

## The Cultural Politics of Sacred Groves: A Case Study of *Devithans* in Sikkim, India

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### Abstract

Sacred groves are areas that are conserved by communities for spiritual or cultural beliefs. They often have associated limitations on activities within the forest. India is believed to have the highest concentration of sacred groves in the world. However, in our research of *devithans* – Nepali sacred groves – in the eastern Himalayan state of Sikkim, India, we reveal that their very existence in India has long remained unacknowledged in sacred natural site research. By researching the proliferation of *devithans* in the village of Biring, East Sikkim, we not only foreground their existence, but also unpack their cultural politics to reveal the contestations and appropriations around the symbolic value of sacred sites. Given that historically the Buddhist Lepcha-Bhutias' cultural association with Sikkim's sacred landscape has been celebrated, while that of Nepali ethnic groups has been largely invisibilised, we argue that *devithans* have emerged as a potential political instrument for the latter to validate political and cultural claims to Sikkim's sacred landscape. The predominant tone in sacred grove scholarship in India has largely been anchored in the language of ecology, and tends to understand sacred groves as communal sites without exploring the associated constitutive politics. By using a cultural politics lens to understand *devithans*, this research expands beyond simplistic narratives to focus on present day cultural politics that are internal to communities that often not only sustain groves, but also help them to proliferate.

**Keywords:** sacred groves, *devithan*, Sikkim, landscape, cultural politics, autochthony, Biring, India, Nepali

### INTRODUCTION

Sacred groves around the world are community conserved areas that often have associated limitations on activities within the forest; these traditional rules can serve a conservation role. Sacred groves or forests are conserved by local residents for a variety of reasons, ranging from belief in a forest deity to protection of a spring or as sacred space where ancestors are buried (Lebbie and Freudenberger 1996; Chandran and

Hughes 1997; Malhotra et al. 2007; Sheridan and Nyamweru 2007). The size of groves ranges greatly from very small plots of less than one hectare to larger tracts of land of several hundred hectares (Ntiamoa-Baidu 1995; Malhotra et al. 2007). In some cases, these fragments represent the sole remaining natural forests outside of protected areas and, therefore, are important areas for conservation of flora and fauna, as well as to preserve cultural histories. The country in the world with the highest concentration of sacred groves is India, estimated to have over 100,000 groves (Malhotra et al. 2007), yet these are disappearing due to cultural change and pressure to use the natural resources within the groves (Chandrakanth et al. 2004; Ormsby and Bhagwat 2010).

The names for sacred groves vary according to the different regions and languages of India (see Table 1). In Sikkim, two different religious communities have different sacred groves: Buddhist monastery (i.e., *gumpa*) forests, and Nepali *devithans* (i.e., sacred grove, abode of a goddess). While Sikkim's

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**Table 1**  
**Terminology for Sacred Forests in Different Regions of India**

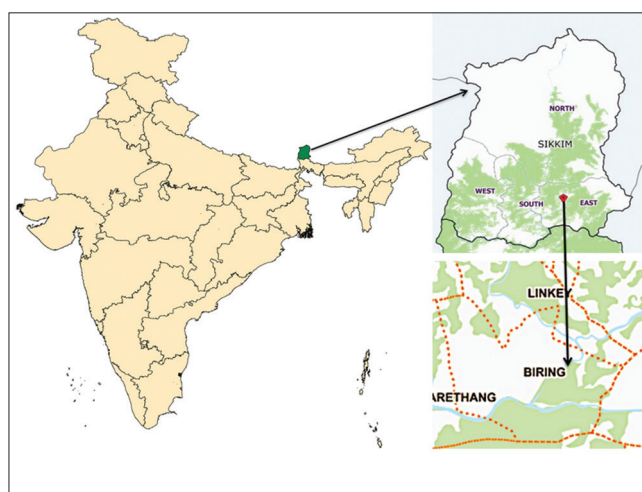
Location	Name for Sacred Groves	Reference
Bihar	<i>Sarnas</i>	Chandrashekara and Sankar (1998)
Himachal Pradesh	<i>Dev van</i>	Khumbongmayum et al. (2004)
Karnataka	<i>Devarakadu</i>	Chandran and Hughes (1997); Chandrashekara and Sankar (1998); Chandranth et al. (2004)
Kerala	<i>Kavu</i>	Chandran and Hughes (1997)
Madhya Pradesh	<i>Dev</i>	Chandrashekara and Sankar (1998)
Maharashtra	<i>Deorais or Deovani</i> <i>Devarai or Devrahati</i>	Chandrashekara and Sankar (1998); Chandran (1998); Khumbongmayum et al. (2004)
Manipur	<i>Lai Umang</i>	Khumbongmayum et al. (2004)
Meghalaya	<i>Law Kyntang or Law Lyngdoh. Khlaw U Blei or Khloo Blai. Asong Khosi</i>	Jamir et al. (2006); B.K. Tiwari (pers. comm. 2009)
Rajasthan	<i>Oran</i>	Chandrashekara and Sankar (1998)
Sikkim	<i>Gumpa forests</i>	Higgins and Chatterjee (2005)
Tamil Nadu and Kerala	<i>Sarpa Kavu or Kavu</i>	Chandrashekara and Sankar (1998)
Uttara Kannada (northern Karnataka)	<i>Kans</i>	Chandran and Hughes (1997); Gokhale (2004)

Buddhist sacred groves have received some attention in scholarship (Chatterjee et al. 2000; Dash 2005; Arora, 2006), Nepali *devithans* have largely gone unnoticed. While scholars (Chatterjee et al. 2000) have listed 56 sacred groves in Sikkim to be all *gumpa* forests, the state Forest Department lists 19 sacred groves of importance, out of which 15 are Buddhist *gumpa* forests and only 4 *devithans* (FEWMD, 2011). Our study investigated the cultural politics related to the worship of *devithans* in the state of Sikkim.

