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RAJESH BEDI

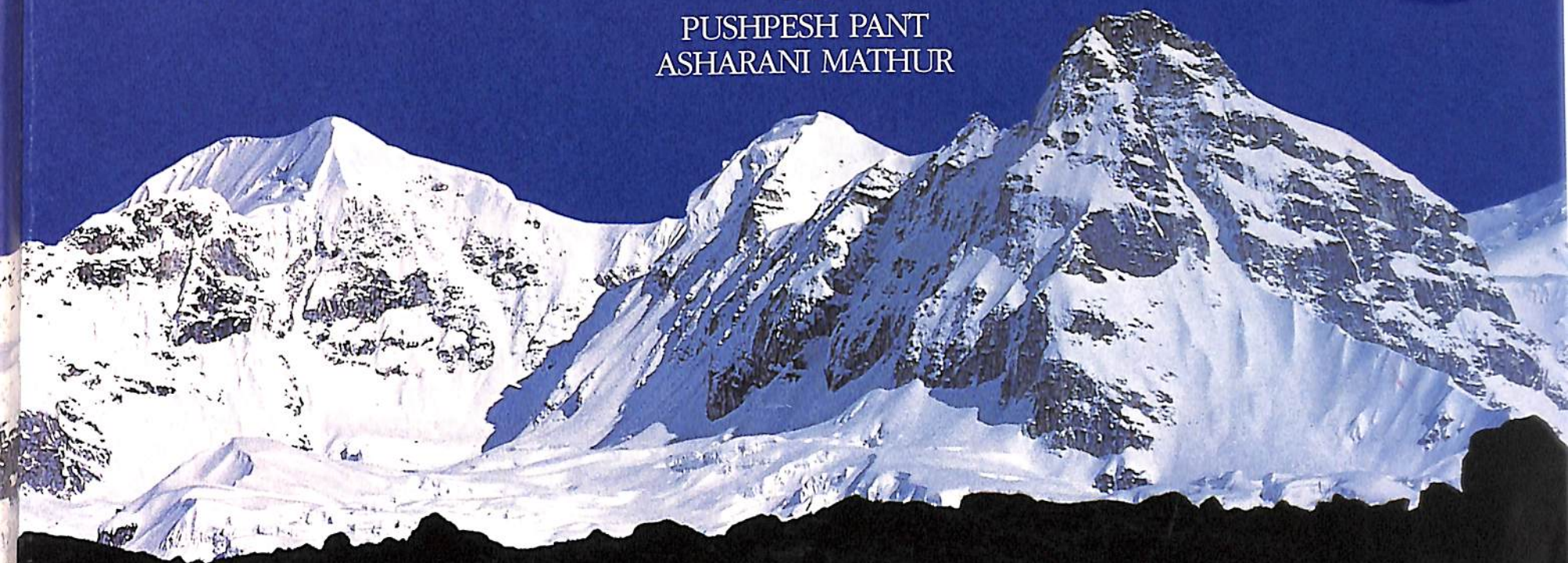


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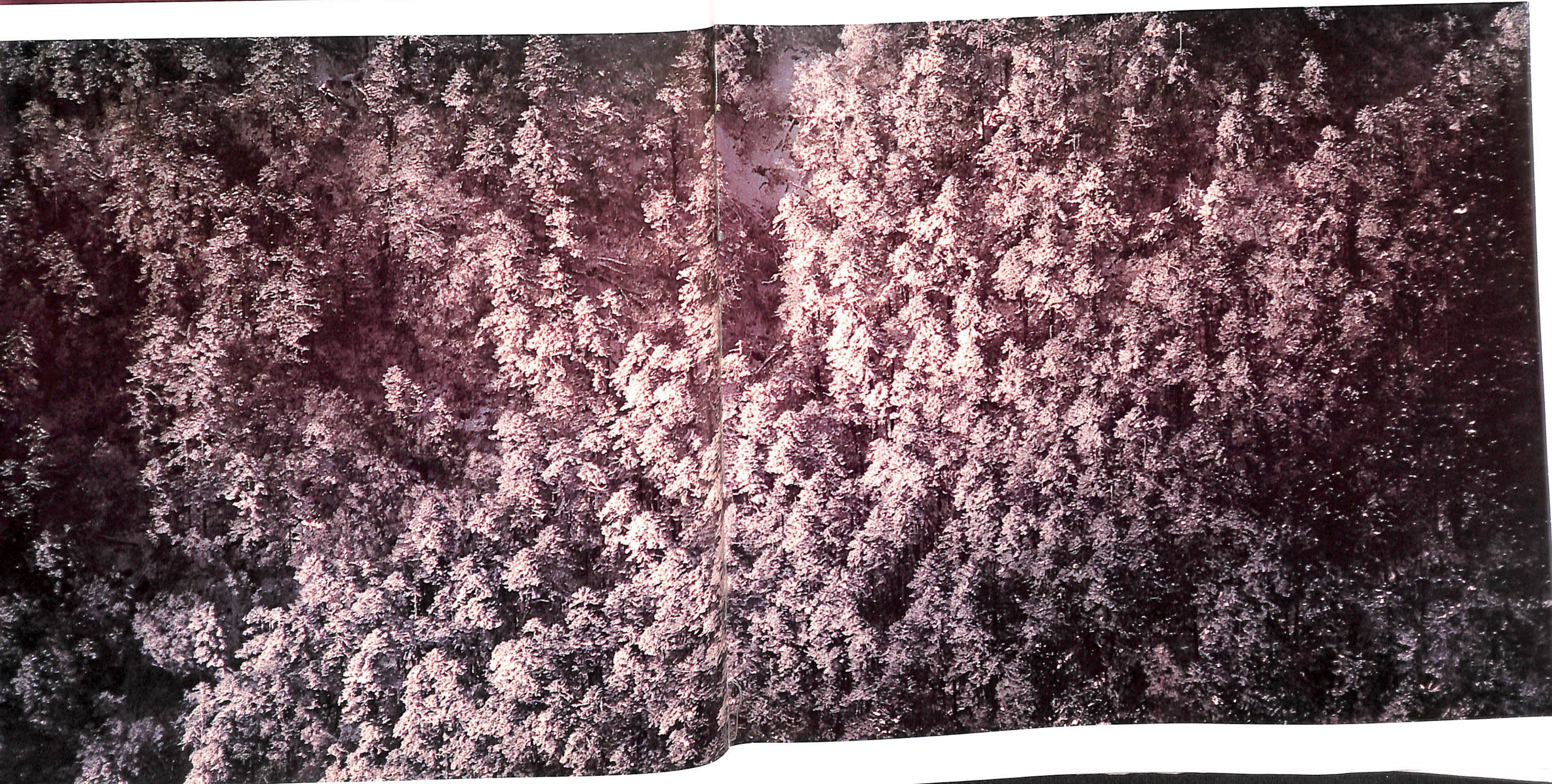
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Stag dance in honour of Lord Mahakala performed by members of the red hat sect.

High mountains and glaciers are said to be the realm of the legendary *seng-ge* or snow lion. White, with a turquoise mane and tail, it leaps from peak to peak without ever touching the snow.

In the Eastern Himalayan state of Sikkim it is not the snow lion alone that has this other-worldly dimension. The clouds that boil down from the peaks, the mists that wisp across the forests, the broad glaciers and dazzling snows, the high mountain passes, vibrate with legend and myth. Here, as nowhere else, legend and landscape come together in a cycle as endless as the Wheel of Life itself.

Dominating both legend and landscape is the mighty massif of Khangchendzonga. Known to the outside world as Kanchenjunga, it is the third highest peak in the world, towering at 8603 metres (28,216 ft). But to the Sikkimese it is much more than a mountain: Khangchendzonga is a guardian deity, a country god whose benign watchfulness ensures peace and prosperity for the land. From his peaks and glaciers, says a Lepcha legend, were created the first man and the first woman, the parents of all the races of man. Across his vast moraine fields the tracks of the fabled Yeti, the Abominable Snowman, manifest an eerie presence. The five peaks of the massif are the Five Treasures of the Eternal Snow, a belief beautifully interpreted by the great Lama Lhatsun Chenpo: "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 other peaks are vaults for gems, grains and the holy books." Each of the five peaks is believed to be crowned by an animal – the highest by a tiger and the others by a lion, elephant, horse and the mythical bird *garuda*.

