

CELEBRATING NATURE-CULTURE RELATIONSHIPS

ADI-BOKAR COMMUNITY'S RELATIONSHIPS WITH HIGH-ALTITUDE MOUNTAINS AND LAKES IN MONIGONG, ARUNACHAL PRADESH

Submitted by Taju Pujen



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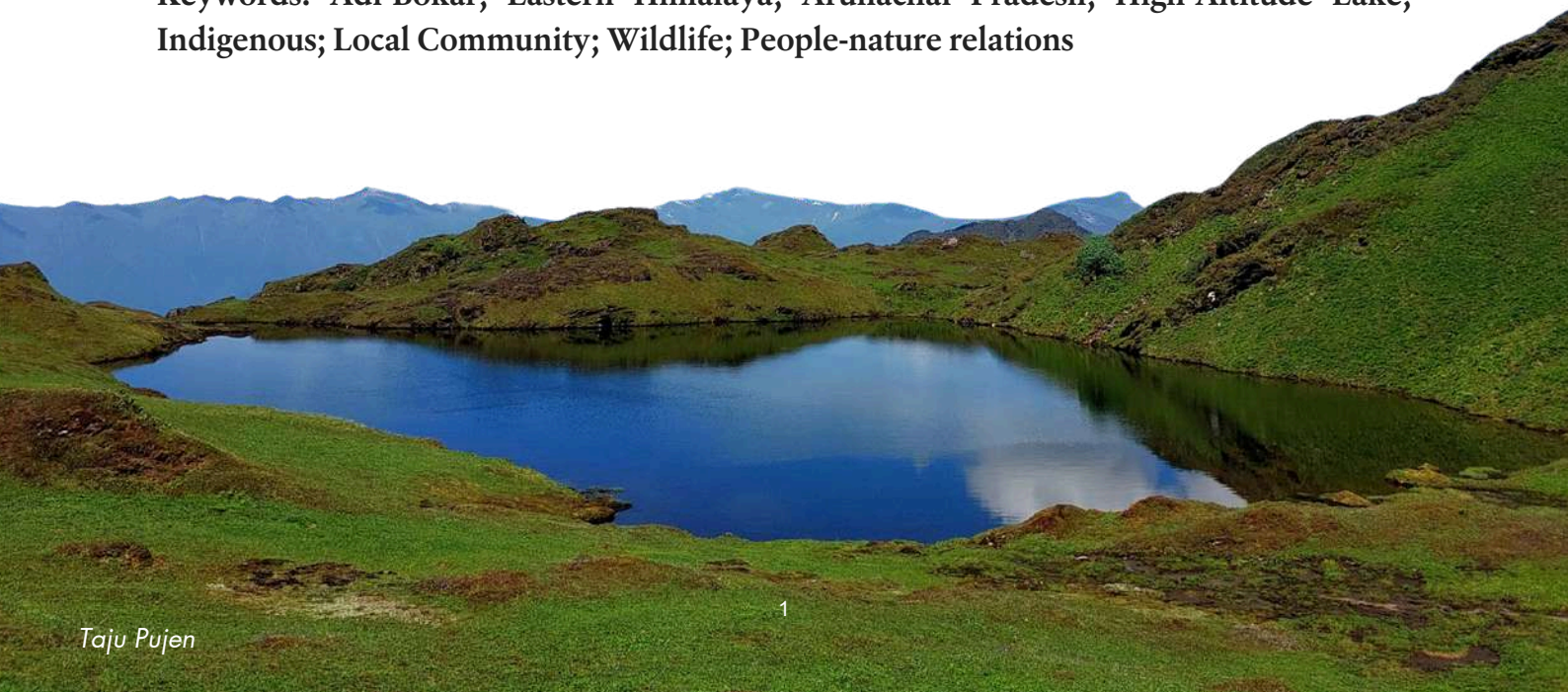
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ABSTRACT

Agropastoral communities in the Himalayan highlands boast spiritual and material relations with the mountain regions and high-altitude lakes. Arunachal Pradesh, Northeast India, in the Eastern Himalaya, consists of several such cultures, whose relations with their landscapes remain understudied. In this study, we explored the relations that the Adi-Bokar community of Shi-Yomi district has with the surrounding mountain regions and high-altitude lakes. With a qualitative social research approach, we employed interviews, participant observation and participatory mapping to understand the stories, beliefs and ritual practices of the community with respect to the mountains and lakes, how livelihood practices are shaped up by these ecosystems, and what kinds of social and ecological changes are being experienced by these community.

Mountains and high-altitude lakes are part of Adi-Bokar cosmology and a dwelling place for several deities and spirits. Several kinds of rituals have been in practice that are related to the wellbeing of people and the non-human beings that inhabit this landscape. Through ecosystem services, the mountains and lakes have also intricately affected several kinds of livelihoods of the Adi-Bokar community, including jhum farming, water harvesting, hunting, timber and non-timber forest produce collection. However, this spiritual-material continuum of the place is now threatened due to two interconnected reasons: religious change from indigenous faith to Christianity, and landscape change due to infrastructure building, deforestation and climate change. Only a few people remaining in the region still practice the old faith and the rituals. One of the respondents voiced concerns about the loss of such knowledge systems, and thereby identity. While the younger generation is getting alienated from age-old practices, a new bio-cultural conservation programme and dedicated research documenting the biological and cultural aspects of the region could help in preserving the balance between tradition and modernity.

Keywords: Adi-Bokar; Eastern Himalaya; Arunachal Pradesh; High-Altitude Lake; Indigenous; Local Community; Wildlife; People-nature relations



INTRODUCTION

Mountain regions are being recognised as socio-ecological systems where ecosystems, culture, and livelihoods are tightly connected (Alessa et al., 2018). In a study of a Swedish mountain county, residents who felt stronger place attachment to favourite personal and collective sites reported greater well-being when visiting those sites (Knez & Eliasson, 2017). Understanding the relational and cultural aspects of mountain and glacial lakes is important given that human presence is not a recent or incidental feature of these landscapes, but one shaped by long-standing, active place-based connections (Ferrari et al., 2021).

Myths, legends, and symbolic tales have a significant influence on how people understand, appreciate, and engage with natural environments. The Loch Ness myth in Scotland, for instance, illustrates how a narrative can become culturally and economically central to a place through tourism (Moir, 2015). In the Himalayas, considered the abode of snow and a reservoir of fresh water, high-altitude lakes are treated as sacred across multiple faiths and language groups: Hemkund Sahib for Sikhs in Uttarakhand, lake Mansarovar near Mount Kailash for Hindus and Jains, and Anavatapta ("the unheated one") for Buddhists and Bon followers (Bernbaum, 2022). The Sherpa people, meanwhile, regard the Khumbila area of Mount Everest as a sacred deity and protector that provides food and water and must not be disturbed: a relationship grounded in everyday provisioning rather than pilgrimage. Across these high-altitude faith traditions, cultural narratives, spiritual meanings, and symbolic connections frequently shape how people relate to mountains and lakes.

Currently, the literature frequently treats place attachment, cultural ecosystem services, governance dynamics, and folklore as distinct components, which limits understanding of how these factors work together and can inform conservation in these dynamic ecosystems. Mountains are rarely seen as neutral physical places for many indigenous and local communities in India; rather, they are integrated into cosmological frameworks that actively shape resource use and everyday activities (Tamang & Pegu, 2025).

