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Preserving Offerings, Prolonging Merit: Efficacy, Skillful Means, and Re-purposing in Plastic Buddhist Material Culture in Contemporary Sikkim

RESEARCH

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ABSTRACT

Despite official bans, public criticism and concern over pollution, plastics are widely used in Buddhist material culture in the Indian Himalayan state of Sikkim. Using the framework of the seven bowls of water offerings, undertaken every morning to the Buddhas and deities in domestic shrine rooms, and ethnographic observations, as a way to frame discussions of changing material culture, I will interrogate how plastics are used and waste is re-purposed in Sikkimese interdimensional engagements in offerings to the deities and spirits. I will argue that plastics continue to be seen as efficacious and generative for Buddhist communities due to their ability to be re-purposed and recycled, acting as exemplars of skillful means that allow for Buddhist communities to exercise their own agency in determining the efficacy of material culture and the making of new futures. This paper engages with scholarship from anthropologists and Buddhist studies scholars on Buddhist materiality, plastic, and waste studies to consider the malleability of plastics, even when they are not malleable, and demonstrate how this malleability generates positive and creative engagements across dimensions that allow for nuanced and complex responses to the anxieties people have about plastic waste in the Himalayas.

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In early January 2022, I went to buy groceries in Gezing bazaar, the urban center of the West District of Sikkim, a small Himalayan state in India. Pasted on the doorframe next to the shop selling packaged foods, along with a variety of plastic daily household items and gifts including plastic Buddha statues and synthetic offering scarves (known locally as *khatak*), was a new notification. This notice instructed the public that as of January 1, 2022, the use, manufacture, and distribution of plastic water bottles of and below two liters would be banned. This ban represented the culmination of over two decades of waste management advocacy on the part of community groups that had begun in 1996, when the popular tourist village of Yoksam in West Sikkim banned plastic bags. In 1998, the State Government expanded the ban to the rest of the state (Simlai and Bose 2014), and in 2016, the sale and use of single-use plastic items were banned as well (Forest and Environment Department 2021). The new notification in early 2022 pre-empted a nationwide ban on single-use plastics in India that was implemented in July, 2022. This event was widely publicized in global media and lauded as necessary in order to counter pollution in 'the world's second most populous country' (Bhardwaj 2022).

The non-profit social and economic analysis website IndiaSpend reported that three months after the initial ban, there were still single-use plastics in 'rampant circulation' in Delhi and Mumbai (Deshpande 2022). Similarly, in Sikkim in January 2022, in the shop beside the pasted notification I found a variety of single-use plastic items including plastic water bottles, and six months later, these items were still available. The IndiaSpend article discussed how the initial national ban had been inadequate, as it did not take into account other plastics that make up more the waste generated in the country and instead, targeted vulnerable populations who use single-use plastics in their businesses as part of their daily life and who do not have other options (Deshpande 2022). In the Sikkimese context, this has also been the case. However, another important reason that plastics continue to circulate in Sikkim is that they often take longer to enter the waste management cycle. This is because local communities re-purpose plastic objects. This is especially the case in religious, and specifically, Buddhist contexts, where plastic items are considered reliable due to their ability to be re-used and repurposed without the efficacy of these religious objects becoming devalued.

In household Buddhist shrine rooms (Sikkimese Bhutia: *gangkhor*) in West Sikkim, plastic abounds: on shrines, people use plastic statues and lights, and food offerings are stored in plastic containers. People offer synthetic prayer flags when they meet Buddhist lamas or when attending celebrations for new babies, weddings, and funerals. Some of the objects people use have been created with a specific intention in mind: for example, plastic Buddha statues are often made in Indian or Chinese factories and brought into Sikkim for both local Buddhist consumers and non-Buddhist tourists. Others are objects that represent creative re-purposing, or recycling, of plastic objects that would have otherwise been discarded. Buddhist domestic shrine rooms in West Sikkim center around seven water offering bowls, along with other statues, food offerings, and ritual objects. The seven water bowls represent offerings to the Buddha, the deities, and their different senses, including water to drink (Sikkimese Bhutia: *chodyon*), water for washing hands and feet of deities (Sikkimese Bhutia: *zhabsil*), flowers (Sikkimese Bhutia: *metok*), incense (Sikkimese Bhutia: *dukpö*), butter maps (Sikkimese Bhutia: *marmey*), perfume (Sikkimese Bhutia: *drichab*), food (Sikkimese Bhutia: *zhalzey*) and cymbals (Sikkimese Bhutia: *rim*).[1] Using the framework of these offerings, undertaken every morning to the Buddhas and deities of the home, I will interrogate how plastic is used in Sikkimese interdimensional engagements in offerings to the deities and spirits. I will argue that this is due to the ability for plastic and plastic waste to continue to be seen as efficacious and generative for Buddhist communities. To do so, I will engage with scholarship from anthropologists and Buddhist studies scholars on Buddhist materiality, plastic, and waste studies to consider the malleability of plastic, even when it is not malleable, and demonstrate how the efficacy of these objects allows for positive and creative engagements and plastic futures, despite the anxieties people have around plastics in the Himalayas. Cultural studies scholar Gay Hawkins discussed how the ubiquity of plastic bags allow us to consider 'ethical significance of bad stuff in the environment' (Hawkins 2009). Buddhist material culture made from plastic provide us with a similar opportunity and thereby contribute to scholarship on religious offerings within the broader field of the anthropology of plastics (Abrahms-Kavunenko 2021, 2022; McKay et al. 2020).

