

# The Stuff of Legend

■ Mark Turin

“How can this book be introduced?” ask the authors in their introduction, sidestepping a number of definitions, since all of them fall short. After careful reading, I think that I have an answer. *Khangchendzonga—Sacred Summit* is the social history of an unusual mountain: it is a rich, captivating and well-illustrated book with an impressive selection of modern and historical photos.

The authors, both based in Gangtok, Sikkim, embarked on their own journey to Khangchendzonga when they started compiling this book. Putting their heads together, Pema Wangchuk, editor of the English language daily *NOW!*, and Mita Zulca, a documentary film-maker, set out to achieve through words what so many others have tried to attempt on foot—come to grips with the mountain. On their journey to the top, the climbers have to navigate through dangerous terrain and battle high-intensity winds that swirl around the summit; in their endeavor to understand the mountain, the writers have had to navigate through the many mythologies and oral literatures about the sacred peak that swirl around in popular discourse. “The mountain continues to find no need to demand respect,” the authors write, “it inspires awe effortlessly” (page 110).

Divided into sixteen chapters—which could easily be serialized in a magazine or newspaper for wider dissemination—this heavy 372-page book is stacked with detail and brims with well chosen images. Wangchuk’s and Zulca’s journalistic backgrounds contribute to the data-rich and analysis-heavy reporting style, in which the past and the present are woven together seamlessly.

The first chapter deals with the relationship between the Lepcha community and Khangchendzonga. According to local beliefs, the mountain, in whose fresh snows the first Lepcha couple was created, is the eldest brother of the Lepchas: “The umbilical cord of the community is thus linked to the mountain and its presence permeates every aspect of the Lepcha life-style” (page 31). The chapter moves from myth to modern identity politics and concludes with a respectful discussion of the forces of change threatening the “clutch of Lepcha social organizations which are working hard to rediscover their roots and re-establish their connection with the land” (page 60).

Chapter two focuses on the Limbus of Sikkim, a group whose territorial identity is also deeply connected to the presence of Khangchendzonga. After providing a brief ethnohistory of the Limbus, the authors conclude that “Sikkim has sidestepped the concerns of one of its original people for far too long and the least respect it can show this resilient tribe is join in its celebration of a recognition long overdue” (page 80).

The third chapter addresses the claims of the Bhutia community to this sacred mountain. While the chapter order, with Lepchas first, Limbus second and Bhutias third, is sure

to raise a few eyebrows in the Sikkimese administration, the reviewer supports the authors in their decision. The autochthony of the Lepchas as the original inhabitants of what is modern day Sikkim, and the antiquity of Limbu settlements across the Nepal-Sikkim border are historical facts. Furthermore, the concept of a unified Sikkimese nation only emerged around 1646, when the kingdom was established under Phuntsog Namgyal (1604–1670), the first Chogyal, or “temporal and spiritual king.” King Phuntsog belonged to the Bhutia community, a Buddhist people from eastern Tibet who entered Sikkim from the north and began settling there in the thirteenth century.

Chapters four, five and six are enjoyable reads. The section on mapping the mountain has elements of a detective novel and the intriguing content is matched by the exuberant stories of the mountain by the early explorers and the philosophical climber, Alexander Kellas, a Scottish chemist, explorer and mountaineer known for his studies of high-altitude physiology.

The seventh chapter is a sobering reminder of the fact that those who attempt to scale Khangchendzonga risk their lives in the process. Entitled “Formidable Antagonist,” this chapter examines fatality rates among climbers, noting that Khangchendzonga ranks fourth highest, after Annapurna, Nanga Parbat and K2. In fact, although less than 200 mountaineers have climbed Khangchendzonga, 40 have already died on its slopes.

The next four chapters chart the trials and tribulations of various ascents of the mountain, including expeditions in the run-up to the 1955 success, the 1977 Indian army expedition and the British expedition of 1979. The final chapters deal with women and the mountain, art, contested spelling and yeti sightings.

The book concludes with a single page of bibliographic sources—rather thin and regrettably arranged in a non-alphabetical order. A more robust set of references combined with an index would be a welcome addition to a second edition.

Part of the challenge in writing something definitive about this mountain is that Khangchendzonga means so much to so many different peoples. In many ways, the peak is collectively owned and remembered by all who live in the region that straddles eastern Nepal, Darjeeling and Sikkim, and each community has its own cultural and physical relationship with the mountain. Full credit to the authors, then, for balancing these competing ethnic and nationalist demands, and producing a book which is as enjoyable as it is educational. For readers interested in mountains and the peoples who live around them, *Khangchendzonga—Sacred Summit* is an unexpectedly rich narrative, thick with fact, pertinent analysis and glorious images. Highly recommended.



Pema Wangchuk and Mita Zulca  
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