Although the Eastern Himalaya is recognised for its exceptional ecological and socio-cultural diversity, significant knowledge gaps remain due to uneven research coverage, particularly in biodiversity and ecological studies (Basnet et al., 2019; Rana et al., 2022). At the same time, the region is characterised by strong interdependencies between people and nature, with local communities relying on mountain ecosystems for livelihoods, cultural practices, and ecosystem services. A study of the Adi-Bokar community of Arunachal Pradesh in the Eastern Himalayas found a deep relationship with high-altitude regions (Pujen & Singh, 2026). Before travelling to these high altitudes, for instance, a man would live separately from his wife for three days, a practice strictly followed in the belief

that any "wrong relationship" before the journey would lead to unsuccessful hunting or accidents in the mountains.

Such practices reflect how religious beliefs, taboos, and ritual practices serve as unofficial but effective systems of environmental governance; with high-altitude regions in the Eastern Himalaya, safeguarded by respect for ancestral spirits rather than by state authority (Aiyadurai, 2021). Yet this governance does not operate in isolation: it is embedded in everyday cultural meaning, shapes how livelihoods are practised, and is itself vulnerable to changes, now underway across the region. Despite such taboos regulating behaviour before travel, hunting pressure on species like snow leopard, bharal, and musk deer remains a documented threat in the state's high-altitude areas (Mishra et al., 2006).

This study takes the Adi-Bokar community of Arunachal Pradesh as a case study through which to understand how high-altitude mountains and lakes are deeply connected to cultural meanings. Building on this, the study has three specific objectives: to understand and document the cultural beliefs, stories, rituals, and traditional ecological knowledge associated with mountain-lake landscapes; to document local livelihood practices, including agriculture, pastoralism, gathering, and mobility, as shaped by the surrounding mountains and lakes; and to explore how landscape changes, whether environmental or infrastructural, influence livelihood, cultural practices, and overall well-being across four villages in a high-altitude district of Arunachal Pradesh.



STUDY AREA

The study was conducted in the Shaji III segment of the Monigong Circle, Shi-Yomi district, Arunachal Pradesh. The Monigong Circle forms part of the ancestral homeland of the Indigenous Adi-Bokar community. Shaji III comprises of four villages - Labukore (1,900 m asl), Lusing (2,000 m asl), Sukdom (1,800 m asl), and Simugong (2,300 m asl) - which together contain 32 households belonging to the Shaji clan of the Adi-Bokar. Shaji III is situated within the Eastern Himalaya biodiversity hotspot along the Indo-China international border in Arunachal Pradesh (see Fig. 1).

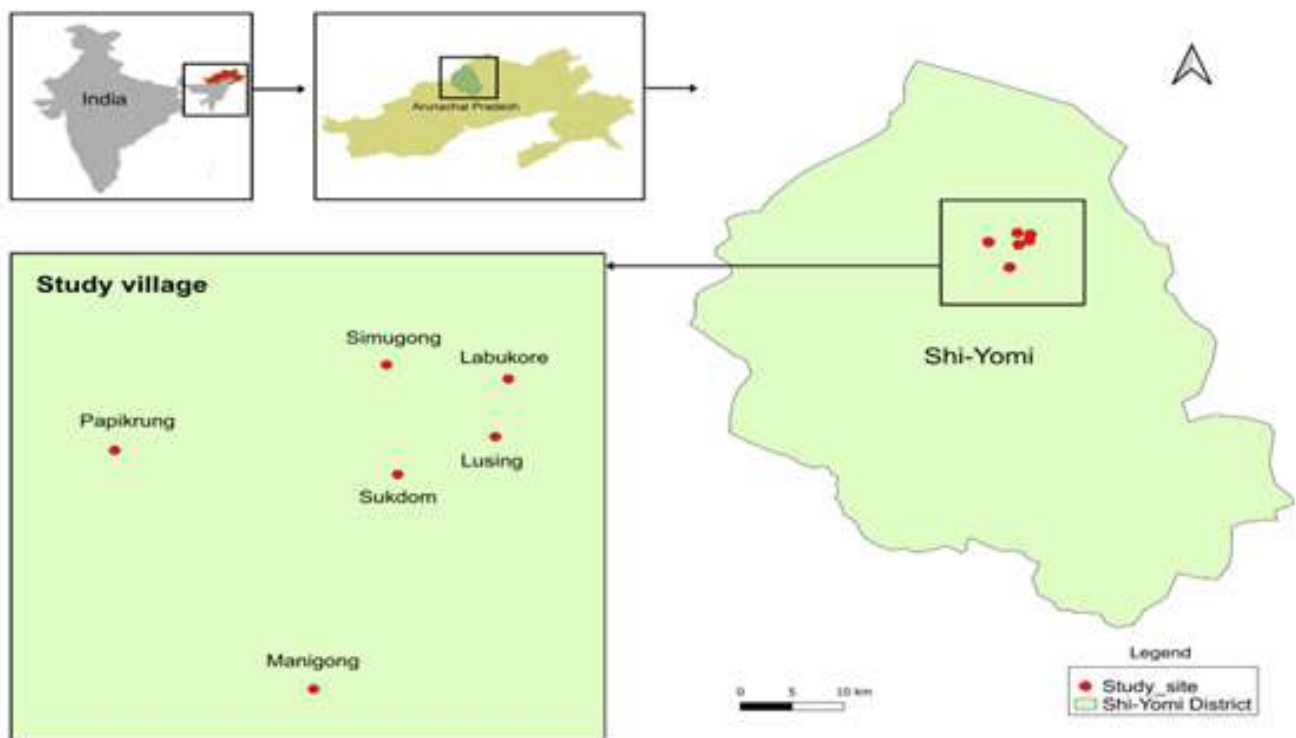


Figure 1: Study Area Monigong circle, Shi-Yomi district, Arunachal Pradesh. Source: Taju Pujen & Aditi Ramchiary.

The landscape is characterized by rocky and snow-covered mountains, high-altitude streams, alpine vegetation, and dense forest cover, with the elevation ranging from 1800-4000m asl (Green Hub, 2023) (see Fig. 2).



Figure 2: Typical mountainous landscape at the study site. Source: Taju Pujen

It is also home to numerous rare and endemic mammal species like the Mishmi takin (*Budorcas taxicolor taxicolor*), red panda (*Ailurus fulgens*), Himalayan black bear (*Ursus thibetanus*), musk deer (*Moschus leucogaster*), and bird species like Sclater's Monal (*Lophophorus sclateri*) and Fire-tailed Myzornis (*Myzornis pyrrhoura*). Local livelihoods are forest-dependent, including small-scale farming, all highly suited to the mountainous landscape (see Fig. 3). The advent of NGOs and researchers in recent years has brought in livelihood support through eco-tourism initiatives where residents earn cash incomes working as tour guides, running homestays, and managing self-help groups to make red panda-themed souvenirs. These efforts in conservation and eco-tourism are developing newer pathways to diverse livelihoods and research interest in the landscape. The main festival celebrated by the Adi-Bokar is a winter harvest festival called *Podi-Barbi*, celebrated annually on December 5th.