This paper is based on research that I have carried out textual, historical, and ethnographic research on Himalayan Buddhist materiality for over a decade throughout the Himalayas. I have focused in this article on Sikkim because of the diversity of materials used in the creation of Buddhist material culture, and also because of the liveliness of local debates over plastic, which provide insight into a local example of plastic cultures in India. These debates might lead us to think that local communities would eschew the use of plastic out of environmental care, but everyday practices demonstrate that this is not the case and that people's attitudes are more nuanced and complicated. It is not my intention here to diminish the tangible negative consequences of plastic in the environment, but instead to point towards how local communities are negotiating with plastic realities in their daily lives. Research for this article included semi-structured interviews with twenty

Buddhist ritual patrons and practitioners and shopkeepers and participant observation of Buddhist rituals in Sikkim between 2014 and 2022, as well as monitoring of news media in this period.

PLASTIC AND RITUAL EFFICACY IN A SOUTH ASIAN BUDDHIST CONTEXT

In Sikkim, there has been widespread public support of plastic bans. However, it remains widely used. Its durability and flexibility allow for plastic to be an important part of material religion. This article will delve into the many afterlives of plastic objects – bags, bottles, and religious materials – in Sikkimese Buddhist communities to examine the complicated interactions between Buddhists and their relatedness with plastic, as plastic allows for connectedness and communication. In a recent article, Buddhist studies scholar Kalzang Dorjee Bhutia explored the use of fiberglass in the creation of Sikkimese ritual statues and masks used in ritual dances (Sikkimese Bhutia: *cham*). He found that people had a wide variety of perspectives on fiberglass due to concern about the toxicity associated with its production. Lamas and religious authorities were concerned that fiberglass and other plastics could generate ritual pollution (Sikkimese Bhutia: *drip*) as they were created from petrochemicals and other toxins, and therefore could make deities and spirits unwell. Ritual dancers who wear fiberglass masks expressed anxiety that this pollution could impact the efficacy of the rituals and could disrupt attempts in Sikkimese ritual chance. However, these communities, and the artisans who craft fiberglass objects, all attested that intention and outcome were also important, and did not engage in outright villainization of plastic, instead pointing to its ambivalent potential (Bhutia 2022a).

This ambivalent potential has meant that other forms of plastic including fiberglass, along with other contemporary materials such as concrete (McDuie-Ra and Chettri 2020), appear widely in Sikkim's contemporary Buddhist material culture. This reflects the flexibility of Buddhist material culture to adapt to the availability of new materials based on the ecosystems surrounding Buddhist communities. For example, prayer flags (Sikkimese Bhutia: *tarchod*), long strips of fabric printed with prayers for all sentient beings, were traditionally raised using bamboo, since there are many bamboo forests in Sikkim. Now, people also frequently make use of iron bars, arguing that they last longer as they can be used for many years, and minimize the need to cut down long pieces of bamboo. Anthropologist Charisma Lepcha has also noted the historical connections between ecology and religious material culture in Lepcha communities, and how these are adapting to new climate-induced changes (Lepcha 2021). This ability to adapt is often articulated by Buddhist authorities as exemplary of the Buddhist concept of skillful means (Sikkimese Bhutia: *thab*), that allows for the Buddhist teachings to be transmitted in many different forms and ways to meet the needs and understandings of diverse sentient beings. It also demonstrates another example of the diversity of Buddhist approaches to relating to the land and the environment (Bhutia 2021, 2022a; Elverskog 2020). Tibetan and Himalayan traditions of Buddhism share vocabularies of symbols and objects that are capable of inspiring spiritual transformation, or as supports for faith (Tibetan and Sikkimese Bhutia: *ten*). In the Sikkimese context, there is no anxiety over the use plastic objects, as they are still seen as efficacious, and capable of bringing about transformation, as they have been ritually empowered through consecration (Sikkimese Bhutia: *rabney*) and can therefore transmit blessings (Sikkimese Bhutia: *chinlap*) and allow for the accumulation of merit (Sikkimese Bhutia: *sonam*).

