



## **The Holy Water lands of Sikkim: A Case Study of Myths, Beliefs, and Conservative Narratives**

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**Abstract:** Among all Himalayan States in Northeast India, Sikkim is popular for many reasons, be it for tourism or its historical and cultural background or the popular folktales or legends about this land. The most prominent rivers of this region, Teesta and Rangeet, both, flow through Sikkim, and the entire state has many holy lakes which connect to these rivers. All lakes of Sikkim along with these two rivers, Teesta and Rangeet, regularly figure in numerous myths, legends and folktales regarding their sacredness. The locals also believe that the religious purification of some of these lakes was done by Guru Padmasambhava, who established Buddhism in Tibet during the eighth century. However, myths, being long existing and traditional stories, can express a conviction and must have a powerful hold on its adherents. In religious discourses the main characters in myths are generally gods or demigods. A myth accomplishes something significant and functions to fulfil the need of it. The purpose of this paper is to review some of the holy water myths of Sikkim — myths that pertain to the natural water bodies like rivers and lakes.

**Keywords:** *water, holy, lake, myth, water festival, folk tales, Sikkim*

### **Brief Overview**

Humans and water have an unbreakable bond. Culture has a direct impact on how people perceive, derive, and use the values of water. The sense of these values associated with water and its

advantages can be very personal. It is crucial to comprehend the cultural context in which values are developed and how culture affects its application. The benefits of water to human wellbeing go far beyond its contribution to the maintenance of vital processes; they also include mental health, spiritual well-being, emotional harmony, and happiness. Unsurprisingly, water has a significant role in life fulfilment and happiness. For instance, people may be drawn to water for its spiritual significance, aesthetic beauty, significance for animals, or recreational value, among other reasons. Water is a significant symbol in many religious and spiritual traditions around the world, representing things like life, purity, regeneration, and reconciliation as well as turmoil and destruction. Some people consider water as a gift that they should take good care of, while others emphasize how vital water is to the ecosystem and to species. Many indigenous cultures have a deep affinity for the relationship between water and place, which is frequently referred to as relational values. A small state in Northeastern India, Sikkim is bordered to the north by Tibet (China), to the west by Nepal, to the east by Bhutan, and to the south by the Indian state of West Bengal. It is known for its stunning natural surroundings, which include snow-capped mountains, dense woods, rushing rivers, and waterfalls. Folktales and stories that have been passed down through the years make up a significant portion of the region's culture, many of which are devoted to regional deities and its water bodies. These tales frequently contain legends, myths and justifications for natural occurrences.

### **Guru Rinpoche and the symbolic significance of water in Buddhism**

Guru Rinpoche, also known as Padmasambhava, played a crucial role in establishing Buddhism in Tibet during the eighth century. Guru Rinpoche's connection with water is significant and has several aspects. Guru Rinpoche is often referred to as the "Lake Born Guru" because, according

to the legend, he manifested on a lotus in the middle of Lake Dhanakosha in Swat Valley, in present-day Pakistan. This lotus was miraculously transformed into a lake of clear water, and from this lake emerged Guru Rinpoche as an eight-year-old child, displaying extraordinary wisdom and spiritual awareness. Alongside, the indigenous Bon religion of Tibet had a number of deities linked to various elements, including water. Being a tantric teacher, Guru Rinpoche was well known for enslaving and transforming various regional deities in order to defend the Buddhist doctrines. He would occasionally bind the gods to oaths, forcing them to uphold the Dharma. In this environment, water-related deities were not an exception. Guru Rinpoche is thought to have bestowed his blessings on a number of water streams in the Himalayan region. Tibetan Buddhism frequently views natural substances, such as water, as sacred representations of the divine. Guru Rinpoche ensured that water sources gained spiritual power through his blessings, making them suitable for purging negativities and bestowing blessings on people who used them. Earth, water, fire, air, and space are the five elements recognized by Buddhism. These components stand for essential characteristics that exist both outside in the physical universe and internally in the body and psyche of a person. Fluidity, purifying power, and emotional clarity are attributes of water. The connection between water and Guru Rinpoche can also be seen in the perspective of using and harmonizing these elemental energies in spiritual practice. Overall, Guru Rinpoche's relationship to water is complex and represents both his profound spiritual significance and his capacity to harness nature's transformational forces for the good of sentient beings.

