

NORTH EAST INDIA LAND AND PEOPLE SERIES - 2

Series Editor: K. Jose SVD

THE LEPCHA OF SIKKIM

Sumitabha Chakraborty



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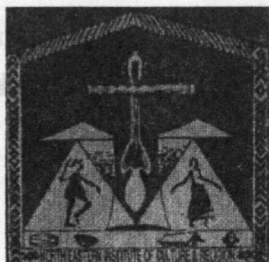
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SANSKRITI

**NORTH EASTERN INSTITUTE OF
CULTURE AND RELIGION
GUWAHATI (INDIA)**



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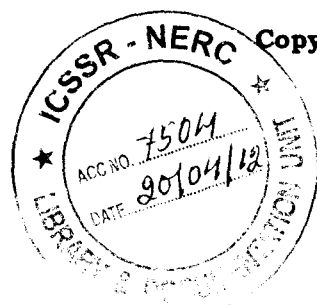
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Chapter One

INTRODUCTION

Sikkim, a small mountainous state as recognized '*Nye-mae-el*' (paradise) by the Lepcha; '*Beymul Denjong*' (the hidden valley of rice) by the Bhutias and '*Su Khim*' (new house) by the Limbu group of the Nepalese (Sharma, 1983) has witnessed great changes in its political structure, social structure, economic life and cultural values during the past hundred years. Some scholars opined that the word "Sikkim" was derived from '*Su Khim*', originally a word of reference to mean the new house by the Limbu group of the Nepalese population. Few scholars have been found its roots in the Sanskrit word, which means 'crested or mountainous country'. Regarding the etymology of the word Sikkim there are many views, many opinions, but it must be noted that Sikkim is one of the most enthralling regions in the Himalayas. From administrative point of view, Sikkim has been divided into four districts - east, west, north and south.

Living on the western flank of the Eastern Himalaya, Sikkim, one of the smallest states in India is flavoured with floral bounty and land-locked terrain. The state lies on the north of West Bengal and located between 27° 05' - 28° 09' North latitude and 87° 57' - 88° 56' East longitude. Sikkim is oblong in shape with a north to south length of approximately 112 km. and an east to west breadth of approximately 64 km. that gives it a total landmass of 7096 square kilometers. Close to three-quarters of its perimeter that covers most of the east and the west including the entire

northern borderline has a contiguous mountain range surrounding the terrain within. The southern fringe of Sikkim, devoid of a Himalayan barrier opens out to the Plains of Bengal and it is towards this direction that Sikkim's two major river systems, the Teesta and Rangeet flow down to drain the land. This gigantic horseshoe enclosure causes the trapping of moisture-laden winds from the Bay of Bengal and results in high precipitation round the year. The state is bounded by Nepal in the West, Bhutan in the east, Tibet in the north and northeast and West Bengal in the south.

The Chola range is pierced by several passes, the most frequented of which are the Tangkar La (16000 feet), Nathu La (14,200 feet), Jelep La (14,390 feet), Kongra La (13,350 feet). From the Northwest face of the Donkya Mountain an immense spur takes off, and runs first west and then southwest to Khangchendzonga, forming the watershed of all the remote sources of the Teesta River. These basins have a southward slope, being broad at the top where they leave the watershed, and gradually contracting like a fan from its rim to its handle, in the Teesta valley near Pashok (Porter, 1931). It will be noticed that a great many of these mountains and rivers are mentioned in the Lepcha mythology, and appear in the creation myths, whilst they are also spoken of in numerous folk tales.

Historical Account

Historical information revealed that Sikkim was known to early European Travelers, such as Horace Della Penna and Samuel Van de Putte, as the name of Bramashon, while Bogle called it Demojong. Since the beginning of 17th century the country had to face numerous invasions from its neighboring countries, Bhutan and Nepal. Consequently, the large portion of

its land was annexed by these countries. The Nepalese conquered the lower Teesta, Bhutan annexed the entire region on the East of the river Teesta including the present day Kalimpong subdivision and Tibet took over Chumbi valley, and thus made the Chola and Jelep La Ranges Northern and Eastern boundary (Singh, 1993). Local tradition asserts that the ancestors of the Rajas of Sikkim originally came from the neighbourhood of Lhasa in Tibet. About middle of the 17th century, the head of the family was named Puntso Namgyal; and to him repaired three Tibetan monks, Professor of the Nyingmapa (or 'red cap' sect of Buddhism), who were disgusted at the predominance of the Gelukpa sect in Tibet. These lamas, according to Mr. Edgar's report, succeeded in converting the Lepcha of Sikkim to their own faith, and in making Puntso Namgyal Raja of the country. The avatars of two of these lamas are now the heads, respectively, of the two great monasteries of Pemiangtse and Tashiding.

