...only holy water and offerings returned by the lamas can be taken back as divine blessings.'

It is believed that people coming with any evil intentions to steal any of these national treasures either are lost in the sacred forest or become insane. During my fieldwork, the lamas narrated four instances of how some persons who tried to steal these treasures lost their way in the forest only to be released after they repented and returned the stolen treasures back to this temple. Some persons are believed to have died under mysterious circumstances in this sacred forest. For the past three centuries, religious injunctions effectively fenced the area and thwarted any attempts to desecrate, steal or disturb the sacred treasures stored at Tholung. However, two recent unsuccessful attempts have shaken the Tholung lamas, the Lepcha residents, other eminent Rinpoche's and Sikkim's administration out of their complacency. These indicate the changes in peoples' attitudes towards sanctified areas, and the declining efficacy of social fencing. Agya Jetha was firmly vocal in his opposition to all development activities such as road-building, transport connections and the promotion of tourism near Tholung, and the implementation of hydel projects in the Lepcha reserve since 'these would undermine the sanctity of this sacred landscape, encourage the settlement of outsiders, open this area to tourists. Tholung is a place of Buddhist pilgrimage, and not a site for any tourists to visit or come and gape!'

Until 1989, Tholung temple used to be a wooden structure built in the traditional house-style of the Lepchas. Agya Jetha and the other Tholung lamas and leaders of the Lepcha reserve persuaded the Government of Sikkim to fund the construction of a new concrete temple in the late 1980s. Agya Jetha admitted to me that he had personally supervised the temple construction to ensure that the sanctity of the area was not violated and all construction activities complied with religious specifications. The religious treasures were transferred to the new temple under the supervision of the lamas.

The ground floor of this new Tholung temple contains an idol of Lhatsun Chenpo's third reincarnate, Lhatsun Rigzin Jigmed Pawo that is immediately recognised by its black beard.⁴⁰ This ground floor serves as the main prayer hall. It contains the reliquary of *Chos-rgyal* Tsugphud Namgyal and stores the major Buddhist scriptures commonly used in rituals. The first floor of this temple consists of a small hall containing Lhatsun Chenpo's idol, his reliquary, and a sealed box containing his personal clothes, sacred texts, and rosary. A smaller room adjacent to this hall serves as the residence of Sikkim's guardian deity, where daily worship by the lamas is mandatory to appease the four local deities (identified to be *bin gyepo*, *bin gyene*, *thangchin* and *dum-num ajo* in the Tibetan language). Propitiating them is extremely essential in order to ensure the peace, prosperity, health and well-being of all sentient beings living in Sikkim's landscape. The revered ethnic-national treasures are placed in another room on this first floor in about 18 wooden boxes that are sealed and placed under the control and supervision of the Ecclesiastical Department of the Sikkim government. These wooden boxes contain the Tholung treasures that include priceless sacred texts, ancient Tibetan paintings (*thangka*), the personal effects of Lhatsun Chenpo, sacred jewels, clothes and sacred objects. In addition, there is a steel almirah containing many sacred statues and objects with a wire-meshed glass-front. The caretaker lamas of Tholung place incense, offerings, and recite their daily prayers here. These treasures are taken out every three years under the supervision of the Tholung lamas, Sikkim's revered Rinpoche's and some responsible officials of the Ecclesiastical Department, Government of Sikkim; I will be shortly discussing the significance of this *kamsel* ceremony. The top floor of the Tholung temple contains a small prayer room around the statue of Gautam Buddha. Lamas use this floor for some of their rituals. For the past several years, Agya Jetha argued with the Government of Sikkim regarding the urgent need to strengthen the security of this area. Consequently, in December 2001 iron gates and iron shutters were installed in this temple. The construction of the new temple precinct and the installation of these iron-shutters signified the declining efficacy of socio-religious fencing and the explicit acknowledgement by these lamas of the need to enforce secular restraints to prevent any desecration and theft of these Tholung treasures.

In addition to the sacred grove and the temple, there is a sacred hot spring near the Tholung temple that is attributed with curative powers. Further, three yaks are dedicated to the protective deities of Tholung and maintained as their sacred mounts. Every year a yak is sacrificed and offered to these deities as thanksgiving subsequent to the harvest and collection of the yak-cheese. Parts of this sacrificed yak are distributed among the Tholung lamas during the end-of-the-year rituals.⁴¹

Tholung clearly is a manifest case of being a sacred landscape that is secondarily fencing the forest and protecting the plant and wildlife of this landscape. The sacred grove is an integral component of this sacred landscape. It serves as a bufferzone

between the Lepcha villages and the Tholung temple. Tholung is a site of intense religious activity and the next section discusses the rituals that are unique to Tholung and the annual end-of-the-year ritual that revitalises Lepcha identity, the community, its ancestral connection with the land and Sikkim's polity.