Figure 3: Adi-Bokar traditional house in Simugong. Source: Taju Pujen

The Adi-Bokar community has a population of 10,000 (as per estimates provided by local community representatives) and is a sub-tribe of the larger Adi Indigenous Peoples in Arunachal Pradesh. The region is organised into various clan-based segments, each comprising several villages. Like many other indigenous and borderland communities in India, the Adi-Bokar face significant challenges, including limited access to health and educational infrastructure, electricity, road connectivity, and livelihood opportunities. Published information on the Adi-Bokar community remains limited, with most available data confined to demographic statistics. Knowledge of local history, cultural practices, and relationships with the surrounding environment is primarily preserved through oral traditions and folklore, which serve as important mechanisms for intergenerational knowledge transmission. However, community members report that increasing education and employment-related migration among younger generations is influencing patterns of knowledge transmission, contributing to changes in the continuity and practice of traditional knowledge systems. While traditionally the Adi-Bokar community practised their indigenous faith and cultural traditions, in recent decades, much of the population has adopted Christianity.

Shaji III has 15 known high-altitude lakes (see Fig. 4), which form a significant part of the ecological and cultural landscape of the residents here. These lakes serve as the primary source of drinking water for the settlements and support downstream hydrological systems. The surrounding high-altitude mountains provide habitat for wildlife species that have traditionally contributed to local subsistence practices. Beyond their ecological value, these lakes and mountain landscapes hold profound cultural, spiritual, and historical significance. They are embedded within Adi-Bokar oral traditions, ancestral connections, and customary travel routes that have connected generations to the landscape for centuries.

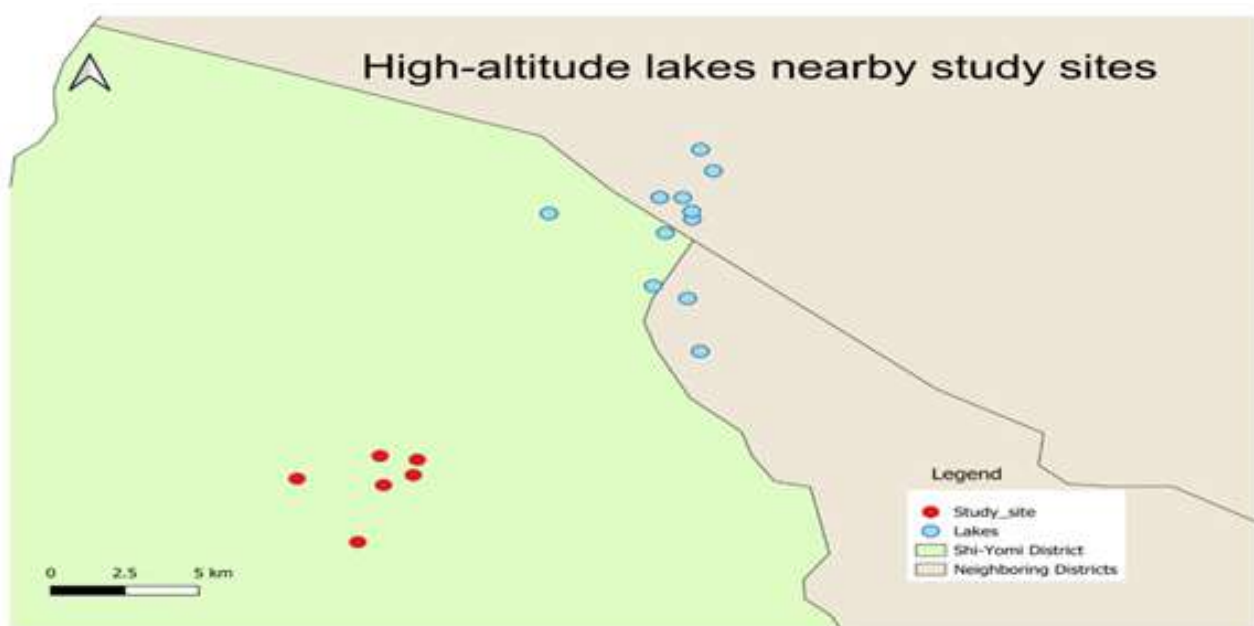


Figure 4: High-altitude lakes near to the study area. Source: Taju Pujen & Aditi Ramchiary

Positionality

Taju Pujen (TP) was born and raised in Labukore village, one of the four villages comprising the Shaji III segment, and grew up within Adi-Bokar cultural traditions and ways of life. Although he left the village at the age of 14 to pursue formal education in the nearby town of Aalo, he maintained close ties with the community through regular visits and extended stays during school holidays. As a child, he accompanied his father and grandfather on journeys to high-altitude mountains and lakes, experiences that fostered an early familiarity with the landscapes that are the focus of this study.

TP's position as both a community member and researcher shaped the research process in important ways. Existing relationships and shared cultural experiences enabled conversations that were grounded in trust and familiarity. At the same time, years spent away from the village for education and employment had created a degree of distance from certain aspects of Adi-Bokar cultural life. As a result, the fieldwork became not only a process of documenting community knowledge, but also one of reconnecting with and relearning cultural practices, oral histories, and understandings of the relationships between people and the natural world. Many conversations extended beyond the formal interview setting, with community members sharing stories, observations, and interpretations of seasons, birds, plants, and landscapes. These interactions enriched the research and deepened TP's own understanding of Adi-Bokar culture, highlighting the fluid nature of insider-outsider positionality in ethnographic research (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009).



METHODOLOGY

To document the Adi-Bokar community's relationships with high-altitude mountains and lakes and examine contemporary changes in these relationships, we adopted a qualitative research approach. Qualitative methods are well suited to examining place-based cultural values, lived experiences, and environmental knowledge, enabling a nuanced understanding of how community members perceive, experience, and engage with these landscapes (Bernard, 2017).

Fieldwork (see Figs. 5 & 6) for this study was conducted between April and May 2026 by TP. Access to the high-altitude mountains and lakes was constrained by the short duration of fieldwork and the logistical challenges associated with reaching these sites, which typically require multi-day expeditions. To overcome these challenges, TP drew on his familiarity with the region and prior experience visiting several high-altitude locations. As an initial step, a community meeting was convened in Lusing village with representatives from all four villages in the Shaji III segment to introduce the study and obtain permission from village headmen and Gram Panchayat members. This also facilitated the identification of potential participants. The meeting was attended by 30 community members (17 men and 12 women), five of whom were youth. Using snowball sampling, attendees recommended individuals with direct experience of high-altitude landscapes through hunting, herding, and seasonal travel, as well as elders knowledgeable about local histories, oral traditions, and cultural practices. This process led to identifying a key informant who is among the last practitioners of the indigenous Adi-Bokar faith in the study area. Additional participants were purposively selected to include village elders, former hunters, and individuals with experience visiting high-altitude mountains and lakes.

Given that men historically constituted the primary group accessing these high-altitude environments, interviews focused on individuals with direct experience of these landscapes. To understand contemporary changes in community-landscape relationships, interviews were also conducted with women and younger community members (25-40 years), providing perspectives across generations and social groups. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, group discussions, informal conversations, and participatory mapping.

