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SACRED TRADITION AND ECOLOGICAL WISDOM AMONG THE BHUTIA COMMUNITY OF SIKKIM

Dr. Sangay Diki Bhutia

Post-Doctoral Fellow (ICSSR), Department of Anthropology,
Sikkim University.

bhutiasangaydiki92@gmail.com

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<i>Keywords</i>	<i>Abstract</i>
<i>Bhutia, Indigenous Ecological Knowledge, Religious Practices, Sacred Landscapes.</i>	Indigenous religious traditions have served as important repositories of ecological knowledge. This knowledge has been passed down from generation to generation in the Bhutia community of Sikkim. This study explores the relationship between ecology and how religion safeguards the conservation of forests, water sources, wildlife, and biodiversity. The present study is the result of ethnographic fieldwork conducted among the Bhutia community. The study locates the importance of religion and ecology in the preservation of natural resources. The study emphasises that the Bhutia community's religious tradition constitutes an important source of indigenous ecological knowledge and offers valuable guidance in contemporary times, when modernisation, socio-cultural transformation and climate change have a great impact on traditional practices.

INTRODUCTION

Religion has played a significant role in an individual's life. A person's identity is grounded in the tag of religion into which he or she is born. Religious traditions, on the other hand, have connected human relationships with ecology. Across diverse cultures, religious practices and belief systems



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have provided a moral framework and practical guidance for the preservation of the natural environment. Sikkim, where spiritual worldviews are deeply interconnected with ecological adaptation, offers valuable insights into the community's role in conservation (Bhutia, 2025). The Bhutias' religious (Buddhist) cosmology emphasises interconnectedness with all natural elements such as mountains, rivers, forests, and lakes. These elements are considered the abodes of deities, commonly known as *Lha*¹ and *Klu*² that protect humans from misfortune. The narratives surrounding such elements shape the community's role in conservation, protection, and land use. In addition, religious taboos, rituals, and festivals have reinforced ecological values. For example, the festival of *Pang Lhabsol*, which pays homage to Mt Kanchenjunga, promotes harmony among and between humans and the environment.

Through the rituals, the community renews its pact with the environment by offering the first seasonal harvest, such as fruits or vegetables, to the mountain deity, remembering that the mountain is a living being rather than an inert natural resource. These practices restrain the exploitation of natural resources and function as a powerful system of environmental governance. Religious practices shape the environment, and spiritual worldviews influence the community's role in conservation practices. The integration of religious practices and their relationship with the environment aligns with Berkes' concept of Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK). Berkes (2012) posited that “a cumulative body of knowledge, practice, and belief, evolving by adaptive processes and handed down through generations by cultural transmissions, about the relationship of living beings with one another and with their environment.” In the case of the Bhutia community, they have widely accepted the concept of TEK as reflected in their daily practices, be it religion or festivals, interlinked with one another. However, such activities aligned with the community's belief system in ecological cycles, behaviours and patterns in everyday affairs.

This study is ethnographic in nature and explores the relationship between the religious beliefs and ecological knowledge of the Bhutia community. Oral narratives, traditions, and indigenous practices related to the environment through participant observation, focus group discussions with the community elders, ritual specialists, monks, etc. Secondary data has been supplemented in the data analysis.

RITUALS AND FESTIVALS (*BUMCHU* AND *LOSSONG*) CONNECTED TO NATURE

The Bhutia communities promote a religious worldview through festivals. The *Bhumchu* festival at Tashiding Monastery involves opening a sacred vase containing holy water, which is regarded as an omen predicting spiritual prosperity and the ecological well-being of Sikkim. It became clear that the

¹Refers to the divine power. Believed to reside in sacred mountains, rivers, lakes, etc and are worshipped through rituals. A sacred and spiritual being that can be in any form, they protect individuals, communities, and the natural environment.

²A spirit, which is usually in the form of a snake, worshiped by the Bhutia community and please them with the offerings. It is believed that if the *klu* is pleased then the family is blessed with good fortunes.



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Bumchu festival holds a deep ecological significance. However, my interaction with Mr. Chhogyal Bhutia (37-year-old) and his father, Mr. Sonam (69-year-old), a resident of Tashiding and a long-time devotee of the *Bhumchu* Festival, who has attended the festival since his childhood days. He stated that

“The festival is not just a religious ceremony, but a spiritual element that helps humankind to guide towards ecological importance.”

Similarly, they connected me with prominent members of the village who had a profound knowledge of the *Bhumchu* festival and its importance to the people of Tashiding and Sikkimese in general.

