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CONTENTS



LOCATING SIKKIM

4

PEOPLE OF SIKKIM

36

LAND OF PADMASAMBHAVA

50

GOMPAS OF SIKKIM

72

EAST SIKKIM

98

SOUTH SIKKIM

106

WEST SIKKIM

110

NORTH SIKKIM

116

ADVENTURE TRAILS

126

PRACTICAL INFORMATION

144

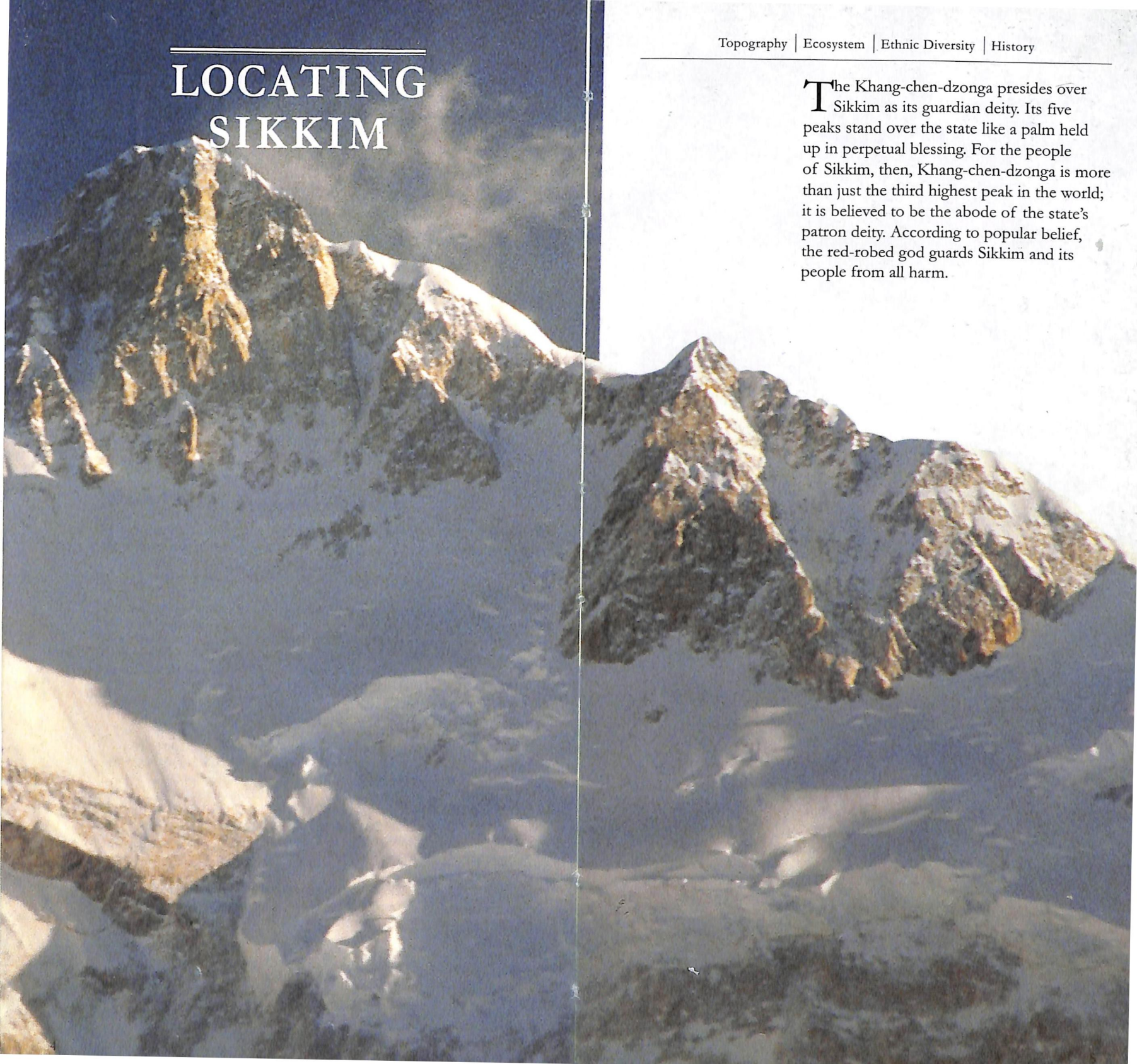
INDEX

168



LOCATING SIKKIM

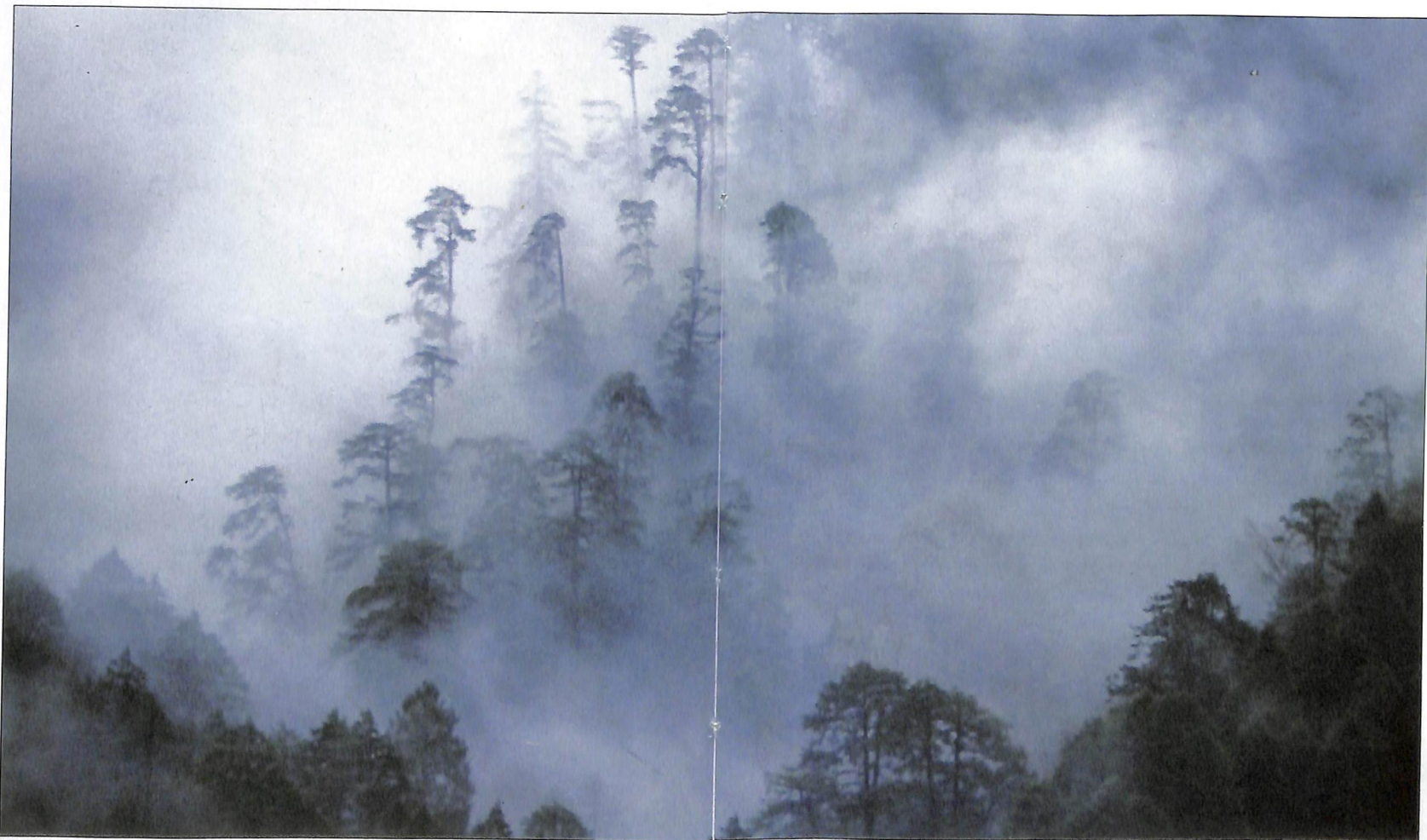
The Khang-chen-dzonga presides over Sikkim as its guardian deity. Its five peaks stand over the state like a palm held up in perpetual blessing. For the people of Sikkim, then, Khang-chen-dzonga is more than just the third highest peak in the world; it is believed to be the abode of the state's patron deity. According to popular belief, the red-robed god guards Sikkim and its people from all harm.





A full view of the Khang-chen-dzonga range
Previous Page: The Khang-chen-dzonga as
seen from Dzongri in West Sikkim

Khang-chen-dzonga, literally Five Treasures of the Eternal Snow, is believed to be the storehouse of all that is precious. In the words of Lama Lhatsun Chempo, the 17th century holy man who anointed the first Chogyal of Sikkim: 'The peak most conspicuously gilded by the rising sun is the treasury of gold; the peak that remains in cold grey shade is the storehouse for silver; and the other peaks are vaults for gems, grains and the holy books'.



Topography

The snow-sheathed Khang-chen-dzonga dominates both the thoughtscape and the landscape of Sikkim. Forming the northwest border with Nepal, the mountain and its attendant range keep the rain-laden clouds of the southwest monsoon from wandering beyond Sikkim.