Interviews were conducted after obtaining approval from the Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC approval no. HREC-2026-04) from Wildlife Conservation Society-India. Following a Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) process, participants were informed about the objectives of the study, the voluntary nature of their participation, and their right to decline to answer questions or withdraw from the study at any stage.



Figure 5: In-depth interview with an elderly woman at Monigong town. Source: Taju Pujen



Figure 6: Group discussion with Adi-Bokar community members at Lusing Village. Source: Taju Pujen

TP conducted semi-structured interviews and group discussions with community elders to document knowledge and experiences related to high-altitude lakes and mountains. He also engaged in open-ended discussions with individuals about local folklore, oral histories, and cultural practices, taking advantage of informal interactions throughout the fieldwork period to gather contextual information. Interviews were conducted in the Adi-Bokar language and audio-recorded using a mobile phone with participants' consent. Recordings were subsequently translated and transcribed into English for analysis. A field diary was maintained to record discussions and other observations during fieldwork. TP initiated fieldwork in Labukore and Lusingyingbe and, following thematic saturation, expanded data collection to Simugong, Monigong, and Sukdom. Apart from interviews, a participatory mapping exercise was conducted with five community members to identify and map high-altitude lakes and mountains (see Fig. 7). Participants included village elders and members of TP's own family, including his mother and grandfather, whose knowledge contributed to the mapping process. Mapped locations were reviewed collectively and validated through group discussion and consensus.

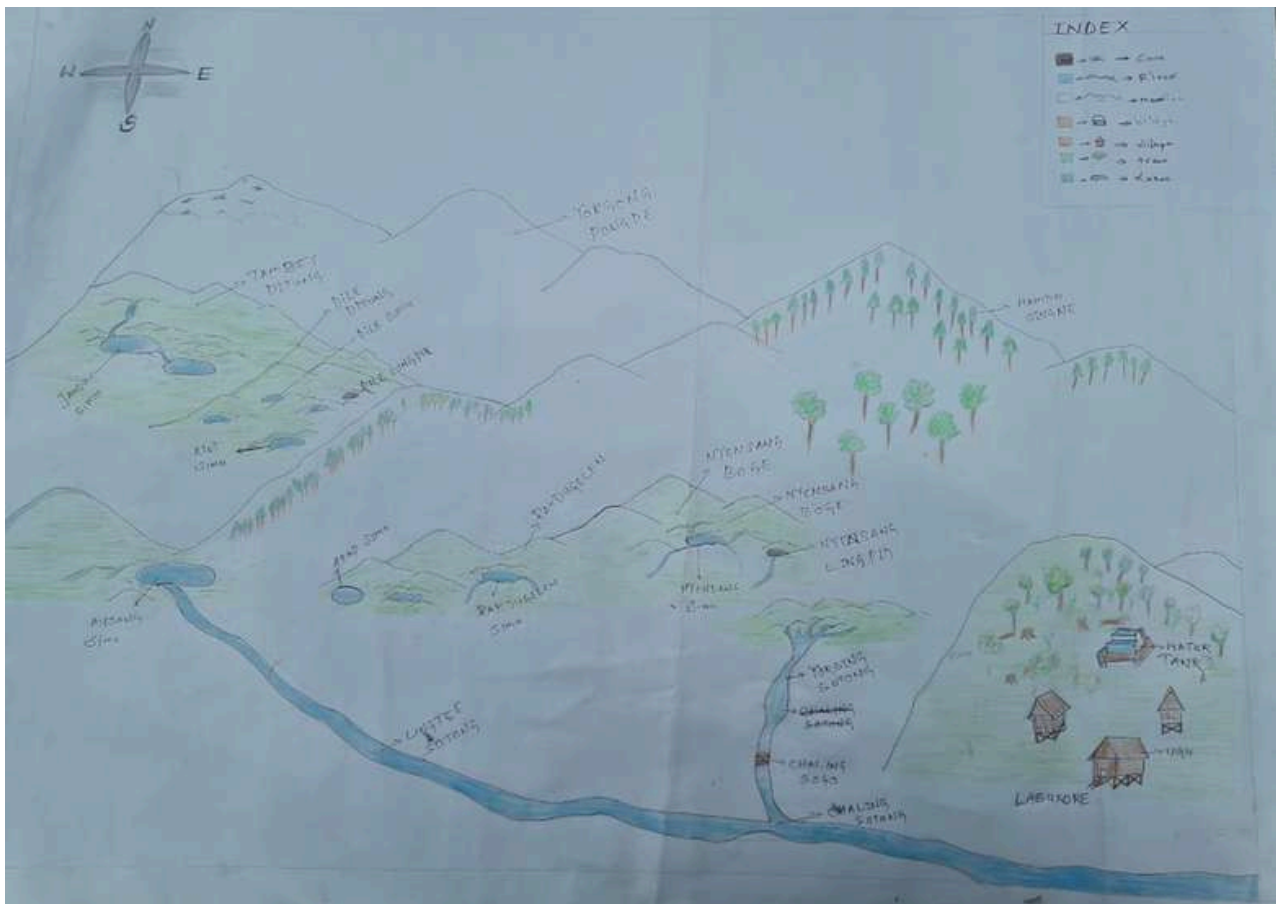


Figure 7: Participatory mapping exercise at Labukore village with the Adi-Bokar community to identify important mountain areas and high-altitude lakes. Source: Taju Pujen

RESULTS

TP collected a total of 20 interviews across four villages: Labukore, Lusingyingbe, Sukdom, and Simugong. In total, 15 interviews were with men (Labukore= 5, Lusing= 3, Sukdom= 4, Simugong= 3) and 5 were with women (Labukore= 2, Lusing= 1, Sukdom= 1, Simugong= 1), all of whom are farmers in their respective villages. Most of the male participants belonged to the 70+ age group, and some were former hunters. The women were all over 50 years old.

Mountain regions and high-altitude lakes

The study area consisted of 7 *ditung* (mountain areas) (see Fig. 8 & 9) and 15 *simu* (high-altitude lakes) (see Fig. 10 & 11) that the Adi-Bokar community members considered important, both materially and spiritually. Table 1 shows the list of these mountain areas and lakes.

Mountain Areas	High-altitude Lakes
1. Kangse ditung	1. Nyensang simu
2. Dile ditung	2. Akap simu
3. Nyensang ditung	3. Rakdu gelen simu
4. Tungkar ogo	4. Kiri simu
5. Jamdo ditung	5. Dile simu 1
6. Kiri ditung	6. Dile simu 2
7. Surtung gibung ditung	7. Dile simu (3), 8. Dile simu 4, 9. Tambey simu, 10. Jamdo simu 1, 11. Jamdo simu 2, 12. Jamdo simu 3, 13. Kanse simu, 14. Simuko simu, 15. Tungkar simu



Figure 8: Didu Ditung mountain landscape, near the study site. Source: Tajü Pujen



Figure 9: Nyensang Ditung mountain landscape, near the study site. Source: Tajü Pujen



Figure 10: Dile Simu 1, high-altitude lake. Source: Tajü Pujen



Figure 11: *Jamdo Simu 2*, high-altitude lake. Source: *Taju Pujen*

The exact meaning of these names has been lost over time, and the respondents could only tell the meaning behind names of a few lakes. The name '*Akap Simu*' came from the time when the early ancestors of the Adi-Bokar community went hunting in the high-altitude mountains. While they were resting on top of a mountain and eating their local millet flatbread (called *akap*), they suddenly spotted a lake. The lake was perfectly round, looking exactly like the *akap* they were holding and eating in their hands. Because of this resemblance, they named the lake '*Akap Simu*.' '*Jamdo Simu*' was named, as this lake was the most distant (*jamdo*) from the habitations. Herders named *Surtung Gibung Ditung* as the first place (*Surtung*) to pitch camp alongside a stream (*Gibung*), from where the high-altitude regions become first visible.

