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BHUTIA'S SACRED LANDSCAPE: CULTURAL BOUNDARIES AND PERCEPTIONS

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Keywords	Abstract
Sacred landscape, cultural boundaries, perceptions, Bhutia.	Sikkim is not merely a geographical entity but a sacred landscape deeply rooted in the cultural and spiritual significance of its indigenous communities. It highlights how oral traditions and ritual practices are imbued with sacrosanct by the diverse communities, where sacred sights are not only loci for religious and spiritual practice but also dynamic arenas where identities are negotiated and culturally bounded. This paper examines the sacred landscape of Sikkim through an anthropological lens, focusing on how cultural boundaries and perceptions are constructed, maintained, and transformed through spiritual engagements with the land. Through ethnographic fieldwork, oral narratives, and historical analysis, the study highlights how sacred territories of Sikkim are constructing and maintaining the spiritual engagement of the land through religious perspectives in contemporary modern society. Drawing through Indigenous communities' practices, particularly in the context of the Bhutia community, the paper further explores the interplay between the belief system, territory, and cultural practices.

1.INTRODUCTION

Sacred landscape of Sikkim holds a deep respect for nature, spirituality, and cultural heritage, and considered to be the most sacred hidden land or Beyul blessed by Guru Rinpoche. The landscape is intertwined with the region's Buddhist heritage, material and non-material culture, indigenous culture and tradition, and its natural beauty nestled in the eastern Himalayas. Namgyal and Dolma (1908) states that the land was initially considered as a sacred realm where Guru Rinpoche hid spiritual treasures, and exorcised the land of all evil spirits and obstructions that disturb the course



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of devotional practices. The landscape is of great importance to its history and culture from the evidence of being blessed and indistinguishable from the rest of the Indian states. The creation of Sikkim as a sbas yul, a hidden land is more important than the identification of Sikkim itself and sets it apart from the mundane world as a worldly paradise from the practice of Buddhism. The sacred landscape is also resulted in the contribution of Buddhist rituals, during the process of the ramification of its history articulated through the gter ma, tradition which received wider acceptance as an authentic process that identified as a sbas yul (Mullard 1979). According to Mishchenko (2018), the perception of the sacredness of space is formed by the cultural heritage of ancestors where, rivers, mountains, lakes, streams, and trees are believed to have divine or ancestral significance associated with the myths, rituals, and conservation practices. Bhutia community believes in the meaning and value of these natural elements having a religious, eventful, symbolic as well as mythological origin. Therefore, it is reasonable to use a holistic approach to understand the relationship with the environment among the Bhutia community of Sikkim. Hence, the sacred landscape is considered as a natural, element associated with certain life symbols, myths, weighty events, and religious feelings, and has a tremendous value for a person or group of people and needs special respect and protection. This definition makes it possible to justify the classification scheme of the sacred landscape.

2. IS LAND OF SIKKIM TAKEN CARE OF ?

The Bhutia community in Sikkim not only shapes cultural identity but also plays a significant role in the preservation of the environment, ensuring the land remains protected. For the Bhutia community land is not merely a resource but a sacred treasure which is evident from rituals, festivals, and oral traditions that are constantly preventing from destroying it. It is believed that destroying natural resources is equivalent to an act of desecration against religion. Taking into consideration, the land of Sikkim is well preserved. Batchelor and Brown (1994) pointed out that the environmental aspects are found in the Buddhist scriptures that raise the concern for the welfare of the natural world, human dependency and interconnectedness have given rise to an instinctive respect for nature (p, 12). The current dispensation has implemented several eco-friendly policies and restrictions for entering tourists in certain areas of Sikkim that are ecologically and culturally sensitive locations. From banning of single use of plastics to becoming the first organic state in the year 2016 ensuring the land has been protected scientifically and spiritually. The Sikkim rich traditional practices in the monasteries, mountains, forests, rivers, wild animals, rocks, plants, etc. play a significant role in both religious and traditional practices. The Bhutia community considers all the elements found in the land of Beyul to have spiritual customs and they safeguard them.