The divine status of the mountain, sanctified by legend, has been made enduring by the widespread worship of Khangchendzonga by all the peoples of Sikkim, Lepchas, Bhutias and Nepalese alike. The god is depicted as being red of colour, armed and mounted on a white snow lion; offerings are made to this majestic presence, ceremonials are held in his

name and dances consecrated to him. So sacrosanct is the mountain that successive mountaineering expeditions have climbed to within metres of the peak, but left the summit inviolate in deference to local beliefs.

Khangchendzonga lies to the northwest of Sikkim, virtually on the border with Nepal. The ramparts of the mountain have not only protected Sikkim from invasion, but also kept in the rain bearing clouds of the southwest monsoon, making Sikkim the wettest area in the Eastern Himalaya, thus contributing to the immense luxuriance and variety of its vegetation. Sikkim is cradled by two enormous spurs, the Singalila range and the Chola range, whose natural barriers hew out a gigantic amphitheatre sloping down on its open side southwards towards the plains.

Tiny jewel-like Sikkim is flanked by Nepal and Bhutan. To its north lies Tibet and girdling it to the south is the West Bengal district of Darjeeling. The Singalila range in the west separates Sikkim from Nepal; and the Chola range marks the northern and eastern divide with Tibet and Bhutan. The snow-crested peaks look daunting but are not impenetrable. Passes pierce the frosty barrier, such as Nathula, Jeleppla, Donkiala and Kongrala, at heights varying from 5520 metres (18,100 ft) to 4392 metres (14,400 ft). These high passes added to the strategic importance of Sikkim as a transit and trading zone. Until the closure of Tibet, the eastern caravan route to Lhasa and beyond lay through Sikkim, carrying cardamoms, rice and spices and bringing back wool, salt, brick tea and silks. Not only traders but invaders, pilgrims and adventurers made the perilous crossings over the passes, bringing in new ideas, thoughts and philosophies; and the resultant melange is what gives Sikkim its special character.

The modern traveller fortunately does not have to suffer any hardships. Bagdogra is well-connected by air with major Indian cities and a swift helicopter hop brings him to the capital city of Gangtok in less than half an hour. The view from the sky has much to recommend it: a patchwork of green and

gold streaked with blue – reminiscent of an abstract etching – framed by the majestic snowcapped peaks shining not very far away.

Alternatively, one may opt for the more leisurely five hour long journey by road meandering through terraced fields, small towns and soothing green landscape. Bustling Siliguri is soon left behind and with it the heat and dust of the plains. The passage through the Dooars – derived from Sanskrit *Dwar* (the gateway) – sets the mood of enchantment. The river Tista rushes alongside, and the narrow winding road dotted with bridges and overhanging ledges adds to the exhilaration. At Rangpo, weary travellers hasten to jump down from cramped seats to stretch their limbs and maybe sample the produce of the local distillery. Further up is Ranipol where one road branches off to Rumtek, and another continues to the capital city of Gangtok.

Through the journey, the road has passed ridges alive with lush bamboos and pandanus, alongside gorges cut deep by turbulent and fast-flowing river waters, across emerald valleys with terraced hillsides, and dense forests. Waterfalls, lakes and a profusion of flowers add light and colour to the countryside. But one is always conscious of the awesome presence of the great mountains to the north thrusting their snowy peaks towards the heavens. No less than 14 of them soar majestically to heights of over 6100 metres (20,000 ft).

Sikkim derives its name from the Limbu word *Sukhim* which means the 'New House'. Lepchas refer to it as *Nye-Mae-el*, 'the paradise', and for Bhutias it is the beloved *Bemyul Denzong* – the 'hidden valley of rice'; all apt descriptions of this enchanting land.

The river Tista rises in North Sikkim originating in Tsochamu Lake. Its foaming waters are augmented by Lachen Chu and Laching Chu as it rushes furiously to embrace the mighty Brahmaputra. The Rangit is born in West Sikkim in the bosom of Rathong Glacier – 'the turbulent one'. These and other no less swift-flowing rivers make the valley fertile and hold out the promise of large scale hydro-electric generation.