In a broader South Asian context, this ability to embrace plastic as part of the efficacious material world contradicts public critiques of plastic and anxieties about its place in the environment. As anthropologist Gauri Pathak has demonstrated, plastic has been vilified in India by newly created ecotraditionalist discourses promoted by the Hindu nationalist state as a part of the nation branding of India as pro-environment. Instead of leading to environmental change, Pathak argues that this discourse leads to the circulation of new forms of consumerism that create 'a false sense of pro-environmental action among consumers (functioning as a compensatory ritual) and obscures issues of resource exploitation, allowing for a perpetuation of the established capitalist order' (Pathak 2021: 12). The situation in Sikkim is complex, since elements of ecotraditionalism are in circulation, but given the different cultural context of this multireligious state, these Hindutva discourses operate differently and the impact of consumerism on Buddhist and Indigenous material culture is not as significant at present (Lepcha 2021). Examining Sikkimese Buddhist examples allows for additional insight into what plastic anxieties look like in different parts of India.

The work of anthropologists Tridibesh Dey and Mike Michael provides additional detail of the complexity of plastic. In a nuanced ethnography of Dey's mother's use of plastic in daily life in India, they illuminate the 'inventive social-material mobilizations' that allow for plastics to be re-purposed and recycled in multiple ways allowing plastic bags and contained to become 'like new again' (Dey and Michaels 2021: 13) this flexibility allows for Dey's mother to 'rekindle and perform social relations' (Dey and Michaels 2021: 14). While plastic is entangled with the pollution of colonialism and capitalism (Liboiron 2021), the ways in which Sikkimese Buddhist communities re-envision plastic use represents their agency and creativity in response to environmental stresses, and indeed to avoid generating waste by

instead re-purposing it. In the Sikkimese context, the use of plastic in, and as, different Buddhist offerings allow for another example of the 'radical plastic futures' Dey and Michaels gesture towards to become visible, as plastic becomes a conduit for linking dimensions between humans and nonhumans, or more-than-human, forces (Dey and Michaels 2021: 15). In the Sikkimese context as well, humans and nonhuman animals are not the only beings impacted by plastic. The landscape is understood to be home to deities and spirits, and ritual life across the different religious communities of Sikkim is often dedicated to interdimensional communication between human dimensions and more-than-human dimensions. For example, in a Buddhist context, more-than-human beings are often known as protectors and manifest as spirits who inhabit places and landmarks. These beings are presided over by Kanchendzonga, the mountain deity at the apex of this empowered landscape (Bhutia 2021, 2022b). Plastic and pollution are therefore concerning for religious authorities as well as the secular state. In this article, I will focus specifically on Buddhist communities as a way to provide a specific example of how particular communities configure and reconfigure plastic beyongs its status as waste into new lives.

OFFERINGS OF DRINKING WATER AND PERFUMED WATER: PROBLEMS WITH PLASTIC IN THE EASTERN HIMALAYAS

Sikkim appeared to be ahead of the curve when it came to environmentally concerned initiatives. The initial plastic ban in Sikkim was informed by a concern for the large amount of plastic waste that ended up on local *jhoras* (Nepali: streams) that would then contaminate water supplies. Although Sikkim is a state with abundant water access, with streams and lakes fed by the glaciers of the Himalayas, and heavy rainfall during the monsoon months, rapid urbanization and poor planning has meant that in the concrete urban spaces that have grown rapidly since the 1990s water is not always readily available. Even in areas with direct pipelines from the mountains, blockages and breakages regularly mean that supply water is cut off. Pollution was also of concern for aesthetic reasons: Sikkim's clean, green image could be threatened by the unsightly mess of Kukure chip packets on the side of the road. This interacts in complex ways with other forms of pollution.

The state has adapted to the plastic ban in a variety of ways. In markets and *haats* (Nepali: markets) throughout Sikkim, shopkeepers wrap up purchases with sheets of old newspaper and torn up used textbooks and exercise books. When entering North District, shopkeepers warn travelers on the road to Lachen and Lachung to purchase BPA-free plastic reusable bottles to take with them to refill up north, since there, in theory no plastic bottled water is available. The state government has promoted images of Sikkim as a 'green,' conservation-minded state, and the former Chief Minister, Pawan Kumar Chamling, received international acclaim for his tree-planting and anti-plastic initiatives (Statesman News Service 2018). Different companies in Sikkim regularly promote alternatives to plastic: shopping bags made from recycled rice bags, and bamboo drinking vessels.