3. FOREST: SPIRITUAL BELIEFS, LIVELIHOOD AND CONSERVATION PRACTICES

Forest (Aranya) were the dwellings of the Rishis (Das, 2009), and Vana was given to lands where pleasure gave way to hardship (Rangarajan, 2001). Similarly, the forest holds a significant



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position, a distinct resource region, and a source of food, goods, and assets (Chaudhuri and Bandopadhyay 2004). Krishna prefers to stay in the forest as a cohered and for this reason, Krishna devotees could never be callous towards the environment (Prime, 1994). Despite that, humans destroyed nature and the environment for personal gain and somewhat neglected particularly from the tribal perspective. Even in modern Sikkim, tribal communities still rely on the forests for food, medicines, and construction. Historically, the Bhutia community is semi-nomadic and practices transhumance, though their numbers have considerably dwindled. Many Bhutia families have a deep understanding of medicinal plants and use them in healing, sustainably used resources, ensuring that they do not lead to depletion, as the community reveres nature and considers the forest sacred. Residing in the forests and groves is said to have given delight and peace to the meditating monks—a requisite for realizing the highest qualities (Chaudhuri and Bandopadhyay, 2004, 23-37). Many forest areas are associated with deities and spirits, as a result, monasteries are often built near forests, reinforcing the link between spirituality and nature. Arora (2006) pointed out that the forests and monasteries are not seen as physical spaces but as living embodiments of spiritual and historical meanings. For instance, Tholung Monastery is still maintaining the sanctity associated with the myths, religious festivals, and rituals. This monastery is one of the oldest monasteries in Dzong North Sikkim, build in the 18th century in a remote and heavily forested area under the guidance of third Chogyal Chakdor Namgyal. The monastery was established to safeguard the sacred relics and religious scriptures. Thapar (2011, 143) writes, “even when the monastic system came to be established, despite the necessity of dependence on alms which linked the monasteries to the grama, the ideal image remained that of monks in forest monasteries.” Concern for animal and plant welfare shaped early Buddhist monastic life associated with the concept of *ahimsā* (non-violence), also applied to two modern issues—animal rights and protection of the environment (Chapple, 1993, 22). In this respect, it is believed that certain elements are worshipped thereby sacred groves and lakes are protected due to religious beliefs.

4. LAKES

Sikkim is home to several sacred lakes which serves as a central part of religious practices deeply rooted in the ancient animistic traditions. Lakes in Sikkim are associated with the guardian deities, spirits, and age-old legends, which are revered by the Bhutia community and are integral to rituals, pilgrimages, and festivals. Natural lakes such as Gurudongmar Lake are deeply sacred to the local communities. Gurudongmar, located in the northern region is considered sacred due to its local legend of being visited by the Guru Rinpoche and a part of the lake never freezes due to its divine blessing. Tsongmo Lake where the monks predict the future based on the lake's colour and the most important and sacred lake in west Sikkim Khecheopalri Lake revered by both Hindus and Buddhists associated with the Tara, also known as wish-fulfilling lake.



5. MOUNTAIN

The significance of the mountain in Sikkim is not merely geographical features but is woven by the spiritual fabric revolving around cultural importance. During a time of resource scarcity, the Bhutia community prays to Mt Kanchenjunga, the third highest peak, a fierce protector who guards humankind and enriches the spiritual landscape, often viewed as an abode of spirits and ancestors. However, on September 19, 2019, the Govt of India decision to allowed the international mountaineering expeditions to climb Mt. Kanchenjunga was met with protests from the locals. In this regard, Kunzang Gyatso, the president of the Sikkim Mountaineering Association expresses that “religion is a priority in many places, and being a mountaineer, I feel that the way we challenge nature, we must respect it, as Sikkim has been built with the blessings of the mountain gods.” The mountain is sacred and is worshipped, pay homage to the deity and seek blessings for the wellbeing of the people. It is evident that the people translate mountain to “five treasures of the great snow” symbolizing essential elements viz. sacred scripture, protection, salt, and grain selling their live stocks to sustain their livelihood, especially in crises.