In 1788 the Gurkhas invaded Sikkim in the governorship of the Morang, and only retired in 1789, on the Tibetan Government ceding to them a piece of territory at the head of the Koti pass. But in 1792, on the second invasion of Tibetan territory by the Gurkhas, an immense Chinese army advanced to the support of the Tibetans, defeated the Gurkhas and dictated terms to them almost at the gates of Kathmandu. The Anglo-Gurkha war and the signing of the treaty of Sugauli (1815) between Nepal and the East India Company and signing of the Treaty of Titaliya (1816) between the East India Company and Sikkim introduced a new phase in the history of Sikkim. The treaty of Titaliya marked the beginning of the British influence in Sikkim.

According to the history, the Lepcha kings, Tur-Ve, Tur-Ayek, Tur-Sang-Pano and Tur-Sung reigned apparently at the same time in different parts of the country. The Rong-folk history is very obscure, and it was only when these four had died, their places were taken by treasurers, secretaries and headman. The recorded history of Sikkim begins with the coming of Buddhism and the founding of the Namgyal dynasty in the 17th century. The genealogy of Phuntsog Namgyal, crowned first Raja of Sikkim in 1642, extends back to Minyak dynasty in Tibet, from there to the royal family of Kosla, a small princely Kingdom in what is present day Himachal Pradesh. It was only around the 15th century that his ancestors first made contact with the local inhabitants of Sikkim. *Khye Bumsa* (Phuntsog Namgyal's great grandfather's great grandfather) came to Sikkim from Tibet in search of the Lepcha *Boongthing Thekung Tek*, who was believed to be the 6th direct descendant of the original Lepcha Chief. Mythological account revealed that *Khye Bumsa* 'equaling a 1,00,000 men' – a sobriquet he earned for his legendary strength which he demonstrated by putting up the pillars of the Sakya monastery in Tibet single handed – was childless and sought the blessings of the Lepcha priest. As predicted by *Thekung Tek*, three sons were born to *Khye Bumsa*, who returned to Sikkim with them. *Khye Bumsa*, his three sons, *Thekung Tek* and his wife sowed a blood-brotherhood pact. The Lepcha priest erected nine stones facing Khangchendzonga at Kabi (north of Gangtok) and invoked all the guardian deities of Sikkim and the sacred mountain to witness the covenant between the Lepcha and the Bhutias. To this day the pact is celebrated by the Sikkimese on the 15th day of the 9th month of the Tibetan calendar. The stones erected by *Thekung Tek* are still standing

at Kabi Longchok - mute witness to that historic accord. The four grandson of *Khye Bumsa* were the first among his descendants to actually settle in Sikkim (Sharma, 1983). The kingship of Phuntsog Namgyal had quasi-religious overtones. He was called the *Chogyal* (Dharma-Raja). In order to help administer the land he appointed 12 *jongpens* (from the prominent Lepcha families) and 12 *kazis* (from the leading Bhutia families) as governors. He succeeded by his son, who built the palace at Rabdentse (West Sikkim), which was razed, to the ground by the invoking Gurkha soldiers in the 18th century.

The 18th & 19th centuries were marked by frequent invasions from Bhutan and Nepal, mostly from the latter and the Sikkimese was constantly embroiled in brutal wars. Following arrival of the British, in their search for trade routes to Tibet, the first Nepali settlers came. This was to change the ethnic balance here, and it was long before the Nepali population was in a majority. However, politically, the power was still retained by the Bhutia, and the Lepcha only. By the late 19th century Sikkim had become a protectorate of the British, an arrangement that was inherited by India when the British left. This arrangement was continued on the basis of the Indo-Sikkim treaty of 1950. In the 1950s and 1960s there was a latent resentment among the masses and a fervent plea arose for 'one-man, one vote'. Democratic aspirations in the people had been awakened. This eventually resulted in the overthrow of the monarchy and culminated in 1975, with the merger of Sikkim with India.