These rivers, like the Khangchendzonga, are intertwined with local myths and legends. The Tista is the chief effluent river in Sikkim. The great Rangit is its main branch. It is called 'the straight river', as its flow is not deflected off its course even after receiving the powerful impact of the fast flowing Rangit; also, perhaps because the Tista itself describes an impressive straight course after entering the plains. The depth of the gorges is incredible. About 50 kilometres inside the hills the river beds of the Tista and its tributaries are barely 200 metres (655 ft) above the sea level, the banks thoroughly tropical, carrying a tropical and subtropical climate far and deep in the heartland of Sikkim.

Great topographical variety is encountered in Sikkim, with elevations ranging from 240 metres (786 ft) to 8450 metres (28,000 ft). Sharp ridges, awesome ravines and deep precipices cover most of the area. The fluctuation in elevation has resulted in sharply varying climatic conditions. While the *terai* region to the south is warm and humid in summer and pleasantly cold in winter, the winter is very harsh at higher altitudes. Sikkim experiences heavy rainfall during the monsoon. This combination of humidity, altitude and temperature has endowed Sikkim with exceptional botanical riches. Within its 7300 square kilometres is encountered the entire gamut of climate, ranging from arctic to alpine to sub-tropical. Nowhere else in the world does such a relatively small area offer such an infinite variety of vegetation. Dr. James Hooker, who conducted a painstaking botanical survey here in the mid-nineteenth century, has left behind an extremely engrossing account of his explorations in the two volumes of *Himalayan Journal*. His researches were found very useful by Charles Darwin and helped him in building an eloquent case for the origin of the species.

Hues of emerald predominate the landscape. The green velvety carpet of grass is soothing to the eye, as is the profusion of trees. 36% of the land in Sikkim enjoys forest cover. Among the trees, fir, oak, chestnut and birch are prominent. While bamboo, mosses and ferns adorn the hill side, rhododendrons

splash their scarlet generously in the alpine zone. Sikkim is indeed a paradise for the flower lover. Hooker listed 2920 species more than 150 years ago.

While the floral world of Sikkim includes primulas, gentians and blue poppies, it is truly dominated by the amazing proliferation of orchids and rhododendrons of differing sizes and colours. The total number of orchid species for the whole world is estimated at over 5000; of these, Sikkim alone has more than 600 species, both the epiphytal which attach themselves to rocks and trees and the terrestrial, which grow on the ground. A third parasitical variety is also found. The profusion of orchids extends all the way from the warm valleys of the south to heights of around 3050 metres (10,000 ft). Some species have large, showy flowers, others have delicate blossoms and luxuriant foliage. Their colours come from an artist's palette – yellow, pink, cream or white, speckled or edged with purple, violet, chocolate or gold. Various species bloom at different times, from early spring to autumn. The most profuse genus of orchid in Sikkim is *Dendrobium*, of which there are no less than 40 species. The best known of these is the *nobile*, which grows on rocks and trees, a common sight from elevations of 305 metres (1000 ft) to 1525 metres (5000 ft). The *nobile* flowers are usually white, broadly tipped with purple and borne on erect stems. Equally common is the *densiflorum*, whose closely bunched golden flowers give it its name. A species of the genus *Pleione* is named *Hookeriana* after Dr. James Hooker, a rosy purple flower which blooms at high altitudes around the beginning of the rainy season. The Sikkim Government has recently banned the export of some species of orchids to check their ruinous commercial exploitation.

More than 30 species of rhododendrons grow here – on trees in the sub-alpine region and in bushes at higher altitudes. The rhododendron has rightly been described as the glory of Sikkim. Flowers, some scarlet, others pale pink or white, grow on trees over 40 feet tall as well as on bushes barely two inches above the ground. The strong fragrance of the blossoms is at

times quite overpowering and aggravates high altitude sickness. The twigs and branches are utilised in monasteries as incense. The trek to Dzongri and the slopes near Singalila in North Sikkim have rhododendrons in abundance. Primulas of brilliant pigments compete with orchids and rhododendrons.

Animal life is equally rich and diverse. The tiny barking deer – *Muntiacus muntjak* – and the huge Himalayan bear – *Selenarctos thibetanus* – co-exist in the jungles of Sikkim. The fabulous musk-deer – *Moschus moschiferous* – too is found but the poor creature – a prime target for poachers – is on the verge of extinction. It is hunted ruthlessly in the misconception that its pouch can provide a potent aphrodisiac. Among the more exotic mammals are the red panda and the shapi. The red panda belongs to the Raccoon family, and does not breed easily in captivity. Found between 1500-3500 metres (5000-11,500 ft) these too are on the list of endangered species.