6. AGRICULTURAL LAND (SHEING GYABDAH)

The path of evolution is the story of the struggle for survival, adaptation, expansion, and dispersal at the cost of primary resource utilizers. In this respect, the story of mankind is certainly complicated because they developed the ability to fashion tools which progressively went on becoming more efficient and sophisticated. Besides they have culture. These two factors allow and at the same time restrict many possibilities. However, the major thrust is that none of the modes of subsistence can be considered independent of others. Even when the other modes have not evolved, the process of development indicates that the emerging mode of subsistence is in the process of being conceived, maturing, and delivered. Even the agricultural land in Sikkim, cannot be considered in isolation rather it transcends its economic role, deeply connected with the spiritual and cultural realm.

The indigenous communities of Sikkim, imbue their agricultural land with sacred significance and view it as the gift of ancestors. What goes on inside the land is a story of intense conflict, negotiation, and alliances with the supernatural elements that guide farming practices, ensuring harmony with nature. So, the agricultural landscapes of Sikkim are intertwined with spiritual belief and how sacredness leads to the conservation of natural resources (Arora, 2006). Supernatural elements, like Sheing Gyabdah (a protector of land or a malevolent spirit), are thought to cause harm to those who try to steal crops, and vegetables. These spirits are also acknowledged by individual households for protecting their land, integrating them into their worldview. Because these spirits and natural forces are formless, the Bhutia community does not create images of these spirits. The formlessness reflects the intangible nature of the spirits and the encompassing presence of the natural world in which they live and these practices have been passed on for generations. The Bhutia community exhibits several distinctive cultural traits that underscore their uniqueness, including traditional practices and worship of such a malevolent



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spirit. Myths and folktales not only narrate their rituals and practices but also highlight cultural significance. Further, distinctiveness is illustrated in ritual practices and beliefs, for example, during every harvest, the first fruits, crops, and vegetables are offered to their protectors but animal sacrifice is no longer in practice.

7. SOURCES OF BELONGING

The Bhutia community has a rich tradition of tangible and intangible aspects in songs, dances, religious chants, oral narratives that explains their origin through a mythical tale. It begins with the religious aspects and beliefs, particularly the formless universe, who look after the welfare of the community people. The mythical stories of the Bhutia community reveal the transition from the Buddhism to a mixture of Buddhism and animisms. Majumdar (1957) pointed out that animism is a crude form of religion in which magic is the predominant element in all the rituals coming out from birth and death, involving many oral stories recounting the struggles of migration to the establishment of Buddhist Kingdom in an animistic way. Myths, ancestral legends, rituals chants, customary laws, and folktales explain the reasons behind specific rituals and the significance of elements in ceremonies offer an insight into spiritual worldview and the interconnectedness of divine and natural elements. As Gulia (2005) posited that religion is part of culture with a set of beliefs and practices which people seek mental and physical harmony.

Similarly, the Bhutia community arises from their belief and worship various deities, natural elements, spirits, and supernatural entities. The Bhutia's ancestral beliefs centred around nature, ancestor worship, and Phow (Male Shaman) and Nejum (Female Shaman), revered the elements like rocks, trees, etc. In this aspect, Sahnii (2008) argued that successful environmental ethics in Buddhism cannot escape including human beings as part of nature with moral accountability.

In the Bhutia's ecosystem, performing rituals during Pang Lhabso, Chirim, is important as they seek to maintain harmony with nature ensuring a prosperous and secure future. Different deities are being worshiped by conducting rituals every year to please them for their protection from natural disasters. They believe in the process which includes rebirth and reincarnation, which is observed from the evidence of reincarnated monks and Rinpoches indicating signs from their previous birth. Unlike, ritual specialists like Phow and Nejhum are believed to be reincarnated to continue the legacy as a ritual specialist (Fieldwork 2024). Moreover, their traditions preserve natural resources, such as worshipping sacred caves, rivers, jungles, and mountains considered equivalent to the different forms of Buddhist gods and goddesses. These deities are represented by yhul-lha-zeb-dah (deities and protectors of land). The Lama (An honorific title of the spiritual Buddhist monk) and the Ajo (Grandfather or old age person) the ritual specialists of the Bhutia community, phow are the prominent figures. In their absence and unavailability, no one can take their place, unless in the case of Lamas, where the junior one is allowed to fill in when given the responsibility to perform the rituals. Whereas the phow are directly connected with the spiritual elements, essentially linked to their environment and nature, meticulously interpreted by ritual



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specialists in every clan. These specialists play a critical role in maintaining the integrity and continuity of the age-old traditions.