Sikkim is like a stupendous stairway leading from the western border of the Tibetan plateau down to the plains of West Bengal, with a fall of about 5,215 metres in 240 kms. The surface of this rough incline is scoured with deep gorges, down which rush glacial waters, swollen by the excessive rainfall of this, the wettest section of the Himalayas.

By virtue of its location close to the equator and to the Bay of Bengal, Sikkim enjoys an uncannily tropical climate in the lower reaches.

The state lies like an amphitheatre, open towards the south, between the Singalila and Chola ranges to the west and east respectively. The two ranges also form the watersheds of the Rangeet and the Teesta rivers, while subsidiary spurs radiate from these ranges, serving as separate watersheds for the Lachung, Lachen, Zemu, Tholung, Rongli and Rongpo rivers. The rivers together make a fan-like formation, converging at the bottom into the Teesta.

The Lachung valley in North Sikkim wreathed in mist

The Teesta

The Teesta is born near the pristine waters of the Tso Lhamu Lake on a plateau in the farthest north of Sikkim, some 5,300 metres above sea level. The glacial waters then slice southwards to meet the Zemu Chu just above Lachen village.

Cascading down through deep gorges, it meets the Lachung Chu at Chungthang. The river has come barely 80 kms from its source but has already dropped some 4,000 metres in a series of stunning waterfalls. Its waters doubled, the Teesta thunders down to collect the Tolung Chu at

