

Sacred Landscapes and Colonial Narratives: A Historical Geography of Sikkim

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ABSTRACT:

This study explores the sacred geography of Sikkim, emphasizing its spiritual significance as depicted in ancient texts, particularly in the writings of Guru Padma Sambhava. Sikkim, traditionally revered as hBras-ma ljongs (Demojong), has been portrayed as a divine sanctuary with hidden valleys, pilgrimage sites, and sacred mountains such as Khangchendzonga. With the advent of colonialism, the British reinterpreted these sacred landscapes for geopolitical and economic purposes. The British Gazetteers and travelers' accounts documented Sikkim's geography primarily for administrative control, leading to territorial reconfigurations. By the 20th century, British paramountcy and later geopolitical shifts, including China's annexation of Tibet, reshaped Sikkim's sovereignty. The Indo-Sikkim Treaty of 1950 marked its transition into an Indian protectorate, ultimately culminating in its merger with India in 1975. This historical analysis highlights the intersection of sacred geography and colonial narratives in defining Sikkim's past and present.

Keywords: Sacred landscapes, Guru Padmasambhava, Khangchendzonga, colonialism, geo politics, Anglo-Chinese Convention 1890, Indo Sikkim Treaty 1950.

1. INTRODUCTION

Sacred landscapes hold a deep spiritual, cultural, and historical significance across societies. These sites of religious devotion, pilgrimage, and rituals, foster a sense of identity and continuity among communities. Beyond their spiritual role, sacred spaces also influence socio-political structures, territorial claims, and cultural heritage. In many regions, they have shaped historical narratives, governance, and even conflicts. Colonial and modern interventions often reinterpret or redefine these spaces, impacting their traditional meanings.

Sikkim is situated in the foot hills of Eastern Himalayas, Sikkim at present is the 22nd state of the Indian Republic. It is a tumbled mass of mountain spurs and deep valleys, 60 miles broad and covering an area of 2,818 sq. miles, wooded up to an altitude of 12,000 feet. It lies between 27°5" and 28°9" N and 87°59" and 88° 56" E. It measures approximately 70 miles from North to South and 40 miles from East to West. It is bounded on the North and North-East by a political line following the lesser spur of the *Donkya* to the *Jeylap*, viz., the Tibetan frontier, on the South-east by Bhutan, on the South by the Darjeeling District of West Bengal which was a part of the kingdom of Sikkim in the olden time and on the West by Nepal.¹

2. SACRED LANDSCAPES IN COLLOQUIAL LITERATURE

During the reign of some of the early rulers or even before them, the territorial limits of Sikkim extended beyond the present boundaries on all sides. The kingdom was then many times its size today.

The '*Bras ljongs rgyal rabs*² follows the traces of Sikkim as:

"This delightful country of Sikkim called hBras-ma ljongs" has been mentioned hundreds of times over in the most eulogistic style by the great Urygen Guru Padma Sambhava in his writings which he has left hidden in bulk and smaller quantities on various places, amongst other hidden stores. He speaks of Sikkim as being a Paradise or a Supernatural place. In the Thang-yikn-Shel-brag-ma it is mentioned thus: The most suitable place of devotion where the Da Kim as congregate without being invoked. In Da-ki Yang-rDzong The Vakas (words) retreat is Samye Chenpo. (Note: it is meant that any devotee meditating here would obtain the perfection or Siddhi in magic

or mantra of the speech) the best place for meditation on the chit (heart) is Lhobrak Kharchu. The best place for meditating on the Attribute is Yarlung Shel-brag. And for meditation on divine Acts is Monkha Singi dZong. Particularly Yarlung Shel-brag and Chimpu are equal to the Sital Vana masha in India (Sil wai Tshal-ki dur-khrod). There are five valleys (Lungs), one Country (Ling), three slopes (Jongs) and twenty mountains (khangs), these are Zab-bu-lung in the centre, Jong pa-lung in the east in Kongbu. Srib-bTsang-lung in the south in Mon, Phagri-lung in the west, Groma-lung in the north. There are five lungs or valleys. To the east there is the hidden country of Padm-lung. In the south-west there is the hidden country of Dema-jong. In the north-west there is the hidden country of Khnpa-jong. In the north-east there is Lung-sum-jong. There are the three Jongs. These are Thang-lha, Tesse, Mangkhar Bulay mountains. sTar-sGo, Phoma, mKhar-ri and rDorje gang, Jomo-kharag, Gang-IZang and rTse-rTen Gang Wode-gang-rgyal, Shampo, Sal-rje gang. Hao-gang-zang, Tsari gang and Nga-lai-gang. These places are great pilgrimage trodden by my feet and they are very suitable for places of solitary devotion".³