Our research in Sikkim brings the largely invisibilised Indian Nepali sacred groves to scholarship. The struggle over different meanings and values generated by sacred groves has led to differing understandings on multiple levels, including management approaches, ecological values, and cultural significance.

Located in the eastern Himalayas, Sikkim is a state that joined the Indian union in 1975 and is the least populated and second smallest state in terms of area. Sikkim is land locked between the state of West Bengal (India) in the South, Bhutan in the South East, Nepal in the West, and China (Tibetan plateau) to the Northeast (Figure 1). This unique geographical location in the Himalayas has made Sikkim a historical melting pot for South Asian and Southeast Asian cultures. Presently, the cultural milieu of Sikkim is composed of 22 Indo-Tibetan and Indo-Aryan ethnic groups (Arora 2008: 131).

The term ‘sacred’ is used extensively to define the landscape of Sikkim (Gulia 2005; Subba 2005; Arora 2006; Ramakrishnan 2008). Recent scholarship on Sikkim (Arora 2006; Balicki 2008) has delved into the politicised history of its landscape. Balicki (2008: 23) discussed how Lhatsun Chenpo Namkha Jigme, the key member of a group of three Buddhist lamas who identified and presided over the coronation of Phuntsog Namgyal as the first King of Sikkim in 1642, converted the sacred landscape of the indigenous Lepcha community into Buddhist sacred sites by celebrating Sikkim as *beyul*, meaning sacred hidden land in *Nesol*, his text of Buddhist rituals. This accommodated Lepcha sacred landscape features into Buddhist



**Figure 1**  
**Sikkim Study Region'**

rituals, making it easier for Lepchas to relate to as part of their conversion to Buddhism. This textual ‘Tibetan formation of Sikkim’ (Mullard 2005: 31) effectively established a Tibetan Buddhist image of Sikkim. This was later reified through an ‘orientalizing the Orient’ project manifest in a number of tribal ethnographies of the Himalayas (Po’dar and Subba 1991: 79). The construction of an ‘indigenous Buddhist Sikkim’ (Arora 2009: 54) has also worked towards invisibilising both earlier animistic Lepcha association, and later Nepali association with Sikkim’s landscape.

While the Indian Nepali community in Sikkim is often viewed as an undifferentiated entity, in reality they are a ‘constellation of communities’ (CRESP 2008: iv), believed to have settled in Sikkim in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century (Nakane 1966; Subba 2005; CRESP 2008). This constellation is composed of different Nepali ethnic and Hindu caste groups, such as Limboo, Rai, Chhetri, Mangar, and Sherpa. The Nepali constellation of communities, the

Lepchas and the Bhutias, constitute a complex social web on the sacred landscape of Sikkim. *Devithans* or Nepali sacred groves are enmeshed in such a social web, where apart from being sites of religious worship and conservation of biological diversity and hydrological regimes, they are also symbolic of cultural association with land for the Nepalis in Sikkim. Though there is an absence of prior research on *devithans* of Sikkim, research has been conducted on sacred groves and forests in Nepal. Both Stevens (1989) and Mansberger (1991) researched the Buddhist *Lami Nati* (Lama's forests) in the Khumbu region, and Hindu *pabitraban/dharmikban* (holy forest/sacred forest) in Kathmandu Valley, respectively. Mansberger (1991) estimated the existence of almost 60 sacred groves in the Kathmandu Valley alone, and the 45 groves he documented are estimated to occupy almost 20% of the land area in the valley. Mansberger (1991: 281) identified sacred groves to be "conspicuous in situ storehouses of flowering, fruit and nut bearing and medicinal plants otherwise rare or absent in the valley". He also identified them as 'symbolic resources' and 'religio-cultural reservoirs' for the people of the Kathmandu valley. Such research points to the long historical trajectory of sacred groves in Nepal and their biological and cultural importance to Nepalis. Also, Mansberger's (1991) assertion that sacred groves, though being widespread in Nepal, yet remain poorly documented, is also valid for Sikkim.

By reflecting on the phenomenon of proliferation of *devithans* in Biring<sup>2</sup> and the micro-politics regarding springs, called *dharas*, we agree with Gold (2001: xv) that "sacred landscapes may be constructed, manipulated, otherwise re-imagined through cultural politics." *Devithans* need to be assessed in terms of their increasing importance not only as a symbol of cultural identity and capital for the Nepali communities but also as a claim to autochthony. Such acknowledgement also requires a revisiting of the debate around environment and development in Sikkim, where invisibilisation of Nepali associations with their landscape makes a large section of affected Nepalis invisible in the movement against dam-related displacement, as 'exotic' Buddhist communities and sacred sites gain conservation priority. Also, *dharas* co-occur with *devithans*, thus they are preferred sites for implementing developmental activities related to conserving biodiversity and hydrological regimes, including providing drinking water supply. Resultantly political stakes are high concerning these areas. As our study of the micro-politics in Biring reveals, *devithans* are a locus of political claims and contestations, with which conservation efforts need to understand and engage.