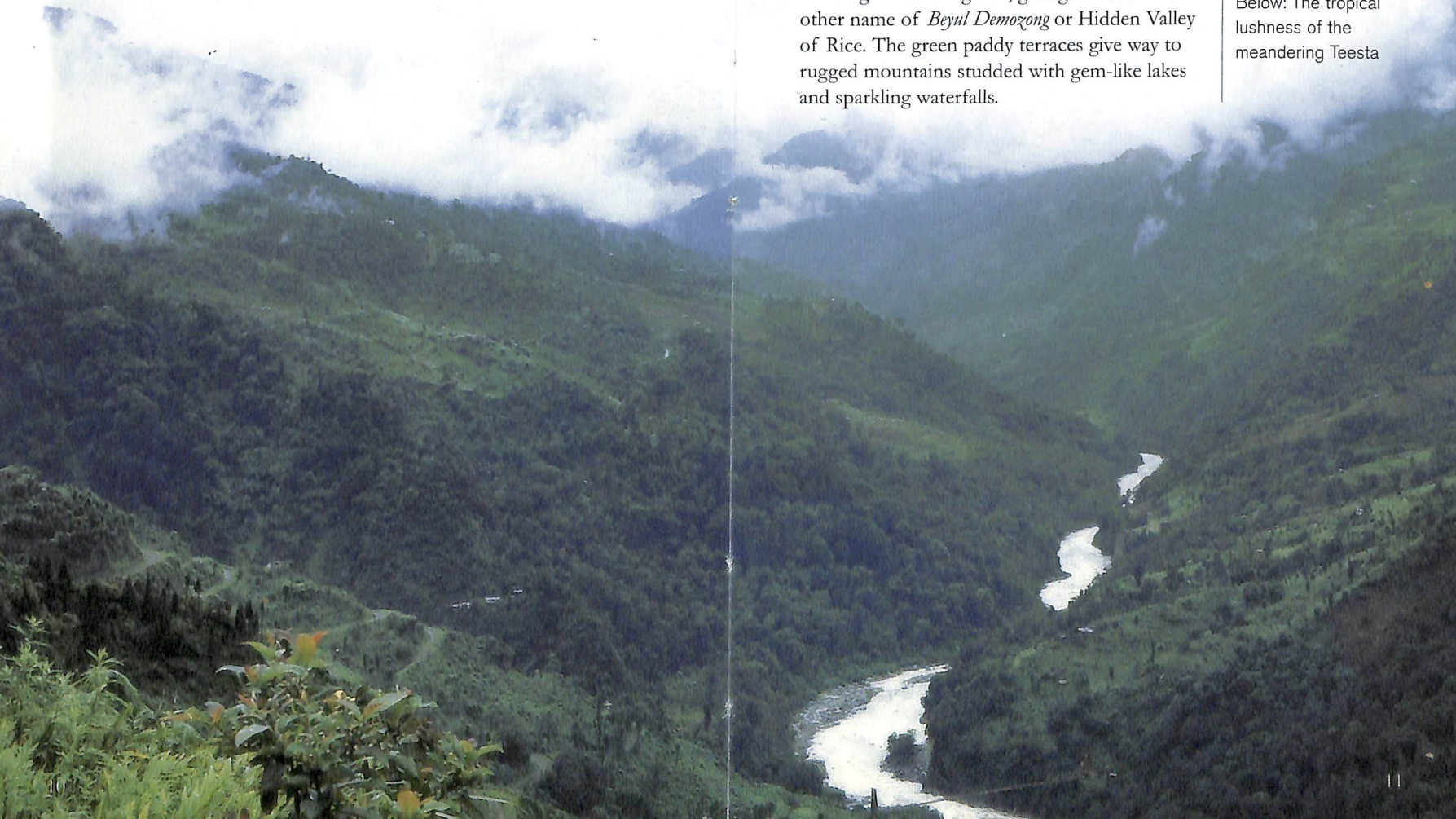
Mangan, before losing much of its force at Singtam where it slows and broadens and becomes navigable for the first time. The stretch of the river between Singtam and Rangpo is a popular rafting tract.

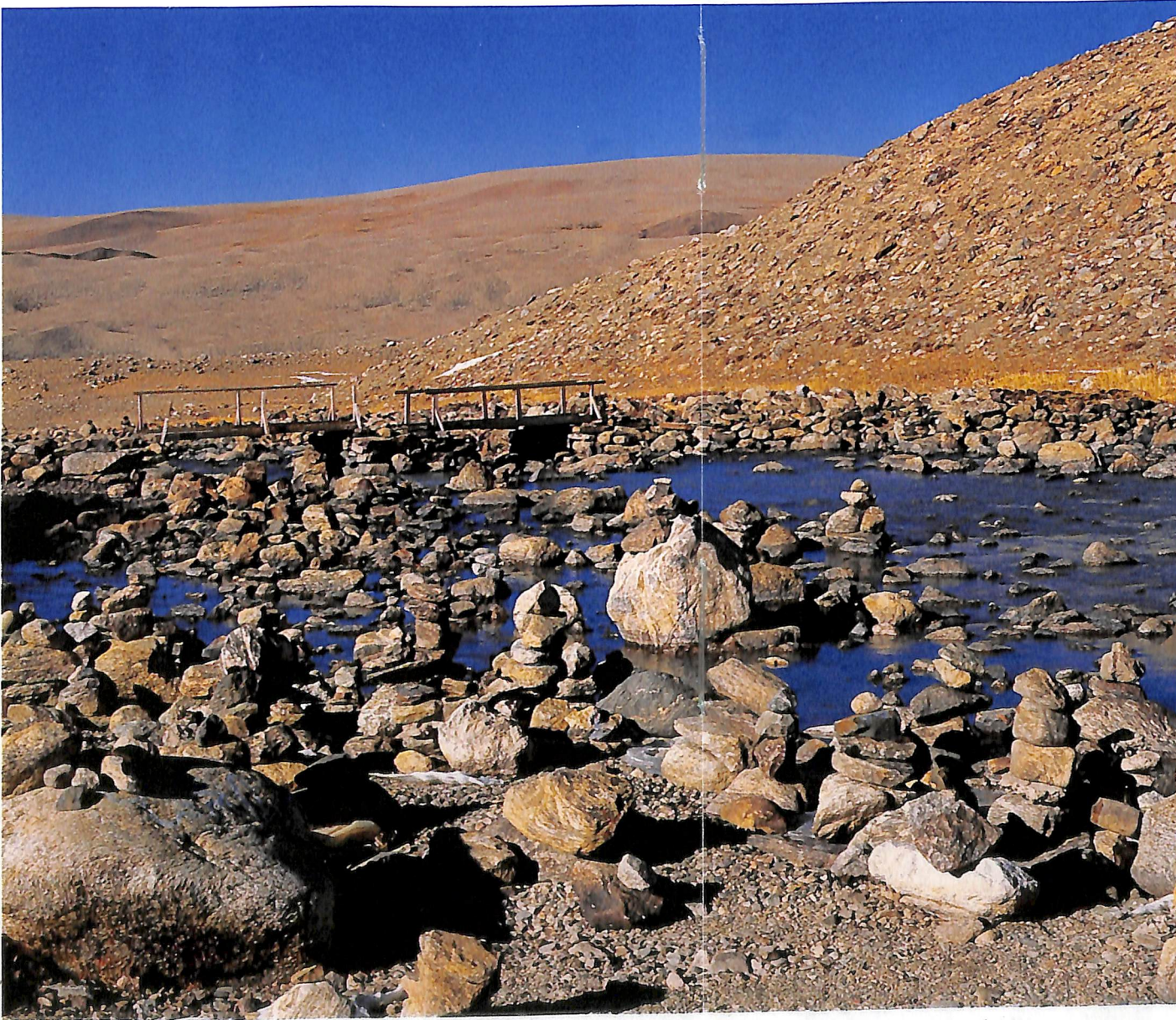
At Rangpo, the river turns west forming the border between the states of Sikkim and West Bengal. At Melli, the Teesta merges its sediment-heavy waters with the lighter stream of the Rangeet that was born in the Rathong glacier in West Sikkim. The swollen waters then flow slowly to join with the Brahmaputra in Bangladesh.