The aforementioned text are very poetic and the use of language is very spiritual. It explains that in numerous writings of Guru Padma Sambhava⁴ he repeatedly praises Sikkim—which is referred to as Demojong⁵ (*hBras-ma ljongs*) as a land of supernatural beauty and divine favor. He describes it as a paradise and the ideal retreat for spiritual devotion, where the faithful can attain perfection in their meditative practices. Specific sites within Sikkim are highlighted for their unique spiritual benefits: for example, Samye Chenpo is noted as the perfect place for achieving mastery over sacred speech, Lhobrak Kharchu for heart-centered meditation, Yarlung Shel-brag for meditating on divine attributes, and Monkha Singi dZong for reflecting on divine actions. Moreover, the sacred geography of Sikkim is intricately detailed and divided into five valleys (*Lungs*), one country (*Ling*), three slopes (*Jongs*), and twenty mountains (*Khangs*). Each with designated names and spiritual significance. Hidden regions such as Padm-lung, Dema-jong, Khnpa-jong, and Lung-sum-jong, along with revered mountain ranges, further emphasize that Sikkim is not merely a physical landscape but a profound pilgrimage ground perfect for solitary devotion.

Ancient prophecies and apocalyptic scriptures attributed to Avalokiteswara⁶, the Omniscient Guru Padmasambha, and various revered Jinas⁷ and Jinaputtras⁸ have long recounted the existence of several hidden countries. These texts assert that such secret realms were blessed and consecrated as sacred retreats dedicated to spiritual devotion. Each concealed land is meticulously documented, complete with its own guidebook that provides specific instructions and clues leading to hidden treasures, all safeguarded in mystical, venerable sites. Among all these hallowed regions, Sikkim is celebrated as the most sanctified kingdom. According to the guidebook of *Gter-Ston-Shes-rab Me-hBar*, Sikkim is uniquely positioned in northern India, immediately south of Tibet, within a region comprised of 18 expansive tracts of land that gracefully slope towards the south. At the center of these descending tracts lies a distinctive territory marked by northern hilltops and southwards by extended hill bases. This remarkable geographical and spiritual description not only underscores Sikkim's exceptional sanctity but also highlights its enduring significance as a divine sanctuary, treasured and revered throughout ancient spiritual literature. This evocative imagery not only enriches our understanding of Sikkim's mystical allure but also invites scholars to explore its layered historical and cultural narratives.⁹

One of Sikkim's most sacred peaks, Khangchendzonga (also known as *Gans-Chen-mDzod-iGna*), is revered not only as a majestic mountain but also as a deity, called *mDzod-iGna-sTag-rTse* symbolizing a divine figure seated on a horse. This awe-inspiring peak resembles a regal king enthroned, with its four corners draped like white silk curtains. Above the valley, five eternal, snow-capped peaks form a crown-like arrangement, reminiscent of the pointed miters on a royal crown. In the foreground, seven crystal-clear lakes appear like a series of sacred water offerings. Flanking these lakes, sheer cliffs rise like lions reaching skyward, their edges adorned with clusters of vulture nests. At the heart of the landscape, the region unfolds like an open bowl filled with dazzling gems, its rim raised as if to invite closer admiration. The valleys spread out like an outstretched hand, while the ridges and hill spurs evoke the distinctive shape of a yak's third stomach, blending nature's grandeur with profound symbolism.

At the base of the hills, the landscape resembles a gigantic fallen wish-granting tree. Above, majestic mountains crown the valleys, while rivers flow from the hillsides, their waters believed to possess healing properties like nectar. The riverbanks, covered in lush grassy flats and gentle slopes, give way to a woodland where every hill is blanketed with towering trees, and the edges of lakes stretch out into vast plains. The grassy ridges and small hill-spurs evoke the image of resting mongooses, and the hilltops soar like mighty lions leaping toward the sky. In the distance, long mountain ranges charge forward like a tigress, with smaller spurs darting ahead like playful leopard cubs. The river currents resemble sleek swords sliding downward, while tiny streams sparkle like strings of pearls and waterfalls cascade like flowing white silk curtains. The harmonious murmur of these falls blends with the sounds of the forest, creating a rhythmic chorus reminiscent of mantras. Altogether, the scene conjures the image of a vast pagoda crowned by a naturally heart-shaped stupa.