In contemporary period the kingship system had been changed, all villages are governed by a '*kazi*'. He is the man who ranks next to the Maharaja, and is a

hand-owner. Then next to him comes the 'mandal', the village headman. In the year 1641, Phungtsog Namgyal was consecrated as the first Bhutia King of Namgyal dynasty. This remained kingdom for long and a protectorate state of India before its merger in 1975 as its 22nd state. The process of change was quickened from different directions, resulting in multiform ethnic mix (Sharma, 1983; p. 18).

Physical Features

Spanning Sikkim's western borders are the Khangchendzonga and the Singalila Range, a north-south spur of the Great Himalaya. The northern limits, which reach out to the Tibetan Plateau, the Donkia Range straddles while the Chola Range bound the eastern flank. The average steepness is about 45 degrees. Sikkim encompasses the Lesser Himalaya, Central Himalaya, and the Tethys Himalaya. The major mountain peaks of Sikkim are; Khangchendzonga-8,846 m, Jonsang-7,444 m, Talung-7,351 m, Kabru-7,338 m, Siniolchu-6,887 m, Pandim-6,691 m, Rathong-6,680 m Koktang-6,148 m, and Simvo-6,811 m. There are numerous perennial lakes in Sikkim among which, Khechiperi, Gurudongmar, Chho Lhamu, Changu and Menmetsho are some of the more scenic.

Having an area of 7096 sq. km. the whole state is divided into four administrative zones; north, south, east and west districts with their headquarters at Mangan, Namchi, Gangtok and Gyalshing respectively. The State receives an Annual Rainfall of 2000 mm. to 4000 mm. The state is wholly a hilly cum mountainous state with varied elevations. The land area can be grouped as -

1. Lower Hills - Altitude from 270 m. to 1500m. above mean sea level.

2. Mid Hills – Altitude from 1500 m. to 2000m.
3. Higher Hills – Altitude from 2000 m. to 3500m.
4. Alpine Zone – Altitude from 3500 m. to 5000m., with vegetation.
5. Snow bound line – Higher reaches of mountains without vegetation and with perpetual snow cover up to 8580 mtrs.

Sikkim provides a great variety of habitats, and this is reflected in the richness of its flora and fauna. The animals in the state are estimated to comprise 144 species of mammals, like Bhral, Clouded leopard, Snow leopard, Leopard cat, Red panda, Musk deer, Great Tibetan sheep, Tibetan antelope, Tibetan fox, Will ass, over 1000 species of Butterflies and moths. Flowering plants comprise about 4500 species, fern and fern allies' account for more than 350 species. The vegetation changes from one altitude to other and has been cleared for cultivation, however, wherever it survives, it is dominated by Sal in the middle hills. Coniferous and oak forest of temperate character to the higher slopes with sub-alpine scrub and stony alpine 'meadows' generally related to the high mountain flora of the north temperate zone.

The variety of elevation gives Sikkim diverse climatic condition. At the lower altitudes the climate is warm and humid during the summer and monsoon months (June-October) and moderately cold during the winter months (December-February). But as one goes higher, the winter months can be very severe and although Gangtok, the capital of Sikkim, at 5,500 feet (1678mtr.) can be said to have a moderate winter, Lachen and Lachung and the areas near Dzongri in West Sikkim are snow covered most of the winter months.

Sacred Places

Supernatural phenomena are immanent in the material world of Sikkimese people. The qualities of sacredness attach to space – Mountain peaks, Hills, Rivers, Lakes, Caves, Rocks etc., whether domestic architecture or the subcontinent itself. An enormous range of geographical features possesses sacred properties. Some are inherent and some are acquired through association with a holy individual or deity. The most sacred places are the places of worship of different faith and belief. For Hindus the temples, for Christians the Churches, for Limboos the Mangkhims, for Buddhists the Monasteries, for Muslims the Masjids etc. scattered throughout the state of Sikkim are the sacred places of worship. On the recommendation of the Committee submitted to the Government on 24th April 2001, the Government has declared all sacred peaks, caves, rocks, lakes and hot springs as the most sacred Buddhist places of worship in Sikkim and protected them under the provisions of the places of worship (Special Provisions) Act, 1991 vide Government Notification No. 355 dated 29th September, 2001 (Subba, 2008). It is worth mentioning that the members of the Committee constituted vide Notification No. 52/Home/98 dated 24.09.1998 selected sacred places only from the Buddhist point of view.