These initiatives suggest a dedication to seeking out alternative materials for packaging products, particularly beverages. However, they are also misleading. Plastic bottles of water and soft drink and plastic packets of chips, dry noodles, biscuits, and confectionary are widely available throughout Sikkim. On a visit to North Sikkim in 2019, I found that that stores where boiled drinking water was available also sold Coca-Cola; and that in the vegetable market in Gangtok, vendors regularly put their vegetables in plastic bags or polypropylene bags for the ease of their customers, as homemade, stapled together paper bags often fall apart due to the weight of vegetables or the monsoon rain. After he banned plastic in the state, in 2014 Chamling supported the opening of food production factory in Rangpo, South Sikkim, that packages Wai Wai noodles and other popular foods. The regional Coca-Cola bottling plant is just across the border from Sikkim, in Phuntsoeling on the southern border of Bhutan. Other plastic products produced in Bangladesh, China, and mainland India are all widely available for purchase in the urban centers of Sikkim and across the border in Siliguri, where many Sikkimese residents venture for shopping trips.

The continued widespread availability of plastic in Sikkim demonstrates that the plastic ban in Sikkim is largely symbolic and nominal. As scholars such as Mabel Gergan and Kalzang Dorjee Bhutia have pointed out, the Government of Sikkim's self-representation of Sikkim as an environmentally state does not hold up with the realities of widespread hydroelectric projects, deforestation, and soil erosion (Gergan 2017, Bhutia 2021). The plastic ban has been similarly effective as an imagined discourse but not in practice.

The reasons for the continued pervasiveness of plastic are twofold. Firstly, plastic remains in circulation in Sikkim for practical reasons. There is a lack of widespread alternatives for shopping bags and for purchasing beverages and food, especially in rural parts of West Sikkim. A number of people commented to me that if Coca-Cola had refill stations in Sikkim, they would happily reuse the bottles instead of buying additional ones, but no such facilities are available. The second reason is because plastic, quite simply, is useful. Even if plastic Coke bottles cannot be refilled with Coke, they can be filled with milk from local dairy producers. Outside of the urban centers of Gangtok and Namchi, in West Sikkim the population either produce their own milk from household cows, or have family members who supply them with milk from

their cows. Indian mass-produced milk such as Amul and milk powder is only used in emergencies, when fresh milk is not available. Therefore, plastic single use bottles are very helpful for transporting milk to be given to family members and friends. Plastic bags and other packaging materials are also commonly re-used and recycled for carrying goods. I have seen friends re-use plastic bags from shopping trips that I undertook with them to Siliguri, or gifts I saw them given from abroad or elsewhere in India from over a decade ago. Dey and Michaels also noted the way Dey's mother re-purposed plastic bags for a wide variety of uses (Dey and Michaels 2021).

The re-using of plastic bottles and bags is widespread, but does not represent the tremendous creative potential that plastic goods have in Sikkim. Although state and conservationist discourse casts these objects as polluting waste, this status does not prevent them from being taken up for other purposes. Gay Hawkins has written of how the plastic bag is 'strangely mute and submissive, a passive victim of reclassification' in broader political processes (Hawkins 2009). In India, these processes have included the criticism of plastic in the mobilization of nationalist discourse that specifically promotes India as a bastion of traditional environmentalism (Pathak 2021). In Sikkim, plastic is demonized in public discourse, but in actuality remains in circulation, especially due to its practicality and ability to be re-used. In the following sections, I will discuss the different ways plastic is re-used and reimagined as liberating material.

OFFERINGS OF NOURISHING FOOD: PLASTIC FOOD PACKAGING AS RELIGIOUS DONATIONS

When discussing the functions of plastic in contemporary Sikkim above, it is hard to separate plastic from food and drink consumption. Part of the reason for the rise of plastic in daily life in Sikkim has been its association with the new forms of food that have become widely available since the 1970s, when Sikkim became part of the Indian Union. Historically, Sikkim was predominantly agricultural. Communities grew their own food, including abundant rice and maize, and the soil was fertile enough that many families had excess to sell or trade. Most importantly, even if families did not have enough, they would always save some food to give as offerings to either local monasteries or ritual specialists they approached for ritual assistance. Offerings were presented in wrappings made from natural products such as bamboo and woven flax (Bhutia 2022b).

Food offerings have been important in Buddhist communities since the early development of Buddhism in India. In Himalayan Buddhism, feeding ritual specialists through feast and spirits through shrine offerings is understood as a signifier of generosity (Garrett et al. 2013). The opening of Sikkim's borders led to the introduction of new forms of material and food culture produced on the mass market. These include soft drinks, biscuits, chips, bread, and a variety of other goods with plastic packaging.

