

## SIKKIM : THE LAND OF FIVE TREASURES OF THE SNOWS

To breathe the air of Sikkim free,  
To wander by her purling rills,  
And seek the beauty of her hills,  
The blueness of her sky.

C. McCauley, *Lay of Lachen*

The Sikkim region of the Himalaya is so small that originally it was classified as part of Nepal Himalaya in the 1860s in a study conducted by Sir Sydney Burrard, the Surveyor-General of India from 1910 to 1919. This diminutive state to the north of Darjeeling, the famous hill town in West Bengal, stretches for about 110 km from north to south, and for 65 km from east to west. The Kangchenjunga (now also known as the Khangchendzonga), at 8,586 m the third highest peak in the world, is situated here. The original inhabitants of Sikkim were the Lepchas whose language and physical features tend to identify them as the ancient tribe that is believed to have migrated from southern Tibet during the 15<sup>th</sup> century. Very few Lepchas remain today, and the population largely consists of the Nepalis who arrived in Sikkim during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century in search of livelihood.

Sikkim was an independent kingdom until a series of events caused the British to take full control of the region in 1861. In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, the East India Company settled a dispute between Sikkim and Nepal in favour of the former, in the process assuming certain protective rights and gaining control over the Sikkimese army. In 1834, the East India Company helped the *Chogyal* of Sikkim in repulsing the Nepalese army, and as a gesture of goodwill, the *Chogyal* presented it with the present day Darjeeling and the Singalila ridge, a small track immediately surrounding it. In 1849, Dr Arthur Campbell, the Superintendent of Darjeeling and Sir Joseph Dalton Hooker, the botanist who introduced the floral wealth of Sikkim to the world, were arrested for entering the kingdom without obtaining the permission of the *Chogyal*. The British responded by conquering large areas south of the Rangit river, and in 1861 they annexed the entire kingdom, imposing a treaty that placed the *Chogyal* firmly under their control. After a British military expedition that nullified the growing influence of the Tibetans in 1888, the boundaries of Sikkim were defined and it was declared a protectorate of British India in 1890. This state of affairs continued till 1970 when the Chogyal married an American Hope Cook, who had political ambitions and irritated powers in Delhi led by Mrs. Indira Gandhi. Opposing the designs of the Chogyal was Elisa Maria, a Belgian who had lived in Delhi, cultivating several political contacts. She counted Chou En Lai and Kamal Ata'tark amongst her friends. She had married Kazi Lhendup Dorji in Sikkim and came to be known as Chakung Kazini. These three ladies guided the destiny of Sikkim. She and Kazi Lhendup became instrumental in organizing protests. Kazini led protests against the Chogyal and his policies which, after some violence, led to elections. Sikkim selected to join India in 1975.

Sikkim is a popular trekking ground, which is partly attributable to its wealth of flora. At Thangu in north Sikkim, rhododendrons can be seen in full bloom in the month of April. To Thangu's east lies Sebu la, leading to Mome Samdong, the land of hot springs, and Yumathang. Although some of the most scenic routes pass through the valleys of Lachung and Lachen to the east, the prime attraction for trekkers is the Singalila ridge,

which plummets from the Kangchenjunga massif to Sandakphu at 3,636 m. With steep drops on each side, the ridge offers spectacular views of the Everest to the west and Kangchenjunga to the east. Dominating the view, near Sandakphu and Tonglu, are the densely forested slopes covered with rhododendrons. A little to the north of Sandakphu is Guicha La at 4,940 m, another popular trekking place that offers a great view of the Kangchenjunga and the Zemu Gap.

In the east forming a natural barrier between Sikkim and Tibet is the Dongkhya ridge, on which the Dongkhya Ri peak and Kangchengyao stand, and it has no summits higher than 6,000 m, and the passes, such as the Jelep La and Nathu La, leading to the Chumbi valley in Tibet, are easy to negotiate. A motorable road is constructed across the Nathu La to Lhasa that would make the approach to Tibet shorter.

## **Flora and Fauna**

In spring, Sikkim is a virtual herbarium. Orchids trail from the trees and begonias cling to damp rocks in the low forest. Alpine flora such as rhododendrons and primulas thrive above 3,300 m in July and early August, and it is not uncommon to see entire slopes carpeted with these flowers in a bewildering range of colours. About thirty species of rhododendrons are found in Sikkim, varying from a 12 m high tree with a girth of 1.5 m to a little prostrate shrub barely rising 5 cm above the ground. Although these plants bloom from April to October, their flowering is especially spectacular in the month of May. Almost as various as the rhododendrons are the primulas of which there are about 30 to 40 species. In the lower and middle reaches of the Sikkim Himalaya, not higher than 3,660 m, thrive nearly twenty species of bamboo. This infinite variety of vegetation with every type of flora found from the tropics to the higher reaches, is the result of the heavy rains and a great variation in temperature.

A varied avifauna is also a characteristic feature of Sikkim, and about 500 to 600 species have been recorded here. They range from the gigantic, high-altitude lammergeyer that measures approximately 115 cm in length and 250 cm across its outstretched wings, to the tiny flowerpecker, barely 8 cm in length, found in the foothills up to a height of 1,200 m. Nearly 600 species of butterflies are found in Sikkim, and of these the oak-leaf butterfly is particularly fascinating due to its striking resemblance to a leaf. There are over 2,000 species of moths, the largest variety in insects, and some of them are so large and colourful that it might be difficult for someone not initiated into entomology to believe they are real.