8. RITUAL FOR CONSTRUCTING A NEW HOUSE

The Bhutia community believes in the sacrosanct nature of their ecosystem. So, in adherence to this philosophy, house construction is not merely a human activity but sacred. Before the construction of the house, several rituals have to be performed. The head of the family consults the highly learned monk, and an auspicious day is fixed for the initial construction. Once the day is confirmed, family members will look for the person whose lob tah (twelve animal signs of the Tibetan Buddhist Calendar) sign is suitable to initiate the rituals. Before digging, offerings of butter, incense, grains, etc are made to the local deities for protection and harmony. The chosen person with a suitable animal sign then marks the ground with a tool, symbolizing the commencement of work. Grains, coins, religious symbols, and tsa-tsa (mini-size stupas made with clay) are buried to bring good fortune. The erection of the main central pillar of the house called the thong-shing is very important and is believed to be the spiritual spine of the house. After the completion of the house, Khim Sa Tashi (housewarming ceremony) will take place, once the house is occupied, the family members offer seasonal prayers or conduct annual household rituals. These rituals reflect the Bhutia community having a strong connection with nature and animistic tradition.

I recall an incident in my field area. In the quiet dawn, as the first light kissed the emerald green trees of Simick Lingzey, my late grandfather, draped his maroon robes, and stepped barefoot onto the yard with the offering of sang, chanting ancient mantras from his Pachya (Buddhist text) in a rhythmic murmur, sprinkled holy water from Phumpo (copper vessel) invoking the guardian deities of the land for their blessing. From a fairly tender age, I have seen my late grandfather practicing such rituals in every possible way. I have sensed his concern and his effort in making us memorize his chanting. So, I have developed a strong desire to know about traditional and spiritual practices. Since he was an excellent storyteller, he would discuss and narrate, how his parents practiced the same traditional rituals, eventually passed on to him. All those stories he narrated to us indicate the community's identity and place of origin. Until I understood his real intentions behind those tales and did not want to lose any traditional and cultural practices of the Bhutia community. This study has fostered my interest in knowing many differences in the performances of rituals depending on their geographical location.

9. TRADITIONAL INDIGENOUS PRACTICES

Bhutia community followed the Nigmapa's sect of Tibetan Buddhism which is intertwined with ancient animistic traditions. Pre-Buddhist beliefs like Bon practice include the worship of nature and local deities related to land, mountains, and other natural elements are still protected and practiced.



10. PHOLA

The Bhutia community believes that their Phola resides in a specific place at their home usually the altar room, basement, or attic. Phola refers to the ancestral spirit worship of a male deity of a family, clan, or village. Every year during the time of the Lossong festival, the Phola ritual is observed to protect the family, and clan and bring good fortune, ward off evils, and bless the family with a male child. During this ritual, the families gather together and offer newly harvested grains, meat, crops, etc. The first harvested rice is propitiated to the ancestor and to honour the deity. Each clan or family has their unique way of practicing this ritual with different stories associated with each clan. The procedure is followed by the making of tormas (effigies) of all the immediate ancestors or members are prepared and the member from the same clan are assigned to perform the rituals. However, in some cases, if the chosen one from the clan is not able to perform then it passes on to another. Similarly, if the chosen member is not able to perform, it will be assigned to a distant member or the monk.

The most common phrase used by the Bhutia family to scare their children is “palangkha ajo honshe” meaning attic grandfather will come. Very common term we heard during childhood days while acting mischievous and sleeping late at night. Every Bhutia household had a sacred attic, where they kept their harvested crops, no female member or child was allowed. This space serves to honour ancestral spirits or protectors of the house watching over the family members from above. This highlights the meeting point between the world of the living, the ancestors and divine reinforcing identity, and spirituality. A sacred attic within the home symbolizes ancestral presence, in every Phola ritual, the male member of the family (the father) will take the effigies highlighting the fundamental importance of honouring ancestors.

