



Exploring the Sacred in the Secret, and the Secret in the Sacred: A

Study of Sikkim as the Beyul Land

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Abstract: As many religions believe in the concept of an ideal place, for example ‘Swargo’ in Hinduism, ‘Jannat’ in Islam and ‘Paradise’ in Christianity, Buddhism also believes in an ideal place, known as Beyul. This paper intends to find out how Sikkim has been seen as the Beyul land both historically and culturally, and why this land is militantly resistant to the progressive modernity of the ‘outer’ world. What makes Sikkim self-sufficient and why Sikkim is a “hidden paradise” will also be discursively analysed in order to foreground the argument of this paper. Beyul is a much more credible reality as its ‘real’ existence has been circumstantially as well as evidentially confirmed by living beings, like Tulshuk Lingpa, the Lama, and one of his followers, Dorje Wangmo, who themselves have ventured into the divine land with many other disciples of the lama through supernatural guidance and divine vision. Although the theories of science are in grim contrast to the realities that are verbally produced in front of the scientific minds with the various testimonies that support the existence of Beyul, a belief in the human consciousness and in their experiences makes its existence arguable, and plausible to some extent. This paper examines the existing literatures based on Sikkim as the secret/sacred Beyul land. The paper also throws some light on how and why the secrecy of this sacred Beyul land to the common eyes has been maintained by the visionary lamas throughout the history.

Key Words: *Beyul, Paradise, Sikkim, Area Studies, Buddhism*

Introduction

Secretness is one of the primary or most fundamental conditions to up-keep the divine status of a place as secretness or hiddenness has an intrinsic connection with sacredness. The sacred just cannot jostle its way through the throngs of the profane. Here lies no wonder that the beauty, sanctity or uniqueness of a place even without any spiritual identity is dependent on how the human interventions are going to interact with it. Dealing with the place with respect

or reverence, and hope or optimism will heighten the status of the space as a sanctuary. Moreover, if the place is referenced from time immemorial with a spiritual tradition of treasure texts about unlocking it with a possibility of failure and danger for those who are not fully eligible, then it is termed a Beyul according to Buddhist mythology. Accordingly, Sikkim is regarded as a Beyul land. As admirers of this place, people should not be greedy for its bountifulness- they should not be enterprising for random escape to this place or become the cause of the exploitation of this place. Only by being utterly dedicated and respectful to the land, the preservation of Sikkim's divine sanctity would be possible. It is completely up to the sense and sagacity of the humans whether they will make "a hell of heaven or a heaven of hell" (Milton 15).

Escapism has been an intrinsic part of human nature from the very outset of human civilization. Though considered by many as a sign of cowardice, escapism does not mean avoiding life at all, but an adulating substitute to live it more fruitfully and consciously. To agree with Sigmund Freud, a certain amount of escapist fantasy is mandatory to make life worth living. People, since the ancient times — be they the poets riding the invisible wings of imagination, the travellers availing the gateways of new lands, or the boozers taking the ecstasy of wine — have been seeking diversion from the unpleasant realities of day-to-day life in some ways or the other. While the materialistic people resort to gross entertainment or addiction in order to avoid what the 'normal' living has to offer, idealistic people opt for the higher realm of spirituality which is totally an-'other' dimension of conscious living. It is probably the intensity of sufferings in this mundane world that has justified the need for an escape and has promoted the necessity for an 'ideal place' as conceived in Buddhism and in the various religions of the world. However, while the religions like Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity conceptualize this ideal realm as 'Swargo', 'Jannat', and 'Paradise' respectively which can be attained only after death, Buddhism believes in an ideal place that can be attained in this life only. This ideal place is called 'Beyul Land'.

What is a Beyul?

The Beyul land can be considered an elevated place sublimated into a space that is at once mysterious, promising and challenging. It is a space where material and physical forces on the one hand and the energies of the Spiritual realm on the other have an interface. It is conceptualized, or rather implanted in the human mind, especially in those of Buddhist believers as a space which is nothing less than a promised land or a symptomatic replica of 'paradise'. A particular branch of Buddhism, namely the Nyingma School is reckoned to be the chief expositor of the 'terma'

tradition or treasure tradition and one of the Nyingma lineages established by *Rigdzin Gödem* became specially noted for expounding the idea of Hidden lands. However, it is most probably from the fourteenth century that Tibet started producing a huge number of writings concerning the pathways to make off to the secret lands, the processes through which people can recognize them and can open the gates of those sacred places. This Nyingma tradition of Tibetan Buddhism proclaims that great spiritual riches have been enshrouded by the Reverend tantric master Padmasambhava and his spiritual consort Ye Shes Mtsho Rgyal in the eighth century. These treasures had been hidden in multiple forms, namely the form of texts or as teachings inseminated in the memory of the disciples of Padmasambhava who are destined to take incarnations when the time will be ripe.