From the valley floor, watered by the fast-flowing Teesta, terraced rice fields rise in amazing shades of green, giving Sikkim its other name of *Beyul Demozong* or Hidden Valley of Rice. The green paddy terraces give way to rugged mountains studded with gem-like lakes and sparkling waterfalls.

The icy source of the Teesta, Sikkim's mightiest river
Below: The tropical lushness of the meandering Teesta





Gurudongmar Lake in North Sikkim is held in deep reverence. Locals leave little pyramids of stones here as marks of their devotion.

Altitudes rise towards the north, where, amid steep ridges, are born many rivers that run through incredibly deep gorges seaming the face of the land.

In fact, Sikkim's tortuous rivers carry tropical vegetation far into the mountains of the interior until you have the strange situation of tropical undergrowth flourishing in the very shadow of snow-capped peaks.

Sikkim is also known for the steepest rise in altitude over the shortest distance. The rise in height from mean sea level to the top of Khang-chen-dzonga at 8,586 metres is achieved in 80 kms as the crow flies. Altitudes in the state vary from 253 metres to 8,595 metres, giving Sikkim its unique climate. Within its 7,300 sq kms lies the entire climatic range: from tropical to temperate to alpine.

Caves of Sikkim

The mountains of Sikkim are studded with caves and most of them are held sacred by the locals. Lamas retreat into them to meditate and pilgrims enter their dark depths to light butter lamps of devotion. Of the four caves considered the most sacred, the holiest is *Lharinyingphu* or the 'Old Cave of God's Hill' which can be accessed only by a three-day trek from Tashiding. Then there is *Dechenphu* or Cave of Happiness and *Sharchok Pephu* or Secret Cave close to Ravangla and *Khandrosamphu* or the Cave of Fairies on the road to Pemayangtse.

Districts

Sikkim is divided into four districts. They are North Sikkim with its headquarter at Mangan, South Sikkim head-quartered at Namchi Bazaar, West Sikkim with its base at Gyaltsing and East Sikkim with its headquarters at Gangtok, which is also the state capital.



Strings of prayer flags fluttering in the breeze are an abiding part of Sikkim's landscape

Orchid

An awesome 600 species of this most exotic of flowers can be found in Sikkim. *Dendrobium*, *Cattaleya*, *Cymbidium*, *Vanda* – all the famous families can be found in their natural habitat in a rainbow range of colours. The most common of the lot, the *Dendrobium Nobile* has been adopted by the state as its official flower.

Polybag-free State

Sikkim is blazing a trail in environment consciousness. The government has declared the state a polybag-free state and you will find none of the offending non-biodegradable packaging in the state.

Ecosystem

The awesome topographical variety makes Sikkim a virtual laboratory for the study of ecosystems. The British naturalist Dr Joseph Dalton Hooker spent several years in Sikkim in the 19th century and his material, compiled in *Himalayan Journal*, proved invaluable for Charles Darwin in his study of the origin of species.

Botanically, Sikkim has an amazing diversity to offer. To begin with, 36 per cent of the state is forested, which makes for a wonderful contrast with the other fast-denuding hill states of India. The lowlands of the south have figs, laurel, sal and bamboo trees. The temperate forests of oak, chestnut, maple, birch, silver fir, bamboo, teak and sal dominate the middle heights, while the alpine forests of juniper, cypress and rhododendron green the area just below the snowline.

Fauna

The animal life of Sikkim is equally varied. A number of exotic animals like the shapi (the Himalayan tahr), red panda, musk deer, snow leopard, blue sheep, and the massive Himalayan bear roam its slopes. There have also been reports of Yeti sightings. This mythical creature is called *Migyud* by the Sikkimese. The state also has over 400 types of butterflies and 550 species of birds.

**Flora**

But Sikkim's actual wealth is in its flowers. When Dr Hooker tabulated them some 150 years ago, there were 2,920 species. Primulas, poppies and gentians all run a riot of colour in spring but pride of place is reserved for the orchids and rhododendrons. Of the 5,000 species of orchids known in the world, 600 can be found in the lower reaches of Sikkim alone. As for rhododendrons, you can find more than 300 species here.

From Top: A flowering magnolia tree, snow leopard, and the Himalayan bear
Opposite Page: Some of the innumerable orchids found on Sikkim's slopes



Biosphere Range

With over 4,000 documented plants, Sikkim is a virtual hothouse and for decades, botanists and plant lovers have been drawn to it. Sikkim's biosphere ranges roughly over three zones: tropical, temperate and alpine.

Tropical Zone

In the tropical valleys between 250 metres to 1,500 metres, figs, sal and wild bananas consort with a host of bamboo varieties. These forests on the lower hills of south and east Sikkim are caverns of green, strung with sprays of the most amazing orchids and bursts of creamy magnolia.

Beneath the canopy shelters a rich moss and fern life. Covering almost all surfaces – weathered stone, fallen trees and any other debris – the mosses blunt every sharp edge, and colour everything a deep green until they dry to a dull amber. Punctuating these algal undergrowth are the ferns, large and spectacular, in many surreal shapes.