### **Sacred Groves, Autochthony and the Politics of Belonging in Sikkim**

The presence of Nepalis in Sikkim is divided into pre and post-colonial phases. While the first wave of migration took place in the pre-colonial period after the Gorkha war of 1775 (Dasgupta 1999; Subba 2005), the second was engineered during the British rule. The Sino-UK convention of 1890-1893 consolidated Sikkim's status as a British Protectorate and

Subba (2005) regards the arrival of the British Political Officer, John Claude White to Sikkim in 1887, as a watershed in the state's political history. White "initiated a series of revenue raising measures in Sikkim" (Subba 2005: 63) culminating in major restructuring of land tenure and management systems (Subba 2005; Balikci 2008; CRES 2008).

In Sikkim, White created a new class of lessee landlords, who were encouraged to use "immigrant labourers to clear the jungles and bring large tracks of land under irrigated terraced cultivation" (Balikci 2008: 50). This period also witnessed substantial changes to the landscape, as terraced agriculture became a dominant form of land use. Further changes to the landscape were triggered by policy initiatives from the Sikkimese monarchy to stem the tide of migration, which was supported by the British in an effort to improve Sino-Tibetan relations. A ban on transfer of lands of the Bhutia and Lepcha to any other community in 1917 led the "new migrants to reclaim agricultural wastelands for fresh cultivation" (CRES 2008: 45).

Migration and socially engineered settlement completely reversed Sikkim's demographics and resultantly, its politics. Though the Nepali constellation of communities gained numerical majority, administrative powers remained vested with the Bhutia-Lepcha elites (Subba 2005; CRES 2008). The settlement of Nepalis in Sikkim is a history of endless struggle with a harsh environment, unaccommodating neighbours, death from disease, and exploitation of labour. As 'allochthons', Nepalis were subjected to state-supported excesses in terms of *jharlangi*, wherein they were forced to provide free labour by Bhutia landlords, or *kalobhari*, where they were forced to carry heavy weights for the British from Sikkim to Tibet without remuneration (Subba 2005). During the British protectorate, the Bhutia-Lepcha elites managed to wrest substantial privileges, such as access to prime lands and lower taxation from the British by virtue of autochthony. By populating Sikkim earlier, they "had acquired a moral authority to claim Sikkim as their ancestral domain" (CRES 2008: 3).

Given that citizenship insecurity has been a leitmotif of Nepali existence in India (Subba 2008), the tension that exists around citizenship and claims to autochthony in Biring is anchored in the past as much as the present. In an eloquent ethnography of self, Subba (2008: 220) points out how the "deterritorialized" Nepali diaspora in India have struggled to carve out their separate identity from the "Nepal Nepalis" (Subba 2008: 229) and simultaneously attach them to the Indian nation state. Deterritorialisation is not something that only happened to Nepalis when they left Nepal and settled in Sikkim, but it continues till date. Initially claims over land were almost absent, and Nepalis largely survived as lease-holding agriculturalists. However, land holdings on the basis of clearance of forest and marginal lands did increase over time. What created the biggest citizenship issue with Nepalis in Sikkim was the Sikkim Subject Regulation Act of 1961. Introduced in order to reduce Nepali migration into Sikkim, only people who had ownership of land 15 years prior to the date of application were recognised as legitimate

citizens of Sikkim. This rendered many Nepali people, who were either landless or without work permits, as stateless. Even after Sikkim was unified with India in 1975, this policy continues under Article 371 F of the Indian Constitution that protects old Sikkimese laws. Thus, the historically tenuous Nepali ownership of land is linked with legalised citizenship. Moreover, “many privileges are confined to only those who are *Sikkim Subject Certificate holders* and their descendants” (CRESP 2008: 271). This makes a section of Sikkim’s Nepali caste Hindu community ineligible for permanent State Government jobs (CRESP 2008).

Hence, validating autochthony has emerged as an important political agenda. This is being furthered through assertion of historical and cultural association with nature and sacred landscapes. Sacred groves have emerged as a key element of such agendas. Over a period of time, Tibetan Buddhist sacred sites have emerged as an instrument to establish Lepcha-Bhutia claims to Sikkim’s landscape. This has been promoted in scholarship (Gulia 2005; Higgins and Chatterjee 2005; Ramakrishnan 2008), biodiversity policy, and tourism (Arora 2009). This pervasiveness is illustrated in the recommendation of the Committee set up by the Government of Sikkim in September 1998 to document all sacred sites that are more than 100 years old. The final published list contained Buddhist sacred sites only and omitted reference to any site considered sacred by other communities (Subba 2005). All the Buddhist sacred sites were subsequently brought under state protection as ‘places of worship’ under the Special Provisions Act of 1991 (Subba 2005).

Given this context, there are three critical issues related to researching *devithans*. Firstly, *devithans*, though having existed from the nineteenth century settlement of Nepali immigrants in Sikkim, find no mention in historical documents. Secondly, though being quite a visible landscape feature in rural Sikkim, they still remain invisibilised in policy making and scholarship. Lastly, scholarship on sacred groves in Sikkim is largely related to the “gumpa forests” in Buddhist monasteries (Higgins and Chatterjee 2005: 91), written by ecologists as part of research commissioned by international and national conservation organisations. Hence, research has been predominantly anchored in the language of ecology, i.e., biodiversity value (Avasthe et al. 2004; Dash 2005; Higgins and Chatterjee 2005; Khan et al. 2008; Ramakrishnan 2008; FEWMD 2011). Though there is anthropological scholarship on issues of cultural identity and politics associated with sacred groves in India (Burman 1996) and Sikkim (Arora 2006), the majority of scholarship related to sacred groves in Sikkim as well as in India tends to invisibilise the associated political and cultural complexities, and anchors the discussion on biodiversity conservation, ecosystem services and traditional ecological knowledge (Ahmed 2004; Higgins and Chatterjee 2005; Khumbongmayum et al. 2005; Bhagwat and Rutte 2006; Jeeva et al. 2006; Samati and Gogoi 2007; Bhagwat 2009; Anthwal et al. 2010; Ormsby and Bhagwat 2010). Except for Burman (1996), most of the scholarship on cultural aspects of sacred groves (Waghchaure et al. 2006; Malhotra, et al. 2007; Murugan et al. 2008) remains largely depoliticised and

reflects on how groves serve to promote “cultural bonding among various communities and maintain harmony in social life” (Waghchaure et al. 2006: 55).