Rituals Legitimising Kingship, Nationalising the Sacred and Rejuvenating the Community and the Land

All the main Buddhist rituals including *Losar*, *Saga Dawa*, *Drukpa Treshi*, *dpang-lha-gsol*, and *Lhabab Deuchen* which are performed in Nyingmapa monasteries of Sikkim are performed in the Tholung temple. In addition, there are some rituals that are unique to this temple. These rituals specifically legitimised kingship and affirm Lepcha allegiance to the Namgyal dynasty. Tholung is perhaps the only Buddhist temple in Sikkim that accepts nonvegetarian offerings. In fact, sacrifices are mandatorily offered to the reliquary of the *Chos-rgyal* and the local deities protecting Tholung. The Buddhist temple incorporates Lepcha shamanic rituals in its annual calendar. Unfortunately, I was not able to attend either of the rituals unique to Tholung while the shamanic rituals of offering a pig was discontinued recently after the select shaman had 'gone crazy'.⁴²

The first of this unique Buddhist ritual is the annual changing of the *gtor-ma* (Tib.: butter effigies representing Buddhist gods and local protective deities) which is performed during the first month of the Tibetan year. This ritual occurs subsequent to and complements the prophecies given by the water divination rituals of *Bumchu* at Tashiding monastery of West Sikkim (Arora 2004).⁴³ The lamas divining the annual forecast are guided by the condition of the *gtor-ma*. These predictions pertain to agricultural productivity, the possible occurrence of natural disasters and indicate the health and the well-being of the Sikkimese people. At the end of this ceremony, new *gtor-ma* are installed that will be worshipped for the next year.

The second ritual unique to Tholung is known as *kamsel* and it was instituted in 1940 and performed not annually but every three years.⁴⁴ This ritual involves the sunning and airing of the Tholung treasures under the supervision of the lamas. *Kamsel* is believed to visually empower the pilgrims, it sanctifies the landscape, and showers blessings of productivity, prosperity and health on all beings. Prior to Sikkim's incorporation into India in 1975, the *Chos-rgyal* used to send a representative bearing his gifts and offerings every three years in order to supervise the condition of the national treasures and confirm the loyalty of his Lepcha subjects. Since 1975, the role of administering these treasures is discharged by the Ecclesiastical Department of the government of Sikkim. The last *kamsel* ceremony was held in mid-April 2003 under the supervision of Chultim Dengzongpa,⁴⁵ the Secretary of the Ecclesiastical Department of the Government of Sikkim. The

sunning and airing of these relics is supervised by the highest-ranking Rinpoche (Tib.: reincarnate lamas) of Sikkim. The Tholung treasures are listed in a text, and the treasures are publicly accounted when they are taken out. Such is their sacredness that even the act of seeing them reduces the burden of sins, imparts divine blessings, longevity and prosperity on all the pilgrims and lamas. In continuing these rituals, the Ecclesiastical Department is discharging its responsibilities towards preserving Sikkim's unique religious heritage while simultaneously legitimising the democratically elected government of Sikkim.

The principal shamanic ritual that was discontinued in 1975 involved the sacrificial offerings of a pig to the reliquary of *Chos-rgyal* Tsugphud Namgyal. It had been customary to sacrifice a pig to this reliquary of the *Chos-rgyal* on *dpang-lha-gsol* and the end-of-the-year rituals in order to propitiate Mt. Kanchenjunga, appease the spirit of the royal ancestor and symbolically affirm Lepcha allegiance to the king.⁴⁶ This ritual had great importance during the rule of the Namgyal dynasty as it periodically affirmed the loyalty of the Lepchas to the royal family and ensured their cooperation in maintaining peace in Sikkim.⁴⁷ Ironically, neither the *Chos-rgyal* nor his family members were allowed to visit Tholung since their ancestor's sepulchary is placed here.⁴⁸ This ritual was reinstated in the 1980s after the caretaker lamas of Tholung reported that loud noises were emanating from the *Chos-rgyal's* reliquary. The lamas reported that they had seen the ghost of the *Chos-rgyal* walking in the Tholung precincts at night and destroying their sacrificial offerings. This ghost was sighted by the villagers living in the villages adjacent to Tholung and seen to be 'killing and consuming' animals belonging to the Lepcha villagers.⁴⁹ These were interpreted to signal his demand for the reinstatement of the annual sacrifice and offerings of a pig. It is commented that even though the Sikkimese kingdom had vanished, the Namgyal family had been scattered and its rule over, the ghost of the *Chos-rgyal* demanded loyalty and offerings from his Lepcha subjects. To placate him, the lamas reinstated the shamanic sacrifice in the mid-1980s but abandoned it when the shaman became insane in the early 1990s. The state government had instituted an annual grant of Rs 1000 to the shaman in recognition of his services. In this manner, Tholung continues to legitimise Sikkim's polity although it no longer sacralises the nation.