Sacred Peaks

- (i) Ghangchen-m Zod-Nga (Kanchanjunga – Main
28,208 ft.)
(Khangchendzonga) (Kanchenjunga –
South 27,803 ft.)
(Kanchenjunga – West
27,625 ft.)

(ii) Mt. Narsing	19,111 ft.
(iii) Gabur Gangtsen	(Kabru North, 24,075 ft.) (Kabru South, 24,005 ft.) (Kabru Dome, 21,600 ft.)
(iv) Pandim Peak,	21,658 ft.
(v) Mt. Simvo,	22,346 ft.
(vi) Goecha Peak	20,100 ft.
(vii) Fork Peak	20,382 ft.
(viii) Pao Hungri	23,180 ft.
(ix) Mt. Siniolchu	22,609 ft.

Sacred Caves

- (i) Sharchhogbayphug at Sangmo, South Sikkim
- (ii) Khadosangphug at Sanganath, South Sikkim
- (iii) Dechenphug above Nampung, West Sikkim
- (iv) Lharinyingphug via Kongri-Labdang, West Sikkim
- (v) Phagmorong, West Sikkim
- (vi) Tragtungrong, West Sikkim

Sacred Rocks (Naydo)

- (i) Yongzokdrak, West Sikkim
- (ii) Tragkar rock at Tashiding, West Sikkim
- (iii) Gyalwa Lhatsun Chhenpo's Footprint at Yuksam,
- (iv) Coronation throne at Yuksom, West Sikkim
- (v) Thegchhok Yangtse Khadoi Drora rock, West Sikkim
- (vi) Guru Rimpoche's Footprint Naydo at Tsunthang (Chungthang), North Sikkim
- (vii) Kabilongtsok stone Naydo at Kabi, North Sikkim.

Sacred Lakes (Tsho)

- (i) Omechho (Omai-tsho), West Sikkim
- (ii) Sungmteng Chho (Tsho), West Sikkim
- (iii) Lamchho (Lham-tsho), West Sikkim
- (iv) Tolechho (Dhole-tsho), West Sikkim
- (v) Kabur Lamchho (Gabur Lah-tsho), West Sikkim
- (vi) Khachodpalri Pemachen Tsho (Khachodpalri lake), West Sikkim
- (vii) Kathogtsho at Yuksam, West Sikkim
- (viii) Tsho-mGo lake, east Sikkim
- (ix) Guru Dongmar lake, North Sikkim
- (x) Tsho-lhamo, North Sikkim
- (xi) Mulathingkhai-tsho (Green Lake) at Zema Glacier, North Sikkim

They completely neglected the sacred peaks, caves, rocks, lakes, etc. of the ancient people of the Lepcha (Menrees), Tsongs (Tsongrees or Limboos) and other communities. The ancient tradition of the Lepcha says that the progenitor Lepchas "*Fodong-Theeng*" and "*Na-Jong-Nue*" were created by their God Rum out of the snows of the untrodden peak of the *King-tzum-Song-bu* mountain. Their leader Thekong-Tek signed the blood brotherhood treaty with Khe-Bumsa at Kabi-Lungchok. Similarly, Sirijunga cave where the Mahatma Sirijunga of the Limboo community of Sikkim was hiding; and the Stone where he started his preaching of Yuma religion at Martam during 1734-1741 AD, are also missing from the list (Subba, 2008).