When these are offered in religious contexts, what do the spirits and ancestors who receive them make of these new forms of food in their colorful packets? Laurel Kendall took up this question in her study of Korean mudangs, who also utilize food as a central element of their offering rituals, known as *kut*. She found that '[t]he spirits own changing tastes' testify to their presence and agency in the mundane world, where fashions are fickle and desires never satisfied. The expense and effort of a *kut* offer only temporary satisfaction of the appetites and desires of gods and ancestors, passing respect from the demands the spirits inflict on the living' (Kendall 2008: 185). In Sikkim, lay sponsors (Sikkimese Bhutia: *jindak*) also like to offer the gods, spirits, and ancestors the best of what is available, including foreign whisky, chocolate, and other exotic commodities.

Since the plastic ban in 1998, monastic authorities have attempted to promote the plastic ban by discouraging offerings with plastic packages, but local *jindak* continued to want to make offerings of plastic-wrapped food and beverage. Packaged soft drink, chips, biscuits, bhujia, and sweets may all represent the worst type of mass-produced items for consumption both in terms of nutrition and plastic waste. However, mass production is also associated with prosperity and modernity. At the opening of a domestic shrine that I attended in 2016, the *jindaks* included bottles of Coke and Sprite along with plastic bottles of milk, and packets of chips and dalmud. The ritual took place on Guru Rinpoche's Birthday (which is celebrated with rituals on the tenth day of the fifth month), and a local bakery supplied specially prepared cream birthday cakes accordingly. Yangkyi, the mother of the house (*Jindak Amla*) explained to me that her intention in doing so was twofold. Firstly, she wanted to give offerings that the lamas and guests would enjoy the taste of, since at the end of the ritual, the ritualists and lay sponsors all join together in a feast where they consume some of the sanctified offerings. Since the ritual was a special event, she saw these offerings as a treat, something outside of the ordinary. Secondly, she also believed that the spirits of the land, and particularly those associated with prosperity (Sikkimese Bhutia: *yang*), would be attracted to the shrine if she made offerings of special and expensive foods. As in the Korean case studies outlined by Kendall, Yangkyi and her family were not concerned that the deities they invoked may not be familiar with these foreign treats. On the contrary, they felt that the specialness of these treats – including their plastic colorful packaging and unpronounceable mysterious ingredients – from 'outside' would also be a treat for them.

OFFERINGS OF BEAUTIFUL FLOWERS: PLASTIC OFFERINGS AND THE AESTHETICS OF PLASTIC

Besides nutritional value, plastic can also have an aesthetic value. In many monasteries and domestic shrines in Sikkim, people offer plastic flowers and foods along with other more traditional offering materials. Historically, Sikkim was predominantly agricultural, so people would offer their crops to monasteries for ritual offerings. However, as more consumer goods have become available on the market, people have expanded what they offer to include other objects of beauty that will bring the spirits aesthetic pleasure. This is not dissimilar from the rise of cardboard sports cars, iPads, and designer suits that I have seen appear as complementary offerings to paper money in Chinese ritual cultures in Hong Kong and mainland China.

Plastic flowers are quite cheap, widespread, and in the words of Aniban Gupta-Nigam, 'generic.' As generic objects, they don't evoke the same sort of mystique or image of luxury as branded things. Of course, plastic flowers are commodities in an economic sense. But they are also contained of the postwar resource economy and its implication in 'petroculture' (Gupta-Nigam 2020: 115). Their ubiquity in contemporary Sikkim reflects the supply lines that have opened in the state since it became part of India in 1975. But unlike in the US context that Gupta-Nigam discusses, the popularity of plastic flowers in Sikkim is not necessarily led by the same market forces and relationships with nature. Indeed, natural flowers, cut and purchased from markets, and grown from cuttings from the jungle in pots, are widely available. In West Sikkimese domestic shrines, I frequently saw plastic flowers and fruits alongside stunning local orchids. In this context what makes plastic flowers so desirable is that they age so slowly that they do not need to be frequently replaced and are always in season. Gupta-Nigam also discusses this, but in a specifically Buddhist context, I think the unchanging – or rather, very slowly changing – nature of plastic flowers allows them to function in as ritual objects in helpful ways. Since deities and spirits, and hungry ghosts in particular, cannot eat anyway, offering images and props in lieu of actual vegetables, fruits, and other foods is interpreted as functioning just as effectively. Plastic flowers and fruits represent ocular elements of offerings, and thereby an additional mode for interdimensional engagement. Additionally, since some offerings, including flowers, might be out of season or unavailable on the local market, offering plastic versions once again allows for the deities to enjoy these goods irrespective of their actual presence.