### **Teesta River: a journey through legends and geography**

The Southern part of Sikkim falls under the Teesta basin. The river Teesta originates at an altitude of 5330m from Tso Lhamo of North Sikkim and then runs down through gorges and rapids in

higher reaches of Sikkim and widens and meanders along the plains of West Bengal. After its origin, Teesta meets with a river known as Chumbu Chu which originates from the Khangse Glacier. Some believe that Chambu Chu is the upper Teesta and then after coming down, Teesta meets Gurudongmer Chu which forms the Gurudongmer lake. At Thangu valley, the river is known as Thangu Chu. As the river continues to flow downstream several other mountain streams from nearby glaciers come and merge with Teesta. Rangeet, the main tributary of Teesta meets it just before the Teesta bridge. The confluence of Teesta and Rangeet is known as Triveni. According to the Lepcha folktales, once Rangeet and Teesta, the god and goddess of rivers in this region, playfully said they would take different routes while flowing down to the plains. Eventually, they set a race and decided to see who could reach first at Pozok (now known as Peshok) and for that race Teesta was guided by the snake Paribu and Rangeet was guided by the mountain bird, Tutfo. The snake went straight to the destination without looking to the left or right, but the mountain bird was being lured by the worms and he started eating those worms rather than focusing on the race. Teesta won the race and waited for Rangeet to join her but the wait for Rangeet grew longer and longer. Later after what seemed like an eternity, Rangeet came and they flew down jointly. These days, the confluence is a holy place for Lepchas. Every year, in the month of 'Magh' they celebrate the feast of these two river gods and sing love songs about these two great lovers—Teesta and Rangeet. It is also said that newlywed Lepcha brides and grooms are taken to the confluence to pray for a happy and prosperous life like that of the two river spirits. The drainage of Sikkim is controlled by the perennial Teesta and Rangeet rivers along with their tributaries. There are many regional myths regarding the Teesta River's spiritual importance in addition to the creation story. It is regarded as sacred by some, who think that bathing in its water

can wash away sins and bring favors. The river is connected to festivals and rituals as well, and the area's folklore is full of poems, songs, and tales that were influenced by the river's pristine beauty.

### **Gurudongmar Lake**

Gurudongmar Lake is a revered high-altitude body of water close to China's (Tibet) border in the northeastern Indian state of Sikkim. It is one of the world's highest lakes, at a height of roughly 17,800 feet (5,430 meters). Significant religious and folkloric significance is attached to the lake in the community. This mystical lake is mentioned in a number of myths and legends. Let's look at some of them. According to a folklore, Guru Padmasambhava stopped by the lake that symbolized Dorje Nyima's holy spot when traveling back from Tibet. Despite the lake's beauty, it was frozen for most of the year. The locals asked Guru Padmasambhava to assist them because this was a major issue for them. Guru Padmasambhava then touched a small area of the lake, and according to the mythology, that area of the lake never froze again. That undoubtedly provided the residents with a solution to their water issue. Since that time, the lake has gained a hallowed character and is a popular Buddhist pilgrimage site.

One of the most well-known myths is associated with Guru Nanak, the founder of Sikhism, who is thought to have traveled through this area at some point. The locals complained to Guru Nanak about their suffering brought on by the scarcity of freshwater. They were given a source of freshwater when Guru Nanak miraculously caused the ice on a portion of the frozen lake to melt by touching it. Despite the harsh winter weather, it is reported that a portion of the lake's water never freezes ever.

According to the local belief, the water from this area is blessed. This water is frequently carried by pilgrims in containers since it is said to have medicinal qualities. Gurudongmar Lake's water is thought to have magical qualities, particularly ones relating to reproduction. Many infertile couples go to the lake and collect its holy water in order to receive blessings for parenthood. Many different religious traditions, including Buddhism, Hinduism, and regional tribal customs, are practiced in the area surrounding Gurudongmar Lake. People of all these faiths regard the lake as sacred, and many pilgrims travel there in search of blessings and spiritual peace. The locals believe that Gurudongmar Lake is a holy location that is home to spirits and gods. They think that these supernatural entities guard and control the lake, and that any disrespect or damage to the lake might bring on their wrath.