11. CHIRIM

Chirim also known as the Sansarik puja, highlights the Bhutia Community's deep connection with their Buddhist heritage observed in the sixth month of the Tibetan Calander, to ward off diseases and illnesses which afflict the society (Gyamtsso, 2011). It is a significant ritualistic practice where Lamas and the congregates gather at the monasteries, and perform rituals. It encompasses a wide range of ceremonies performed for spiritual purification, protection, and well-being of an individual members. The effigy made with flour is taken out amidst the chanting of Buddhist mantras offering butter lamps, incense, and food symbolic gesture to invoke blessings from ancestors and territorial deities for their protection from all kinds of evil forces. It is not just a ritual but an intangible heritage that strengthens the bondings among the Bhutia community. The practice of Chirim also plays a vital role in different events such as birth, marriage, and death. However, with the coming of the Modern era, certain changes in the pattern of practices have been observed in the past years posing a threat to a community's identity, but Chirim continues to be played as an element of Bhutia culture reflecting their spiritual and religious belief.



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12. PANGLHABSOL

Tracing back to the blood brotherhood treaty and the origin of the history of Sikkim, the Pang Lhabsol is an important festival celebrated in Sikkim indicating both religious and cultural significance preserving Sikkim's spiritual heritage and unity. The meaning of pang refers to witnessing and lhabsol refers to the worship of deities. In other words, panglhabsol means worshipping the guardian deities and Mt Kanchenjunga (protector deity). During this festival, Pangtoed Cham is performed by the monks and lay persons at Pema Yangtshe and Chuglakhang monasteries. Pangtoed Cham is a sacred masked dance created specifically for panglhabsol, introduced during the reign of Chakdor Namgyal. This festival is a reminder of Sikkim's founding values celebrating harmony, historical legacy, and environmental significance commemorating the protection of Sikkim by Mt Kanchenjunga. During this festival, the oath of blood brotherhood between Khye Bhumsa, (a Bhutia prince) and Thekong Tek (a Lepcha chieftain) laid the foundation for peaceful coexistence and unity between the two communities.

13. INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE

For Bhutia community their surrounding resources and territories rooted in sacrosanct encompassing various aspects of their daily life, including herbs, medicine, spirituality, social customs, agriculture, etc. Traditional healing practices using herbs, and minerals for treating different kinds of illnesses like fever, diarrhea, food poisoning, snake bite, etc are the holistic healing techniques passed down orally through generations. Generally, Bhutia community treats illness using a blend of traditional medicine and spiritual healing. They use herbal remedies for symptom relief, and spiritual rituals to restore balance and prevent further ailments. In this paper, a case study about illness before consulting the modern healthcare system and how Bhutia community treats food poisoning using indigenous knowledge.

Before I ventured into my fieldwork, I was advised not to eat anything everywhere. After completing my fieldwork and back home, the next morning I developed a symptom of nausea, vomiting, and diarrhea. My mother suspected it could be a thuk (food poisoning) as I was just back from my fieldwork. Upon experiencing such symptoms, my aunt from Simick fed me the medicine she prepared at home with the herbs she collected from the nearby forest. She is a well-known figure for treating food poisoning. After consuming her medicine, the severe unbearable diarrhea and vomiting occurred for another half an hour, during this hour, she was continuously monitoring me. After a few hours, my illness subsided and reduced significantly and my appetite returned to normal. With the growing interest in alternative medicine, I asked my aunt about the process of medicine but she politely refused, instead, she ended the conversation saying (after me), one of you will continue this legacy. Apart from this treatment, she consulted with a local monk Aching Champo, who indicated, that sudden illness is caused by imbalanced spiritual energy and shapten should be performed to support the treatment. This combination of herbal treatment and spiritual healing, proved effective, allowing a natural and realistic recovery.