This in turn has fostered a linear narrative where sacred groves are viewed as common property regimes where biodiversity (read nature) is protected through cultural values held by rural communities and where, through worship, people regenerate their spiritual and cultural identities. We find such a narrative to be incomplete. Scholarship on sacred groves in Africa indicates how they are also a “significant political instrument” (Sithole 2004: 132) where their symbolic nature has resulted in struggles around groves for groups to assert their right to land. Using a cultural politics lens to understand sacred groves is not aimed at disproving the existing scholarship in India. We intend to problematise the simplistic linear narrative by adding another layer to this complex phenomenon by exploring the constitutive politics of *devithans* in Biring village in Sikkim.

### UNPACKING DEVITHANS IN BIRING VILLAGE, SIKKIM

Biring, a village in the Linkey-Tareythang Gram Panchayat Unit (GPU) in Rhenock block in the district of East Sikkim, has a population of 1322<sup>3</sup> constituted by 275 households, and is located between altitudes 672 MSL (metres above sea level) to 1400 MSL. Biring is further divided into upper and lower Biring by a road that cuts it into two halves. Each half is then further constituted by a group of habitations, each of them composed on kinship lines.

Upper Biring is composed of Dhandgaon, Manpur, Raigaon and Kamigaon. Lower Biring is composed of Gautamgaon, Kherabari, Banstola, Ghimiregaon, Thapagaon, Kamigaon and Subbagaon. Solely Nepali communities and Limboos inhabit Biring. Biring exists as a web of habitations, where different people use their own points of reference to make geographical sense of their village. The most commonly used reference by which people locate themselves in the landscape is their habitation or locality. This is evident in the way habitations are named. Raigaon, Gautamgaon, Ghimiregaon, Banstola, Subbagaon, Thapagaon and Kamigaon are openly declarative of the caste/kinship group that is the largest constituent of each habitation or by the first family that settled in that area, namely Rai<sup>4</sup>, Gautam (Chhetri<sup>5</sup>), Ghimire (Bahun), Banstola (Bahun), Thapa (Chhetri), Kami (Scheduled Caste) and Subba (Limboo)<sup>6</sup>. The rest, according to their inhabitants, are indicative of the memory of the landscape that the earliest settlers encountered. Kherabari owes its name to the dense wild banana forests that existed in the area (*khera* means banana in Nepali), which had to be cleared to make cultivation possible. Dhandgaon means a village located in a rocky area (*dhand* means rocky and fallow in Nepali). The etymology of these areas corresponds with the larger history of the settlement of the Nepali community in Sikkim where mostly wild and marginal lands were made available for the Nepali settlers for practising agriculture.

Ethnographic fieldwork in Biring was conducted for 2 months between April and June 2011, and was based on living and dwelling in Biring and recording events and interactions. It involved participant observation, interviews, and documentation of religious rituals, such as ceremonies by traditional healers, rituals related to death and worship at a sacred grove. A total of 15 field visits to different *devithans* in upper and lower Biring were conducted, which allowed for discussion and observations on their location within the habitations and the watershed, their history and social access.

Our research found that Nepali sacred groves in Sikkim (i.e., *devithans*) are not subject to episodic engagement but are constituted through the practices of everyday life, as manifest in the regular collection of water from the *dharas* (springs) located inside *devithans*, and the regulation of practices in and around these areas. Though community norms on complete ban of extraction of any forest produce is believed to be inviolable, only water and worship blurs the boundary of sacredness of a *devithan*. Unlike worship at a *devithan*, which is episodic, collection of water, or fixing pipes that carry water, enables people to access a *devithan* regularly, though they still have to follow rules regulating practices within it. This includes non-extraction of any kind, or consuming any kind of food or alcohol, or urinating or defecating anywhere within its boundaries. A substantial number of stories shared by interviewees related to people suffering from sickness and other forms of pestilence as a result of having transgressed the sanctity of a *devithan*. For example, washing of utensils in a *dhara* located in a *devithan* can cause the *dhara* to dry up completely. Unlike other sacred groves in India where everyday access is mostly disallowed, the need to withdraw water from a *devithan* allows it to deviate from such sanctions. Also, while free movement within a *devithan* for collecting water is allowed, it is important to mention that menstruating or pregnant women are barred from entering a *devithan* even for collecting water. They are deemed to pollute a *devithan*, which can even result in crop damage from hailstorms. These beliefs convert the *devithan* into a site where norms of purity and pollution are reified through regulation of practice within it. The *devi* in a *devithan* is always a female goddess, hence all *devithans* are supposed to only have a female resident deity. However, in our field site, there were *devithans* that did not follow this norm, and later, became a point of enquiry in our research.