AN OFFERING OF WATER TO WASH THE FEET OF THE HONORED GUEST: THE PLASTIC PRESENCE OF STATUES

Plastic is a ubiquitous feature of domestic shrines, but it also appears in mobile forms. A common feature of Sikkimese vehicles, irrespective of their size, is the presence of deities and religiously themed decorations on the dashboard, including stickers featuring prominent religious teachers and mantras. Secular vehicle decoration featuring the owner of the vehicle's name and interests are also common. But religiously themed objects are especially common and often represent demarcated religious identities. Hindu vehicle owners and/or drivers, for example, will often have a Ganesh or Sai Baba statue on the dashboard, and perhaps an Om sticker stuck to the front window. Christians may have crucifixes dangling from the rear-view mirror, and Christ or Mary images stuck to the front of the glass. Muslims often have prayer beads on the rear-view mirror. Buddhists in Sikkim also have a variety of other objects, along with small figures of Shakyamuni Buddha, including prayer flags, amulets, and solar-powered prayer wheels.

What connects all of these religious communities is the significance of these objects and images as apotropaic devices; and also that they are often made from plastic. Plastic objects and stickers are affordable and therefore accessible. In the case of Buddhist vehicles, new vehicle purchasers invite lamas to perform a consecration (Sikkimese Bhutia: *rabney*) before they use the vehicle. As part of this consecration, burned offerings will be made and the lama will apply stickers to the windscreen and tie prayer scarves and other amulets to the windscreen. The lamas who carry out these consecrations have no concern with the fact that these items are plastic. They are seen to be as efficacious as those made from more precious materials. As one lama related to me, in the case of vehicles, intention is more important than materiality. The intention is to keep the driver and passengers safe. This includes safe from thieves, so besides being affordable, plastic objects are unlikely to invite break ins.

The accessibility afforded by plastic is significant. Many of the deities affixed to dashboards are made from simple plastic molds. Some are made in Chinese factories, but many come from Indian sources as well. Vehicle owners purchase these objects themselves from Hong Kong Market in Siliguri or roadside stalls in Gangtok. Smaller Buddhist supplies shops are open in Mangan, Namchi, and Gezing, so they are also sourced there. At times, lamas will supply their own images that they purchase in bulk for the purpose in Siliguri, or may distribute objects and stickers that they have been given at large empowerment rituals in Kathmandu or at Bodh Gaya Monlam.

Scholars have argued that the accessibility of mass production transformed the South Asian religious landscape. Patricia Uberoi and Kajri Jain have written about calendar art and its wide availability (Uberoi 2002; Jain 2007). Plastic objects are similar in Sikkim, as they are reasonably priced and thereby accessible, particularly for portable shrines. Their point of production or purchase does not disrupt their ritual efficacy.

AN OFFERING THAT ILLUMINATES: WHEN PLASTIC IS UNDERSTOOD AS SAFE

Plastic statues are clearly religious items, purchased with specific intent for specific purposes. But the vast majority of plasticity in Sikkimese religion is repurposed, recycled – or to borrow the Buddhist concept, reincarnated – from their original use. In Buddhist cosmovisions, rebirth is cyclical, and *karma* or action propels human beings onwards into new forms in their next lives. The ultimate aspiration is to escape this cycle by reaching *nirvana.* The idea of objects being reincarnated, instead of disposed of, connects to Buddhist cosmovisions in generative ways. The repurposing, or reincarnation, of objects that may otherwise be seen as waste is extraordinarily creative and promises to actualize sustainability goals, unlike the nominal plastic ban (Holmes-Tagchungdarpa 2021).

Centerfresh jars are especially useful items. Centerfresh is a popular type of chewing gum, and is sold by shops from large 30-centimeter high plastic jars made from polyethylene. These jars are frequently reused for the purpose of storage in people's homes. Anthropologist Trine Brox has written of how in Dharamsala, Tibetan communities use these jars for storage for sacred objects, and specifically, for *tsha tsha,* votives made from clay and at times, ash from human remains (Brox 2022: 101–106). In domestic shrine rooms, these jars are used for many types of objects, including food offerings, such as fruit and eggs, but also for storing amulets and other precious objects. They are considered to be a convenient size and can be firmly sealed to keep out insects or rats.

These jars are also used by ritual specialists known as *zung* masters, who specialize in the preparation of fillings for religious objects. Several *zung* masters I met made use of Centerfresh jars for storing the materials they use in preparing these sacred fillings. These materials include all kinds of different items: dust and stones from sacred places, real and imitation coral and turquoise, and printed amulets printed onto paper by hand or printer (inkjets and lasers) that are folded up. Once a *zung* master prepares packaged *zung* – either sewn into silk or cotton pouches or inserted into small Ziploc bags – Centerfresh jars are also helpful for the sorting of specific *zung* dedicated to different deities.