Cultural beliefs, stories, rituals, and traditional ecological knowledge associated with mountain-lake landscapes

At the heart of Adi-Bokar spiritual life was a particular understanding of how the world was arranged: humans were not the owners of the land, the forest, or the water. When respondents talked about *Dibin* — the high-altitude region in the mountains (*Ogo/Tarok*), lakes (*Simu*), and caves (*Lingpik*), there was a quality to their descriptions that went well beyond the landscape. This was not simply where people went to hunt or graze cattle. *Dibin* was, in their understanding, a living place, one that had its own owner which sheltered both humans and animals like red goral, musk deer, Sclater's Monal, eagles, and they were the home of the forest guardian spirit 'Donze Yapom', also known as *Opom* or *Mirgeey*. These beings belong to *Donze Yapom* — the guardian spirit of the high altitudes and to *Uyu* and *Orom*, the spirits more broadly. This was not a metaphor. For residents, it reflects a practical reality that shapes every decision about how and when to enter a forest, fish in a lake, and hunt an animal. Nobody entered this territory casually. Entry into *Donze Yapom*'s territory required permission, and that permission was sought through offering and ritual. A respondent reminisced, *"I have visited high-altitude (Dibin) places many times, but I only ever saw the lakes (Simu) and mountains (Tarok), and I don't know much else about them. However, in the past, whenever I used to go with my elders, they would not allow us to speak loudly. They also forbade burning clothes and plastic in the fireplace. Whenever we crossed a mountain, we were made to place a small stone on it. Upon reaching the camp, they would perform the "yangmar japnam" (ghee marking for the camp) ritual and chant things we didn't understand."*

Rivers, lakes, and other water bodies also held significance in the Adi-Bokar community's traditional belief systems. Water ran through every part of how respondents understood their landscape. Three rivers *Decho Sirung*, *Dangyu Sirung*, and *Tumrung Sirung* were said to be the reason it still rained four to five times a day in the area. Underground water sources, called *Sumi*, were treated as sacred and were woven into the origin story of the villages themselves: a Tibetan figure named *Pobbe ge Lamak* was said to have named Labukore and Lusingyingbe and declared that water in their land would one day be as precious as milk. Oral tradition counted over a hundred such springs in each village. Describing the waterscape of the region as magical, one respondent mentioned, *"Sometimes it's confusing because streams appear in places where there were none before. In my village, we say the weather changes 500 times and 500 honeybees emerge; similarly, there are specific mountains you cross, or certain river points you reach where it will always start to rain."* Another respondent put forward his sense of wonder, *"These lakes also make our high-altitude regions beautiful and serve as important landmarks. When fog makes it impossible to see anything, spotting the lakes helps us find our way and stay on the right route. On clear days, the sun reflects off the water, and the sight of the mountain shadows dancing on the lake is breathtaking. I've also heard, though I don't know the exact spots, that some of these*

lakes were ancient sites where our ancestors performed magic, which required inviting a skilled shaman (medicine man) to conduct the ceremony. Only then would the problem be resolved."

Respondents described the origin of the rituals through the stories of *Abo Tani*, the supreme being for the people of the *Donyi Polo* faith (the main religion of the Adi-Bokar community before the change to Christianity) that involved the mountains and their creatures. *Abo Tani* was once weakened due to the threat from his brother, and to recover, *Abo Tani* started performing the rituals of *Uyu Monam*. *Abo Tani* tried to perform rituals using every animal and bird in the jungle, but his illness was never cured. One day, *Abo Tani* met *Bote* and *Kante*. They told him that in the centre of the upper mountain, there would be a creature making a sound like "chiyop chiyop" (the sound of a chicken chick). They advised him that if he performed the ritual called "*Rogo Pynam*" on this wild chicken chick, his sickness would be cured. *Abo Tani* set out to search for it and successfully found the *Rogo* (baby chicken). He then examined its liver and performed the ritual, which cured his illness. A respondent mentioned, "This is why, whenever the Adi-Bokar people start any ritual, they begin by examining a baby chicken liver. This is how our traditional rituals first originated."

Rituals were very important in the Adi-Bokar community's lives (see Fig. 12 & 13). Before setting foot in *Dibin*, three rituals had to be done. The *Tarjo Pyernam* involves placing a decorated bamboo pole and making an offering to the lake spirits. A respondent explained, "When we travel to high-altitude forests, we perform *Tarjo* rituals at the lakes. We do this because these lakes are inhabited by spirits; the ritual is an offering to the spirits of both the forest and the water. Without it, the spirits of the high-altitude regions will not allow us to travel in peace." The *Tuba Tangnam* is a body purification ritual using Pameh leaves, respondents compared it to the way people use perfume before going somewhere important. A respondent described, "*Because I am entering their territory, I bring these offerings to give to them. Before reaching the alpine areas, we perform the Ompeyok ritual by offering eggs and rice. We also take a white chicken (either male or female). We wash the chicken with water, perform the Ompeyok ritual with rice, and then conduct the Tuba ritual using branches from the Pameh tree. We burn them on a flat stone and mix in a little local ghee*". The *Ompeyok Sunam* is an act of seeking permission from the forest spirits, with rice and eggs as the offering. Respondents were clear that these were not rituals one could skip. Forgetting or ignoring them brought illness, misfortune, or worse. The white cotton used in the *Tarjo* reflected the belief that spirits were drawn to light, clean things—rice, cotton, white thread. Placing a stone at a mountain pass the first time you crossed it was another kind of marking, a way of saying: "*I am building a relationship with this place, and I intend to keep returning*". Taken together, people described *Dibin* as the cleanest, most peaceful place they knew. That was not only an aesthetic feeling, it carried an obligation. One should not pollute it; one should not make noise near the lakes; one should not burn plastic in the fire.