### Autochthony and Politics of Belonging around *Devithans* in Biring

Based on discussions with civil society members, academics, and government officials on *devithans* and *dharas* in Sikkim, it emerged that *devithans* are sites of worship where people from all ethnic communities participated in the village. It was also believed that generally each village had an individual *devithan*. Discussion and fieldwork with residents in Biring revealed 15 *devithans* (see Table 2 and Figure 2). These 15 *devithans* roughly occupy a total area of 14.8 hectares in Biring, out of a total area of 510 hectares, which is 2.9% of the total area of

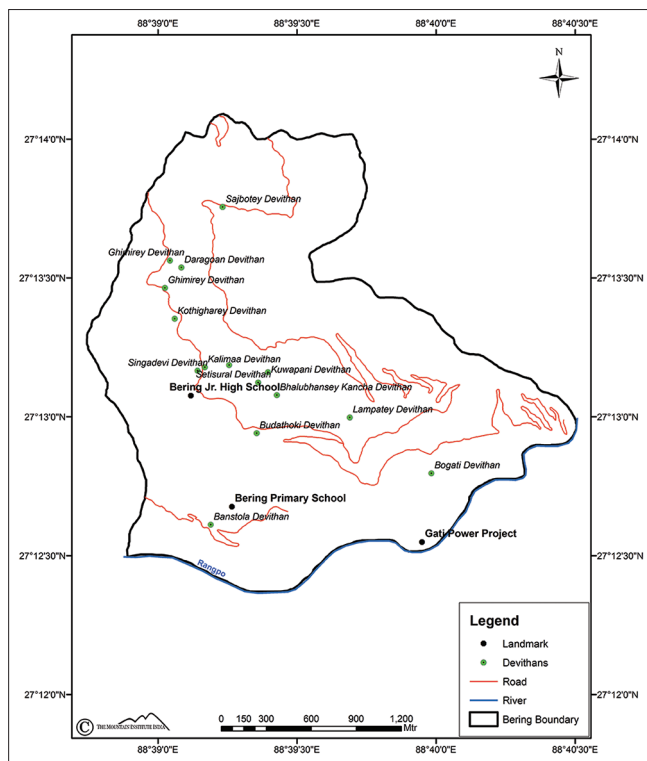
the village. Given the absence of empirical data in Sikkim on sacred groves, it is difficult to draw any conclusions based on size. However, through fieldwork interactions it was explained that the variance in size of the *devithans* in Biring could be explained by availability of land of the family and community. Hence, the size of the *devithan* can also be a marker of a particular community or household's power and status.

This large number within a single village was seemingly in contravention to the popular discourse on *devithans* in Sikkim where one or two are considered to exist in a village. In Biring, a *devithan* is believed to exist from the point of first settlement of a village. But since Biring, as a village, is essentially a rich mosaic of constitutive habitations, it was evident from discussions with village elders that over a period of time, as more habitations have emerged due to expanding population, additional *devithans* have been established, which counters the existing over-simplistic narrative. This relationship shows how the establishment of *devithans* is critical to the construction of the history of locality for the Nepalis in Biring. *Devithans* legitimise a clan or family's history of settlement and as clan/caste-based habitations branch out, *devithans* follow suit, marking a new beginning in each point. The primary explanation for numbers of *devithans* increasing from 4 during the early phase of settlement to the current 15, as offered by the people of Biring, was "*bustiwala ka sankhya zaada ho gaya hain*" (the number of villagers have increased). Hence, *devithans* also become sites that anchor the Nepalis of Biring to their habitation, and subsequently, the landscape of Sikkim. Very few families acknowledged having settled in Biring largely after 1920s (and some after 1975) and most asserted that their ancestral (i.e., *baaje*) association with the settlement (and hence the village) span 'countless' generations, hence making their family autochthonous to Biring. In such conversations, *devithans* were the most frequently used referent to validate local claims of autochthony. "My family in Biring is as old as that *devithan*" was often heard in the habitations in Biring. However, there is an undercurrent of insecurity in such claims. A shadow of Intelligence Bureau (IB) investigations for locating illegal Nepali immigrants in Sikkim looms large on individuals in Biring who are unrecognised by the state. Possible deportation resulting from weak citizenship claims is avoided through protective kinship networks. Respondents whose relatives or they themselves are at risk from such investigations are said to be more vocal about their autochthony.

While in the larger context of Sikkim, Nepalis still remain culturally deterritorialised, in Biring, locality becomes "a staging ground for identity" (Appadurai 1996: 41). Ceremonies, rituals, practices, and knowledge converge around *devithans* to provide a sense of belonging for Nepalis. The concept of belonging subscribes to "the construction of locality... as a structure of feeling, a property of social life, and an ideology of situated community" (Appadurai 1996: 199). Belonging and locality also helps contradict the totalising logic, which views territory as a primary source of identity. Hence, the material discourse of land ownership remains an

**Table 2**  
*List and area of devithans in Biring village*

Name of devithan	Administrative Ward	Habitation	Area (hectares)
Kali ma ka devithan	Upper Biring	Subbagaon	1
Kuapaani devithan	Upper Biring	Raigaon	1.5
Seti Sural devithan	Lower Biring	Kamigaon	0.5
Ghimirey devithan	Upper Biring	Upper Biring	1
Sasboti devithan	Upper Biring	Manpur	0.5
Jyotidhara devithan	Upper Biring	Upper Biring	1
Daragaon devithan	Upper Biring	Daragaon	0.5
Bogoti devithan	Lower Biring	Kerabari	0.25
Singha devithan	Upper Biring	Subbagaon	1.5
Kotighar devithan	Upper Biring	Upper Biring	0.5
Bhalubashe Kancha devithan	Upper Biring	Subbagaon	2
Ghimirey devithan	Upper Biring	Upper Biring	2
Buratoki devithan	Upper Biring	Upper Biring	1
Lampati devithan	Upper Biring	Upper Biring	1
Banstola Khudurki devithan	Lower Biring	Lower Biring	2



**Figure 2**  
*Location of devithans in Biring (Biring) village<sup>7</sup>*



**Figure 3**  
*Kali Ma Ka Devithan, Biring, East Sikkim*

incomplete aspect of belonging for the Nepalis in Biring who seek to become Sikkimese and subsequently Indian. Though there are a myriad ways by which citizens of Biring construct their belonging, the focus of our research is the role of local sacred sites in such a construction.