Correspondingly, while focusing on the importance of the *Lossong* festival, which begins after the harvest, I was more curious about the festival’s significance and age-old traditions. I was not very familiar with the traditional cultural practices and customs of my own community, though my parents often shared the stories and memories of how the festival was celebrated in earlier times. In this reflective process, I recall an incident of *Lossong* festival (2025) which was held at Ridge Park by All Sikkim Bhutia Association (ASBA), I noticed a group of an old aged men were discussing about the age old customs, out of my curiosity, nonchalantly, I approached one of the elderly man, Mr.Gurme Bhutia, a ritual specialist and a retired Bhutia teacher, “how was the festival celebrated in the past? Did you experience any kind of changes from then to now?

Yes, of course! He replied, during our time, there used to be more rituals. It was mandatory to be followed by a particular person. However, nowadays, it has changed, with more cultural dance and band performances. In the past, the *Lossong* Festival demonstrated the religious rituals that serve as an effective mechanism for ecological conservation. We maintained harmony with nature through this festival, in which the year’s harvest is offered to the deities to please them and bless humanity with abundant food for the coming year. The festival also serves to mark the end of the agricultural season, express gratitude to nature, and show respect to the environment. Laughingly, he added, "Sooner or later, it is obvious that our traditional culture might vanish along with us”.

I could sense his concern about age-old practices, and his desire for the present generation to learn the importance of festivals and encourage themselves to uphold them. I view this as an opportunity to enhance one's own interest in culture and tradition without any moral obligation, which allows not only to know about our roots, but also makes it in certain ways to fill the void of knowing socio-cultural issues, a junction which is also equally necessary for academic writing for the time ahead.

ROLE OF MONASTERIES, MONKS, SHAMANS, AND LOCAL COMMUNITIES

Monasteries act as custodians of sacred ecological knowledge. Different ritual offerings to the mountain deities, territorial deities, water deities, forest deities, etc are performed within these institutions. Monasteries shape both community identity and religious ecology. It guides the spiritual,



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cultural, and ecological institutions that mediate the relationship between the Bhutia community and the natural environment. To the Bhutia community, the natural environment is perceived as a sacred and priceless resource inhabited by the deities, protective forces, and territorial spirits (Bhutia, 2025). The relationship between such entities is monitored, ritualized, and sustained by the religious norms and practices within the monasteries.

Monasteries as Custodians of the Sacred Landscape

It is fair to say a monastery is a social institution; a place of worship, a place of religious indulgence, a place of interaction, etc. Every village has a monastery, where rules and regulations are equal irrespective of social distinction. Moreover, the worldview of the Bhutia community is embedded in religious teachings and a sense of responsibility toward the surrounding environment. Recognizing the role of spiritual beliefs in the surrounding environment, the community designs inclusive and culturally sensitive conservation programs to maintain biodiversity and cultivate respect for the natural world. Within their cosmology, nature is a sacred living space. For them, natural elements are not merely natural features but the abode of deities and spirits. Buddhist monasteries in the Sikkim Himalayas functioned as the custodians of the sacred landscape, shaping both environment and spiritual life (Arora, 2006; Acharaya, 2017). The monasteries regulate worship and human interaction with nature through rituals and customary laws. Through prayers, rituals, and ceremonies in every festival in monasteries, the sanctity of natural spaces and collective responsibility toward environmental conservation are promoted. Monastic institutions often taught that forests and lakes are to be protected. Locally, it is referred to as Gumpa Forests, which are preserved, and hunting and other exploitative activities are prohibited. Gumpa Forests often act as informal mechanisms of environmental governance and function as reservoirs of biodiversity while simultaneously preserving cultural memory and religious identity (Chettri, 2012; UNDP, 2020; Tatay & Mercon, 2023). Therefore, it is evident that monasteries have continued to play a crucial role in transmitting indigenous ecological knowledge to this day.

Role of Lamas, Shamans (*Pawo, Neyjum*) in Ecological Conservation

The Lamas serve not only as religious authorities but also as the protectors of the environment. Various studies on the Eastern Himalayas suggest that Buddhist monasteries and religious leaders play a significant role in biodiversity conservation by integrating spiritual values with environmental governance (Sponsel, 2012; Chettri, 2012). Lamas guide the community and teach the value of the environment by fostering harmonious relationships with nature. By performing religious rituals, they discourage the destruction of forests, pollution of water, and environmental exploitation. Similarly, *Pawo* and *Nejum*, among the Bhutia community, have played an important role in balancing between humans, ancestral spirits, local deities, and the natural environment. Through seasonal offerings and rituals performed before any agricultural activities, they seek to maintain harmony between the community and the environment. Their ritual practices are based on the belief that the mountain,



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river, forest, lakes, and rocks are protected spirits whose well-being is linked with the community (Balakci, 2008). Though rapid modernisation has greatly impacted such traditional practices, the Pawo and Nejum have continued to be represented as the custodians of cultural traditions.