Shapi – the Himalayan tahr *Hemitragus jemlabicus* – is rarely seen. It is estimated that only 40 shapis survive today. It was first sighted by the German zoologist Ernst Schafer in 1938 in North Sikkim near Chungtang. Poor Schafer was interned here during the Second World War and was identified as a Nazi. Subsequently, he was not allowed to return and complete his scientific survey. Only recently has the past been forgotten. Schafer was invited to draw a plan for wild life conservation in Sikkim. In consultation with Schafer, the Government of Sikkim has drawn up an ambitious blue-print for the development of the Khangchendzonga National Park. This, when developed, would be the largest nature park of its kind. The Khangchendzonga National Park covers an area of 850 sq. km. Its northern boundary is marked by the tent peak on the Nepal-Tibet-India border and the ridge along the Zemu glacier to Zedong. To the east, it extends to the reserve forests along the ridge of Mount Lamo Augden. The southern extremity is defined by Mount Pandim, Narsing, Gochala and Kabru South. To the west, the park runs along the border with Nepal through Kabru North, Tolung and Khangchendzonga. It is claimed that this National Park is the largest biologically intact

tract of mountain land and is perhaps the highest national park in the world. The entire park land has not as yet been fully explored.

There have been reports that the Abominable Snowman, the Yeti, too dwells in the snowy wilderness of Sikkim. The Sikkimese call the creature *Migyud*. It is said to have an ethereal and eerie presence. Monks meditating in mountain caves in the past used to leave offerings for the Yeti, which was supposed to have a benign temperament. However, the existence of Yeti has never been proved beyond doubt.

The snow leopard – *Panthera uncia* – inhabits the Gochala region and preys upon the blue sheep – *Pseudois nayaur*. The blue sheep itself is a peculiar species falling between sheep and goat. The snow leopard – a beautiful cat – dons a pale misty grey coat with black rosettes. The fur is rich and the tail quite thick and long. The snow leopard is a shy and elusive creature and very little is known about it. Only recently have some adventurous naturalists succeeded in radio-collaring and tracking it.

Sikkim is a bird watcher's delight. Perhaps in no other part of the world does an area of this size carry such a large profusion of species. From the tiny Olive Ground warbler, *Tesia olivea* barely nine centimetres long, to the bearded vulture *Gypaetus barbatus* flaunting a two and a half metre wing span, over 550 species of birds soar in the Sikkim sky. The monal pheasant – *Lophophorus impejanus* – with its rainbow feathers is perhaps the most beautiful of them all. Rhododendron forests are its favourite haunts and it seldom flies down to an altitude below 3000 metres (10,000 ft). The monal has a well-known plaintive cry and looks majestic in flight. "The flight", as Barron notes in his *Wanderings in the Himmala*, "is so graceful and so elegant that it appears to be solely the result of volition, while the colours of their plumage are so brilliant ... that any attempt at either painting or describing them would be abortive". The zoological name of the monal immortalizes Lady Impey, the wife of the first Governor - General of Bengal. Chroniclers of the Raj trivia would have us believe that Lady Impey was so enamoured of this bird that she

took considerable pains to have it bred in England. The Impean male pheasant has a peacock-like crest and a body bronze-green glossed with gold. The underside is black and the tail cinnamon red. Understandably, the locals call it *naurange daphne* – the nine coloured bird.

Of the commoner birds, Sikkim can boast of dozens of varieties. Wood-peckers, kingfishers, laughing and whistling thrushes, finches, magpies, doves, owls, falcons, kites, eagles are all found here and add to the charm of the land.

The trekker on the way to Dzongri comes across the monal frequently. These encounters bring much wanted relief on the steep climb. Western Sikkim offers attractive trekking possibilities to visitors. One can begin at Yuksam (1769 metres, 5800 ft), and proceed to Dzongri – pasture land for yaks at 4209 metres (13,800 ft). En route one has to stop at Bakhim (2684 metres, 8800 ft). A rich variety of ferns, lichens and bamboos is encountered. Among the trees oak, chestnuts, maple and birch are in abundance. In season the rhododendrons run riot with colour. Tsoka is the last inhabited settlement at about 2745 metres (9000 ft). The climb from Yuksam to Bakhim is a moderate gradient, but the trek from there to Dzongri is quite strenuous. However, it can be completed without undue exertion in two days. The trek from Dzongri to Gochala should be undertaken by the more adventurous. It passes through wonderful wilderness from Ongiathang to Jemathang. Skirting glaciers and icy moraines, the climbing is tough but well worth the exertion. Mount Pandim and Lake Samiti unveil their beauty to those who dare this seldom-trodden track.