In the annual ritual calendar of the Tholung temple, the main ritual is of *Dubchen* that comprise the end-of-the-year offerings. This ritual celebrates their social and agricultural regeneration while enabling them to welcome the New Year in *Namsoong*.⁵⁰ All Lepcha households of Dzongu send their family representatives to Tholung with offerings such as incense, butter lamps, harvest offerings of rice, wheat, and millet, ginger, sugarcane, various types of fruits and edible roots, millet beer, silk scarves, flowers, and money, etc. This ritual is believed to vanquish all the sins that are accumulated during the past year. It sanctifies the land, and drives away all the evil spirits causing disturbances and conflicts among people.⁵¹ During this ritual, lamas prepare and propitiate a big butter sculpture depicting the wrathful

form of Padmasambhava in order to drive the evil spirits away from the area. Simultaneously, a lama performs *cham* (Tib.: sacred Buddhist masked dances) as a personification of Padmasambhava. At the end of this ritual, this sacred figurine is burnt since it had become a receptacle that accumulated all the evils spirits of the area. The ritualised destruction of this figurine ensures the health and prosperity of the individual households of Dzongu, the Lepcha community and their landscape. This yearly event is simultaneously the time set aside by the Tholung lamas to resolve all administrative matters relating to the temple, present the statement of accounts and decide a new budget and elect new office-bearers for the next year. I noted that much socialising occurs during this ritual. Births, deaths and marriages are announced in the Lepcha community. Tholung rejuvenates the Lepcha community, the land and the polity of Sikkim. Sacred sites such as Tholung play an important role in reinforcing the image of the Lepcha as indigenous to Sikkim and naturalising their prior claims. In sharp contrast, the Nepali association with Sikkim's landscape is expressed in politico-economic terms based on their contribution of labour.

Tholung reinforces the ethnic boundaries between the Lepcha-Bhutia tribes and the Nepali groups by reviving the memories of the Gorkha invasions of the eighteenth century while perpetuating the ethnic stereotype of the Gorkha looters.⁵² It plays a crucial part in ethnic relations by perpetuating the ethnic stereotype of the 'Gorkha looter' image of Nepalis. Given the context of political and numerical dominance of the Nepalis in Sikkim and the resurgence of the demand for a separate Gorkhaland state in the Darjeeling Hills, the Lepcha-Bhutia fears of cultural extinction and political marginalisation in Sikkim are gaining strength. The regional context of cultural revivalism in Bhutan, the Maoist insurgency in neighbouring Nepal, the rise of separatist movements in Northeast India and demands of regional autonomy inform the ethnic nationalist aspirations of the Lepcha-Bhutia tribes who were once the ruling elites of the former kingdom of Sikkim but are now progressively marginalised with the mobility and political dominance of the Nepalis in Sikkim and the Darjeeling Hills. In this scenario, the sacred grove is becoming the locus for constituting the self and the other.

The Forest of Symbols Embodied in the Sacred Landscape

The idea of the sacred landscape lies at the heart of Lepcha (and Bhutia) cosmologies and shapes their attitudes to the ecology and the environment and the spirits and humans residing in it (Arora 2004). The symbol of the forest and the forest of symbols embodied in the idea of sacred landscape legitimises Sikkim's polity into the present.⁵³ I perceive Tholung as a void capable of encompassing diverse meanings: a forest, the residence of the guardian deities of the area, a place of Buddhist pilgrimage, a fount of customary wisdom, a repository of Sikkimese national treasures, a site legitimating temporal authority, a place affirming ancestral

connections with the landscape and expressing indigeneity in land, a forest where society rejuvenates itself, members cement alliances and take important decisions. The power of the sacred site emanates from its threshold function and its transformative capacities. It is a void as far as it has the ability to encompass a diversity of meanings and simultaneously reflect the changes in the community and its relations with the wider society.⁵⁴

Morinis argues that ‘the pilgrimage place stands apart from society yet it is sensitive to, reflective of, forces at work in society’ (Morinis 1992: 24). The commemoration of identity and cultural roots in rituals in sacred groves such as Kabi and Tholung are enabling the Lepcha community to express their alienation, and cement the internal fissures within the community.⁵⁵ These rituals provide a bridge between the past, the present and the future. They are both expressions of social memory and prescriptions of collective action (Arora 2006a). The contemporary cultural revival of the Lepchas in the region emphasises their cosmological attitudes and reinvents them as the guardians of the sacred grove. This has led to the subversion of dominant ideologies that had earlier denigrated and dehumanised their identities as primitive forest-dwellers. These contemporary discourses affirm their cultural roots in the forest by evoking their intimate connection with the (sacred) landscape as sites embodying their environmental knowledge and healing traditions (Arora 2005). Lepcha-ness is being reconstructed within a modern frame by instrumentally using the trope of indigenous environmentalism. Their assertion that they are primordial environmentalists bears the imprint of global development discourses on alternative development strategies, the rights of the indigenous people and the existence of their indigenous knowledge. The trope of the Lepchas being the guardians of the sacred grove serves a dual purpose in enabling them both to bargain with the state for preferential rights as the indigenous group while articulating their opposition to the implementation of development projects such as the Teesta hydroelectric project that can marginalise and displace them from their reserve area in North Sikkim. In contemporary Sikkim, sacred landscapes reflect and materially represent the politicisation of culture and ethnic identity, indicate the processes of conflict and integration between groups and constitute the locus of ethnic-competition over resource-use in the context of state-directed development (Arora 2004, 2006a).