Temperate Zone

The next biospheric zone, stretching from 1,500 metres to 5,000 metres is the reserve of the rhododendron, that hardy flower that sets mountains ablaze when in bloom. In 1849 and 1850, Sir Joseph Hooker's botanical expedition to Sikkim discovered 45 species of rhododendron on the hill slopes of the mountain state. The other trees in these temperate forests are oak, chestnut, maple, birch, alder, magnolia and silver fir.



Alpine Zone

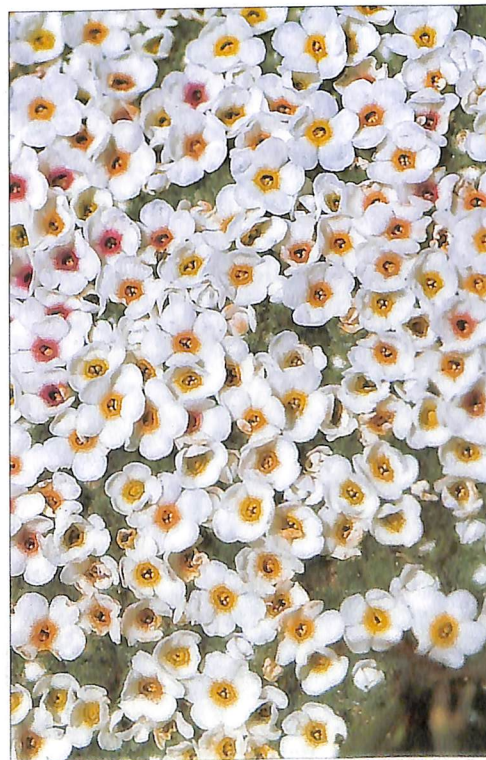
The heights above 5,000 metres are a treeless wilderness, which flare out in beauty when the primulas come to life in summer. Over 40 types of these lilliputian blooms carpet the barren land in mauves, blues and purples. At other times, too, mosses and lichens make intricately beautiful patterns as they spread their sheaths over stones and rockfaces.



Horticulture

Horticulture is one of the major economic activities of the people of Sikkim. Ginger, turmeric and large cardamom are the principal crops, while mandarin orange, guava, and banana are the principal fruits grown in the state. The state government's department of horticulture is deeply involved in motivating and providing technical guidance to local farmers. There is immense potential for developing floriculture into an export-oriented industry.

Tea is also grown extensively in the lower ridges. Sikkimese tea is a connoisseur's delight for its aroma and flavour. There is only one tea estate in Sikkim, Temi Tea Garden, which produces top quality tea. It is spread out on a gentle slope from Tendong Hill in the South district.



Above: R. Hodgsoni

Left: A carpet of wild flowers

Opposite Page from top: R. Grande; R. Thomsoni; Sikkim's state flower, the orchid *Dendrobium Nobile*; and, a spray of wild orchids

Butterflies

There are over 500 kinds of butterflies in Sikkim and these rainbow creatures add colour to any walk through Sikkim's woods.



Royal Swallow-tail (*Teinopalpus Imperialis*) or Kaiser-i-hind

This magnificent butterfly can be found in forests between 1,500 metres and 3,000 metres. The female is larger and rarer than the male, but the latter is brighter, with a large yellow area on

the upper and undersides of the hind-wings. Its flight is fast and powerful.

Bhutan Glory (*Bhutanitis Idderdalei* Papilionidae)

As its popular name indicates, this curious looking butterfly is found abundantly in Bhutan and its neighbouring areas, including Sikkim. The body is covered with coarse hairs and for its size the legs are rather short. Its flight is weak and faltering and the wind will take it like a piece of flimsy paper.



Orange Oakleaf (*Kallima inachus* Nymphalidae)

When at rest with its wings closed, this butterfly is indistinguishable from a leaf. The colour and pattern of the undersides is such that it blends with the foliage. This species is on the wing during the rainy season and has a liking for flowering trees and bushes.

Orange Tip (*Hebomoia glaucippe* Pieridae Great)

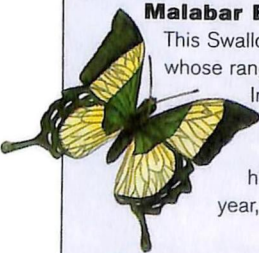
This is the largest of the Pieridae found in Asia and one of the largest whites in the world. It is very active in the morning.



Malabar Banded Peacock (*Papilio buddha* Papilionid)

This Swallowtail belongs to the species-group *Papilio Palinurus* whose range extends from India through Burma to the Philippines.

In marked contrast to the overall metallic mossy green and brilliant green band on the upperside, the underside is a reddish brown, relieved by a few small half-moons on the hindwing. A fast strong flier and prominent throughout the year, except June and July.



Common Map (*Cyrestis thyodamas* Nymphalidae)

The various lines and bands of colour on the wings look like contours on a map, giving this distinctive butterfly its name. Females are slightly larger but paler. It is fond of basking in the sun along the banks of streams and in other damp places.



Birds

The immense variety of Sikkim's avifauna owes much to the natural diversity of the terrain and climate, ranging as it does from the torrid heat of the Terai region, skirting the base of the cool mountain ranges to the arctic cold of its everlasting snows. This makes Sikkim a bird-watcher's paradise, with over 550 species sighted. In fact, close to 50 per cent of the subcontinent's species can be found here.

The range, hence, is enormous, from the tiny Olive Ground Warbler (*Tesia Olivina*) barely 9 cm long, to the huge, Bearded Eagle (*Gypaetus Barbatus*) which has a wingspan of almost two-and-a-half metres.

Perhaps the most beautiful is the monal pheasant called *naurang daphne* by the locals on account of its colourful plumage. It was given its zoological name, *Lophophorous Impejanus*, in honour of Lady Impey, wife of the first Governor General of Bengal who was so taken with the bird that she took it back to England to breed it there.

The lower hills, covered with rich vegetation, shelter some incredible birds, a few of which are migratory. Among the more common birds are the Bulbul, Tit, Thrush, Hoopoe, Cuckoo, Cormorant and Ibis-bill.

An hour's travel up the heights and you can spot Lammergeiers, Serpent Eagles, Choughs, and Ravens, while the Satyr Tragopan, Snow Partridge, Snow Cock, Blood Pheasant and Rose Finches inhabit the juniper trees further up the mountains.

