

HIMALAYAN ENVIRONMENTALISM: BUDDHISM AND BEYOND

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Abstract¹

Buddhist monks have become increasingly visible in environmental movements in the last few decades, including in Arunachal Pradesh, India, my fieldwork site. Monks in environmental protests have contributed to the popular representation of Buddhism as ecological. A review of existing literature suggests that what we are looking at is a re-interpretation of Buddhist traditional philosophy by modern environmentally conscious people and contemporary Buddhists. I argue that as anthropologists, we have to note that while Buddhism can help mobilise lay activism, local practices about the environment do not often overlap with Buddhist doctrine. I illustrate this through the example of the ban on yak meat in Arunachal Pradesh, which is linked to wider Hindu nationalist politics in India. Environmental activities in the Buddhist Himalayas cannot be understood simply through the lens of Buddhism and one has to adopt a more pluralistic approach that is accommodating of customs that do not fit within an imagined “environmental identity” (Sharma 2009). I propose Himalayan environmentalism as an alternative to Buddhist environmentalism, not to disregard the role of Buddhist belief but to show how Himalayan environmentalism goes beyond Buddhism in scope. Second, my intention is not to propose a uniform model for the Himalaya, but to point to the processes at work between culture, politics, and ecology, and to the role of power in fashioning environmental identities. I support my argument with empirical data from my own fieldwork and those of scholars working in other parts of the Himalaya.

Introduction

Buddhist monks have become increasingly visible in environmental movements in Arunachal Pradesh, Ladakh, Sikkim and other parts of the Indian Himalaya in the last few decades. Monks leading environmental protests have contributed to the popular

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representation of Buddhism as ecological. Building on scholars who show how the representation of Buddhism as eco-friendly is a modern reinvention, and drawing on my ethnographic insights from the Indian Himalayan state of Arunachal Pradesh, where I have done long term fieldwork, I argue that the idea of Buddhist environmentalism is a partial, even essentialist reading of the diverse phenomena of environmental practices in the Buddhist Himalaya.² I put forward the term Himalayan environmentalism in order to capture the plurality of practices rather than a singular religion-based environmental ethic.

Here, I am mainly concerned with understanding environmental practices among Tibetan Buddhist communities in the Indian Himalaya.³ While this article arises out of my ethnographic work in Arunachal Pradesh, its focus is not limited to that region alone, and hence, I also draw on scholars who have written about other parts of the Himalaya. In ordinary life, people in the Buddhist Himalaya are very spiritual in terms of observing religious rituals and in professions of piety but also follow practices that may not fit well within an overarching religion-based environmental agenda. I bring in the example of the ban on yak meat in western Arunachal Pradesh since 2017, and show how the politics around bovine meat highlights the intersection of Buddhist environmentalism and Hindu nationalism in the Indian Himalaya.

Therefore, I propose Himalayan environmentalism as an anthropological response to the idea of Buddhist environmentalism. This is not to disregard the role of Buddhist belief in environmental conservation but to show how Himalayan environmentalism goes beyond Buddhism or any other religion in scope. I do not wish to propose a uniform model for the Himalaya, but to highlight the distinct economic and social relations between human and non-human nature in local ecologies which make a uniform environmental ethic for the Himalaya difficult to conceive.

Buddhist Monks and Modern Environmentalism

In the Tawang district of Arunachal Pradesh, monks were at the forefront of environmental movements related to hydropower projects between 2011 and 2016. In 2006, the Arunachal Pradesh state government signed several agreements with public and private firms for setting up hydropower projects in Tawang. The monks protested by conducting door-to-door campaigns in villages, organised rallies, and wrote open letters to the state administration challenging the construction of dams. They alerted the people to the dangers that dam waters posed to the local ecology and economy, to the threat to people's living habitats, and farm and pasture lands, and to Buddhist sacred sites, and

2 In this paper, I use Buddhist environmentalism, ecological Buddhism, eco-Buddhism interchangeably to mean the fusion of modern environmentalism and Buddhist ethics. But I am aware that this synergy between the two have been presented in different forms in different contexts, for example, eco-Buddhism refers to an ecologically engaged form of American Buddhism which has risen to the fore in recent times (Harris 1995: 200)

3 Buddhists in contemporary India include the Tibetan Buddhists, comprised of mainly the Tibetan community-in-exile and other Buddhists in the Himalayan areas such as Ladakh, Himachal Pradesh, Sikkim and Arunachal Pradesh, the Theravada Buddhists in Northeastern India, and the Ambedkarite Buddhists, or Dalits who converted to the Navayana sect of Buddhism founded by B.R Ambedkar (Geary and Mukherjee: 2017).

local flora and fauna, especially the black crane, thought of as an embodiment of the Sixth Dalai Lama, who was born in Tawang (Gohain 2017). As a result of their mobilisation, thousands of people turned up to participate in anti-dam rallies in 2012 – 2016.

The monks associated with the environmental protests were influenced by the environmentalist discourse prevalent in the Tibetan Buddhist circuits in India. The Fourteenth Dalai Lama has consistently endorsed care for the environment through Buddhist teachings and helped mould an environmentally conscious image for the Tibetan community-in-exile.⁴ The organizations at the vanguard of the protests in Tawang – the Society for Development of Culture and Education (SDCE) and the Save Mon Region Federation had connections with Sera Monastic University in Mysore; and the leader, Lama Lobsang, an alumnus of Sera university, was encouraged by his mentor and contemporaries in the monastery networks to start the environmental movement (personal interview with Lama Lobsang, Delhi, 20 July 2019).

Monks have also led environmental campaigns in countries such as Thailand, Cambodia, and Myanmar where Theravada Buddhism is prevalent. Thai ecology monks gained fame in 1970s-80s by organising Tree Ordination and Long Life Ceremony rituals for rivers – ceremonies normally performed on human individuals – drawing on traditional Buddhist teachings as well as indigenous beliefs in spirits (Darlington 1998, 2007). The Thai monks in turn were inspired by the Engaged Buddhism approach started by Vietnamese monk, Thich Nhat Hanh, which advocates active intervention of monks in societal matters for a better future.