At the center of this enchanted land lies a revered stone of good fortune, set in a valley that unfurls like a Chinese scroll, with a massive rock resembling a king's throne. This central marker serves as a reference point for locating hidden treasures and sacred sites. Beneath the stone lie the keys and guides to these mysteries, while five extraordinary trees—believed to cure all ailments, stand nearby, surrounded by a dazzling array of fruits in every color and flavor.¹⁰

The natural features mentioned are not merely scenic elements; they are imbued with spiritual significance. For instance, the base of the hills is likened to a gigantic fallen wish-granting tree; a symbol of abundance and divine benevolence, suggesting that the very earth here is a source of miraculous blessings. The description of the majestic mountains, healing rivers, and lush woodlands evokes a sense of a living, sacred landscape. The imagery of rivers with waters as healing as nectar, grassy banks, and woodlands filled with towering trees illustrates nature's nurturing qualities. Every element of the scenery from the lion-like hilltops to the cascading waterfalls that resemble white silk curtains serves as a metaphor for divine power and beauty.

Moreover, the central placement of the revered stone of good fortune highlights the region's role as a spiritual nexus. This stone, along with the extraordinary trees nearby, symbolizes not only natural prosperity but also a repository of hidden wisdom and healing keys to unlocking the region's deeper mysteries. The vivid metaphors and symbolic descriptions collectively remind us that this land is far more than a geographical location; it is a sacred sanctuary where nature and spirituality intertwine, underscoring its enduring importance and sanctity.

3. COLONIAL LITERATURE

With the advent of colonialism in the Himalayas these sacred landscapes were looked upon as a means to strengthen the British geo-political presence and widen their resource extraction. The expeditions; be it commercial, missionary, military or political had a perspective of exploitation leading to an extension of political dominions in the highlands. The Himalayan region, considered sacred by locals, was seen by colonizers as a resource hub leading to removal of commodities like timber, minerals, and water, while also undermining indigenous cultures. These expeditions weren't separate but intertwined in their goals, serving political and economic interests. Scientific exploration, in particular, was often a means to solidify control and disrupt traditional beliefs tied to sacred sites.

The Imperial Gazetteer of India Vol. XXII, mentions the main axis of the Himalayas which runs east and west, forms the boundary between Sikkim and Tibet. The Singali *la*¹¹ and Cho *la* ranges, which run southwards from the main chain, separate Sikkim from Nepal on the west, and from Tibet and Bhutan on the east. From the eastern flank of the Singalila range rise the great snow peaks of Kinchinjunga (Khangchendzonga) (28,169 ft). It throws out a second spur terminating at Tendong. The Chola range which is much loftier than that of Sangalila, leaves the main chain at the Kongkya mountain. It is pierced by several passes, the most frequented of which are the Tangkar *La* (16,000 ft), Nathu *La* (14,200 ft), and Jelep *La* (14,390ft). From the north-west face of the Dongkya Mountain an immense spur takes off, and runs first west and then south-west to Kinchinjunga, forming the watershed of all the remote source of the Tista River. These basins have a southward slope, being broad at the top where they leave the watershed, in the Tista valley near Pashok. The rivers are very rapid, and generally run in deep ravines, the ascent from the bank for the first few hundred feet being almost precipitous.¹²

Besides many European travelers like Horace Della Penna and George Bogle have also left behind their account describing the kingdom of *Bregion* or *Bramashon* or *Demojong* as they called it.¹³ It says that the kingdom was bounded on the north by the province of *Tzang*, to the south by *Mon Altibari* and *Brukpa* or *Laltopivala*, to the east and south by *Lhaoba*, to the east by *Kako* and *Kombo*, and to the west by *Maronga* and *Nekpal*.¹⁴

Moreover, the north-western part of Sikkim consists of high mountains and the well-known *Zemu* glacier. Towards the north, the *Lachen* and the *Lachung* valleys is sheltered by the mountains which used to serve as highways for trade with southern Tibet. In these valleys unmindful of the niceties of international law and frontier demarcations, the yaks graze in the summer. The northern portions of the country remain pastoral, whereas cultivation is the main stay of the people of the southern half. The majority of the people of Sikkim seem to have continued shifting cultivation until the late 19th century. The change from shifting cultivation to wet cultivation occurred mainly during the later part of the 19th century. About one third of the total area of Sikkim is covered with forest and these yield precious timber. Although the forest resources have not been fully tapped these constitute a source of real wealth for Sikkim. Besides forest, Sikkim is also rich in minerals, there are useful deposits of copper associated with bismuth, antimony and galena in different parts of Sikkim. The Gazetteer of

Sikkim 1894 provides a list of such places as yield traces of copper. In earlier days the traders among the *Newari* were given contract to extract copper from the mines by the *Chogyal* (Dharma Raja) of Sikkim.¹⁵

As in any standard, the history of any kingdom, or the territories become large and they also shrink, Sikkim was no exception to this fundamental law. With the change in the political situation, the boundaries of Sikkim also underwent great transformation. During the time of *Chogyal*, many territorial losses were suffered by the Himalayan kingdom of 'Sikkim'. The territories on the southern part viz. Present Kalimpong was lost to Bhutan on the eve of Bhutanese incursion in Sikkim during the reign of Chador Namgyal. Similarly during the time of Gyurmed Namgyal, due to his ill policies towards *Tsongs*¹⁶(Limboos) Sikkim lost the areas of Limbuwan. The Limboo threw off their allegiance to Sikkimese raja and started ruling their own country by declaring themselves as independent *Kirat* States.