Centerfresh and other confectionary jars also have another purpose beyond storage. Their tops and bottoms can be sheared off, to make a round plastic tunnel, and they are placed around, or dangling over, butter lamps. Butter lamps are multilayered, deeply important objects for Himalayan material religion. They represent the light of wisdom brought by the Buddhist teachings. Historically, they were made from yak butter in nomadic communities at higher altitudes, and in West Sikkim's valleys, from cow milk butter, thereby representing the connection between conceptions of prosperity and prayer in the local landscape.

However, butter lamps are also recognized as menace to Himalayan material culture. The residue of burning animal fat stains and discolors the walls of enclosed spaces where they are kept, leaving a black stain that accumulates over time; and historically, many fires have been caused by butter lamps, thereby destroying invaluable and irreplaceable architecture and objects of great historical and spiritual value. To circumvent the dangers of butter lamps, Sikkimese Buddhists have opted to make cases for them from glass, metal, and wood. But if those are not possible, Centerfresh jars are also used. By placing it over the open flame, the container captures a lot of the black soot that comes from the burning butter, and can also prevent the lamp from being knocked over by the wind.

Ironically, in this way, Centerfresh jars can be interpreted as superior forms of material culture, as they help Buddhist communities overcome limitations to, and dangers from, a traditional form of material culture – the butter lamp – by acting as an extension of or additive to the form of the butter lamp. Reincarnated in this way, Centerfresh jars can last for years, for even if they are discolored by the soot, it is the intention – and added safety – that counts.

AN OFFERING OF FRAGRANCE: THE PROBLEM WITH DISPOSING OF PLASTIC

One small problem that can arise from this use of Centerfresh jars is the smell. Over time, as the plastic thins from constant use, the heat from the flame can distort the jar, and as it melts a foul smell emerges. The smell of burning plastic is quite common in contemporary Sikkim, especially in urban centers. As well as letting off toxic fumes, burning has other spiritual consequences. In Sikkimese Buddhist traditions, burning is the preferred method for disposal. Burning allows for the merit in the sacred object to be spread through the smoke into the infinite universe to satiate seen and unseen beings. Burning also does away with anxiety around sacred waste. Once a sacred object has been consecrated and awoken, disposing of it can be difficult

due to its generative nature. Throwing an object into the garbage collection may inadvertently lead it to mingle with physical and spiritual pollutants, known locally as *drip*. This could lead the person who threw out the object in the first place to become ill or receive misfortune. Additionally, as well as being poisonous and unpleasant to humans, the smell that burning plastic generates can also be agitating for deities and spirits. To avoid angering or making the deities ill, burning of plastic is avoided. However, sometimes there are no other choices. There are practical access challenges for plastic disposal in Sikkim. As waste collection trucks may only visit once a week, residents often resort to burning plastic materials to dispose of items and keep warm. The Government of Sikkim and local offices have attempted to ban this, due to the widely known poisonous materials that come from the burning plastic. This ban is inconsistently enforced.

The problem of the smell of burning plastic gets to the heart of the problem with plastic: how to get rid of plastic waste. As much as it can be repurposed and reincarnated, eventually plastic, like life itself according to the Buddha, is subject to the forces of impermanence. Once plastics break down in Sikkim, the problem remains of how to dispose of the waste. The State Government promotes recycling initiatives, but ultimately, still relies on trucks to collect waste and recycling plants on the plains of India to dispose of the excess, even if they are overrun as well. At the end of the cycle – when plastic materials break down and are used up – what happens to them? The problem with the disposal of plastic remains, and this issue is perhaps the biggest drawback to the creative re-using of plastic that is so central to Sikkimese Buddhist material culture, which often leads people to burn their waste.

Recently, young entrepreneurs have started to develop innovative means for countering the issue of disposal by returning to forms of traditional knowledge for manufacturing sacred objects. Throughout the Inner Asian and Himalayan Buddhist worlds, popular fabric objects such as offering scarves and prayer flags have been made from synthetic fabrics since the 1980s. This has led to a drop in price and rise in accessibility. However, as anthropologist Saskia Abrahms-Kavunenko has pointed out, these have also led to the emergence of 'zombie materiality,' as these synthetic fabrics do not biodegrade easily, and the more there are, the more of a problem they are (Abrahms-Kavunenko 2022). By contrast, historically prayer flags on mountain passes would break down over relatively short amounts of time in the elements. These cloth objects were made from biodegradable, locally sourced material.

In the last five years, entrepreneurs in Sikkim, Nepal, and Bhutan have sought out biodegradable materials to make these objects. In Sikkim, designer Sonam Tashi Gyaltsen has worked with his design firm LA to make offering scarves out of cotton and nettle-based fabric. In a newspaper article promoting the scarves, he critiqued Buddhist communities for polluting the environment by using polyester materials. However, he also admitted the difficulties that local communities have in accessing biodegradable alternatives due to the issue of affordability, since GST makes his sustainable scarves to be more expensive than polyester alternatives (Dhungel 2022). In Nepal, Ang Dolma Sherpa has used bamboo fiber to create offering scarves and prayer flags, but she also has to deal with the issue of affordability, since biodegradable fabric is more expensive and there are also challenges with supply lines to more remote areas. Sherpa sees her work as a reconnection with ancestral knowledge of material religion production (personal communication 2022).