Bird-watching in Sikkim is less expensive than in the rest of the Himalayas, largely because the area to be covered is small and the biodiversity rich.





Rufous-bellied Niltava (15 cm)

This sparrow-sized bird has a stunning plumage. Its forehead is black, the sides of its head and back are a deep purplish blue, and its crown, rump, shoulders and neck-patch are a dazzling ultramarine.

The rest of the underparts are a bright rufous-orange. The female Niltava is predominantly olive or brown, with a blue patch on each side of the neck and a white one on the lower throat. It prefers the dense undergrowth of forests or bushes by the waterside, hunting for berries and insects. It nests in clumps of moss in crevices of rocks. The Lepchas call it *margong*.

Crested Goshawk (42 cm)

A short-winged hawk, that is dark brown above with its forehead, crown and crest in blackish grey. Its tail has four dark brown bars, while its breast is white, streaked in brown and, thereafter barred with brown. A conspicuous black stripe runs down from chin to breast. The sexes are alike, although the female is larger. A forest dweller, the goshawk is rather sedentary. It perches amidst foliage in the highest branches of a tree, waiting for small ground birds or animals to emerge from the undergrowth, and then swoops down silently. It has a screech for a cry and lays two or three bluish-white eggs in massive (50 cm wide) nests of twigs lined with leaves. Both sexes share the parenting.



Verditer Flycatcher (15 cm)

The male is bluish-green, while the female is duller and greyer. It affects well-wooded country and swoops down on flying insects, capturing them mid-air. It nests in a thick-sided cup of moss under the eaves of houses or in a hole in the wall or embankment or between the exposed roots of a tree. The eggs are usually four and pale pink in colour, but darker at the broad end.



Three-toed Kingfisher (13 cm)

It has a dark purple mantle, an amethyst-blue rump and an orange-yellow underside. It also sports a coral bill and has three-toed legs. The bird is usually found beside shady streams in moist and evergreen forests, feeding on small fish, crustaceans and insects. Its call is a sharp *chichee*. This kingfisher usually nests in a narrow, horizontal tunnel in the earth bank of a *nullah*. It generally lays a cluster of six or seven white eggs.

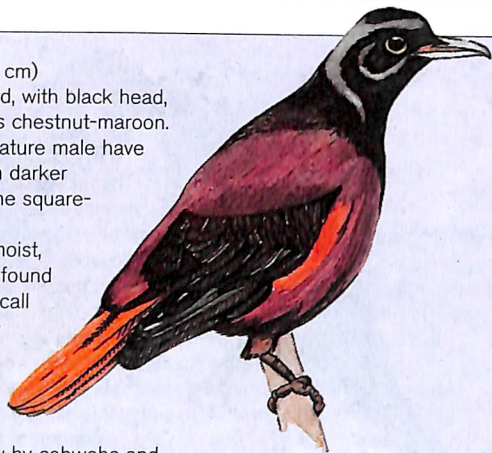
Blue Chat (15 cm)

The male is slaty blue, with a conspicuous white supercillium, black lores and cheeks. The flanks, throat and breast are all ochre. The female is olive brown above and whitish below. It comes to the damp forests of the mountains to breed and is especially fond of the undergrowth of rhododendron forests. It is an unobtrusive bird, found singly, usually feeding on insects. Its call is a sharp trill (*jerri-jerri-jerri, quick-quick-quick*) on an ascending scale. It nests in a cup of moss on the ground, lined with fur, hair, or grass. It lays blue eggs, usually numbering four, which the female then incubates.



Maroon Oriole (28 cm)

It is a glossy, crimson bird, with black head, neck and wings. Its tail is chestnut-maroon. The female and the immature male have a greyish underbelly with darker streaks. While in flight, the square-cut crimson tail remains diagnostic. It is fond of moist, evergreen glades and is found among the tree-tops. Its call is generally a harsh *kee-ah*, followed by a fluted *pi-lo-lo*. Its nest is a deep cup woven from plant fibre and bound generally by cobwebs and can be found in the fork of a branch. The eggs are pinkish-white, dotted with black or brown. The Lepchas call it *melambok*, while the Nepalese call it *singanee*.

**Orange-headed Groundthrush** (21 cm)

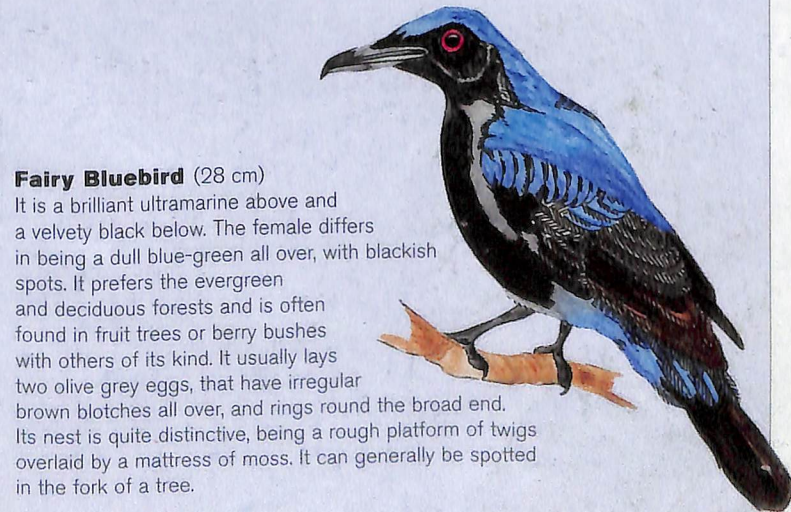
Its head, neck and belly are rusty chestnut, while the vent and undertail coverts are white. It has a white wing bar. The female's mantle is tinged olive-brown. It is a partial migrant, and comes from the peninsula to the Himalayas to breed. It is found singly or in pairs in damp forests that have plentiful undergrowth. The thrush has a loud, sweet call, but also imitates other birds on occasion. It nests on a pad of moss in the fork of some tree.