Figure 12: Rogo Pynam ritual performed by the Midgik at Lushing. Source: Coexistence Consortium



Figure 13: Rogo Pynam ritual performed by vthe Midgik at Lushing. Rogo means chicken chick in Adi-Bokar language Source: Coexistence Consortium

The person who mediated the relationship between the community members and the spiritual/natural world is the *Midgik* – the shaman and ritual specialist. When someone fell ill, the *Midgik* read the liver of a baby chicken (*Rogo Pynam*), following the teachings of *Abo Tani* to identify which spirit was responsible and what sacrifice was needed to restore balance. If the *Midgik* communicates that a cow or pig is required, a cow is sacrificed, and the entire community shares the meat. The *Midgik* also led the full range of ceremonies: *Uyu Monam* for spirit appeasement, *Ompeyok Sunam* for entering the forest, *Tarjo Pyernam* for protection near lakes and mountains, *Tuba Tangnam* for purification, *Hynam* when a hunt is failing, *Benlam* after a successful hunt to make sure the animal's spirit does not follow you home. Certain underground springs are considered dangerous, drinking from them or even disturbing them can make a person ill. Recovery requires a *Midgik* to perform the appropriate ritual, using eggs, chicken, and cotton. The *Nyubu* on the other hand is the female equivalent, a shaman figure who appeared in origin stories and in certain ritual contexts. The story of *Nyubu* also involved mountain lakes: Long ago, two *Nyubu* (women shamans) named Bone Miling and Bone Michak arrived at the shores of *Kiri Simu*. They were traveling toward Tibet to bring back *Sayom* (a type of cottage cheese or paneer) for their brother. After collecting the *Sayom* in Tibet, they began their journey home through the dense forests and rugged mountains. On their way back, they heard a mysterious voice calling their names. It resembled their brother's voice, echoing softly across the lake. Alarmed, yet deeply drawn to the sound, Bone Miling and Bone Michak listened carefully. They discovered that the voice was originating from the *Kiri Simu*, the very centre of the lake. Believing the call to be a divine or ancestral summons, the two shamans placed their bundles of *Sayom* at the lake's edge. Using the curd they carried, they shaped a pathway stretching into the still waters, known as *Sayom Lingzang* ("the path of paneer"). Holding each other's hands, they entered the lake, performing the sacred *Nyubu Henam* ritual as they descended. They walked deeper into the water until a third of their bodies vanished beneath the shimmering surface. There, they clasped hands tightly, chanting and continuing the ritual. Before long, both Bone Miling and Bone Michak were completely swallowed by the waters of *Kiri Simu*, never to return. Even today, the Bokar people believe that the traces of *Sayom Lingzang*, the path made of paneer, remain imprinted in the rocks beneath *Kiri Simu*. The layering of these ceremonies reflected not superstition but a very detailed map of the spiritual landscape that hunters and families were navigating.

The folk beliefs attached to the landscape were specific and consistent across respondents. *Sebeh* or Mithun, the semi-domestic cattle, came from a high-altitude lake; most respondents remember this but had forgotten which specific lake they came from. Fire originally came from mountain stone (*Mecho*), which is why mountains were respected, and rituals were performed before using their resources. Some respondents mentioned that the *Dile Simu* 4 lake glowed at night, and many years ago on a hunting trip TP's grandfather witnessed this glow inside the lake.

He described the glow moving from one site to another. Certain mountain passes would always bring rain when one crossed them with a lot of noise or while returning from hunting Mishmi takin. Several respondents presented a story about a man who set fire to high-altitude forests. According to the story, a Tibetan Lama told him that no medicine could help him, and he subsequently died. The respondents described this as an actual event rather than a parable, reflecting their belief that setting fire to high-altitude forests is a grave act from which one cannot recover.

Local livelihood practices (agriculture, pastoralism, gathering, mobility) shaped by the surrounding mountains and lakes

For most of the living memory, Adi-Bokar livelihoods revolved around what *Dibin* could offer. A respondent described, “*Since we are dependent on the forest, we visit high-altitude mountains and lakes at least once a year, as they are the source of our livelihood. Sometimes, we go there four to five times a year. During those times, we camp right in front of the lakes and mountains. Our village is surrounded by mountains and lakes, which is why we depend so heavily on them*”. These accounts mainly come from men, as women were historically excluded from *Dibin*, which meant they had little direct involvement in hunting or high-altitude grazing. Womens accounts of livelihood focus almost entirely on farming, looking after domestic animals, and village-based work, a different economy, largely invisible in the accounts of male respondents.

A respondent mentioned, “*In our area, we don't get enough money from farming. Therefore, it would be best if we could find a good market to sell our produce for a decent price; otherwise problems will persist*”. Cattle grazing was the second mainstay: from June to September, herds were moved to high-altitude pastures like *Nyensang Boge* and *Dubu Boge*, where the grass was considered nutritious. The milk from those months were richer; the cheese and ghee made from it fetched good prices when traded in Tibet for salt, clothes, and household goods. Fishing during July-September in *Jamdo Simu* and *Dile Simu* filled the gaps, if a hunt came back empty, the lakes provided. Jhum cultivation of maize during March to September on the slopes and small-scale farming of vegetables in the village completed the picture.

Throughout accounts of livelihood practices, none were ever treated as purely material. Every single one of them, hunting, grazing, fishing had to begin with a ritual. Describing the ritual related to hunting, a respondent said, *“Our grandfathers used to go to the high altitudes long ago for hunting and to herd our cattle in the Dibin area. Before we reached those heights, we would prepare everything at home. Most importantly, we would carry rice (Ompeyok), Eggs (Pipi), and white cotton or a white sheep (Soyong) to perform the 'Tarjo & Ompeyok' ritual. We don't look at the mountain as just land; we see the high-altitude regions as the homeland of the spirits (Opom). It is their home, not mine”*. One had to perform Tarjo and Ompeyok Sunam before entering Dibin, not because it was tradition for tradition's sake, but because the animals, the fish, and the land itself were understood to belong to Donze Yapom. If one wanted what the spirits held, they had to ask. Several respondents put it plainly: without the rituals, the hunt would fail; the animals would not show themselves; the catch would be poor. Describing the traditional ritual, one respondent explained, *“We tie white cotton to the white chicken, apply ghee (Yangmar) to it, and release it alive into the jungle as an offering. After that, you take this white chicken, and as long as we stay in the jungle, please do not harm us or kill my cows. After performing these rituals, nothing bad happens while we are in the jungle. Otherwise, if we didn't do this before, our cows and we humans would fall sick, or some accident would surely happen in the jungle.”* Another respondent added, *“During the ritual, we say: I have not come here to become the master of your land. I have only come for a few days to hunt. Please show me what you are willing to offer me for the hunt, and I will leave after a few days. I have also brought my cows for herding; I am not here to claim ownership. Please do not be angry with me. In exchange for my presence, I have brought you this rice, egg, and chicken.”*

Participants also alluded to how livelihoods are changing in present times. India's Wildlife Protection Act (WLPA, 1972) bans most kinds of hunting, and border restrictions led to the Tibet trade route closing down for years. High-altitude grazing had also largely been given up. Describing declining farming output, a respondent mentioned, *“In the old days, our soil was very good, and there was no need for fertilisers, but now farming is not going well at all; it feels like the world is turning upside down. Recently, some types of grass that I had never seen before are growing on farms. There was a type of grass in the past that we used to call 'Homey Tapey' (child beans) that has completely disappeared now; I don't see it anywhere.”* Respondents mentioned insects like caterpillars are destroying maize and potato fields, despite repeated attempts at controlling. According to the respondents, one thread connected to many of these problems: the retreat of snowfall. Snow used to kill the insect eggs that damaged crops. Now that snow no longer reached the lower elevations, the insects survived and multiplied. Firewood and bamboo, once gathered near the village, now required hours of walking or money to buy. One respondent put it simply: *“We never paid for water before. We never paid for firewood. Now we pay for both.”* The bamboo die-off in 2025, a cyclical event that the oldest respondents have only ever seen twice, had hit farming, building, and cultivation simultaneously. To maintain a steady income for their families, community

members were either largely involved as porters for the huge military establishment in the district or simply moved out of the region to towns and cities in search of jobs or further studies. Targeted hunting of Mishmi takin persisted, which fetched high cash income. However, this has also reduced after the youths of these villages got involved in wildlife conservation-related activities and the concomitant establishment of a tourism economy.