I discern similarities between my research on the politicisation of identity and indigenous knowledge and their embodiment in sacred landscapes and the reimagining of aboriginality among the indigenous Indians of Canada and the Aboriginals of Australia. The studies of the Australian Dreamings highlight the intertwining of the individual, community, the human body and the landscape in myths, rituals and memories to constitute Aboriginal identity and frame their indigeneity in the idea of the Law of the land (Strang 1997; Connors 2000; Hume 2000). The Law of the land, located within the land, is the source of all social life, creating, identifying and binding the Australian Aborigine’s socially, politically and

spiritually (Strang 1997). The current political struggle of the Australian Aborigines and the Canadian Indians to assert their aboriginality has revived their traditional cosmologies. Additionally, indigenous culture and identity in Canada are linked to issues of self-determination and land rights. The implementation of hydroelectric projects in James Bay during the eighties precipitated the reimagining of their aboriginality and cultural renewal in ‘gatherings’ to promote cultural knowledge and indigenous values (Adelson 2001). Similarly, a controversy around the Rathongchu hydel project in Sikkim became the context for the indigenous Lepcha-Bhutia tribes to reinvent themselves as guardians of Sikkim’s sacred landscape and express their ethnic nationalism (Arora 2003, 2004, 2006a). Articulation of Lepcha (and Bhutia) identity and indigeneity in the landscape did not begin with the battles around the Rathongchu hydel project nor have they ended with its cancellation in 1997.

The idea of a defiled sacred landscape was the chief argument used by the Lepcha, Bhutias and Buddhist activists protesting against the implementation of Rathongchu hydroelectric project in West Sikkim during 1993–97. The project was implemented in Yoksum area of West Sikkim, which was identified as being a biodiversity hotspot by the WWF in 1992–93. Nevertheless, this project was given environmental clearance by the Ministry of Environment and Forests in 1992 while specifying some conditions under the Forest Conservation Act of 1980 and Sikkim’s Forests, Water Courses and Road Reserve (Preservation and Protection) Act 1988.⁵⁶ Approximately 7 hectares (originally 8.15 hectares) of forestland was acquired by the Rathongchu project. However, the project evoked strong opposition from the Lepcha-Bhutia and Buddhists of Sikkim who lamented that the project undermined their cultural rights and their sacred heritage. They argued that the project infringed their indigenous rights in land and violated Article 371f of the Indian Constitution under which the kingdom of Sikkim was incorporated into India. The battles between the Lepcha-Bhutia activists and the state over the implementation of the Rathongchu divided Sikkimese society and spilled into the High Court of Sikkim and the Supreme Court of India (Arora 2003, 2004, 2006a). At the height of the Rathongchu agitations, the lamas declared:

‘We, the monks of Sikkim, hereby demand that the Rathongchu hydroelectric project located at Yoksum be stopped immediately...the gnas bsol text is to the Sikkimese Buddhists what the Ramayana is to the Hindus, the Koran to the Muslims, and the Bible to the Christians.

If the Rathongchu hydroelectric project is not stopped and abandoned, we, the lamas of Sikkim are ready to burn our gnas bsol text, as its meaning and purpose will be lost.’ (Extract from a memorandum submitted by the Buddhist monastic order to the Chief Minister of Sikkim on 29 July 1995).

It will be misleading to conceive the Rathongchu movement as an expression of indigenous environmentalism of the Sikkimese Buddhists and the Lepcha-Bhutia

tribes since it expressed their ethnic nationalist sentiments (Arora 2003, 2004, 2006a).⁵⁷ The Chief Minister of Sikkim, Shri Pawan Kumar Chamling was forced to shelve this ecologically viable and economically profitable project in August 1997 to avert an ethnic imbroglio. The main reasons cited by the Sikkim government for shelving the hydroelectric project were escalating ethnic tensions, preserving Yoksum as a sacred landscape and respecting the religious sentiments of the Buddhists, checking environmental destruction caused in the area by frequent landslides, the escalating costs of construction and gaining favourable public opinion before the general elections scheduled for 1998.