Modern environmentalists have often highlighted the connections between Buddhist ethics and their own philosophy. While the different schools of Buddhism – Theravada, Mahayana, and Vajrayana differ in their beliefs and approaches, all three schools adhere to the ideas of the four noble truths and the eightfold path.⁵ They also share the Buddhist doctrine of dependent origination (*pratitya-samutpada*) or the idea that nothing exists in itself or by itself as a separate unit in time and space, but is dependent on a variety of conditions and is related to everything else in the world (Govinda 2019 [1956]: 312). Several Western environmental activists in the 1970s such as the poet Gary Snyder and the Norwegian mountaineer and philosopher Arne Naess compared the Buddhist concept of dependent origination with the environmentalist notion of the inter-dependence of earth's parts.⁶

4 The Dalai Lama's message on April 22, 2020, on the 50th Anniversary of Earth Day was to highlight the connections between human action and the Covid-19 pandemic <https://www.buddhistdoor.net/news/covid-19-a-lesson-in-universal-responsibility-dalai-lama-says-on-earth-day>.

5 It is generally accepted that the three main schools of Buddhism are Theravada, Mahayana, and Vajrayana or Tibetan Buddhism (for this form developed largely in Tibet). The four noble truths are the truth of suffering (*dukkha*), the truth of the origin of suffering, the truth of the end or cessation of suffering, and the truth of the path to the end of suffering. The eightfold path is the fourth truth, which gives Buddhists a path (middle way approach) to end suffering.

6 Ian Harris shows how the founder of deep ecology, Arne Naess, a Norwegian mountaineer and scholar working in the legacy of philosopher Spinoza, wedded Spinoza's thought with Buddhism and the Buddhist doctrine of dependent origination, arguing that "there is a network of cause-effect relations connecting everything with everything" (Harris 1995: 204).

Environmentalism advocates an eco-centric rather than an anthropo-centric approach, that is the view that the needs of the earth, and not human needs, interests, or desires, should come first. This is related to the concept of bio-ethics, which states that nature has intrinsic worth regardless of its use value to humans; and hence, humans should have an ethical approach in their treatment towards plants, animals and all non-human nature (Pepper 2003:15). Arne Naess's concept of deep ecology distinguishes itself from shallow ecology by asking basic questions such as, do we really need all that we think we need? It urges radical social change, focusing on transformation at the level of individual consciousness, so that each individual changes their attitude, values and lifestyles. While modern environmentalism is not one school but many, all of them have in common the critique of existing social values and consumerism across all human societies, which has led to unfettered exploitation of nature's resources (Pepper 2003: 16). This critique of consumerism is seen to resonate with Buddhism's philosophy of non-attachment and simple living.

Dialogues between Western environmental thinkers and Tibetan Buddhist exile leaders in India in the 1980s led the latter to become reflexive about the role of their religious beliefs in modern environmentalism. The Dalai Lama's speeches and writings about the environment was instrumental in a Buddhist environmental ethic spreading to other parts of the Indian Himalaya, with Ladakh even hosting a conference Ecology and Principles for Sustainable Development in September 1986 (Huber 1997).

The representation of Buddhism as ecological and Buddhists as ecologically conscious is now widely available and accepted. Jataka stories, which are stories of the Buddha's previous reincarnations before he became a Bodhisattva are seen as environmental fables.⁷ However, what do the canonical texts say about a Buddhist environmental ethic? Do classical texts verify the association of Buddhism with a modern environmental consciousness?

How true are the representations?

Many philosophers of Buddhism have shown that the representation of Buddhism as ecological is a re-interpretation of Buddhist traditional philosophy by modern environmentally conscious people. Ian Harris (1991) notes that with regard to the animal world, the canonical texts say that an individual Buddhist should respond with compassion to animals. This quality is increased for monks. Buddhist classical literature enjoins monks not to hurt animals, and to release animals caught in traps etc. These rules do not apply to the lay population.⁸ Yet, the killing of animals does not lead

7 For example, in a recent paper, "the Jātaka tales are presented as a beneficial discourse for creating ecological awareness among people" (Bhattacharjee and Sinha 2021).

8 Harris is mainly talking about the monastic way of life here. But Buddhism is also about the middle way or the eightfold path which prescribes an ethical way of living and is compatible with the goals of sustainable development and environmental protection. This enjoins simple living for lay individuals as well as monks and nuns. Harris's answer to this is that a mode of living cannot be equated with a definite ethic.

to monks being expelled from monastic life (sexual offences, homicide and theft do). Harris argues that the practice of non-injury to animals is valued for its instrumentality (good karma and better rebirth) and not for the inherent value of the animals.⁹ Buddha was a meat-eater, and vegetarianism in Buddhism was a later addendum.¹⁰

With regards to the plant world the anomaly is even starker. The plant world is not part of the world of being (*sattva loka*). Another philosopher, Malcolm David Eckel (1998: 60-61) notes that Buddhist peasants, townspeople, and even monks preferred the civilized world of the village and city and feared the untamed jungle. In Buddhist texts, monks seek out forests as a locus for self-transformation through meditation. Rather than wild nature being valued for itself, however, it is a symbol of impermanence and the unsatisfactoriness of death and rebirth.

Harris therefore asks, “Are we really describing a phenomenon which naturally arises from the heart of the Buddhist tradition or simply- a series of compatible secular concerns which can be happily assented to by contemporary Buddhists?” (1991:110). A third philosopher Damien Keown makes the same argument, when he writes, “that the concerns of ecology are essentially modern ones, and the ecological problems we face today such as greenhouses gases and global warming are only intelligible against the background of a scientific understanding of the world. Until Buddhism updates its ancient cosmology, it is not clear how it will take part in a dialogue that is conducted in the vocabulary of modern science” (Keown 2007: 97) Keown agrees with Harris that Buddhism’s ecological credentials arise more from Western green activists’ agenda rather than from within Buddhism itself (Keown 2007: 98) Basically, these philosophers agree that ecological Buddhism is a reinvention of Buddhist traditional philosophy.