The glorious natural wealth of Sikkim, its rushing rivers and tropical forests, its majestic peaks and forbidding glaciers, have shaped the history of its people. Much of the history is veiled by legend and myth; but it is established that the earliest inhabitants of the land were the Lepchas. A fey and gentle people, the Lepchas were food gathering tribes who claimed they came from Mayel, a legendary kingdom on the slopes of

Khangchendzonga. They lived in close harmony with nature, for she gave them all they needed – the flesh of animals, fruits, medicinal herbs, honey and fibres that could be woven into fabric. They also cleared and cultivated small patches of land where they grew maize and millet. Their unique knowledge of their environment enabled the Lepchas to identify by name every animal, insect and plant; their vocabulary, however, had no word for “war”. Like many other peoples who lived in isolation close to nature the Lepchas had an oral tradition of recounting their history. But their accounts weave legend and mythological flavour with fact. There is more than a hint of the supernatural and the spirit world, a reflection of their animistic beliefs.

Somewhere around the 15th century came the first contact between the Lepchas and the ancestors of the Bhutias. “The strangers rode on huge pigs and carried long sticks that made a noise like thunder”: this was the awed reaction of the Lepchas to the Tibetans who came in on horseback carrying guns. Their leader Khyebumse was a nobleman from Eastern Tibet renowned for his superhuman strength. Childless and yearning for a son, Khyebumse met the Lepcha priest Thekong Tek and sought his blessings. In the course of time he had three sons with whom he returned to Sikkim. The grateful Khyebumse swore a blood brotherhood pact with Thekong Tek at Khabi Longchok. To this day the pact is celebrated in Sikkim. The story symbolically rationalizes the alliances between the traditional Lepcha-Bhutia ruling elite in Sikkim. A descendant of Khyebumse was crowned first Raja of Sikkim in 1642; and with this founding of the Namgyal dynasty begins the recorded history of Sikkim.

However tradition maintains that the Namgyal family was connected with Sikkim even before this historic event. The Namgyals, passing through Sikkim on their way to Tibet, were so wonderstruck by its natural beauty that they decided to make it their home. The head of the family married a Lepcha maiden and had three sons, one of whom settled in Gangtok and was the great grandfather of the first Raja, Phuntsog Namgyal. (Another legend traces his ancestry to a royal family

in Himachal Pradesh).

Phuntsog Namgyal, whose official title was Chogyal, is credited not only with the political consolidation of Sikkim, but also with the establishment of monasteries and encouraging the spread of Buddhism by proclaiming it the state religion. The concept of Kingship in Sikkim was charged, thus, with religious leadership.

The first Chogyal appointed twelve Jongpens and twelve Kazis to help him administer the kingdom he had founded. These were drawn from leading Lepcha and Bhutia families, and had the status of local governors.

The third Chogyal was one of the most interesting figures in Sikkimese history. Chador Namgyal – the All-Victorious Thunderbolt Bearer – was a pious Buddhist but throughout his life had to contend with the murderous intrigues of his half-sister, Pedi Wangmo. Her conspiracies led to invasion by Bhutan and in 1700 the hapless Chador had to take refuge in Tibet. It was eight years before the Tibetans were able to persuade the Bhutanese to evacuate Sikkim, but there was some loss of territory. Chador's years of exile were spent in monasteries; he returned a scholar and is credited with a text on monastic discipline. He devised the Lepcha script, choreographed the famous warrior dance in honour of Khangchendzonga and commissioned the building of the Pemayangtse Monastery.

Pedi Wangmo had not given up, however, and with the aid of the palace physician had the monarch slain as he was taking a bath in the thermal spring at Ralung. Later, in expiation, she ordered the construction of a monastery at Tashiding. This may have absolved her sin, but she could not escape punishment for her crime. She was killed in the manner reserved for high-born persons: a ceremonial scarf was stuffed down her throat.