Landscape changes (environmental or infrastructural) and their influence on livelihood, cultural practices, and overall well-being

While life has been slowly changing for people, the respondents spoke about two major changes, one social and another environmental. Presently, there is only one indigenous faith-practising family and an ageing *Midgik* without a successor, and multiple changes in ecosystem elements of the mountains and lakes. While global social and environmental changes are affecting mountains and water systems worldwide, there are specific ways local communities in the study villages understand such changes. People, regardless of age, gender, or religion, felt that the landscape itself has changed a lot. Deforestation is the thread that runs through most other environmental changes, including major changes that were being observed in the mountains and high-altitude lakes. A respondent lamented, *“The forest in our village has changed, and it is completely gone now. Ever since chainsaws arrived, everything has changed.”* Another added, *“We are doing a lot of deforestation. Ever since Chinese machines arrived, they have been cutting down more trees, and there is no limit to what anyone does. No one is planting new trees either.”* Firewood, once collected just outside the village, it now requires a walk of 3 km or more; many families have started buying it. *The trees needed for building traditional houses are gone. And the forest's disappearance has set off a cascading effect.* Another respondent mentioned, *“Some underground water sources have completely dried up; we are not getting enough clean water to drink in the settlement now. I think it is happening because of excessive tree cutting. The river in front of the village also doesn't have as much water as before; very little water comes.”* Another respondent added, *“We cannot do jhum (shifting) cultivation in the mountains like before because all the bamboo died due to flowering since last year. Also, in the jungle, there are no animals left for hunting like before, and water is not available for drinking as it used to be. There are no fish in the river to eat like before; it has become very difficult these days.”* One respondent described the chain of events clearly: *“air guns wiped out the birds; without birds to eat and disperse fruit, new trees stopped growing; without new trees, the forest could not regenerate. Each loss made the next one worse.”*

Snow and glaciers that were permanent features within living memory were retreating, as claimed by many respondents. A respondent reminisced, *"During our childhood, the winters were different; before it snowed, everything would turn to ice. When we woke up in the morning, everything would be completely frozen. Now, the snow hardly reaches the village."* It had impacted farming as well, as one respondent described, *"In our village, when it snows, the snow kills the eggs of the insects that damage our crops. If the snow doesn't reach the village, those insects destroy the farm and damage all the leaves."* Rivers are running erratically in the present times, sometimes flooding, sometimes barely flowing, and the fish that once filled them were mostly gone. High-altitude lakes appeared more stable to those who have visited recently, though some reported shrinking water levels and fewer fish there too. Landslides were more frequent, linked to both forest loss and road construction. This change also impacted the people effectively, as one mentioned, *"When passing through high-altitude mountains, you feel a bit scared, and when passing by large lakes, you also feel a bit scared; plus, such strange winds blow, and the weather changes so suddenly, doesn't it?"*

TP's experience and the place and people's testimonies suggested that socially, many aspects are changing: education levels, health practices, farming systems, and other non-farm work, among others. Presently, there is only one family that practices the *Donyi Polo* faith. Among respondents, there was a worry of losing intergenerational knowledge transmission across generations and through change: *"If we continue with the current method of destroying the forest, nothing will be left for future generations. Just as we have run out of things and become crowded, we will have to buy everything- air, water, and firewood, which I feel is the biggest risk"*. The strict protocols around entering *Dibin*, multiple preparatory rituals, days of abstinence, silence near lakes and mountains are not practised. Restrictions on burning plastic near sacred sites are followed by fewer people. Mithun and livestock that were once kept primarily for ritual sacrifice are now sold openly. The *Jaying Bari* folk songs that were performed at every major ceremony are heard less, because the ceremonies themselves happen less.

Participants mentioned that the ritual knowledge held by *Midgiks* and senior elders exists nowhere in written form. It lives with people. Performing *Rogo Pynam*, *Uyu Monam*, or a *Sobo Medang* ceremony required mithun, pigs, and chickens in quantities that many families could not afford. When someone fell seriously ill, their family sometimes had to borrow animals or take on debt just to perform the healing rituals. A respondent described, *"After that, when you cross a mountain, you are supposed to remain completely silent. Even when passing by a lake, you must pass in absolute silence. They said all this was done because the Opom (spirits) of that place would otherwise make a person seriously ill or insane. That is why they did not even allow speaking loudly. I have never done this myself, but they said it used to happen during my father's generation. And now, in our generation, since*

becoming Christian, we do not follow all this anymore. Everyone goes as they please; for us, just praying is enough now. Even those who used to go by performing rituals during the indigenous times do not maintain those rituals when going to the jungle in the present day. Everyone just prays freely and goes.” Earlier, women were not allowed to venture into high-altitude areas, but now women and children groups visit the area after praying. A respondent shared, *“Previously, I used to not take women to high altitudes, and no women would go there. If you ask why they didn't go, it was said that the 'Opom' spirits of the high altitudes did not accept them. They said that if any woman went to a high altitude, she would not return alive. However, 30 years have passed now, and since converting to Christianity, women and children are going there. Nowadays, even all women's groups are going. Perhaps they are no longer afraid of the spirits, believing that everything turns out fine just by praying.”* The rituals that were associated with *Dibin* are now fading.



DISCUSSION

Through our extensive fieldwork and interviews, we documented the belief systems, stories and lived experiences of the Adi-Bokar community related to the high-altitude lakes and mountains. While we found a consensus around these narratives and experiences at the community level, there were individual variations depending on gender, age, and livelihood. Furthermore, these beliefs were shifting across generations due to two major factors. First, the change from indigenous cultural practices to Christianity, and second, the landscape itself was drastically changing due to local-to-global factors. Due to these changes, various traditional rituals that were to be observed to appease the deities of the mountains and high-altitude lakes for the well-being of individuals and the community were almost becoming extinct. Among the Adi-Bokars of Monigong, only one family remain, who is a *Midgik* and a knowledge holder of *Rogo Pynam*, *Bote Kante Panam*, *Tarjo Monam*, *Uyu Monam*, and *Tuba Tangnam* rituals. Therefore, through our study, we not only documented the socio-cultural dimensions of mountain regions and lakes from the Eastern Himalaya, thereby plugging a critical research gap, but also highlighted the diminishing aspects of Adi-Bokar knowledge and practices related to these mountains and lakes.