The state government was forced to rework its attitude towards the environment by according legitimacy to the 'indigenous' relation with the landscape and affirm its commitment towards preserving their cultural heritage embodied in their sacred sites. In November 1998, the Home Department of the Government of Sikkim issued a notification 'prohibiting the conversion of sites, the defilement of sacred lakes and the scaling of sacred peaks such as of Mt. Kanchenjunga' (No.59/Home/98, published in the Sikkim Gazette). This notification conforms to a legislation issued by the national government on 'Places of Worship (Special Provisions) Act 1991' prohibiting the conversion of any place of worship and instructing the administration to maintain their *status quo*. Hence, the State government declared: 'no conversion or alteration or new construction or any developmental activity shall be undertaken at the site or in the close vicinity of any place of worship or religious institution or sacred lakes or of sacred peaks'. A list of sacred peaks, sacred caves, sacred rocks, sacred lakes, stupa and hot springs was included in this notification to prevent the occurrence of ethnic conflict in Sikkim. The Ecclesiastical Department of Sikkim was given the responsibility of identifying and preparing this comprehensive report, which was released during the period of my fieldwork (Committee 2000). The researchers used both the *History of Sikkim* and the pilgrimage guide to Sikkim to prepare this report (Dolma and Namgyal 1908).⁵⁸ The main purpose of the report was not simply to authenticate the existence of these sacred places and religious structures, but to certify their status as historically significant sites that have 'existed in Sikkim for the last hundred years'. The rationale justifying this exercise was to delimit and identify sacred places and to prevent the recurrence of controversies such as the Rathongchu movement (Arora 2004). An unforeseen consequence of the Rathongchu movement was that the Lepcha-Bhutia perception of Sikkim as a sacred landscape was incorporated into their official discourses as a strategy of development based on promoting pilgrimage tourism in Sikkim. Any development project implemented by Sikkim's government such as the Teesta hydroelectric project cannot disregard the indigenous conceptions of the landscape and people's continuing relation with the land as expressed and reaffirmed periodically in rituals in sacred sites. On 3rd December 2001, Tholung temple was the epicentre of the most severe earthquake that has rocked Sikkim in the last cen-

ture. Thankfully, there were no human casualties although the earth-quake triggered severe landslides into the Tholung river and the precarious mountainscape of the Lepcha reserve.⁵⁹ The government of Sikkim promptly donated Rs 51,000 to the Deorali monastery to offer prayers to appease the angry place-deities of Sikkim. Seismic activity rekindled debate on the wisdom of the Teesta hydel project, united the Lepchas in their dissent towards the project and the settlement of migrants in Dzongu. Indeed the Tholung earthquake woke up the Lepchas, the Teesta activists and the government from their complacency and prompted a critical appraisal of the Teesta project. In early 2005, the leadership of the Teesta Bachao Andolan joined hands with environmental and indigenous activists of Northeast India in currently opposing the project. The battle over Teesta has now entered Sikkim's courts.

CONCLUSION

The shifting discourses about the perception and social construction of nature, the associated changes in environmental conservation strategies with the recognition of the critical role of state and communities in preserving biodiversity are explicit in the debate on sacred groves. In this context, the paper explained the cultural meanings of the (sacred) forest for the Lepchas of Sikkim, highlighted the role played by sacred landscapes in crystallising ethnic identities and articulating interests, discussed the generation of social consensus in the Lepcha community, and emphasised the symbolic arena provided by sacred landscape for legitimising the power of the state, both in the past and in the present. The forest of these symbols explains the cultural politics in the landscape, which the other studies of sacred groves in India had emphasised inadequately. The roots and routes of conservation at the Tholung sacred landscape cannot be explained by any need to conserve the forest. Yet Tholung conserves not only the forest and the wildlife residing therein, the ethnic-national treasures of Sikkim, the identity of the Lepcha community, but also the state in the development context. At the other end, the state government has positively acknowledged such affective and ritual connections between the Lepchas (and the Bhutias and the Buddhists) and their landscape by altering its development plans to conserve areas claimed as sacred. The importance of Sikkim lies in providing a model of community conservation in a national scenario where resources conflict between communities and the implementation of development projects by the state are making the sacred groves extinct.