## **Kangchenjunga**

The main attraction of Sikkim remains the mighty peak of Kangchenjunga, called 'the five treasures of the snows' by the Sikkimese after five peaks of this massif. The two prime approaches to the Kangchenjunga massif are from the west (Nepal) and the east (Sikkim). All expeditions to the summit prior to 1949 went through the east as Nepal had sealed off its borders to foreigners from 1885 to 1949. Explorations to the Kangchenjunga massif, the most revered peak in Sikkim, began in earnest with Douglas Freshfield's circuitous journey around the mountain in 1899, throwing up the possibility of climbing the peak by its north-west face. The first serious attempt to climb the peak was made by a young German team led by Paul Bauer, in 1929. They pitted their strength against Kangchenjunga's east face, only to be pushed back by a heavy blizzard raging on the north-east ridge. Paul Bauer returned in 1931, and in a remarkable small team effort reached a height of about 7,400 m, the highest point on the formidable north-east spur, which would have led the team to the north ridge at approximately 7,700 m, and on to the summit. However, a dangerous stretch of loose

snow obstructed their path, and the threat of impending snowfall coupled with the low morale of the team prevented them from proceeding further. Meanwhile, in 1930, an expedition led by Professor G O Dyhernfurth, a German explorer, tried to scale the mountain from the north-west face, an attempt that was abandoned after the team lost two fellow climbers in a grievous accident.

A few decades later, efforts to scale the peak were renewed, this time from Nepal. In 1953, a small British team made a reconnaissance of the Yalung glacier, west of the Kangchenjunga massif, and recommended that the mountain be climbed from its south-west face through the ice-shelf higher up the glacier. The ice-shelf had breaks, which would make it easier to set up camps. The 1955 British expedition led by Charles Evans took this route to the summit. George Band and Joe Brown were the first to reach the top on 25 May 1955, and the following day Norman Hardie and H R A Streather repeated the ascent. All the climbers stopped five feet short of the summit, honouring their promise to the Chogyal that the top of the mountain would remain inviolate. However, the *Chogyal* felt that the sacred mountain had been desecrated as the six feet tall climber was a foot above his god. Whether this was true or not, the gods were offended, and storm and rains devastated Sikkim after the first ascent.

In 1977, attention turned to the north-east spur once again, and the *Chogyal* reluctantly granted permission. The Indian Army expedition, led by Col. N. Kumar, was larger and technologically more advanced than the earlier teams in 1929 and 1931. They crossed this spur, reaching the peak on 30 May 1977. Two summiteers, Major Prem Chand and Naik Nima Dorjee Sherpa made their most acknowledged climb and achieved what Paul Bauer had striven so hard for almost forty years ago.

## Darjeeling

In the shadow of the Kangchenjunga lie the hill towns of Darjeeling and Kalimpong, which though not a part of Sikkim are closely associated with it. Once a British administered territory, Kalimpong in West Bengal is 64 km from Gangtok, the capital of Sikkim. It used to be an important terminal point for wool trade with Tibet, and mule caravans carrying manufactured wool from Amritsar would make their way across Nathu La and Jelep La, bringing back in exchange salt to India.

Darjeeling was the starting point for early Everest expeditions, a factor that caused many Sherpas from the Solu Khumbu district of Nepal to migrate here in search of work. Today it is the home of the Indian Sherpas. Many Sherpas migrated from the Khumbu district of Nepal, at foot of Everest, to Darjeeling, in search of work. The early Everest expeditions employed them and now for generations they have made home in Darjeeling. Tensing was one of such Sherpa. Another ethnic group that forms a distinct identity is the Gorkha soldiers of the Indian army. Traditionally many young Gorkha boys ran away from their families to join the Gorkha regiments raised by the British. Starting from the recruiting centre in Darjeeling they have excelled and won many medals in war. The town is also famous for the Darjeeling Himalayan Railway, a remarkable piece of engineering that was declared a World Heritage in 1999.<sup>1</sup>

Darjeeling is also well-known as a major tea production area. Along with Assam tea the Darjeeling tea is a product known the world over. It is cultivated in large areas and road from Siliguri to Darjeeling is almost through tea gardens. The British laid out tea gardens and set up factories which gave employment to hundreds of workers, one of the prime reasons for growth of Darjeeling. In annual auction the best quality tea is sold at a

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<sup>1</sup> See note on Himalayan Railways in Appendix.

very high price.<sup>2</sup> Generally the highest bidders are royalties of Japan and England. Do not decline an invitation to tea should you be invited by them !

The flight of Dalai Lama to India in 1959 infuriated the Chinese. One focus of their anger was Sikkim with which they had always coveted. During the 1962 Indo-China war, much firing took place on the high passes of Nathu La and Se La. Historically China always recognised Sikkim as an independent country and even after it joined India as a state, China refused to change its stand. In 1967-68, situation on the passes with China was grim and at certain points, Indian and Chinese armies were constantly in skirmishes. Luckily a war was averted. During 2001, the Indian Prime Minister visited Peking and the Chinese negotiated a road from Kolkata to Lhasa via Sikkim, Nathu La and Chumbi valley, which was a prime need for China as it would give them an access to the warm water port of Kolkata and bring Lhasa much closer for supplies. As a *quid pro quo* China agreed to recognise Sikkim as part of India. After some time when nothing was heard from the Chinese authorities, the Indian Government inquired about their promise. Pat came the reply, to look up the official website of the Chinese Government. 'We have done the needful'. On the website map, below the word 'Sikkim', they had added a word, in red, 'India'. Only by such subtle diplomacy did China concede that Sikkim was indeed part of India !

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<sup>2</sup> At recent auction best quality tea was sold at Rs. 17,000 per kg (US \$ 425 per kg)