This exclusively Tibetan concept of the Sacred has multiple layers of meanings and functions too. For instance, some perceive the Beyul land situated not in the earthly dimensions, but in such a space that exists somewhere between the geographical and the psychological realm. (Mullard, 10) It is perceived as a multi-layered mandala where the believers and the practitioners can obtain spiritual realization (Gelle 360). While others consider this place to be a safe-refuge for the Tibetans during political upheaval and unrest in the doomsday, when the conservation of the Buddha's teachings is on the way of decline. The time of Buddha Shakyamuni is often regarded as the Golden era of Buddhist literature. Through the ages, numerous prophecies and ideas have developed regarding the duration and decline of Dharma. Amongst them, Padmasambhava's prophecy considers foreign intrusion as the main indication that the end of times is approaching. Mongols and Turks have been identified as the chief invaders, although it seems quite impossible to collect concrete truths as historical facts have been tremendously overlapped by the Buddhist mythologies (369). Whatever may be the exact truth, the function of Beyul as a political refuge can not be negated. To be specific, fourteenth century Tibetan high lama Rig dzin regod Idem Can himself testifies to this concept as his own visit to the Himalayas was not merely a religious pilgrimage but rather an attempt to find a refuge after losing the royal patronage. According to some sources, born in a time of extreme socio-political restlessness, this lama was pursued by some higher official enemies to leave Tibet (Mullard 10).

Sikkim as a Beyul Land

Terton Rigdzin Gödem is assumed to be the first Tibetan lama who visited Sikkim, meditated there, and even unearthed spiritual sites well as texts concerned with Guru Rinpoche's prophecies

about the foundation of Sikkim as a Beyul land. So, it is to him that the land of Sikkim is indebted for its designation as prior to his arrival and proclamation Sikkim was identical with the rest of the Southern Himalaya. This holy land with a quadrangle topography expanded from Mountain Sidhi of India in the east to the mountain of Zar district of U-Tsang, Tibet in the west, reaching up to Kangchendzonga in the northeast and touching the borders of Bengal in the south-east is till now venerated as a blessed place by Buddhist denizens- a place of sustaining an idealised population involved in agronomical works, and a beautiful land where resources are inexhaustible and life is pleasant.

It is firmly believed in the Buddhist tradition that this auspicious land obtained the blessings of Lord Avalokitesvara, Lord Indra and five other sublime incarnates. After that, in the 8th century AD, Guru Padmasambhava, known also as Guru Rinpoche consecrated it, meditated in the caves here, muffled spiritual treasures in one hundred and eight secret places, namely caves, rocks and lakes that would aid the proliferation of Dharma in the appropriate times. He also put down all the troubled spirits residing there, and appointed them as Dharmapalas. Besides these dreadful spirits, Guru Rinpoche is said to have subdued Mountain Kanchenjunga too. However, it is from 14th century onwards that this identity of Kangchendzonga as a mountain god and protector of Dharma came into light by the proclamation of Tertön Rigdzin Gödem and in the 17th century after the induction of the first Chogyal, it began to be populated by the Buddhist pilgrims.

Amongst all other hidden valleys scattered on the lap of Himalayas, Sikkim is considered by many to be the most valuable and sacrosanct (Balicki 87). However, according to various sources, the hidden land has various connotations. For instance, being fortified by the encircling mountain cliffs, this land has less probability of being attacked by the invaders and thus gives the guarantee of the continuous and of life. Moreover, acting as a very ancient and important trade route between Tibet and India, and being situated between two historic sub-Himalayan forces like Nepal and Bhutan, Sikkim has availed huge financial profit from time immemorial. It has been mentioned in various religious texts that people resorting to Sikkim will defy irremediable diseases as it is a land of medicinal herbs and no one will be left hungry as this land grows almost 105 different types of fruit and 360 sorts of esculent vegetables (87). The bountifulness of natural resources has been beautifully represented in a novella by Chetan Raj Sreshtha, named *King's Harvest*. In this novella, there is a place called Laizelzed managed by Tontem with the due approval of the King. The natural resources of this place can be quite associated with that of Sikkim