Notes

1. The Indian state's concern for conserving wildlife and bio-diversity has led to the creation and establishment of national parks and protected areas in India and in many areas displaced villagers and the tribals from their traditional habitat including forests (Kothari et al. 1996, Saberwal and Rangarajan 2003). Simultaneously in the name of serving the national interest, the state has implemented development projects and given mining leases that have degraded forestland and also displaced many forest-dwellers or alienated communities dependent on forest resources. Such exclusionist strategies have only generated conflict over natural resources.
2. Forest management under the British colonial regime was guided by such premises. Sivaramakrishnan (1999) argues that the evolution of forest management was a form of state making itself. He defines state making as the emergence of regimes of government.
3. This paper was presented initially to the Forestry and Biodiversity division at TERI Delhi (September 2005), the XXXI Indian Sociological Association at Jammu (October 2005) and the Department of Sociology at the University of Delhi (December 2005). It draws on an unpublished paper reviewing the literature on sacred groves that was submitted in 1996 to the Department of Sociology (Univ. of Delhi) in partial fulfilment of requirements for the M. Phil degree. I am grateful to Amita Baviskar and Rita Brara for their critical insights on that earlier paper. Fieldwork for this paper was conducted during my doctoral research in Sikkim during August 2001 to September 2002. My studies have been funded by the Commonwealth Scholarship Commission, United Kingdom, and grants for fieldwork were given by the Beit Fund for Commonwealth History, Oxford, and Linacre College, Oxford. I am grateful to my supervisors Marcus Banks and David Parkin for their comments and encouragement. I am indebted to Shri. Sonam Tenzing, the Chief Secretary of Sikkim for permitting me to undertake research in the restricted access areas of North Sikkim, including the Lepcha reserve. Last but not the least, this paper could not have been written without my friendship and kinship with the Tholung family and Chongla Lepcha, the cooperation of the Sikkim Lepcha Youth Association, and the naughty lama novitiates of Tholung who educated me in the ways of Nyingma Buddhism. I also thank Mahesh Rangarajan, Savyasachi, K. Sivaramakrishnan, Kartik Shanker, Virginus Xaxa, Arima Mishra and Arun D'Souza for their constructive comments and encouraging me to publish this paper. The usual disclaimers apply.
4. Here I am influenced by anthropological theories that regard the landscape to be a foreground of everyday emplacement and a background of social potential (Hirsch and O'Hanlon 1995).
5. A Tibetan word referring to the institution of divine kingship where the king is not merely the temporal ruler but also the upholder of the moral and spiritual order.
6. Kabi materially represents the blood-brotherhood treaty enacted in the fourteenth century between the Lepchas and the Bhutias that legitimised the migration of the Bhutias from Kham in eastern Tibet and their subsequent settlement in Sikkim. My doctoral dissertation has an extended discussion on the significance of the Kabi sacred grove for maintaining the Lepcha–Bhutia ethnic alliance (Arora 2004: 146–196).
7. These simplistic tendencies are explicit in the literature on environmental conservation in sacred groves and in current debates on the proposed Scheduled Tribes and Forest Dwellers Bill 2005. The literature on sacred groves is reviewed extensively in the next section therefore here I am highlighting the contemporary debate on the proposed Scheduled Tribes and Forest Dwellers Bill 2005. The current debate in the Forest Bill is between activists advocating the devolution of powers with participatory resource management and the conservationists demanding the exclusion of local communities from the forest in order to preserve the forest and its wildlife. According to many tribal and environmental activists this bill/law will give legitimacy and livelihood to the forest-dwelling tribes who have long suffered harassment by forest officials. The bill would enable the tribal communities to live harmoniously with their forests while utilising its resources for their livelihood needs. The opponents argue that this law will promote the degeneration of forests and lead to the extinction of wild-life such as tigers. There is a middle category of those who believe in joint management of natural resources along with the accountability of these local committees to the state government.

8. The perceived environment is a cultured artefact while the actions that are presented as being economic or political are equally symbolic and expressive as any cultural form.

9. Agarwal has used the term 'environmentality' to denote a framework for understanding how the technologies of the self and power are involved in the creation of subjects/agents concerned about the environment. The term refers to 'the knowledge, politics, institutions, and subjectivities that come to be linked together with the emergence of the environment as a domain that requires regulation and protection' (Agarwal 2005b: 226). People's relation with the environment is neither constant nor immutable but is mediated by their self-identities and political institutions and circumstances. The concern for the environment as reflected in people's beliefs and their social practices cannot be presumed per se as they are critically influenced by the regulatory policies of the state. This is explicit in his discussion of historical changes in environmental subjectivities in Kumaon (Agarwal 2005a: 161–166).

10. Guha and Martinez-Alier (1997) give a comprehensive overview of the varieties of environmentalism manifest in South Asia.

11. D'Souza's (2003) review of some recent environmental writings on South Asia emphasises the shift towards deconstruction ecology.

12. These trees, shrubs and plants may be pre-existing and then segregated, planted specifically or certain species may be selected.

13 Such as *Ficus religiosa* (basil or tulsi) in South Asia.

14. In 1967, the historian Lynn White wrote in *Science* that the historical roots of the modern ecological crises could be attributed to the Judaeo-Christian ethic that promoted an exploitative attitude towards the environment. His article triggered a furious debate on the environmental value of different religions.

15. This information is based on my reading of the draft publication compiled by Sudipto Chatterjee for WWF. I have not been able to refer to the entire publication since it has not been published yet.

16. Historically Sikkim has been a *de facto* protectorate of British India since the treaty of 1861, and the treaty with India in 1950 continued Sikkim's status as a protectorate until 1975 (Singh 1988: 191–97; Bajpai 1999: 121).

17. The Nepali category is not homogeneous as it comprises groups which migrated from East Nepal such as the Rai, Magar, Yakha, Khumbu and Mechi that have histories of migration and settlement in Sikkim, and there are other Nepali groups such as Gorkha, Newar, Chetri and Sunwar. Many of these communities have multiple identities and there are degrees of inclusion and exclusion in social relations between ethnic groups (Arora 2006c).