Interviews with members from different communities in both upper and lower Biring, who claimed to be managers of *devithans*, pointed to the recent phenomenon of proliferation of *devithans*. It is generally accepted that the *Kali Ma Ka devithan* (Figure 3) and *Kuapaani devithan* are the principal sacred groves of the village. However, faced with many *devithans*, the

official caretaker of the ceremonies that take place in *Kali Ma Ka devithan* said, “Earlier there used to be only one *devithan*, now everybody wants their own”. His melancholic response was actually a discovery. The need for individual Nepali clans/caste groups to establish their own *devithan* seemed to contest the popular discourse that sacred groves are communal sites where people from different communities come together for worship and collective rituals. Most of the *devithans* in Biring are within individual private lands, and the caste or clan affiliation of the owner indicates that the *devithan* is largely for the worship of that specific clan or caste group, or in some cases for individual families.

This phenomenon finds credence in the words of a village *jhankri* (shaman), interviewed outside a *mandir* (temple) near *Thapagaon*. Asked about the difference between a *devithan* and a *mandir*, he said “*devithan paribar ke liye hain aur mandir pura samaj ke liye*” (*devithan* is for family worship while temples are for the entire village). His response encapsulates the phenomenon of the changing nature of symbolic value of *devithans* for individual Nepali families, and accounts for their proliferation. When a Chettri

patriarch in lower Biring was asked why he felt the need to initiate worship at a separate *devithan* when a community site already existed, he cited the need for a separate place for worship for his own family, without disconnecting from the larger village. He said that worshipping at *Kali Ma Ka devithan* links his family to the larger village society and authenticates belonging. However, worshipping at *Buratoki devithan*, located on land owned by a person from the same caste group, is both an assertion and consolidation of a family's specific ethnic or caste-based identity. This is further cemented by his family's investment in the site where stairs and a railing had been constructed. Such acts reify the status of a family, establish their power and authority, and substantiate belonging.

Evidence of *devithans* as sites for belonging was apparent in one of the three specific cases where an individual family had established their own *devithan* in Biring, namely *Jyotidhara devithan*. Not only is this *devithan* interesting because it was established by an individual family who had recently settled in Biring, but also because it is rare to associate a person's name with a *devithan*, i.e., *Jyoti*. *Devithans* are largely referred to either by the resident *devi* (goddess), such as *Kali*, *Teen Kanya*, *Saath Kanya*, *Singha*, or by the clan or caste group on whose land it is located, such as *Bogoti (Chhetri)*, *Ghimire (Bahun)*, *Buratoki (Chhetri)*, or by the name of a key species of tree located in the *devithan*, such as *Lampati (Duabanga grandiflora)* or *Sasboti (Terminalia myriocarpa)*. '*Jyoti dhara devithan* makes the relationship of the person apparent. Such naming not only etches the new settler's presence into the landscape but also serves to legitimise "the immigrants right to land and their place in society" (Sheridan 2009: 82). Hence, for Nepalis, *devithans* emerge as a response to the need for belonging in a landscape, at a constellation of community, clan or caste group, and even individual household level. Apart from satiating the need for belonging, *devithans* also "legitimate resource ownership and political influence" (Sheridan 2009: 82), for example, *Singha devithan* is popularly referred to as *Mandal devithan*, after the former village revenue collector on whose land it is situated.

That *devithans* satiate the quest for belonging is evident in the pride associated with the history and age of particular sacred groves with specific caste or clan groups. Almost every family interviewed who had a *devithan* on their own land or on that of their kin, insisted on visiting the *devithan* together and discussing its history in detail. The appropriation of the symbolic value of the *devithan*, for belonging and display of cultural association with the landscape, is evident in *Seti Nag ka devithan* (*seti nag* means white snake), which is located in the land of a family from the Kami community in Biring. Kamis are included under the category of Scheduled Castes in Sikkim, and though a part of the Nepali constellation of communities, are not known to have *devithans* on their land. This discovery, serendipitous to say the least, pointed out the desirability of *devithans* as symbolic of the presence and status of a family or a clan within a village. When other residents were asked whether they were conversant with members of Scheduled

Caste households in Biring who have their own *devithan*, they expressed surprise and disbelief. Nevertheless, not only was the *devithan* present, it was subjected to regular worship by a *jhankri* (shaman) of the Kami community. Interestingly, a neighbouring Kami household member claimed that the *devithan* belonged to his family, rather than his neighbours, and said that he regularly worshipped there. The original owners of the land were quite surprised to hear this and could not explain why their neighbour had made such a claim. This contesting claim over a *devithan* even within Kami households is further indication of the subaltern aspiration that coalesces around these sites.

This points towards the growing importance of *devithans* as source of status and pride. The Kami household that established their own sacred grove also offers their prayers at the *Kali Ma Ka devithan*, so their claim of having a separate *devithan* just for performing rituals hardly makes sense. *Devithans* in this case are not only emerging as symbols of cultural claim and recognition/assertion of family history within landscapes for the traditional higher caste Nepali ethnic groups, but also for the Nepali Scheduled Caste communities. This is particularly significant as Scheduled Caste Nepali groups in Biring have very little land under ownership given that their position in the Nepali Hindu caste hierarchy largely stems from their engagement with non-land-based occupations. Kami households are considered to be socioeconomically worse off compared to Limboos, Rais and other higher caste Nepalis. This phenomenon of establishing their own *devithan* is also expressive of their political desire to be considered as equal members within the Nepali constellation of communities. *Devithans* are hence not only symbolic of the need for expressing Nepali association with landscapes outside its constellation of communities, but also emerges as a movement within the constellation where it has become symbolic of social mobility.