**Brown Wood Owl** (50 cm)

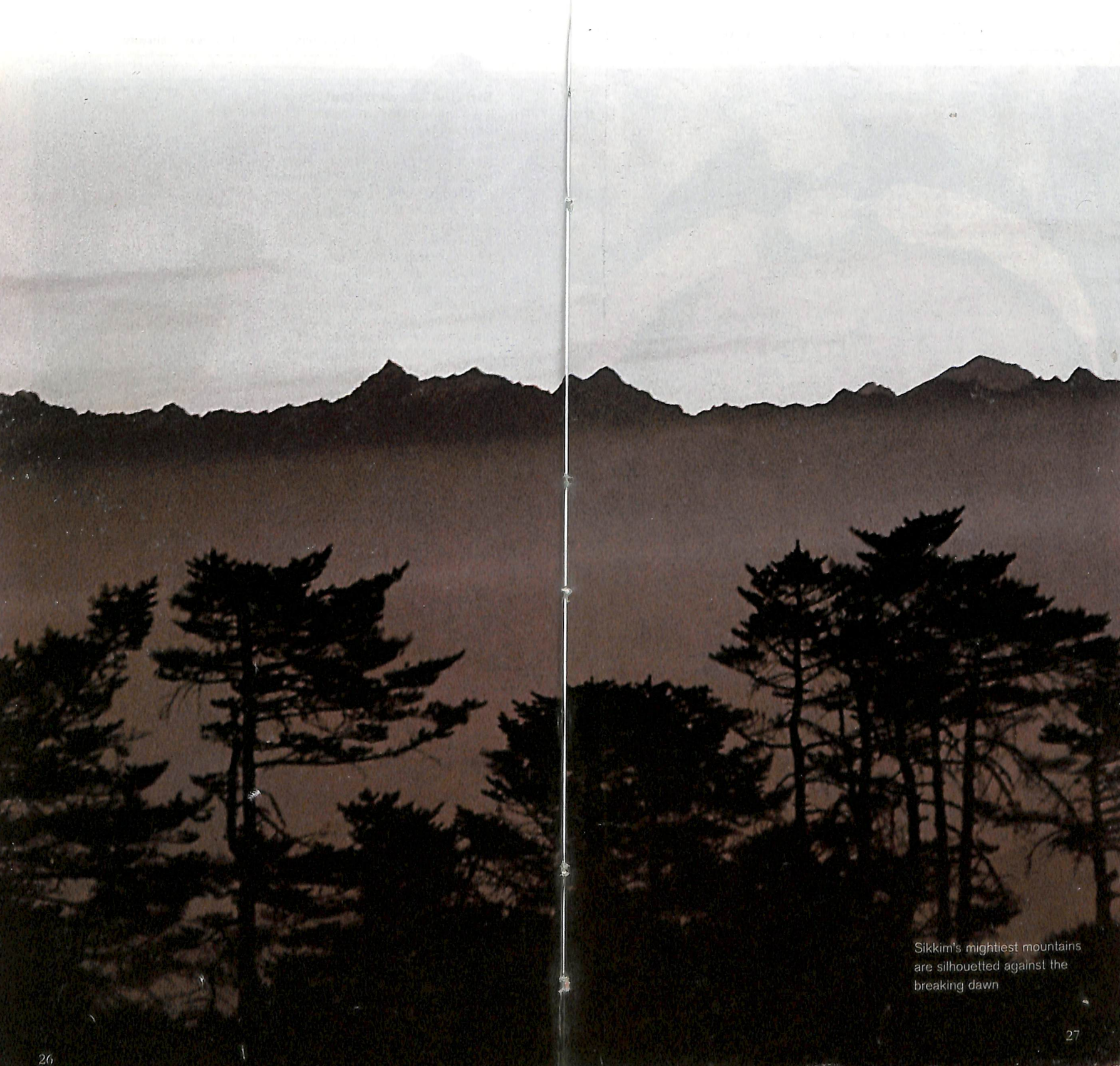
It is chocolate brown in colour, with close, barred underparts and a white supercillium. The face is paler in the hill version and more brownish in the birds found in the plains. The bird has a white patch on throat and tail tipped white. It lives among the dense and moist deciduous forests and is habitually found in pairs. It is very shy, but has the most amazing repertoire of sounds – its call is a musical *tok-tu-hoo*, but it is quite capable of suddenly bursting into a series of eerie shrieks, interspersed with loud snaps of its bill. It is quite non-fastidious in its choice of nesting ground, and can quite happily lay its speckled eggs on a bed of twigs on a rocky shelf, or in the hollow of a tree or even on the ground.

**Striated Green Bulbul** (20 cm)

It is a small bird with an upstanding brownish-olive crest and its mantle is olive-green, streaked with white. The bird has a yellow ring around the eye, and its wings and tail are olive-brown. The yellow throat and pale yellow outer feathers are its other main characteristics. The male and the female of the species are similar in appearance. It can be found profusely in the evergreen forests pecking at berries and insects. Its call is a loud *pyik-pyik* and it nests in a cup of twigs placed strategically in a bush or in a bamboo cluster. Its eggs are creamy white, with small brown and purple blotches. It is called *senin-plek-pho* by the Lepcha.

**Fairy Bluebird** (28 cm)

It is a brilliant ultramarine above and a velvety black below. The female differs in being a dull blue-green all over, with blackish spots. It prefers the evergreen and deciduous forests and is often found in fruit trees or berry bushes with others of its kind. It usually lays two olive grey eggs, that have irregular brown blotches all over, and rings round the broad end. Its nest is quite distinctive, being a rough platform of twigs overlaid by a mattress of moss. It can generally be spotted in the fork of a tree.



Sikkim's mightiest mountains
are silhouetted against the
breaking dawn



Left:
A bejewelled Nepali girl. The Nepalese form the majority of Sikkim's population.

Below:
Bhutia boys try their hands at the cymbals

Ethnic Diversity

Sikkim might seem locked in, but the ranges are punctuated by passes, high but not impenetrable. There are Nathula, Jelep, Donkiala, Kongrala, where *la*, as in other parts of the Himalayas, means pass. It was through these passes that caravans bearing silk and spices headed for lands beyond the mountains, making Sikkim an important trading stopover and gave it a melange of people as its populace.