18. In 1978, the Lepcha and the Bhutia groups were accorded Scheduled Tribe status while the Limbu and the Tamang were recognised as being Scheduled Tribes in 2002. Refer to Arora (2006b) for understanding the ethnic identities of Bhutias in contemporary Sikkim. However, the 2001 Census had already been conducted and therefore the current Scheduled Tribe population totals do not include the Limbu and Tamang population.

19. It is widely accepted that the Sikkimese Bhutia migrated from Eastern Tibet in the fourteenth century under the leadership of Khye Bumsa. The settlement of the Bhutias was solemnised as a covenant between the representatives of the Bhutias and the Lepchas and materially represented by the raising of stones in the Kabi sacred grove of North Sikkim (Risley 1894; Siiger and Rischel 1967). The Bhutias were indigenised due to the blood-brotherhood treaty enacted at Kabi and the subsequent conversion of the Lepchas into Buddhism.

20. A group's recognition as being a Scheduled Tribe, Scheduled Caste or as Other Backward Classes entitles them to protectionist measures and reservation of seats in the assembly, educational institutions, and government jobs.

21. In Sikkim, it is not possible to disassociate religion from politics or to place the lama and the shaman above politico-economic concerns. I have discussed this issue at length in another paper (Arora 2006d).

22. The Darjeeling Hills were formerly part of Sikkim and were annexed by British India in 1835.
23. The majority of the Lepchas of Sikkim are followers of Shamanism and Buddhism while many Lepcha have converted into Christianity in the Darjeeling Hills under the influence of the Christian missionaries.
24. Shamanism is not a single religion but refers to the central figure of a shaman who has localised nomenclature and associated activities (Vitebsky 2003: 55). Shamanism is a category of practices concerned with the regulation of human life and society through the use of alternative states of consciousness (Samuel 1993).
25. The inclusion of Lepcha sacred mountains and landscapes into the Buddhist pantheon facilitated the indigenisation of the Bhutias and the coexistence of Shamanism and Buddhism in Sikkim.
26. Elsewhere I argue that the Buddhism in Sikkim's nationalism was the Buddhism of nationalist practice (Arora 2004: 109). Sikkim is not unique and other Buddhist countries such as Tibet, Bhutan and Sri Lanka have indicated similar articulations and expressions of nationalism (Kapferer 1988, Spencer 1990, Goldstein and Kapstein 1998).
27. This Lingzar village usually serves as the base camp for any Tholung pilgrimage.
28. Even the Sikkimese people need to secure a special permit from the government to enter this area. Only the Lepchas of the reserve area are allowed unrestricted entry, as even other Lepchas of Sikkim need to secure permits to enter this area. Until 2001 all foreign nationals were denied permission to visit Tholung.
29. This site is located in a landslide-prone area. These landslides are often inferred to signifying the anger of the Tholung deities and Sikkim's other protective deities.
30. This trade route was used by the Tholung family and the other Lepchas to trade with Tibet and in fact all salt came to the Lepcha reserve from Tibet, and they exported rice, medicines, and a vegetable dye that is used to colour the clothes of the lamas. This route was closed in the 1950s.
31. Lhatsun Chenpo was an eminent Dzogchen master of the seventeenth century and regarded the chief propagator of Nyingma Buddhism in Sikkim. He is also credited for his efforts to establish the Kingdom of Sikkim (Waddell 1891). It was the fifth reincarnation of Lhatsun Chenpo, Lhatsun Pema Dechen Gyatso who transferred sacred Buddhist scriptures, several priceless religious idols and objects, and other treasures from Dubdi monastery in West Sikkim to Tholung in order to keep them inviolate, ensure their safety and preserve them for the future generations (Rinpoche 2000: 31–32).
32. The Tibetan title of Sikkim's king, the *Chos-rgyal* implies that the king is the temporal ruler and the upholder of the Buddhadharma. Historically Sikkim's monasteries were closely involved in the formation of the State and the socio-temporal affairs of the Kingdom of Sikkim, as was in Tibet (Dolma and Namgyal 1908, Samuel 1993).
33. A select Lepcha lineage of Tingvoong village in this Lepcha reserve was entrusted with the responsibility of propitiating Mt. Kanchenjunga and appeasing the spirits and place-gods of Sikkim. A good description of this ritual is available in Siiger (1967: 105–130).
34. *Mandol* is a Nepali term referring to the revenue-collector and head of the village.
35. These villages are Sakyong, Pentong, Shipgear, Tingvoong, Lingthem, Lingdem, Lingdong, He, Lung, Beh-Tholung, Lingzar, Lum-Langnything, and Santhok (the spellings of these village-names vary a bit).
36. The present head has only one son Palden who declined to undergo monastic training in favour of a modern English education in schools at Darjeeling and college education at the University of Delhi. Palden currently works as a contractor and looks after the family property. Hence, Agya Jetha adopted the son of an eminent Lepcha lama as his godson, and sponsored his monastic education in Sikkim and Dehradun. Chongla Lepcha who is this godson is a highly learned and spiritually accomplished lama. He is also the principal teacher of the recently established Tholung lamasery at Lingzar village of North Sikkim.