### **Khecheopalri Lake**

Many legends and belief are associated with the formation, existence, and holiness of the "Khecheopalri lake". The lake is situated in the west district of Sikkim which falls under the sacred landscape "Demazong", a land of hidden treasures. It has been said that at Khecheopalri, Guru Padmasambhava was seen in a place called 'Hungri' in the day of full moon of lunar eclipse. It is believed that the entire area was blessed by him. Four famous religious sites of this sacred landscape have been considered the four parts of the body where Khecheopalri is one of them. The Lepcha community dominates this place, who are the aboriginals of Sikkim. This lake is originally named as Kha-Chot-Palri meaning the heaven of Padmasambha. It is the place where Guru Padmasambhava sermonised sixty four yoginies. One of the local legends state that the lake is

called “Chho” as many years back, some Bhutia communities had settled around the lake Khecheopalri. They had herds of cattle that grazed in the dense forests around the lake. One day a white holy ox had come out of the lake called Chholang (Chho-lake, lang- ox), which was probably sent by the lake goddess. This white ox had started to graze around the lake and finally mingled with the herds of cattle that belonged to the Bhutias. When the owner noticed a foreign animal in his herd, he was trying to locate its owner. Eventually not knowing to whom this white ox belonged he slaughtered the animal for its meat and was surprised to notice that instead of blood a whitest milky discharge oozed out. He washed the discharge, cooked the meat and had a great feast with his friends. After some days he realized that all his cattle and Bhutia communities in the locality started to vanish one by one. It is believed that in this way the entire Bhutia community vanished from the Khecheopalri village. Now, mostly Lepcha settlement is found around the Khecheopalri lake and a very few Bhutias who married Lepchas are believed to have survived the dreadful curse. There is a popular belief about Khecheopalri lake that there cannot be any leaves floating in the lake water. In case of any stray leaves that happen to fall in the lake, birds do the job of picking them up. When the lake is viewed from above, it resembles a footprint. Some believe the footprint is that of the Goddess Tara or Jestun Dolma meanwhile some Hindus believe that it is of Lord Shiva. Just above the lake, there’s the Dupukney cave. Some people believe that Lord Shiva meditated there, and this is the reason why on every Nag Panchami, people flock to this lake to worship the God.

### **Tsomgo Lake**

The surface of this lake reflects so many different colours with the change of seasons and is held in great reverence by the local Sikkimese people. The local Buddhist monks analyzed the colour

changing fact of this lake and predicted it to be sacred. Tsomgo or Chhangu lake is the venue of Guru Purnima festival of Sikkim. There are also some local tales about the healing power of the holy water of this lake. It is also said that Sikkimese people preserve this lake's water just like how the holy Ganga water is preserved by the Hindus. In Bhutia language, the word 'Tsomgo' means 'the source of water', but the original source of Tsomgo lake's water is still a mystery for Sikkimese people. According to some local legends, where the lake is situated, was previously a shed of yaks and near there was a village where tribal people lived. One night, the oldest woman of the tribe had a dream about the village sinking into the water of the lake leaving no signs of life and immediately after this she informed all the villagers but nobody listened to her. Eventually, after failing her task of convincing the villagers to leave the village, she left with her Yak. After some days the village was really submerged into water leaving no signs of soul. The natives of Sikkim visit Tsomgo lake to pray for the dead spirits.

### **Kartok Lake or Raj Kathok Lake**

It's a small waterbody surrounded by prayer flags. This lake is also known as 'Kathok Tsho' in the local language, situated in the west part of Sikkim at Yuksom. It is considered as the soul lake of Lama Kathok Kuntu Zangpo, who pioneered Buddhism to this beautiful land in 1642 AD. He sanctified this lake so that it can be used as a medium to connect with God for oracular practices and to maintain its sanctity. A purification ceremony called 'tru-sol' is performed here by lamas every year. The crystal-clear water of this serene lake reflects the mesmerizing beauty of the



mountains and clouds looming over them. It is also said that the first king Phuntsog Namgayl was blessed with the holy water which turned into Kartok lake.

### **Lampokhari Lake**

This lake is one of the prominent natural lakes in Sikkim but it is also widely popular as Aritar Lake since many years. Lampokhari lake is believed to be a sacred pilgrim site and the locals narrate so many holy tales about it. An 1120ft. long and 240ft. wide boot shaped lake is surrounded with tall and green pine trees, making it look a lot more fantastic. A small shrine on the bank of Aritar lake is dedicated to guru Padmasambhabsa. Some local legends say that this clear water is believed to be the mirror of the goddess of hills and the god Kanchendzonga sees the first reflection of the himself in the holy water of Lampokhari lake.