INDIGENOUS ECOLOGICAL ETHICS AND TABOOS

The relationship between Indigenous people and the natural world is grounded in the spiritual world, their ancestral knowledge. Indigenous worldviews are fundamentally relational- the elements like animals, rivers, forests, and even weather systems as sentient beings with whom they share a reciprocal relationship (Cajete, 2000; Kimmerer, 2013). The Bhutia community in Sikkim has its own concept of practicing this system to govern this relationship. Nevertheless, it is believed that nature is an external resource to be managed; indigenous people have their own sentiment towards nature and natural beings. If ethnicity is embedded in everyday practices, taboos function as a psychological regulator. Indigenous communities impose certain restrictions to ensure future generations understand the ethics of hunting, harvesting, and entering into certain spiritual places (Coding & Folke, 2001; Berkes, 2018). The taboos reflect detailed ecological knowledge developed over centuries of observation and adaptive management by contributing to biodiversity conservation and resource renewal (Gadgil et al., 1993).

SACRED GOD AND ITS RELATIONSHIP WITH THE FOREST AND WILDLIFE

Nachay Lha is the custodian of the forest and wildlife. Annual rituals are conducted to appease the forest spirits to ensure safe passage for those gathering sacred herbs and other essentials. The intimate relationship between indigenous communities and their natural environments, particularly concerning medicinal plants, is a well-documented aspect of ethnobotany and shamanic practices (Plotkin, 1993). The community still holds the view that the forest is a sacred dwelling place of deities, and hunting and tree cutting are discouraged. As a result, the Bhutia community worshiped these deities for good health, protection from natural calamities, and to prevent individuals from encounters with wild animals. In the Bhutias' worldview, forests and wildlife are part of nature; being indiscriminate towards them means illness, crop failure, accidents, or other misfortunes. Additionally, the cutting of trees is embedded in the religious worldview, in which the community regards the forest as a sacred landscape protected by guardian spirits. Such customary beliefs serve as a conservation mechanism by protecting biodiversity while reinforcing the community's cultural identity.

CHANGING DYNAMICS VIS-À-VIS MODERNISATION

Over the years, the Bhutias' worldview had witnessed significant change due to modernisation and a shift in the socio-economic landscape. With increased road connectivity and changing livelihood patterns, the community has reduced its dependence on customary practices and traditional knowledge systems. It is observed that there is less awareness among the younger generation of ritual



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practices associated with traditional knowledge. In addition, climate change has altered ecosystems, resulting in massive landslides, floods, heavy rainfall, rising temperatures, and disruption of wildlife, threatening cultural and ecological systems. It is also observed that Bhutia villages in Sikkim have now embraced the ecological practices and religious customs. Village associations, with the help of community members and monasteries, are restoring these practices and encouraging youth participation in such rituals and festivals.

DISCUSSION

For the Bhutia Community, their religion is woven into animistic, ancestral, and shamanic practices, where their land and geographical boundaries play an important role in their lives. Having a deep connection with nature, they practice a vibrant form of animism, rooted in the worship of the natural world. Their spiritual worldview, known as *Phola*, centres on the belief that natural elements are inhabited by male ancestral deities and their lineage protectors, believed to have social and ecological roles. They are the torchbearers of the spirits of past family members, and the earliest settlers of this region who continued to protect the land and their people, with whom present generations maintain reciprocal relations. This system emphasizes the interconnectedness of humans and the natural world, a hallmark of animistic traditions worldwide. The veneration of stones as sacred objects is a widespread practice in animistic cultures, symbolizing enduring power and connection to the earth (Campbell, 1988). The sacred natural sites, such as mountains, rivers, groves, hot springs, and particular rocks, are perceived as inhabited by deities. Bhutia recognizes deities residing in various natural features, including springs, water sources, rivers, ponds, herbs, stones, and forests, and depends on a harmonious relationship with those non-human entities. These locations are central to their rituals, social customs, and spiritual worldview, reflecting a common theme in animistic societies where natural landmarks serve as points of spiritual interaction (Harvey, 2005).

CONCLUSION

The present study highlighted that the Bhutia community's religious beliefs and their relationship with the ecological elements constitute an important practice and are significant for the conservation of the sacred landscape of Sikkim. The forest, mountain, river, tree, and lake are considered sacred. It is an integral part of the community's beliefs, which have been preserving ecology through religious practices. Different agents of modernisation and changing socio-economic conditions have eliminated some aspects of rituals; their respect for nature and ecological responsibility continues to remain relevant in today's changing society. There is a growing awareness in the Bhutia community to revive the rituals in all aspects. Also, community associations, along with the village organisations and monasteries, are actively involved. Therefore, integrating indigenous religious ecology into conservation policies can preserve the cultural identity and protect the rich heritage of the Bhutia community.



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