37. In her early forties, she is the eldest daughter of Agya Jetha and teaches at a High School of Mangan in North Sikkim. She is a good family friend of my friends at Gangtok who facilitated the necessary introductions and secured gatekeeper clearance. It would have been impossible to do this research without Chumsay's and the Tholung family's cooperation. Our relationship went beyond friendship in being translated into fictive kinship. I visited Tholung twice, initially in October 2001 and later in December 2001 when I stayed there for a week to document the annual end-of-the-year rituals. It was during my December visit that the infamous earthquake of Sikkim measuring 6.7 on the Richter scale occurred on 3rd December at 4.10 am with Tholung as its epicentre.

38. The Tibetan terms *ajo* and *ana* used to refer to the protective spirits guarding the Tholung sacred grove who are affectionately called grandfather and grandmother.

39. *Lun cuk* is a Lepcha word referring to vertical stones erected into the ground that often mark boundaries, transition points, and places of oath among the Lepchas and some other Indo-Tibetan groups of the Himalayas.

40. Agya Jetha explained to me that this idol was consecrated and installed in 2001 and its expenses were borne by the Lachen Rinpoche and the Tholung Agya Jetha. This statue also holds the *rkan-gling* of the Pathing Rinpoche who was renowned for his healing powers and had meditated at this site for many years.

41. These yaks are part of the yak-herd maintained by the Tholung family. Yap Maila (the second son of the Tholung family) sacrificed a yak to appease the deities after the infamous earthquake of December 2001. He hung the head of this sacrificed yak in the kitchen to ward off all evil-spirits and nailed its hoofs outside the entrance to protect the area from further landslides. I cannot comment on the effectiveness of these protective measures, as like other pilgrims I returned to Lingzar village after the rituals. I was unable to visit this site thereafter.

42. This select shaman used to perform the famous *dpang-lha-gsol* rituals at Tingvoong village that had royal patronage until 1975 and government of Sikkim continued this practice until 1995 when it was popularly agreed that the shaman had become insane.

43. Since I was attending the Bumchu ritual in West Sikkim, I was not able to reach Tholung in time for observing this ritual.

44. Personal communication by Agya Jetha.

45. Incidentally I lived with Chultim Denzongpa's family while undertaking my research around the Kabi sacred grove of North Sikkim.

46. This responsibility was rotated among the various villages of this Lepcha reserve.

47. Due to lack of historical data, I am being suggestive in stating this that rituals instituted to affirm Lepcha loyalty also undermine expressions of their dissent in other contexts.

48. With the exception of the present heir of the Royal family, Prince Wangchuk who is also a lama and who visited the monastery in 2000 to borrow some sacred texts for use in Sikkim's monasteries. The sacred texts placed here are regarded to be authentic versions and written by Lhatsun Chenpo.

49. Personal communication of villager's of Lingzar and Tingvoong village.

50. Many lamas confirmed the recent Buddhicisation of all the rituals and the decline in the continuing participation of the Lepcha shamans at Tholung. This decline was traced to last two decades and the general decline in the incidence of Lepcha shamans.

51. In Buddhist societies both interpersonal conflicts and social tensions are attributed to the anger of spirits.

52. Similarly, the rituals of Kabi sacred grove commemorate the ethnic alliance of the Lepchas-Bhutias while reiterating the migrant status of the Nepalis in Sikkim (Arora 2004: 196–197).

53. The ritual connections between these various Lepcha and Bhutia sacred sites transform Sikkim into a sacred landscape (Arora 2004: 32–34). Although secular, the government of Sikkim under the aegis of the Ecclesiastical Department and the Department of Culture continues to patronise many Lepcha-Bhutia rituals that formerly legitimised temporal authority in Sikkim.

54. The sacred landscape is a 'ritual void capable of accommodating meanings and practices', (Eade and Sallnow 1991: 15) and a space that 'can be imagined to fit almost any number of socio-cultural and politico-economic circumstances' (Parkin 1991: 9).

55. Commemorative rituals in sacred sites such as Tholung and Kabi sacred grove are repairing the fractures within the Lepcha-Bhutia ethnic alliance.

56. This act preserves the forest and ensures afforestation in case where the state acquires forestland for development purposes. It is the success of afforestation programmes under this act that forest cover of Sikkim has increased to 44.9 per cent in 1997 from 27.4 per cent in the early 1970s (Lama 2001).

57. The conceptual idea of ecological nationalism suggested by Sivaramakrishnan and Cederlof is quite useful here as it stresses the varieties of nationalisms that are mediated and constructed with reference to the natural (2005: 10).

58. Sonam Gyatso and N. Dorjee, who are senior officials in the Ecclesiastical Department of the Government of Sikkim confirmed this to me during an interview in April 2002 at Gangtok in Sikkim.

59. Incidentally, I was conducting fieldwork at Tholung during that time.

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