Studies on the historical and contemporary environmental practices of Buddhists corroborate this point. Scholars have pointed out that the capitalist destruction of forest and wildlife and rampant construction in some East Asian Buddhist countries do not bear out the thesis of an ecologically informed Buddhist ethic in practice (e.g. Eckel 1998). Tibetan societies historically practiced hunting for subsistence as well as commerce. Toni Huber (1997) argues that the representation of Tibetan Buddhism as a non-violent religion that prohibits the killing of animals is an essentialist representation of Tibetan people, largely disseminated by the Tibetan community-in-exile, and is related to a larger politics of identity, where green Tibetans are contrasted

9 I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for bringing to my notice the role of intention in the theory of karma. If we take into account intention, then acts of kindness towards animals cannot be reduced to instrumental action as one can then discriminate between the intention of gain and altruism. Traleg Kyabgon argues that although most people understand karma to mean, simplistically, fruits of one’s actions, it is more than that. Buddha emphasised that we are responsible for our own actions and the consequences of these actions are not fixed. But karma is more than the action performed. It is also the character formation that goes with it; that is, we should think about what kind of person we are becoming (Kyabgon 2015: 36)

10 Scholars have tried to explain the anomaly between the Buddha preaching kindness to animals and his own meat-eating habits by arguing that Buddha as a mendicant depended on public alms and had to eat whatever was provided, including meat (e.g. Bapat 2019: 2).

with ecologically destructive Chinese (Goldstein 1995).¹¹ It is not different from the essentialist depictions of tribal communities as being one with, and living in harmony with, nature (Huber 1997). Emily Woodhouse (2012) similarly shows how Buddhist people in Samdo invoked karma to explain their actions such as not killing animals and plants, as these actions accumulated merit. There is an instrumental value to being non-violent towards animals (Woodhouse 2012: 63). Woodhouse maintains that while people understood about the sufferings of animals and plants in the wheel of life, they still maintained a hierarchy between animals and man rather than the interdependence that Western ecology imputes to Buddhism.

However, it is important to recognise that Buddhism is not a monolithic tradition and that some strands or features of Buddhist moral teachings might be conducive to the development of an environmental philosophy (Keown 1999: 98). Damien Keown suggests that Buddhism is amenable to environmental concerns not on account of any ecological worldview or ideology, but because of its conception of human life, and, in particular, its account of what it means to live a good human life. In this sense, the Buddhist emphasis on compassion, self-restraint, non-violence, non-greed, and so on can provide the basis for an environmental “virtue ethic”. Virtue ethics is about developing human potential and states of character to achieve a sense of fulfilment and long-term happiness (Keown 1997: 99).

Indeed, Ruben Habito (2007) tries to analytically adapt the four noble truths of Buddhism, which includes the truth of universal suffering or *dukkha*, to the present global environmental crisis. Habito maintains that we now live in a time of “global dukkha”, of war, poverty and disease. Applying a Buddhist analytic, our first step would be to realise this fact; second, to identify its root causes in the ethos and institutions of modern life; third, to envision the end of global dukkha; and fourth is to take steps to bring about change.

Arguments such as Habito’s above are very persuasive. The Covid-19 pandemic has brought home to all the debilitating effects of human interference on the natural environment. I believe seeking and finding a Buddhist environmental ethic is also an affective response to find allies in our fight to save the environment.

Ecology, Everyday Practices, and the Yak Meat Ban

However, to romanticise any religion or indigenous belief system as being inherently ecological is to fall into the essentialist trap. In other words, when religion or indigeneity becomes the central anchor of an “environmental identity” (Sharma 2009), it not only hijacks the environmental movement to serve a politics of cultural identity but also glorifies and fixes the relationship between the human and non-human natural world as sacred or pure or compassionate. The entry of right-wing Hindu groups in the movement against the Tehri dam construction in Uttarakhand led to the discourse of green politics

11 Post 1990s, this dichotomous representation between the ecologically-friendly Tibetan versus the ecologically-destructive Chinese has undergone a change, as there has been a creation of Tibetan environmental subjects who are aligned with Chinese conservation policies (Yeh 2014).

in the region merging with Hindu nationalist politics, where saving Ganga became a matter of saving Hindu cultural heritage (Sharma 2009). Fixing environmental identities goes against an anthropological understanding of reality.

Scholars who have urged an understanding of human and non-human relations through the lens of Buddhism – specifically Vajrayana Buddhism, and spirituality, cite evidence of the daily life of local Himalayan communities being molded by religion. For example, Elizabeth Allison argues for “environmental imaginaries” or a “place-based spiritually-generated perspective [which] places humans within networks to which humans and other living and non-living beings contribute and respond” (Allison 2015:440). Drawing on her work in Bhutan and Nepal, she shows how religion infuses landscape and thought to the extent that climate crisis and natural disasters are interpreted as the doings of deities.¹²

I relate to this notion of a religious topography. In many parts of the Buddhist Himalaya, including in my fieldwork site of Monyul in western Arunachal Pradesh, places carry names that commemorate the passage of a holy person, or a religious revelation and bear imprints of religious events (Gohain 2020: 140). Mountains, rivers and waterfalls are worshipped as the abodes of deities. What I find problematic is the representation of the region as a homogenous Buddhist space, for it excludes and marginalises non-Buddhist people and practices. Fixing human and non-human relations through a religious environmental identity is similarly untenable. If we look at the everyday practices of communities in the Himalaya, we see not an imagined cultural universe or cosmology but the local, routine interactions and rituals associated with particular entities of the natural world that tie people, nature and religion into a complex. When local practices are in conformity with an imagined environmental identity, they are embraced and co-opted. When they clash with this ideal, they are sought to be ejected or neutralised.

Let me now turn to the case of the ban on yak meat in Monyul. Monyul is the collective name for the two districts of Tawang and West Kameng in Northeast India, where the Monpa communities are the predominant group. Monpa refers more to a geographical category (it means lowlander) with respect to Tibet and there are several sub-groups within Monpas. Living on the Indo-Tibetan borderlands, the Monpas shared cultural and commercial ties with both neighbouring Tibet and Bhutan, and was also part of the Tibetan state from 1681 for nearly three centuries (Aris 1980). In 1914, the British colonial government demarcated the Indo-Tibetan boundary, placing Monyul on the Indian side, but de facto Tibetan rule continued in Monyul until the postcolonial Indian government established its first political offices in the region in the 1950s. Following the India-China war of 1962, many of the former routes between Tibet and Monyul were sealed off. While most Monpas are Buddhists, some Monpa groups are considered inferior Buddhists by the others, while some others still adhere to the pre-Buddhist Bon customs. There are also non-Monpas groups who are recent converts to Buddhism and hence inhabit the fringes of the Buddhist cultural world.

12 Another example is when in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic, a recent article claimed that fumigation rituals conducted by lamas and healers of Buddhist traditions in Sikkim ward off infectious airborne diseases (Bhutia 2021).

The yak figures prominently in Monpa life and culture. During the Losar festival, which is the Tibetan New Year celebrated by the Monpas, there are performances of the yak dance, accompanied by the ritual slaughter of the yak. Traditionally, yak was used as a pack animal for long distance trade with Tibet. Yak milk, cheese, butter were items of exchange in trade, especially by the yak-herding Brogpa communities among the Monpas, and yak meat was consumed as a valuable source of protein.