However, establishment of a *devithan* is not contingent on the need for belonging or influence of the landowner alone. Myths and their interpretation play a significant role in rationalising such an enterprise. The interpretation of myths and supernatural events and the identification of a *devithan* fall in the domain of the village *bijuwa/jhankri/phedangma* (shamans<sup>8</sup> for the Khambu Rai, Bahun-Chhetri, and Limboo communities, respectively). Special events can establish the need for creation of a *devithan*.

A *devi* (goddess) is supposed to be located in a grove only if the shaman can sense her presence through the medium of a trance-like state referred to as *chinta*. According to the shamans interviewed, a specific *devi* appears to the shaman during *chinta* and leads him to the exact spot where she wants to reside. The shaman physically journeys across the landscape guided by the *devi* to her preferred location. Where she gets him to stop becomes a *devithan* and is identified with the *devi* who guided the shaman. However, a *chinta* does not take place independently but always for a specific purpose, which ranges from finding a solution to a problem to an actual identification of a *devithan* on an owners land. For example, the

reason articulated by the Mandal (i.e., former village revenue collector) for establishing his *devithan* was that the flow of water in the *dhara* (spring) located near his house on which his family was dependent had decreased and he wanted to increase it. A *bijuwa* told him that establishing a *devithan* around the spring would increase the flow in the *dhara*. Another *bijuwa* had a dream in which a *devi* appeared and told him to ask the Mandal to establish a *devithan* next to his *dhara* near a specific *lal patti* (*Euphorbia pulcherrima*) tree. Hence, if the *devithan* legitimises belonging or influence, it needs to acquire legitimacy for itself first through myths and shamans. At the same time, the shamans themselves are wedded to locating *devithans* as a way of legitimising their authority as spirit mediums.

Once established, a *devithan* does not simply exist to offer legitimacy to an individual or group but also exerts its own influence. The story of the death of a labourer whose head was crushed under a road roller with which the driver had accidentally demolished a sacred grove during road construction, lends legitimacy to the potency of divine powers of the goddess and her penchant for vengeance. Such stories go on to negotiate the process of road building itself, with engineers refusing to cut roads across areas containing a sacred grove. This leads to ordering of the landscape in ways other than what had been intended in techno-bureaucratic planning. Thus, myths create and conserve *devithans*.

### CONCLUSION: TOWARDS A CULTURAL POLITICS OF SACRED SITES

Our analysis of the cultural politics of sacred sites, i.e., *devithans* in Biring, is in consonance with Arnold and Gold's (2001: xv) statement that "sacred landscapes may be constructed, manipulated, otherwise reimagined through cultural politics". Worshipping nature at sacred sites in Biring has become a "significant political instrument" (Sithole 2004: 132) used for substantiating claims to indigeneity, as in the case of Buddhist Lepcha-Bhutias, and assertion of autochthony for the Nepalis. Proliferation of *devithans* in Biring is indicative of their symbolic importance, manifest in their display as cultural capital. A *devithan* in Biring can serve to link a family with locality and also to the larger sacred landscape of Sikkim. In Biring, sacred sites such as *devithans* satiate the "quest for belonging" (Geschiere 2009: 1). They also link local assertions of ethnicity and identity with larger group identities such as the categories of Scheduled Caste or Tribe generated at national and supranational levels.

The relation that we observed in Biring between increasing number of habitations and sacred groves finds resonance in Sheridan's (2009: 77) study of North Pare Mountains of northeastern Tanzania where sacred groves served as markers for new settlements. It also resonates closely with Chouin's (2002: 39) observations on sacred groves in coastal Ghana, where he identified them as "historical markers and archaeological indicators."

Through this research in Biring, we establish sacred sites as "politicised environment" (Bryant and Bailey 1997: 27)

that pose a serious question to existing assumptions of sacred groves in Sikkim (and in India) as homeostatic systems where 'nature' and 'culture' harmonise to create idyllic village societies. Such narratives in turn blame the decline of sacred groves and sites on external factors such as modernisation, industrial culture and markets, and in the process create another simplistic narrative, blocking inquiry into the inner mechanics of cultural politics by which sacred groves are either threatened or sustained. Such narratives have largely succeeded in bringing recognition to sacred groves as traditional/alternative/decentralised forms of conservation in India (e.g. Gadgil and Guha 1995), but do not guarantee their continued survival. Unless the political and cultural underpinnings are accounted for in analysing and questioning narratives of sacred grove decline, we will only have half of the picture on which to build conservation strategies.

It is the symbolic aspects of *devithans* that have contributed significantly to their proliferation in Biring, and of sacred groves in general in Sikkim (Arora 2006) as opposed to their national trend of continued loss. Unfortunately, there is a temporal mismatch in sacred groves scholarship in India. It seeks solutions to the present and future crises of loss of sacred groves, caused largely by external phenomenon such as urbanisation, industrial culture, and markets, through past religious and cultural practices. Hence, calls for renewing traditions for sacred grove conservation may shift focus away from present-day cultural politics internal to communities that is perhaps generating a new kind of politically rooted conservation ethic.