### **Bumchu, A water Festival in Sikkim**

Bumchu is one of the major carnivals of Sikkim. Bum, which means “ pot or vase, ” and chu, which means “ water, ” are the two terms that make up the origin of Bumchu. Bumchu means “sacred pot ” in its original language. The Tashiding Monastery in Sikkim, India, hosts this Buddhist festival. It has a deep connection to Guru Rinpoche and Ngadak Sempa Chenpo. The religious and cultural significance of water and the sanctity of a river are both demonstrated in this rite. The Bumchu, a holy vase, is supposed to have been sanctified by Guru Rinpoche and is a hidden treasure. Tertön Zhigpo Lingpa rediscovered an identical vase. Eventually, Ngadak Sempa Chenpo transported the same to Sikkim. The latter filled the vase with water from the Rathong River and offered prayers. It is believed that the water in the vase foretells the future of the land

and its inhabitants for the upcoming year. A holy pot filled with water serves as the jubilee's focal point. According to the legends, the pot's water position can read unborn events. However, holocaust and chaos are suggested if there is water up to the brim. The pot is a sign of a severe hunger in Sikkim if it's roughly dehydrated. A pot that is just half full is regarded as a symbol of harmony and wealth. A specific chanting is performed before the vase is taken out of the case, and the vase's seal is checked. Seven mugs of water are taken from the vessel, mixed with water from Rathong Chu, and given to the followers by the monks after it has been opened. Rathong Chu is used to collect seven spectacles of water, which are also put in the vase and sealed until the following year. This holy pot is displayed at the Bumchu jubilee after a year. Additionally, devotees think that the water from the Bumchu holds the seed of enlightenment and functions as an elixir for long life. A trip to the neighboring hot springs is frequently paired with participation in this ceremony. This rite requires the sacred water from the Rathong River. The river is protected and kept clean by people. Devotees from all across Sikkim as well as from girding countries like Bhutan and Nepal participate in this ritual.

### **Water Myths as semiotics of Sikkimese Culture**

In Barthesian analysis, myth plays a role in the formation of ideologies and that it serves to “naturalize” beliefs by straying from reality rather than attempting to reveal or conceal the truth. Myth cannot be seen as a ‘non-truth’; it has to be seen as a socially constructed truth that societies create and carry forward for its own sake of survival. The semiotic code is viewed as truth, giving

it some strength or authority. In the second tier of signification, “signs,” in Barthes’s view, function in two unique ways: as mythmakers and as connotative agents. A sign becomes a signifier of cultural meaning when it moves to the second order of signification and when it carries cultural connotations in addition to representational ones. The holy water myths of Sikkim are connected to the ideas about where the water comes from, its significance in religious rituals, or how it affects the livelihood of the community. According to Barthes, myths frequently support and strengthen prevailing cultural beliefs. The myths regarding the sacred water bodies of Sikkim may represent the morals, ideologies, and social customs of the area. It might be applied to define social roles, defend particular behaviors, or support long-standing water-related traditions. Myths have the ability to make particular ideas or concepts seem inevitable and natural. In the context of Sikkim’s water myths, it could support the idea that certain water-related customs or beliefs are fundamental to the region’s identity, are unquestionable, and deeply embedded in local cultures. According to Barthes, myths change over time and adjust to shifting social settings. These narratives may have changed over time to reflect regional cultural and political shifts as well as adapt to current beliefs and practices. The Sikkimese water myth depicts tales that transcend beyond their literal content and influence the local communities cultural identities, beliefs, and codes. In *Myth and Meaning*, Claude Levi Strauss has argued that all myths have some similarities like *langue* and there are similarities in myths as well as diversities and variations and these come under the *parole* section. The water myths of Sikkim allude to the cleanliness, rebirth, or life-giving qualities of water in numerous symbolic ways. By comprehending these symbols, one can gain knowledge of the regional people’s traditional values and beliefs. Hinduism shares certain similarities with Buddhism in terms of the Sikkimese water myths.

Thus, holy water myths of Sikkim provide a fascinating glimpse into the rich tapestry of beliefs, culture and history that define this Himalayan region. The significance of water in Sikkim's myths and legends cannot be overstated, as it is deeply intertwined with religious, cultural and ecological aspects of life. The holy water myths of Sikkim exemplify the enduring power of storytelling and the role of water as a symbol of life, purity and transformation in the region's collective consciousness. These myths continue to shape the way people perceive and interact with the natural world, fostering a sense of reverence and respect for the sacred water that flow through this picturesque land.

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