In the oral lore of Monpa communities, yak is invested with a high rank in the food hierarchy, where the ruling Bapu clans are said to have preferred yak and lamb, over the meat of *bree*, the female yak and *dzo*, the hybrid of yak and domestic cattle. One popular story narrates the search for a ruler in the country of the Monpas. In all the different versions of this story that I heard, the search party invariably comes across a group of children playing and they offer the children the meat of various animals, such as goat, lamb, and yak; the child who chooses yak meat over the others is immediately identified as belonging to the lineage of a ruling clan.¹³ According to another oral narrative from the Bapu clan, if any cow fell down from the hillside and died, the Bapus would summon their Gila or servants to collect the carcass and consume the meat, suggesting that custom allowed the consuming, if not the killing, of bovine stock.

In Tawang, yak, and more commonly, beef was part of the normal diet in households till a few years ago, given the low availability and high cost of chicken and fish, procured mostly from the plains. Like everywhere else, the food of Northeast India and the Himalayan region are cultural adaptations to local environments (Tamang, Okumiya and Kosaka 2010). Diet and food preferences are a condition of the geographical location, climatic factors, and availability of plant and animal sources. Thus, people in higher altitude areas of the Himalayas have adapted to cereals and grains growing in cold, dry climates with less vegetables and more meat-based protein in their diets. While Hindus of the Himalayas avoid yak and beef, for others, these meats comprise important sources of protein.¹⁴

A brochure of the Department of Tourism, Tawang mentions that people cut yak and beef meat into strips and store them through smoking, curing, drying and fermentation techniques during winter months for later consumption.¹⁵ Yak fat, smoked yak meat, yak sausages are common items of storage. During Losar, yak are ritually slaughtered before their meat is eaten, the ritual before the killing signaling the deep bonds between the yak and its owner. Remarking on the difficulty of making

13 The source of these stories are different people I met during my fieldwork in Tawang and West Kameng. Another popular story is that of two buffalo brothers, one of which became a yak. One buffalo went to bring salt from Tibet and in the cold climate of the higher altitudes, grew long hair and never came back. The other buffalo continued to wait for his return and therefore, the buffalo always seems to be looking up. A variant of this tale is narrated by Jelle Wouters (2021: 27) in his account of yak herders.

14 Kancha Illiah (1996) argues that beef has constituted a cheap source of protein for the poor, lower caste people in India. This argument applies to beef eating in hilly areas too, where protein sources are minimal.

15 <https://cdn.s3waas.gov.in/s39b70e8fe62e40c570a322f1b0b659098/uploads/2018/07/2018070315.pdf>

a clear ontological distinction between yak, yak-herders, and the environment in the highlands of Bhutan, Wouters writes that instead of being pristine nature, “the highland is the result of active processes of place-making, resulting in a deeply socialised and carefully managed landscape that has co-evolved and co-shaped with herders and yaks for centuries” (Wouters 2021: 35). In Bhutan, people make a distinction between the animals they rear and the animals in the wild, and while there is an injunction on hunting the latter, people eat the meat of the reared animals.¹⁶ Regarding a different part of the Hindu Himalaya, Govindrajana (2017) talks about inter-species relatedness being forged between rural women in Kumaon, Uttarakhand and their cows and goats through practices of sharing and care-giving. People share affective ties with their domesticated animals which is further cemented through bonds of gratitude when they use their meat to sustain them in difficult climates (Gagne 2018, Govindrajana 2017).

In the last few years, yak meat has been banned in the two districts of West Kameng and Tawang. According to my fieldwork sources, the ban started gradually.¹⁷ While I could not verify the exact sequence of events, I was informed that the district administration in West Kameng issued a ban during April 2017, when the Dalai Lama visited the region. It was further enforced in the next month, Saga Dawa, a month in the Buddhist lunar calendar when people are not supposed to eat meat. The ban was extended the following month since a high-ranking Buddhist leader was visiting the region. In the meantime, the people became used to not finding meat in the markets. In July 2017, the district administrations in Tawang and West Kameng issued an official order banning the slaughter of cows and prohibiting yak and beef trade in the region, citing the religious sentiments of the majority Monpas and claiming that it is aligned with the Buddhist vegetarian ethic. This coincides with the beef ban imposed in many parts of the country by the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party government, which is also in power in the Arunachal Pradesh state government. The ban on meat in these two districts is ostensibly to deter non-Buddhists from killing, trading and selling beef or yak meat in these areas.

A local organisation called the Tangnyom Tsokpa (Tangnyom/Tib. *btang snyoms* means equanimity and Tsokpa/Tib. *tshogs pa* means society or association) – which has been involved in environmental awareness in the Monpa areas – has lent active support to the yak meat ban. The members of Tangnyom Tsokpa keep a close vigil in the marketplaces of Tawang trying to find out if anyone is slaughtering or selling meat and impose hefty fines of 20000 to 50000 rupees (upto 700 dollars) on those they find guilty. Lama Lobsang, the monk who was formerly involved in the anti-dam protests in Tawang, has also professed support for the yak meat ban.¹⁸

16 I thank the anonymous reviewer for the observation that in Himalaya and Tibet, it is considered better to eat yak than other animals because they are large. This means that killing one animal will feed more people than killing many small animals like fish and fowl, and people appreciate what they consider to be a sacrifice by the yak.

17 I keep the names of my fieldwork informants in this case anonymous since the matter has become entwined with political interests.

18 <https://thewire.in/food/arunachal-pradesh-tawang-buddhism-meat-ban>

Apart from religious reasons, members of the Tangnyom Tsokpa and supporters of the yak meat ban cite environmental conservation as justification. Killing animals is seen as both anti-environmentalist, and antithetical to the Buddhist principle of *ahimsa* (non-violence). Tellingly, in his critique of Buddhist environmentalism, philosopher Damien Keown points to the difficulty of applying the Buddhist principle of *ahimsa* to real life situations arguing, “it is difficult to legislate [for vegetarianism] in abstraction from the particular circumstances. The consumption of meat may be necessary for dietary reasons in certain circumstances, and developing countries cannot be expected to abandon meat consumption, even when meat is a rarity” (Keown 2007: 108)