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14. CULTURAL BOUNDARIES

Cultural boundaries are deeply rooted in shared beliefs, practices, values rituals, and relationships with the environment. These boundaries are based on symbolic geography defined by each community based on daily practices. The concept of cultural boundaries highlights how communities perceive themselves and others and negotiate their religious and environmental relationships. In this context, the Lepcha and Bhutia communities are deeply rooted in their distinct yet interconnected relationship with religion and environment and maintain a strong spiritual relationship with their land. Lepcha known as the original inhabitants of Sikkim, regard their land as sacred landscapes through animistic traditions where different elements like rivers, mountains, etc are considered sacred. Bhutia on the other hand, follows Tibetan Buddhism and manifests the animistic religion as Lepcha, an indication that these communities go hand and hand in connecting with nature. The relationship between the Lepcha and Bhutia who are united by their understanding of Buddhism, and the blood brotherhood treaty for the historical alliance between the two communities (Gyamtso, 2011). Nonetheless, both communities responded and value ecological preservation based on their spiritual and cultural priorities in contemporary Sikkim.

15. CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES AND TRANSFORMATIONS

Thendup (2019) argued that religion can be used in seeking a comprehensive solution to both global and local environmental problems, thus religious environmentalists have connected religious ideals and practices with environmental concerns. The Bhutia community exhibits several distinctive cultural traits that underscore their uniqueness, including religious practices and deep-rooted symbiotic connection with nature and the environment and rituals they employ. Myths, folktales, traditional beliefs, cultural practices, and spiritual worldview highlights the cultural significance. Their ritual practices and beliefs further illustrate their distinctiveness and their way of life is deeply intertwined with the natural landscape that surrounds them. For example, during the Phola rituals, the first harvest of crops is offered to the deities and ancestors (Balikci, 2008). Further, the Bhutia Community influenced by the indigenous animistic beliefs, regards natural elements such as mountains, rivers, forests, and sacred grooves as the embodiment of divine power and spirits. Bhutia community possesses a wealth of indigenous knowledge, related to agriculture, animal husbandry, forests, herbal medicine, and animal husbandry. This practice symbolizes the offering of rituals and festivals often centred around the worship and conservation of natural entities demonstrating a deep connection to their ancestry and a unique spiritual understanding. However, a sacred mountain, forests, and rivers became subject to commercial which led to environmental degradation. The Bhutia community is trying to revive the age-old traditional practices to protect these landscapes. Thus, such an offering signifies a symbolic link to their ancestral lineage, such knowledge passed down orally from generations, enabled the community to maintain ecological balance.



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16. CONCLUSION

In Sikkim's ecological landscape, every territory of land, the mountain peaks, rivers, streams, springs, trees, rocks and stones, forests, lakes, glaciers, has its special places of spirit dwellings of deities, divinities and retinue of divinities (Subba 2009). Mountains for the people of Sikkim make a self-contained unit, provided with everything required to sustain life-biodiversity, fertile valley, abundant streams, protected geography, and elaborate mythology (Wangchuk and Zulca, 2007). Forests, rivers, etc are often seen as living entities, and sacred landscapes, rugged terrain, and remote areas, are treated as the home of deities and spirits. The Bhutia community has developed a strong sense of self-reliance on these spiritual realms connected with their daily-life and ritual practice, reinforcing their connection with the land. As a custodian of a religious tradition, maintain cultural boundaries that define their sacred landscapes. This is evident in their subsistence farming practices, offering small portions of food to their deities. Similarly, their health management strategies demonstrate self-sufficiency, leveraging natural resources available in their surroundings. For instance, when treating food poisoning, fever, etc, and minor injuries, and cuts, in these situations, they employ immediate healing remedies using locally sourced materials like titepati (mugwort) or even mud. Furthermore, consulting with a monk about the symptoms of the sickness of a person plays a vital role in the community's faith in their religion. Knowledge of natural resources served as the community's understanding of the importance of landscape in shaping both the culture and environment. However, looming with contemporary environmental degradation, and cultural shifts are transforming this sacred landscape. Thus understanding from the community perspective where spirituality and nature are inseparable and fostering religious approaches to preserve the environment.

17. AUTHORS CONTRIBUTION

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19. PLAGIARISM POLICY

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