The original inhabitants of Sikkim were the mountain people, the Lepchas. They called themselves, the *Rongthub* or the Ravine People or else, the *Mutanchi*, the Beloved People of Mother Earth. They are concentrated in the Dzongu, Penlong and Dikchu valleys of North Sikkim. The late Chogyal of Sikkim, Tashi Namgyal, handed over Dzongu to the Lepchas from his royal estate to serve as a reserve for this fast-dwindling community. The Lepchas are essentially woodsmen who know the ways of the birds and the beasts and possess an extensive zoological and biological nomenclature of their own. Their arts, crafts and songs reflect their deep bond with nature.





A thangka depicting the enlightenment of Lord Buddha. For the people of Sikkim, the serene being of the Buddha, radiating compassion, is an eternal beacon.

The Bhutias came over the mountain passes from the Kham province of Tibet. The word Bhutia, in fact, is Nepali for the people of Bhot or Tibet. They are a fun-loving people, and can be often seen holding impromptu soirees on the roadside, rhyming verses and singing folk songs to the accompaniment of the *damney* (string instruments). They are devout Buddhists.

Most early immigrants from Nepal came to Sikkim to work on the tea plantations and till the fields. They stayed on and today form over 70 per cent of the population. Most are Hindu and follow the usual caste structure with the Bawans or Brahmins at the summit.



History

The history of Sikkim is shrouded in myth. Back in the 8th century, the legendary Buddhist monk Guru Padmasambhava or Guru Rimpoche prophesied that Sikkim would be overrun by Buddhism. This prophecy came to pass in the 17th century, when the Tibetan lama Lhatsun Chempo decided that he must go and 'open the northern gate of *Beyul Demozong*'. He led his disciples to the mountain wall, beyond which lay Sikkim but could find no way to cross the mountain until a vision of the mountain Khang-chen-dzonga showed him the way in.

When Lhatsun Chempo did enter the new country from the north, he found two other lamas, Sempa Chempo and Rigzing Chempo, coming from the west and the south. The three met at a place thereafter known as Yuksam or Place of the Three Wise Ones and decided to launch a hunt for a king. 'Towards the East, it is written,' said Lhatsun reading from Guru Rimpoche's prophecy, 'there is a man named Phuntsog, a descendent of the brave people of Kham from eastern Tibet, and according to the prophecy of the master, we should invite him to join us.'

The prophecy played itself out. The man, Phuntsog, did come out of the east and was duly crowned Chogyal or Great Religious King in 1641. He assumed the family name of Lhatsun Chempo and formed the Namgyal royal house.



A thangka from Phensog monastery showing the venerated figure of Guru Padmasambhava or Guru Rimpoche, the patron saint of Sikkim



This story not only personifies the entry of Buddhism into Sikkim, it also strengthens the Lepcha-Bhutia bond that is the cornerstone of Sikkimese culture. For, the man who became king was the descendant of Prince Khye-Bumsa, the Tibetan aristocrat who came into Sikkim childless and was blessed with three sons by the grace of a Lepcha priest, The-Kong Thek. The grateful Bhutia swore a pact of blood-brotherhood with the Lepcha priest, which became symbolic of the Lepcha-Bhutia tie.

Kabi Longstok, about 20 kms from Gangtok, on the way to North Sikkim, is the ancient site of the blood-brotherhood pact between the Bhutias and the Lepchas

The Chogyals ruled without great incidence until the 18th century when neighbouring Nepal began making inroads into Sikkimese territory, much reducing it in size.

However, with the advent of the British into the Himalayan reaches, equations began changing yet again. When the British defeated Nepal in 1817, they returned to Sikkim its southern reaches which had been overrun. But typically the British took their own pound of flesh in the form of suzerainty over the little mountain kingdom.

And typically, too, they lost no opportunity to advance their imperial interests. When the two kingdoms had another round of acrimony in 1834, the British interceded and in return for their exertions had the Chogyal turn over Darjeeling to them.

Another opportunity presented itself fifteen years later. The British superintendent of Darjeeling, Dr Campbell, and the famous naturalist Dr Joseph D Hooker were imprisoned on the orders of Tokhang Namguay, known commonly as Pagla Dewan or the Mad Prime Minister, while on a field trip to Sikkim. The British retaliated by annexing the whole of the Terai regions or the foothill tracts. The subsequent decade that followed was peppered by incidents of insurgency against the British and, in 1860-61, the imperial forces occupied the Sikkim capital of Tumlong.

Nepalese migration into Sikkim was increasing and, over the years, differences deepened between the immigrants and the original inhabitants. In 1880 there was an open clash at Rhenock, in which the British favoured Nepalese interests.

Meanwhile, the British, in a bid to set up trading links to the virgin markets of Tibet, began laying roads through Sikkim. Nervous about British intentions, the Tibetans responded in 1886 by occupying and subsequently fortifying Lingtu, some 12 kms inside Sikkimese territory near Jeleppla.

Two years later they attacked the town of Gnathang but were summarily defeated by the British. Alarmed by British advances towards Tibet, China offered a treaty in 1890 under which it ceded all rights over Sikkim in return for control over Tibet.

Claude White, after whom Whitehall in Gangtok is named, was the first British Political Officer with virtual run of Sikkim. This arrangement continued until 1949, when the post was changed to that of Dewan and filled by officers of the Indian Administrative Service.

The ruins of the second capital of the Chogyals at Rabdentse, near Pelling in West Sikkim

The Dewans continued ruling Sikkim in tandem with the Chogyal until 1973 when a pro-democracy movement overran the Sikkim Durbar. Elections were held and Sikkim passed from being an Indian Protectorate to an Associate State with an elected chief minister, while the Chogyal remained the constitutional head. A year later, in May 1975, Sikkim became a full-fledged state of India.

So visit this jewel of India, a land beautiful as few others. Visit it for scenic views and for an adrenalin-pumping dose of adventure.