On 17 October 2014, at a meeting held in Liung Monastery, Dirang and attended by Panchayat¹⁹ members, monks, senior public leaders, students leaders and thirty members of the Tangnyom Tsokpa, a resolution was passed to ban any form of animal slaughter and the hunting, trapping, fishing or poisoning of wild life in Dirang sub-division of West Kameng. The Tawang Forest Division too organized an environmental awareness programme at Zomkhang Hall, Tawang on 25 February 2017, attended by school children, government officials, and Panchayat members, which included among other performances, the seizing and consignment of wildlife parts to a fire in public view in the presence of the Executive Magistrate, a veterinary doctor, members of Tangnyom Tsokpa, and forest staff.²⁰

I must mention here that yak conservation is not a new environmental initiative in Monyul. The Indian Council of Agricultural Research, an organisation under the Ministry of Agriculture, Government of India, set up the National Research Centre on Yak at Dirang in West Kameng in 1989 for research on sustainable development of yak-husbandry. Since 2008, I have stayed several times in the old guesthouse of the Yak Research Centre (there is a second, bigger guesthouse now), helped by a friend who works in the institute. He showed me around the yak farms at higher altitudes, managed by the centre, the diary processing unit, where yak milk products such as butter and cottage cheese are stored, and the crafts workshops where women weave caps, mats, carpets, jackets, bags etc out of yak wool. The centre recruits dedicated scientists and has published several important research papers on yak conservation and on the livelihoods of the Brogpa yak herders.²¹ What is new in the discourse of yak conservation in Monyul, enforced by organisations such as Tangnyom Tsokpa, is the ban on yak meat.

While on the surface, people welcomed the yak ban, especially on social media, locally, there is public resentment and underground transactions as I witnessed during my field visits. People also brushed aside the activities of the Tangnyom Tsokpa as

19 Village level grassroots governance system in India

20 <http://www.tawangforest.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/Newsletter%202.pdf>

21 <https://nrcy.icar.gov.in/index.htm>

simply “political”.²² A Monpa friend told me during a phone conversation just as I was finishing this paper, “sab chal raha hain” (“everything goes on as usual”), explaining that yak and beef meat are available to those who look for it. My experiences also showed that yak and beef, although banned, can be availed by those people who wish to eat it. I saw momos made with yak meat apparently sourced from rural areas in 2017. Yak is not a symbol of ritual impurity here and is not frowned upon socially. People cite the Dalai Lama in telling me that Buddhists may eat meat but not kill animals. After the district administration in Tawang and West Kameng banned the slaughter of cows and prohibited beef trade in the region, including the sale of yak meat, the public consumption of these meats has dwindled considerably in the region. This is in sharp contrast to earlier years when yak meat would be sold openly on the road by traders.

Food Politics, Religious Environmentalism, and Hindu Nationalism

While the yak and beef ban in Tawang is justified through a Buddhist environmentalism, the ban clearly is in line with the cow politics, or “bovine nationalism” (Suresh 2018) of the present Indian government. Beef has increasingly become an important marker of a Hindu Indian national identity against non-Hindu (Muslim/Christian) others in contemporary India. It is a political symbol instead of a purely ritual marker. Despite scholarly debates on whether prohibitions on cow meat stemmed from its veneration as sacred or for its economic importance, neither side of the debate can be clearly proven. What is clear, though, is that cattle veneration is more rooted in nineteenth century than in ancient times, as a product of Hindu nationalism against both colonial rule and former Muslim rule (Staples 2018: 62). James Staples cites ample evidence to show that despite the ban on cow slaughter, India was the second largest exporter of beef in 2014, and that 70 percent Indians are non-vegetarian with beef being the second preferred item after fish in their diet. In present times, it appears that not simply cow-meat but meat eating in general is disapproved by a militant form of vegetarianism espoused by some Hindu nationalist leaders.²³

Staples rightly argues that “the symbolic value of its (cow) flesh is highly contested” (2018: 60) and instead of generalising about why Indians do not eat beef, one has to explore the ground realities and practical considerations under which beef eating happens or is discouraged. For example, beef-eating is a positive marker of identity

22 Beatrice Jauregui (2016: 116) notes in her thought-provoking ethnography of the Uttar Pradesh state police in India that implications of “political” in Indian everyday parlance is more than an inference to the machinations of politicians who try to exercise their will and choice on bureaucratic positions after they come to power. Apart from being about politicians’ influence and the political interest of vested groups, the political carries a mix of context-based personal motive, structural (caste, religious, kinship ties) factors and one’s rank and role in the official hierarchy.

23 This is seen, for instance, in the recommendation of one minister that eggs should be removed from the diet of school children in their mid-day meals provided by the government. <https://lifestyle.livemint.com/news/talking-point/why-is-the-madhya-pradesh-govt-replacing-eggs-with-milk-in-midday-meals-111634529560395.html>

for Dalit Christians in Andhra Pradesh wishing to assert their presence against Hindu hegemony (Staples 2018: 66). By 2011, however, beef as a symbol of oppositional identity politics against Hindu nationalism in Andhra Pradesh was on the wane, as people became more ambivalent about eating beef.

In contrast, eating beef and yak were part of the everyday food practices in Tawang and West Kameng and was not counted as oppositional politics. Yet, during my field visits in the winters of 2017 and 2018, I saw how people who had previously served beef freely now offered simple vegetarian meals or chicken at the most. I visited several homestays in these districts, where the hosts serve home-made vegetarian food in north Indian style; and only provide local dishes like *chhurpi* (fermented cheese), *zhan* (millet porridge) or *local liquors* (*ara* and *chang*) on demand. One homestay owner, Tsering (name changed) told me, non-Indian nationals often ask for and are served local fare, but “Indian tourists *alag hote hain*” (Indian tourists are different). They are very spiritual and follow many religious rules. Tsering said that they gave up serving beef because Indian tourists do not like it. Tsering was careful in wording his sentences, and justified the change in fare by saying that earlier alternatives to beef were not available but now there are alternate sources of protein such as fish and chicken, all coming from “*neeche*” (plains). In another homestay, rice, dal, egg curry, and vegetables (mostly potato) were served for both lunch and dinner, while breakfast had north Indian fare such as *parantha* (stuffed flat bread) and *aloo puri* (deep fried puffed bread and potatoes) on offer. Here, the hosts told me that they did not serve traditional Monpa cuisine such as fermented meats and cheese or bovine meat such as yak or beef. They justified their choice of menu by saying that most people prefer vegetarian fare. One of our host families was reluctant to open up about yak meat and even hesitated to serve us fried fowl but delightedly offered to cook yak fry and yak meat soup when we evinced interest in the traditional cuisine.