The change in the territorial extent of Sikkim can be witnessed since the Nepal's Gorkha incursion on the Sikkim soil during the close of 18th century. This was followed by the treaty of Sagauli /*Segaulee* (1816) which marked the close of the Indo-Nepal war of 1814-15. The British authority offered the Raja of Sikkim the hilly or mountainous country situated to the eastward of the *Mechee* river and to westward of the Teesta river, which formally possessed and occupied by the king of Nepal. Not long after, in February 1835, the Raja of Sikkim by a deed of grant made over site of Darjeeling to the East India Company. Alongside, the Southern and Western boundaries of Sikkim also have undergone changes intermittently till 1835. Later, with the conclusion of the Anglo-Chinese Convention of 1890, the northern boundary of Sikkim was defined as the water-parting of the Teesta which is known as *Mochu*' in Tibetan. As a result of this agreement, Sikkim lost *Chumbi* valley which was merged to Tibet.¹⁷ This process further helped in reduction of boundary of the territory of Sikkim from all sides.

4. CONCLUSION

During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Sikkim underwent significant political changes under British colonial influence. The kingdom, traditionally a Buddhist monarchy with deep ties to Tibet, was drawn into the geopolitical struggles of British India and China. The period from the Anglo-Chinese Convention of 1890, resulting in the establishment of British Regency in 1891 to the outbreak of World War II (1939) saw Sikkim's gradual transition into a British protectorate, administrative restructuring, and increasing internal tensions. The *Chogyal*'s administrative authority was curtailed while the paramountcy of the British was firmly established.

After the conclusion of the Second World War and the subsequent withdrawal of the British from the Himalayan political gambit; what followed was a creation of political vacuum in the region. The People's Republic of China which had political ambition in regard to the expansion of its territorial boundary in the region took advantage of the situation. China thereafter, made an incursion into Tibet in 1950. However, the process of full annexation of Tibet was completed in year 1959. This was one of the long standing desires to accomplish on the part of China. This Chinese annexation necessitated the change in the foreign policies of both Sikkim and India which brought them closer to each other. Moreover, after the incursion of China in Tibet, the closeness of both India and Sikkim ultimately culminated into signing an agreement on 1950 called the Indo-Sikkim Treaty. On the basis of this agreement, the Kingdom of Sikkim accepted the protectorate status of India and eventually the Kingdom of Sikkim was merged with India in May 1975 thus becoming the 22 state of the Indian union.

6. REFERENCES

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² *History of Sikkim ('Bras ljongs rgyal rabs)* compiled by Their Highness Maharaja Thutob Namgyal and Maharani Yeshi Dolma: 1908.

³ *History of Sikkim ('Bras ljongs rgyal rabs)* compiled by Their Highness Maharaja Thutob Namgyal and Maharani Yeshi Dolma: 1908.

⁴ Guru Padmasambhava (c. 701–c. 800) was an Indian Buddhist mystic who introduced Tantric Buddhism to Tibet. He is also known as Guru Rimpoche, Padma 'Byung-Gnas, and Slob-dpon

⁵ Scared hidden paradise

⁶ Avalokitesvara is a bodhisattva, or divine being, in Buddhism who embodies compassion. He is also known as Lokeśvara ("Lord of the World") and Chenrezig (in Tibetan)

⁷ In Buddhism *Jinas* are enlightened beings who have overcome sufferings and defilements.

⁸ In Buddhism, *Jinaputras* is a term that means "son of the victorious one". It is a common epithet for Bodhisattvas.

⁹ Ibid.p.6

¹⁰ Ibid. p 6-7

¹¹ La here refers to a mountain pass.

¹² *The Imperial Gazetteer of India*, Volume XII, Samadhiala to Singhana, Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1908.

¹³ Markham, Clement R (Ed.). *Narratives of the Mission of George Bogle to Tibet(1774)and Journey of Thomas Manning to Lhasa*. Tubner & Co: London 1879.

¹⁴ Aitchison,C U. *A collection of Treaties, Engagements and Sanads relating to India and Neighboring countries, Vol.XII*. Calcutta, 1931.

¹⁵ Riskey, Op.Cit.

¹⁶ *Tsongs* or *Limboos* are another indigenous community of Sikkim

¹⁷ Bhattacharya, PK . *Aspects of Cultural History of Sikkim; Studies in Coinages*. KP Bagchi and Company: New Delhi 1984.