Court intrigues, conspiracies and attempts against the monarch were not uncommon in those troubled centuries of Sikkim's history. Equally serious were threats from outside. Time and again hordes of warlike Bhutanese surged in from the east, while in the second half of the eighteenth century the Gurkha masters of Nepal mounted incursions from the west.

Sikkim was like corn caught between two millstones, its population forced into a desperate two-front war. The Gurkhas succeeded in overrunning Sikkim, and the royal family was forced to flee the palace leaving everything behind them except for an ancient mask representing Khangchendzonga, an especially priceless relic for the Sikkimese. Turbulent events followed; but what eventually saved Sikkim from subjugation was the arrival of the British on its borders.

The British, who were exploring a trade route to Tibet, had no intention of letting the Gurkhas continue their rampage. The British defeated the Gurkhas decisively and peace was restored after signing the Treaty of Sigoli. Sikkim, like the princely states in Himachal, Kumaon and Garhwal, came under British control. The British made Sikkim their protectorate and this relationship continued with India when the latter became independent.

Sikkim joined India as an associate State in 1975 in accordance with its people's aspiration for a democratic form of government, and later attained full statehood within the Indian Union. With the merger, the age of monarchy came to an end.

Of this violent and often bloodstained history, there is little or no trace in Sikkim today. There is an ethnic diversity startling for so small an area, true, but tolerance and harmonious co-existence are the characteristics of Sikkimese society. The ethos of Sikkimese life, the Buddhist – Hindu culture, is shared by all, and shared beliefs have laid the foundation for an integrated community. The Lepchas, the Bhutias – whose ancestors followed Khyebumse into Sikkim – and the Nepalese, themselves a melange of diverse ethnic groups including Limbus, Rais and Chettris, live together in their mainly agricultural land. Ironically today it is the Nepalese who form the majority of Sikkim's population. The first Nepali settlers were sharecroppers; it is they who introduced terrace farming to Sikkim, and with their initiative and skills, have made great contributions to the state's development. Different communities had traditionally opted for different settlement areas following their economic interest. The cattlegrazing

Bhutias seldom moved out of their villages skirting the high altitude meadows, and the Lepchas were confined to the valleys at about 1800-2000 metres (5900-6600 ft). Most of the Nepalese toiled in their fields in the *terai* region. With increasing modernization, mobility has greatly increased and new avenues of economic enterprise opened up. As a result, one can discern a more balanced ethnic distribution in Sikkim. The Dzongu area in central and north Sikkim, however, has been reserved by the government for the Lepchas to preserve their fragile tribal cultural heritage.

In the terraced fields of the valleys and uplands, rice, barley, buckwheat and millet are the principal crops, and provide staple items of food. Orange, ginger and cardamom are important cash crops. The Sikkimese – Lepchas, Bhutias and the Nepalese alike – relish *chhang*, which is a mild beer drink prepared from fermented millet. The traditional way to serve it is in a *tongba*, a bamboo container with a hollow pipe used as a drinking straw. *Chhang* drinking is an integral part of social get-togethers and religious festivities in Sikkim. *Churpi*, a cheese-like preparation made out of yak milk, is another local delicacy. *Churpi* is only one of the uses of the yak, a massive short legged bison-like creature with a shaggy dark coat. Ubiquitous in the alpine regions and higher altitudes, it is a domesticated animal whose bulk and glowering appearance belie its nimbleness of foot and generally gentle disposition. In Sikkim, the yak is indispensable for transport, and is also used for cultivation. Indifferent to the weather, it forages for itself and requires no grooming or stabling. Yak herders marshal their flocks with shrill whistles, but if sterner measures are required, they sling stones with unerring skill at the animal! Milk, cheese and butter are obtained from the yak, and its meat is considered a delicacy. The long silky hairs of the yak's tail were traditionally used to make the ceremonial fly whisk.

Given the historical and cultural links between Sikkim and Tibet, it is not surprising that Tibetan Buddhism has deeply imprinted itself in the land, and particularly amongst the

Bhutias. Social life revolves around the monastery whose monk plays a crucial role in giving direction to existence and meaning to daily toil. Till recently, one male member from nearly every Bhutia family entered the monastery. The Lepchas adopted Buddhism in the seventeenth century, and amongst the Nepalese there are both Buddhists and Hindus.