Here, it is neither resistance nor social mobility that is being asserted when people avoid introducing a bovine fare but rather a position of accommodation. While the hosts may prefer bovine meat, they would not serve it because of fear of offending Hindu Indian sensibilities, and more importantly, of violating the ban. It is a political position of not opposing, but rather, complying with the state stance. Writing about *akhuni* (fermented soyabeans), a popular fare in Nagaland and India’s Northeast, Dolly Kikon (2015) states that it is often in the news for the wrong reasons, which is its smelliness that repel other people who are not used to it. This is a result of the food practices of dominant groups (north Indian/upper caste Hindu) being presented as the national cuisine while other food and diets are made marginal or erased. As we see in the case of the Monpas, beef and yak meat have become attached to a stigma, which is not merely because of a food ethnocentrism at work here, but also because of a religious environmentalism and the larger cow-politics in the current Indian nation-state. If *akhuni* is “less sophisticated”, backward, and irritates the sensory aesthetics of non-consumers in mainstream Indian society (Kikon 2015: 321), yak is exotic and strange, and now in the current context of Buddhist environmentalism and Hindu nationalism, also outlawed.

In Arunachal Pradesh, another animal of the bovine species has attracted controversy. The *mithun* or bison found in Northeast India, and neighbouring Myanmar and Bangladesh, has a lot of symbolic value in the customary practices of many

Arunachali tribes. It is used as an important medium of bride price, and a mark of a household's prosperity. It is also the most preferred meat among a number of tribes in this state, especially the Abo-Tanw group of tribes consisting of Adi, Apatani, Nyishi, Tagin, Galo and Mishmi tribes of Arunachal Pradesh.²⁴ In 2016, a controversy erupted when Arunachal Pradesh Governor J. P Rajkhowa, finding a slaughtered animal outside Raj Bhavan, the state assembly house, mistook it for a cow, and suspecting political rivals of sabotage, sent images of its slaughter as evidence of breakdown of law and order in the state, and called for President's Rule in the state. Given the cow slaughter ban across many parts of the nation, this amounted to crime.²⁵ However, many local scholars (Rikam 2005, Gambo 2015) have pointed out the importance of the mithun in Arunachal Pradesh, and noted how it is often slaughtered as part of sacrificial rituals and its meat eaten.²⁶

The yak and mithun episodes show how the bovine-centric cuisine of Arunachal Pradesh sits awkwardly in relation to a hegemonic Hindu cultural nationalism. In Tawang and West Kameng, therefore, it is cultural compromise at work, where Tibetan Buddhists of the Himalaya seek to display affinity with a Hindu majoritarian vegetarian ethos by declaring, "We are Buddhists. We do not believe in killing".²⁷ In doing so they allow themselves to be coopted into the narrative of Hindu nationalism.

We see a similar intersection of religious (Buddhist) nationalism and food politics in Bhutan, where Tshethar, the Buddhist practice of releasing animals destined for slaughter in order to accumulate merit, has now been officially adopted by the Bhutanese government as national legislation (Miyamoto, Magnusson and Korom 2021: 125). Tshethar – along with the Gross National happiness (GNH) – are both promoted by the Bhutanese government as practices derived from Buddhist doctrine, and held up

24 Here Abo means father/forefather/ancestor and Tanw a proper name and the Abo-Tanw tribes are known as such because these tribes believe themselves to be the descendants of Abo-Tani whom they regard as their earliest (mythical) known ancestor (Gambo 2015).

25 <https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/not-cow-but-mithun-a-sign-of-serious-trouble-in-arunachal-pradesh/>

26 Arunachali academic Nabam Tadar Rikam (2005) has said that while most tribal communities of the Himalayan state rear mithuns, it is the most valued and sacred animal for the Nyishi community. Traditionally, the mithun figures prominently in the pantheon of powerful deities the Nyishis worship. The bovine-centric cuisine of Arunachal Pradesh leads Journalist Kai Friese to call it a case of exceptionalism. Describing his visit to the house of now departed politician Kalikho Pul, where he encountered several mithun skulls on display on bamboo poles all along the driveway, Friese writes, "Mobs of Hindus known as 'cow vigilantes' have murdered Muslims in recent years, accusing them of slaughtering sacred cattle. Yet here Mr. Pul's trophies represented respect for old gods and old ways of sharing the fat of the land". <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/24/opinion/india-election-modi-arunachal-pradesh.html>

27 I had met and interviewed several homestay owners in December 2018. One of them, a young woman in her early 20s, whose name I withhold for anonymity, made this declaration. This is a common public attitude I observed among many people, including homestay owners. Once they realized that we were not there to censure their food practices, they opened up about their meat-eating preferences.

as markers of a Bhutanese religious national identity. Miyamoto, Magnusson and Korom (2021) show that this official stance against animal slaughter is not without its inconsistencies, for it upsets the local ecosystem as pastoral farmers, peasants and herders struggle for livelihood, abandoned animals run amok, and yet, meat-eating practices continue with imported stock from across the national borders. Scholars have pointed out more problematic aspects of the practice of animal release in other Buddhist countries in Asia, where it has been commercialised and regularised such that releasing animals requires hunters to first catch them; further, transfer and release of captured animals into different eco-systems lead to the creation of foreign invasive species as well as spread of new infectious diseases (Shiu and Stokes 2008: 189-190). Still, the state-supported vegetarian ethic has affected how people represent their food habits.

Not unlike the ordinary Bhutanese, the Monpas are keen to be seen to conform with the dominant political and cultural beliefs, leading to their public presentation of a vegetarian diet. They tend to justify their current rejection of beef and yak on grounds of religion, environment and health. “Beef, while considered good for strength and stamina, or framed as a medicine, cited in Ayurveda, was also seen as posing potential health risks”, especially for diabetics or people with high blood pressure (Staples 2018: 69). I encountered similar views in Tawang and Bomdila that vegetarianism is good for health, the continued consumption of bovine meats notwithstanding.

A question here is how does one make a meat-eating community forgo this important part of their diet? When political and religious leaders advocate a meat ban, how are local people coaxed into participating in this belief? It is possible that by making the Himalayan people subscribe to an environmentalist ethic that prescribes vegetarianism, the district administrations of West Kameng and Tawang qua the Indian state, are practicing a form of governmentality, which Arun Agrawal (2005) terms “environmentality”. Agrawal argues that when local communities are invited to participate in the governance of forests, wildlife, and natural resources, they internalise an environmental ethic. It is possible that recruiting local organisations such as the Tangnyom Tsokpa and giving them a surveillance role, is a step in this direction.