Population of Sikkim: 2001

STATE/ SECTOR DISTRICT		POPULATION		
		PERSONS	MALE	FEMALE
North	Rural	39782	22643	17139
	Urban	1248	771	477
	Total	41030	23414	17616
East	Rural	192188	104150	88038
	Urban	52852	28767	24085
	Total	245040	132917	112123
South	Rural	27579	66096	61483
	Urban	3946	2145	1801
	Total	131525	68241	63284
West	Rural	121432	62885	58547
	Urban	1824	1027	797
	Total	123256	63912	59344
SIKKIM	Rural	480981	255774	225207
	Urban	59870	32710	27160
	Total	540851	288484	252367
INDIA	Rural	741660293	381141114	360519109
	Urban	285354954	15013584	135219060
	Total	1027015247	53127708	495738169

Source: Census of India, Sikkim, 2001 - Final Population Totals

In the population table district-wise population of Sikkim is mentioned (Census, 2001) with a distinctive outlook of Indian population, from where the reader can understand the comparative figure. As time goes the population has increased in a rapid manner, much infiltration has been taken place time and again which shows a direct influence to the original inhabitant for the survival.

The area under the study is mainly chosen from the Khangchendzonga Biosphere Reserve (KBR), which lies in the West and North district of Sikkim considering the view of the Lepcha population concentration, which is more in this part, while the 'Dongu' is believed to be the mother land of the Lepcha of Sikkim. In the west district, the study had been carried out in different hamlets (*bustees*), lying under the revenue villages, like, (a) Yuksam (under Yuksam-Dubdi Gram Panchayat), (b) Tsozo (under Tsozo-Lethang Gram Panchayat) and (c) Khecheopalri (under Khecheopalri Gram Panchayat). A total number of 636 households with a total population of 3385 (Census of India, 2001) souls are inhabited in west districts; of which about 75 per cent are tribal (Lepcha and Bhutia are regarded as the tribal people in Sikkim). They are mostly residing in the remote hill-slope hamlets in the vicinity of forest.

Showing the areas of West Sikkim



Showing the areas of North Sikkim



In the north district of Sikkim, the study was conducted in Dzongu, an isolated place separated from the district headquarter Mangan by the river Teesta. Dzongu is a Tibetan word and combination of two syllables, i.e., *Dzon*, means hillock and *gu* means nine, which makes to understand that the place Dzongu is the concentration of nine hillocks. Dzongu is somewhat a triangular mountainous land having approximately 60 kms., on each side, bounded on the south-east by the river Teesta, on the north-east by the river Talung and on the third side by the mountain peaks of Khangchendzonga. The land is excessively precipitous; the rivers are at about 700 meter above the sea-level and the average height of the hills is about 4200 meter; but the peaks rise to more than double that height Khangchendzonga at the head of the Talung valley, which dominates the western

horizon. Except for a few artificially leveled places of flat ground in the whole district; the tracks are very much steep and too uneven for it to be easy for mules to track, let alone horses; all traveling has to be done on foot, and all goods transported by human portorage.

The river valleys are hot, steamy and somewhat malicious, and consequently there are no houses right on the river, though the ground is used for raising subtropical plants; there are however occasional houses about 180 meter higher up. Most of the houses and cultivated land are between 1200 meter and 2500 meter above sea level, a relatively narrow band above the two rivers, though occasionally fields are made at even higher altitudes. Above the cultivated land is the forest in which wild produce is gathered, a decreasing amount of hunting done, and to which the cattle are sent up to pasture in the winter months. Above the forest level comes first the rhododendron forest, and then the snow, rarely visited except by hunters searching either for ibex and musk deer or for the wild aconite, which forms the basis of their arrow, poison (Gorer, 2005; p. 56). The *Dzongu* is considered as the '*Mayel Lyang*' (hidden city) of the Lepcha and it is believed that from where they had been originated (Tamsang, 1982, p.22).

The area, *Dzongu*, is administratively divided in two parts – (a) the lower *Dzongu* and (b) upper *Dzongu*. In administrative point of view the lower *Dzongu* has altogether two GPU (Gram Panchayat Unit) – (i) Gnor-Samdong and (ii) Hee-Gyathang. The upper *Dzongu* has altogether five gram Panchayat unit (GPU), namely (i) Lingthem-Lingdem, (ii) Sakyong-Pentong, (iii) Shipgyar-Salim Pakhel, (iv) Tingboon-Linzya and (v) Lingdong-Berfok.