For the Adi-Bokar, the mountains and the lakes influence much of their lives, starting from intangible heritage of myths, stories, beliefs, rituals, deities and spirits that govern daily life, to the material aspects of critical livelihood support through ecosystem services, such as water and climatic cycle regulation, and material provision (fish, nutrient, animals, timber etc.), This spiritual-material continuum is difficult to separate as both reinforce each other, much similar to the mountains and lakes in other parts of the Himalaya. Hindu belief holds that the Himalaya is the abode of various deities that involve specific ritual systems, and by extension this belief sustains not only the farm-forestry based livelihood of the locals, but also a huge pilgrimage economy (Verschuuren & Furuta, 2016). The Kailash Mansarovar sacred landscape in Tibet attracts people across various religions who search for spiritual wellbeing, thereby supporting a huge economy, apart from providing water for the entire South Asian river systems (Pandey et al., 2016). Across the Himalaya, Tso-Moriri in Ladakh, Roopkunda and Hemkunda Sahib in Uttarakhand, Chandrataal in Himachal Pradesh, Shey Phoksundo and Gosaikunda in Nepal are similar examples of high-altitude lakes that are auspicious and critical reservoirs of water-based ecosystem services (Joshi et al., 2026). In the Eastern Himalaya, similar research is sparse, even though the region boasts a high number of high-altitude lakes that have spiritual and material significance for the local communities. The Khecheopalri lake in Sikkim is thought to be the seat of Padmasambhava for Buddhists, and so, it is forbidden to use the lake for fishing (Jain et al., 2004). The Loktak Lake in Manipur also holds cultural importance for the Meiteis, and the lake is also a critical resource for the fishing community who created unique *Phumdi* socio-ecological systems on the lake (Bharati et al., 2017).

The Adi-Bokar community's rituals associated with daily life revolved around appeasing spirits of the mountains and the lakes. The rituals were complex and sometimes expensive, as they involved sacrifices of domestic livestock. Similar rituals exist for communities across the Himalaya. Mishmis from the Dibang Valley of Arunachal Pradesh have their own forest and mountain spirits for whom they must perform various rituals, often involving sacrifices of chicken, mithun and wild animals (Aiyadurai, 2021). Like the animist communities, Hindu communities around the Himalaya also have rituals, albeit accompanied by pilgrimage. The Gosaikunda lake in Nepal experiences heavy footfall on a particular day in July, when devotees perform a holy dip in the lake along with various other rituals involving holy thread (*Janai*) and trident (Thakuri et al., 2021). Buddhist sacred sites in the mountains and lakes often have flags with printed hymns and prayers. Across these sites, including the Adi-Bokar land of Monigong, a commonality observed is that such spiritual-material relations, along with taboos and rituals, may have caused conservation of these land and water-scapes from overexploitation. Respondents described a reciprocal relationship between ritual practice, hunting success, and the landscape. Hunting depended on maintaining proper relations with spirits, and without the necessary rituals, animals would not show themselves, and hunts would fail. Yet when game was scarce, the lakes continued to provide resources, sustaining people through difficult periods. The landscape was thus understood as an active participant in a relationship of mutual obligation and care.

While the rituals and knowledge among the Adi-Bokar elders about the mountains and high-altitude lakes provide an excellent glimpse of the socio-ecological system of the region, we also found that such knowledge and practice are diminishing due to changes in religion and the landscape itself. As a result, we saw that on one hand, younger members of the community were much less aware of the rituals that were mandatory before going to high altitudes, and on the other hand, women are now able to access the high-altitude areas that were previously restricted for them. Livelihoods here were described as more than material practices; they were deeply intertwined with spirituality and ritual. Material relations of hunting, farming, timber and non-timber forest products remained the same, but the underlying taboo-based philosophies were changing. On top of that, a new conservation programme has also been initiated, which is creating new rules of engaging with the mountains, forests and the animals, where youth are at the forefront. Therefore, with the changes, Adi-Bokar members were developing new subjectivities that simultaneously involved a sense of loss and grief and a sense of rejuvenation. In the Western Himalaya, erosion of traditional beliefs about forest deities, changing attitudes towards taboos, and reduction in participation in traditional festivals have resulted in alienation of people from the sacred groves and thereby, degradation of those sacred groves (Singh et al., 2017). Similar erosion of cultural relations with sacred landscapes has resulted in greater resource extraction in Assam (Baidya & Devi, 2024).

However, it is not universally the case that changes in religious beliefs that were once associated with environmental protection inevitably result in environmental destruction. New kinds of knowledge and ethos towards environmental protection can emerge as well. Religious authorities of dominant religions often interpret scriptures towards environmental stewardship, be it Christianity, Hinduism or Islam (Jenkins & Chapple, 2011). Whether such religious stewardship can take place among the Adi-Bokar community or not, will depend on how the religious leaders bring forward the message of environmental protection. Perhaps, the conservation programme has come up at the right time when the landscape level changes in water, snow and farming systems are going through negative changes.

The Adi-Bokar relations with the mountain regions and the high-altitude lakes are not static and change depending upon the socio-ecological context of the place. Therefore, the place-biasedness of the spiritual-material continuum will always be in transition, and how the younger generation carries it forward will depend upon how they balance the traditional and modern aspects of the Adi-Bokar society. For the Adi-Bokar, identity is constituted through intimate relations with land, ritual practice, and customary belief systems; changes in these domains can therefore be experienced as losing the sense of who they are. However, changing aspirations and growing economic pressures cannot keep them isolated from modern amenities, education and income opportunities. For the next generation of Adi-Bokar people, the challenge lies in negotiating the integration of these different worlds in ways that sustain a sense of identity while engaging with broader developmental trajectories.

Community Conserved Areas (CCAs) across northeastern Indian states could provide an example of how land-and water-scape governance can contain both traditional and modern elements, and how taboos and rituals can be integrated with modern technologies and governance schemes (Dutta & Dutta, 2023). The respondents also pointed towards a sense of urgency towards both preserving the knowledge before it gets lost and acting on this knowledge to bolster conservation of mountain and lake-based resources. Our study was able to document Adi-Bokar relations with mountain regions and the lakes within a short time. Restricted access to the region, the specific time period of rituals and, moreover, given that these rituals are now only done by a few ageing community elders make it even more important to document these rituals in various formats and preserve them. This might be a long-term community-based project in the region. A bio-cultural documentation cum conservation strategy may be important for the Adi-Bokar communities of Monigong.

CONCLUSION

Our study brought forward the socio-ecological world of the agro-pastoral Adi-Bokar community of Shi-Yomi district in Arunachal Pradesh, where we documented stories, ritual practices, and traditional and contemporary lived experiences related to the mountain ranges and the high-altitude lakes of the region. We also captured the notion of change that the community felt has been happening not only with their social world, but also with these mountains and lake systems. While our respondents voiced out concerns for possible extinctions of Adi-Bokar customs, knowledge and rituals, we also found that the younger generation is now creating new environmental subjectivities through conservation programmes, eco-tourism and community-based research-work.

Therefore, we conclude that studies on human-land/waterscape relations for place-based communities need to go beyond the ritualistic aspects and see how such relations navigate social, political, economic, and ecological context. Documenting ritualistic and cosmological aspects around the mountain ranges and high-altitude lakes is also important, especially due to these ecosystems being intricately linked to a community's (such as Adi-Bokar) identity and history, and with a genuine concern for loss of this identity. As we mentioned, many stories and ritualistic practices related to the mountains and lakes have already been lost, and therefore this research will provide impetus to broaden the horizon and query of not only about the agro-pastoral Adi-Bokar communities, but also similar communities across Himalayas and other Asian highlands. This knowledge can be further preserved and exhibited in different available formats (oral/ print/ online/ multimedia) with the very communities with whom such studies are done. Attending such nuanced human-land/waterscape relations through qualitative social research holds promise for not only effective documentation of nature-culture relations, but also preservation and possibly, assertion of local indigenous people's identity.



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