Going Beyond the Buddhist Framing of Human and Non-Human Relations

The entangled discourses around the yak ban, environmentalism and Buddhism in Arunachal Pradesh stem from a politics of cultural identity that is gradually spreading in the Buddhist Himalaya, where previously peripheral Himalayan border communities are now asserting their Tibetan Buddhist identity (Gohain 2020). They are mobilizing in support of campaigns that have as their main objective the preservation and promotion of Buddhist cultural heritage in the Indian Himalaya, such as the movements to get official recognition for the Tibetan Buddhist script and for the Tibetan medicine system in India, which is an important part of the Buddhist Himalayan heritage (Kloos 2016).²⁸

28 Several scholars, including Stephan Kloos have noted how Tibetan Buddhist medicine system has been appropriated as a traditional Indian medical system called Sowa Rigpa since the 2000s. Kloos documents this transformation that took place, involving much negotiation among conflicting Tibetan, India and Himalayan interests (2016: 21)

This form of cultural politics, led primarily by Buddhist religious leaders as well as some lay activists, has emerged among India's borderland Buddhists as a response towards their perceived regional marginalization, and as a counter-politics to carve out a distinct space for themselves within the larger Indian national identity. Paradoxically, these movements to reinvent Buddhism in India have gained momentum over the years with the support of the Indian state, for whom having loyal Buddhist subjects in these Himalayan borderlands serves the cause of national security (Gohain 2022, forthcoming). Buddhist environmentalism, in the context of the Indian Himalaya, is tied up with this form of cultural politics, with the survival and adaptation of Buddhism in the modern world, and also, as I have shown, with the politics of Hindu nationalism.

But as anthropologists, what we should note is not a decontextualized religion coming to the rescue of environment. We should not accept without question the projection of a set of Buddhist beliefs onto local environmental practices. I must stress again that my intention is not to dismiss the mobilisation of Buddhism for environmental causes.²⁹ I do find a lot of value in the participation of Buddhist monks in environmental struggles, and agree with anthropologist Susan Darlington's suggestion that "by focusing one's intention on fulfilling the Buddhist teaching of interconnectivity rather than just making merit, monks and laymen have been able to make a real environmental impact" (Darlington 2016).³⁰ It is true that the environmental awareness spread by Buddhist religious leaders have had a real impact. What I am concerned with is the use of an essentialised religious identity to anchor these environmental struggles. It is important not to see religion or singular notions of culture as encompassing local practices and to understand that local practices are also part of a local ecology, in which life, livelihood, and environment are intertwined.

As anthropologist Georgina Drew (2014) notes with regard to the Hindu areas of the Himalaya, when women resisting dam building in Uttarkashi in Uttarakhand invoke the river Ganga, it is not a Ganga in a pan-Indian Hindu sense, but a Ganga that they know through the daily rituals and activities with the local water body. Although the local people merged their religious sensibilities with their environmental protest, it was not a blanket spirituality and hence, they expressed discomfiture with the activities of G.D Agarwal, activist involved in the Ganga Safai Abhiyan (Clean the Ganga) movement, who equated saving the Ganga from dams with safeguarding the Hindu faith. Agarwal's appeal to a pan-Indian Hinduism did not evoke the same response from the mountain people who considered him an outsider with no concern for local development and concerns.

This takes me to the second point, which is that insider-outsider dynamics play out in local environmental struggles. Citing her experience from Samdo in China, Emily Woodhouse (2012) states that local people prevented outsiders from cutting down or using the resources of these forests but took zero or minimal action against their own people who had broken norms on sacred land. According to Woodhouse, conflict over natural resources was purely about boundaries and access (2012: 53).

29 I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for pushing me to clarify this point

30 <http://chqdaily.com/2016/07/the-buddhist-approach-to-environmentalism/>

This is borne out by similar observations on the Chipko movement in Uttarakhand which became famous as a local conservationist movement because of the image of the tree-hugging women. What is less advertised is that these women were not hugging trees to send a message against the felling of trees. Rather, they were conveying a message to the state and to contractors that the trees were not theirs (the contractors) to do what they will. In other words, they were staking their rights over the trees as a local forest resource.³¹ Chipko was a local statement about the rights of local communities to the resources of the region (Rangan 2000). We see in Tawang too that the environmental struggle to oppose large dams contained the idiom of insider and outsider dichotomy, as local protestors argued that dam construction will bring in huge numbers of migrant workers from outside the state, who would threaten their culture and livelihoods (Gohain 2017).

Thus, in many areas of the Himalayas, even when people use Buddhist or Hindu values to articulate concern for the environment, they are simply voicing in a familiar framework their concerns about local customs, livelihoods, and ways of life that are under threat from climate change, state formation, infrastructure intrusion, or forced displacement. Closer anthropological investigations can reveal that local customs and ways of life are separate from religious prescriptions. As anthropologist Karine Gagne shows in her study of the relations between local Ladakhis and their natural environment, despite professing Buddhist values, the local people's concern for the environment is informed not by religion but by a "a practical ethics that stems from a deep attachment to, and respect for, their land and its gifts" (2018: xiii). While Buddhist doctrine may tell us about how Buddhism values animals, it alone cannot explain how Buddhist people in real life nurture an ethics of care through their practical knowledge of and engagement with the world.³² Gagne argues that the ethics of care is not divorced from religion but not defined by it.

I go further to not only point to dissonances between textual Buddhism and the practices of Buddhists, but also to argue that when power and politics enter the picture, a politicised Buddhism may discriminate against practices that do not fit into its worldview. Attending to questions of how power enters into human and non-human relations and how politics shape the way in which we perceive and enact our equation with the non-human world are important to retain a critical perspective towards the role of religion in environment.

31 Years after the Chipko movement attained international fame as a local conservationist movement, the Himalayan people of Uttarakhand had become disillusioned with the word conservation, as some reports claimed. "Chipko was essentially an economic campaign, a fight for local livelihood and when this was not achieved, the people became disillusioned. Now, even their traditional rights have been taken away and the forest guard is supreme." <http://www.indiaenvironmentportal.org.in/content/41/chipko-an-unfinished-mission/>

32 Gagne (2018) emphasises an ethics of care which is built on reciprocity and the practical character of how there is coexistence among human-non-human nature, not only in how animals sustain human lives through the food and labour they provide but also how animals play a role in the way affect enters knowledge (a mountain herder in following his flock not only gets to know the grazing routes but also develops an emotional bond with the landscape). She makes a distinction between ethics as practice and morality as duties and obligations.