itself. The scientific reason behind such inexhaustible resourcefulness of Sikkim is that being situated at a lower altitude than Tibet, it gains more than its fair amount of yearly South Asian monsoons. Resultantly, this place has become extremely fertile, covered with abandoned fruits and grains, yielding a huge amount of agricultural production as well as dense woodland providing large amounts of timbers. This extreme fecundity justifies the status of Sikkim as Demo-shong or valley of rice. Except such external signs, the inner purity, wisdom and kindness of the people residing in Sikkim who are deemed to be highly enlightened add to the divine status of this land. The location of Sikkim along with the Himalayan Crossroads has literally made it a refuge for people belonging to different Tibetan and Himalayan regions. The five peaks of Kangchendzonga contains five sources of treasures like salt, gold, turquoise, Dharma Scriptures, arms and various medicines that are capable of offering material opulence to the residents while the four mysterious caves situated at the four principal directions of Tashiding are capable of offering miraculous spiritual powers to those who practice devotion in any of these blessed places (91). All these references undoubtedly uphold the Buddhist mythological saga of this place being a palpable paradise upon earth.

An Extraordinary Journey to the Land:

Buddhism is not an aggressive religion, so its cultural and spiritual properties had been concealed by the Guru in places of difficult terrain and topographical sublimation where exists a spiritual harmony between the man, matter, and spirit. Those who are eligible in terms of inner purity and spiritual superiority can rediscover these sites in appropriate times only. One of the most recent attempts to open this Beyul Demo-shang occurred in 1962 as a result of the massacre caused in Tibet by the Chinese invasion. The respected Tibetan lama Tulshuk Lingpa claimed to have received spiritual revelations concerning this Beyul, the entrance of which was rumoured to be found on the flanks of Kangchendzonga, and he led his 300 followers to this direction, as reported in Thomas K. Shor's book *A Step Away from Paradise*. Survivors of this incident reported that Lingpa and a number of his devotees perceived some bright lights calling them to a particular direction when they had gone to do a reconnoitre of the route. But as a perfect leader, this great soul did not want to avail the pathway without gathering up all his followers, and unfortunately, while returning to do so, most of the group members, including the lama himself, were killed by an avalanche.

The Greater Ecological Concern

As evident from the sacred scriptures, nature has been given the primary agencies by ancient Gurus in the protection of Buddhist dharma- almost all the mountain apexes, caverns and cliffs have been blessed, consecrated and employed as protectors of Dharma. Many of the local lakes, rocks, and forests are believed to be inhabited by deities and many other supernatural beings. Such a pantheistic approach towards nature has helped in the sustenance of the sacred place as a major hub for biodiversity. Since mother nature is highly revered by the Sikkimese Buddhists and other local residents who are wholly dependent upon nature for livelihood, cutting down of trees, causing pollution, and destroying the sacred environment are considered highly offensive and sinful. The sanctity of Sikkim as a slice of Paradise free from the clutches of capitalism and the benevolent altruistic residents' feeling towards it has been well illustrated in the anti-dam movements in the early 2000s. Trouble started brewing in this land when Sikkim Power Development Corporation drew its plans for building dams on river Teesta that were not only going to affect the people and their livelihoods negatively but also the unique biodiversity which was on the way of decline. Such unwise steps taken by the government and engendered vehement discontent among the Lepcha and Bhutia communities as well as the Buddhist clergies. Consequently, protests by the monks and local people began to be intensified. Various activities like protest rallies, mobilizing villagers, spreading awareness and submission of petitions went on. However, things came to a halt between the years 2007 and 2009 as the activists started a peaceful hunger strike that continued for 915 days. This incredible devotion towards religious, cultural and historical tradition of the land and united defiance led to the cancellation of four hydroelectric power projects in the state. Sikkim is the only state in the country that has defied the aggressive political projects by virtue of its special religious character.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be said that along with the rich cultural and historical legacy of Sikkim, the faith of people plays an important role in shaping the place as a significant site where life is aligned with nature, and nature with nurture. As this paper has aimed to explore, it is no wonder that this place is notable for its natural bountiful resources along with the spiritual abundance and religious living which has been the constant feature of this space. Known as Beyul, the culturally and historically rich Sikkim has been militantly resistant to the progressive modernity of the 'outer' world due to the probability that outer forces can cause havoc to the 'hidden' heaven, i.e., Sikkim.

In Buddhist belief, the concept of Beyul has its 'real' existence confirmed by lamas and various survivors of the voyage that was undertaken by Tulshuk Lingpa to reach the Beyul land. As contrasting as it may seem to the science of the world, the human experience and its testimony, however unreal it may sound, has a discourse which can not easily be entirely denied.

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