In the larger discourse of environment and development in Sikkim, the continued invisibilisation of Nepali association with landscapes has led to erasure of their stories of loss from dam-related displacement in the talk and text of anti-dam movements. In Biring itself, Nepali families displaced from villages near river Rongli have taken shelter, and they too have significant grievance against dams, perhaps as much as Lepchas and Bhutias. But the anti-dam movement in Sikkim remains largely anchored on issues of loss of indigenous culture of the Lepchas and does not provide space for Nepalis to articulate their tales of loss. The successful cancellation of four of five hydroelectric power projects in 2008 in the Lepcha reserve area of Dzonghu (McDuie-Ra 2011) on grounds of marginalised cultures, vanishing tribes and vandalising of sacred landscapes, is also a distraction, as the state Government has continued its intensive dam building in the not-so-sacred landscapes in all remaining districts of Sikkim.

In Sikkim, religious worship of nature has emerged as a key delineator between who belongs in the sacred landscape and who does not. Autochthony is an invisible line that maintains a separation of the Bhutia-Lepchas from the Nepalis, and as Geschiere (2009: 1) mentions, "[R]eligion plays a front-stage role" in such an enterprise. In such a context, establishment of *devithans*, as witnessed in Biring, is also related to the need for the Nepalis in Sikkim to assert their autochthony and cultural claim to the landscape. This has largely been spurred by a race between different ethnic groups in Sikkim



to attain the politically lucrative status of Scheduled Tribe, within which only the Lepcha, Bhutia, Limboo and Tamang have been included. The Ministry of Tribal Affairs (MoTA), Government of India had a set of criteria for recognition of a specific group as Scheduled Tribe (ST). Primary among them were “primitive traits, distinctive culture, geographical isolation, shyness of contact with the community at large, and backwardness” (MoTA, 2017). Of the many facets of ‘backwardness’ that groups had to exhibit in order to be legitimated as a tribe, worship of nature was one. In July 2006, MoTA developed a new policy, which removed ‘primitive traits’ and ‘backwardness’ and replaced them with “community consciousness” and “harmonisation with nature” (CRESP 2008: viii). Nevertheless, this kept the designation open to claims of religious and spiritual associations with landscapes. This was further accentuated when the Government of Sikkim constituted the B.K. Roy Burman Committee in 2005 to push for recognition of all resident ethnic groups of Sikkim as Scheduled Tribes (ST). The government asked for an ethnographic report from each ethnic association to be submitted to the committee, which would lead them to substantiate their claims to ST status. Most of these reports which were published as Annexures to the Commission for Review of Environmental and Social Sector Policies, Plans and Programmes (i.e. CRESP) in 2008, attempt to establish ‘nature worship’ as a significant claim to ‘tribal’ culture.

Nepali claims to autochthony, apart from other factors, also depend on showcasing a culture of conservation. They serve to validate Nepalis as ‘keepers’ of Sikkim’s landscapes as much as the Bhutias and Lepchas. They also serve to refute historical allegations that Nepali allochthons had little love for the land. Hence, *devithans* can also become a “significant political instrument” (Sithole 2004: 132) in the politics of belonging and autochthony given that worship of nature has emerged as policy criteria for getting recognised as a Scheduled Tribe. The need to integrate into the nation state is not purely driven by the need to belong as Sikkimese in India but also by politico-economic motives of accessing a larger universe of welfare schemes and development benefits at the national level. This encourages strategic deployment of essentialist representations as that of nature worshipping autochthones. Sacred natural sites of Sikkim become symbols used by the Lepchas and Bhutias to legitimise their claim to indigeneity and resultantly a political claim to the landscape of Sikkim. In the same context, *devithans* may emerge as a critical content in the text of ‘nature worship’ which Nepali communities are willing to apply as a claim to autochthony. Hence, *devithans* move beyond the trappings of a static ecological idyll and become complex and dynamic sites located at the heart of “cross-cutting matrixes of culture, power, and history” (Moore 1998: 346).

The case study of the proliferation of *devithans* in the village of Biring, East Sikkim, takes place in a context of limited availability of prior research and data on sacred groves in Sikkim in general. This made it difficult to draw conclusions on whether the same phenomenon recurs in other Nepali villages in Sikkim. However, drawing from interviews with

local residents of Biring, civil society members, academics, and government officials and also on earlier studies on Nepali sacred groves in Nepal (Stevens, 1989; Mansberger 1991), such an occurrence seems quite probable, and merits future research. However, our study aims to unpack contestations and appropriations around the symbolic value of sacred groves and the larger political context with which they engage. In a context where worship of nature has become critical for different ethnic groups to validate political and cultural claims to Sikkim’s sacred landscape, *devithans* are a potential political instrument. This symbolic aspect of sacred groves, including political and gendered implications, needs attention in both conservation practice and future scholarship.

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## NOTES

1. Map acquired from Global Administrative Areas Database (<http://gadm.org/>) accessed on 29/01/17
2. Biring is officially referred to as Bering in some documents, while Biring in some others. We have used the phonetic version, i.e., Biring as it is closer to how it is pronounced in the local area.
3. As per Government of India Census 2011.
4. Rais are classified by the Government of Sikkim as Most Backward Community (MBC) and there is a movement underway where Rais are seeking the status of Scheduled Tribe at par with the Limboos and Tamangs.
5. Bahuns and Chhetris are classified as Other Backward Communities (OBCs) in Sikkim.
6. Limboos are now recognised as Scheduled Tribes in the state of Sikkim and West Bengal.
7. Map developed by The Mountain Institute, Sikkim
8. The word ‘shaman’ has been used for its familiarity to the English reader. In the context of Sikkim, ‘shamans’ are categorised differently based on their role in society, which ranges from healing to communication between the living and the dead to oral documentation of clan history.

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