The packaging of environmentalism as a kind of religious environmentalism specific to Indian (whether Hindu or Buddhist) value systems or the appropriation of local environmental protests to grand narratives of religion are tied up with nationalisms (Hindu nationalism or Buddhist nationalisms), which were also produced at a specific moment in history. As anthropologists, we must be cautious in applying or imposing them wholesale onto local lives and livelihoods, as this may be disruptive of the local ecology.

But in rejecting these positions, we must not lose sight of our common agenda. How may we salvage environmental concerns by theorizing an environmental ethic based on practical concerns of everyday life that resist incorporation into larger schemes of religion and nationalism? I have a set of thoughts rather than a conclusive argument to end my paper.

From Buddhist Ecology to Himalayan Environmentalism

Conceptually, how do we frame an environmentalism that is not defined by any religion but by the practical character of Himalayan life? The Himalayan ranges subsume a great diversity of terrain and cultures, and hence, a practical Himalayan environmentalism rather than an esoteric, doctrinal, ecological Buddhism, can better capture the local environmental practices. That is, can we talk about a Himalayan environmentalism, which is plural and not essentialist like ecological Buddhism? And how can anthropology help in arriving at a concept of Himalayan environmentalism that is plural instead of a singular, essential construct. As ethnographers, through ethnography, we can facilitate the rethinking of a Himalayan environmental ethic that is not a pre-determined approach but a practical and context-oriented one, and one that is attentive to the political ecology and to the lived realities of ecological relations. What, in other words, can be done to develop a practical ethics that is inclusive (does not leave out religious others) and can be adopted while developing context-based practical lessons for environmental preservation?

This conceptualization is aligned with the new Himalayan humanities approach proposed by scholars (Yu and De Maaker 2021) as an inter-disciplinary study of the anthropogenic or human-induced qualitative changes in the Himalaya. Himalayan humanities is critical of the fact that the Himalayan environment continues to be seen solely as a natural resource and energy source and not as the home of diverse ecosystems, habitats, heritages, and indigenous ecological worldviews and environmental ethics (Yu 2021: 9). The concept of Himalayan environmentalism creates space for discussing local ecological worldviews without the constricting covering of religious tradition.³³

Therefore, and this is the second point, Himalayan environmentalism should be unmoored from religious identity, because the identity-religion-environment nexus creates boundaries that are rigid. We should be more flexible in understanding

33 I prefer to use the term local over indigenous because of the problematic connotations of the latter in the Indian context, where the official position is that it is difficult to assign the indigenous label to select communities in a country where there have been many waves of migration.

Himalayan environmental practices as not stemming from Buddhism, Hinduism or Islam and instead point to those breaks, or gaps, between a universalizing ethic attributed to a religion and the everyday, the routine and the particular. Moreover, the Hindus, Buddhists and Muslims in the Himalayan mountains are marginal to the more organized Hindus, Buddhists, and Muslims in the plains, with distinct social customs and cultural practices that stand apart. For example, the meat-eating practices of many mountain-dwelling Hindus in Uttarakhand are seen as not conforming to majoritarian Hindu caste ideas of purity and pollution. Respecting the customs of these marginalized Himalayan communities will mean that some of their practices, such as the bovine-centric diet among the highland Buddhists, need not be abolished in order to adhere to a religious-environmentalist ethic.

Third, the Himalaya consists of many sensitive, even disputed borderlands and hence, are zones of heavy militarization. Militarization has had many environmental ramifications in the mountains. Army settlements, sprawling firing ranges, roads, observation sites, and other infrastructure built for military use in higher altitude areas have meant the compression of spaces traditionally used for grazing yak. Military surveillance and restriction of movement have affected both yak and yak-herders, led to the loss of livelihoods for the Brogpa yak-herding communities, and made previous pasture lands unavailable (Gagne 2018, Gohain 2020: 151). According to yak researcher, R.N Goswami, the closure of the border roads in 1962 as a result of the India-China war, was a major reason for the decline of the yak population, for in the days of free trade between Monyul and Tibet, “yaks were used as transporters to carry trade items to the highlanders, but with the closing of the border, the yak lost its prime place as a transporter and yak-herders lost their prime source of income” (Goswami 2009: 6). Many Brogpas now work as seasonal agricultural labourers or construction workers for the Border Roads Organisation, the roads construction wing of the Indian army.

Illegal and unabated tree felling in Himalayan forests have led to a drastic reduction in the forest cover, and often, members of the border security forces are found complicit in timber smuggling.³⁴ Military presence and the infrastructures of state security such as roads, tunnels and so on built in the fragile Himalayan terrain have further exacerbated landslides, avalanches, and other environmental harm (David, Gamble, Roche and Gawne 2021). Gamble and Davis make a compelling argument for setting up demilitarised zones in high altitude regions, where borders do not work because landscape changes in these seismic zones lead to “geological surprises”.³⁵ Demilitarisation would avoid much senseless loss of life, environmental destruction, and allow social and cultural exchange for the region’s local communities. Can a Himalayan environmentalism recognize this common effect of militarization and thereby discuss steps forward to protect these ecologically sensitive spots through demilitarization and increased local control?

34 <https://www.downtoearth.org.in/indepth/of-barren-hills-and-barrel-smoke-29175>

35 <https://thediplomat.com/2020/06/the-big-lesson-of-the-india-china-conflict-borders-dont-work-at-high-altitude/>

The concept of Himalayan environmentalism arises out of my dissatisfaction with paradigms that try to subsume local environmental struggles within a grand religious tradition, whether it is Hinduism or Buddhism. What value lies in imposing the image of ecological Buddhist on border communities of the Himalaya if it ends up imposing on and disturbing local ecologies? On one hand, we have growing concerns about the fragile Himalayan ecosystem, with its high seismic hazards, glaciers facing climate change and high altitudes prone to landslides. On the other hand, local ecological practices in this region have either been romanticised as native ecology or subsumed within major religious traditions, mainly Buddhism, while harmful incursions in the form of state security and private infrastructure expansion go on. I have tried to show that the paradigm of ecological Buddhism is not enough to describe the complex environmental practices in the Himalaya. To see people in the Buddhist Himalayas as being ecological Buddhist is to blindside the practices that have sustained these communities over years and centuries and maintained a balance between the social and physical environment, between the realities of livelihood, access and available resources.

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