Both of these initiatives have been lauded by environmental action groups and local communities, but the higher price points for production, and the issue of limited distribution lines, have meant that biodegradable objects are not yet widely available. In Summer 2022, I spoke with a number of Buddhist community members in West Sikkim who indicated their excitement about these sustainable alternatives. There was a general awareness and concern about synthetic materials, since they do not break down naturally leading to the need to burn them. When the scarves in particular are burned on funeral pyres – as is the local custom – they emit noxious odors. People indicated to me that they would be thrilled to opt for the biodegradable alternative if they were affordable and easily available because they are worried about the environmental impact of synthetics. I was told about social media commentators who recommended the use of cut flowers instead. However, there is a historical significance of using offering scarves in the making and consolidating of relationships between humans and deities. Cut flowers do not have this form of multilayered resonance for Buddhist communities. At present the polyester scarves are widely available and can be purchased for as little as 10 INR, so meeting this price point will be challenging, for producers of biodegradable alterantives but necessary, to change the market. However, the widespread nature of these discussions, and acknowledgement of the different economic and cultural complexities of changing plastic habits, demonstrates the many ways people are thinking about the issue of plastic and its disposability in the future of the mountains. These concerns resonate with concerns about plastic among communities elsewhere in the region. Examples include discussions in Limi, Western Nepal, studied by Diemberger and Skrievere 2021. These discussions illustrate the importance of collaboration between local communities and scientists in the development of inclusive and just waste management and climate response strategies that have been called for by anthropologists Ritodhi Chakraborty and Pasang Y. Sherpa (Chakraborty and Sherpa 2021).

CONCLUSION

The challenges associated with the disposal of plastic gets to a central issue with plastic: despite its usefulness, beauty, and flexibility as an offering it is ultimately impermanent, but cannot be disposed of as easily as other forms of historical offerings, including bamboo, milk products, and cloth, that are biodegradable. However, these plastic objects remain resonant, for as Hawkins has written about plastic bags, they are 'useful and sensual and vital, and they can suggest and invite other sorts of collaboration' – just as they have in Sikkimese Buddhist religious life. Here, plastic objects function as signifiers of skillful means, the ability for Buddhist concepts such as merit and blessings to be conveyed in a variety of sensory methods and to allow for Buddhist material culture to take on a variety of forms. Hawkins as outlined how innovative uses of plastics have inspired new forms of relations, where 'unexpected reactions and innovations with matter might surface that generate different circuits of obligation from creative reuse to a deeper ecological thinking about stuff and where it ends up' (Hawkins 2009).

In the Sikkimese context, plastic is as capable of generating connection and merit as any other type of offering material, and the creative afterlives of plastic materials point towards how plastic can be rethought. These creative afterlives are distinct from the vision extolled by politicians elsewhere in India seeking to promote eco-traditionalism and '[r]omanticized versions of an ecologically sensitive Indian – usually coded as Hindu.' (Pathak 2021: 6) along with 'apolitical cultural Hindutva' (Pathak 2021: 11). The popularity of plastic flowers and food packaging in Sikkim and the re-use of waste, as with Centerfresh jars, demonstrate how novelty interacts with tradition. Sikkimese Buddhists are not romanticizing a past when they creatively embrace and repurpose plastics, but instead are aware of their modernity and complexity. They are positing new ways forward in the Anthropocene where waste can be reborn into new forms of use, rather than rotting away as 'zombie rubbish' in the landscape that creates different types of disorder, illness, and decline (Abrahms-Kavunenko 2021), and thereby potentially making the deities of the land ill (Bhutia 2022a).

The approach to waste in Sikkim reaffirms what has been noted by Pathak (2021), Dey, and Michael (2021) elsewhere in India: that instead of ineffective, hollow bans, maybe embracing the recategorization of plastic may help deal with waste more effectively. In Sikkim, the invocation of re-purposed plastic waste as an offering to the deities may encourage more awareness of its potentialities and thereby lead to less irresponsible generation of destructive waste.

NOTE

1 Sikkim is an ethnically and religiously diverse state. This research is based on fieldwork undertaken in Buddhist communities who speak Sikkimese Bhutia, Nepali, and English, so I have included phonetic terms where they first appear in the paper.

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The article draws on the author's experiences, observations, and general information, and therefore, no ethical approval for research has been sought. The names of persons in the article have been anonymized, apart from in the names of people provided in other cited sources.

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