But amongst some groups, old animist traditions persist. The Lepchas believe in benign spirits known collectively as the *rum* and malignant spirits called *mung*. Horrific phantoms who appear as black fire-breathing dogs, giants or feathered monsters, the *mung* dwell in hollow trees, snowy summits, or in the dark depths of the forests. Elaborate rituals are prescribed to propitiate these beings and to ward off the harm they can do, and the sickness they can cause. The *bongthing* is priest, exorcist and physician all in one; it is he who is the intermediary between the human and spirit world, who interprets the evil intent of the *mung* and averts or lessens it through ritual, incantation and sacrifice. Before sowing and harvesting, or when a village is struck by misfortune or disease, the *bongthing* and his assistant the *mon* make offerings to the spirits of the ancestors and to the great god Khangchendzonga, and sacrifice animals to propitiate their supernatural tormentors. The *bongthing* also predicts the future with an offering of parched rice and raw eggs.

Not everyone can become a *bongthing*. One account describes how a young man was seized by high fever. In his dreams his ancestors appeared before him and told him that he was to become a *bongthing*. After a long initiation, he made his first offering, and only then did he recover completely from his illness.

The Lepchas practise Buddhism and maintain their centuries-old beliefs side by side. Nothing incongruous is perceived in this, and the same is true of the Nepalese who, parallel to their Hindu beliefs, have an important figure in their *jbankri* or shaman. Similarly the Limbus have tribal priests, male *yebas* and female *yemas*, who exorcise evil spirits, perform sacrifices and supervise rituals.

Tibetan Buddhism, once the state religion decreed by Phuntsog Namgyal, remains a powerful force in shaping thought and action. The bulwark of the people's faith, it is the Vajrayana school, itself an offshoot of Mahayana Buddhism. It incorporates the essential teachings of Gautama Buddha and embellishes these with elements of Tantric tradition. The cause of all human misery is traced to desire, and the way to root out desire is the eightfold path – right view, right thought, right conduct, right speech, right livelihood, right action, right mindfulness and right meditation, which alone can break the endless cycle of births and rebirths according to one's Karma. Freedom from this bondage is Nirvana. All this is derived from standard Mahayana texts. But in Tibet, a new shape was given by the addition of Tantric concepts – the identity of the macrocosm and the microcosm (the universe and man); the proliferation of the pantheon which now included female deities representing cosmic female energy; liturgical rites; and meditative practices. The duality inherent in all things was expressed not only through the male and female principles, but also through the depiction of the pacific and horrific aspects of divinities. Thus the same Being could be benign and peaceful, or yet again fierce and terrifying enough to combat evil.

Great emphasis is put on the chanting of *mantras* – sacred incantations, on *mudras* – symbolic gestures, and *mandalas* – cosmic diagrams charged with potential energy. A variation of the *mandala* is the Wheel of Existence which graphically depicts the ceaseless round of worldly life in which time moves in cycles (*Kalpas*) revolving through periods of destruction and recreation set off by ceaseless action. In the centre are animals symbolizing the sins of Anger, Ignorance and Greed; while the rim of the circle illustrates the twelve-linked chain of causes of re-birth, the sorrowful consequence of the sins depicted.

This proliferation of concepts and deities is clearly visible in the images seen in monasteries throughout Sikkim. Often seen are the Dhyani Buddhas, the five Celestial Buddhas who

represent not only the centre and the four compass points but also the five Great Elements and warn against the five Great Evils. They are Akshobhya, the unshakeable, Ratnasambhava, the jewel-born, Amitabha, of infinite light, Amoghasiddhi, accomplisher of all works and Vairochana, radiant mover of the Dharmachakra, the Wheel of Law.

Other frequently depicted deities are the Bodhisattvas who, in the Mahayana school of Buddhism, are those divinities who are destined to become Buddhas. But such is their deep compassion, that they will postpone their attainment of Nirvana until the humblest of worshippers has reached the highest goal. Chief of the Bodhisattvas from the earthly point of view is Avalokiteshvara, "The Lord who Looks Down", who holds a lotus as a symbol of purity and perfection, and whose compassion is infinite. Another Bodhisattva, Manjushri, pierces error and falsehood with the sword he holds in one hand; in the other, he holds a book which describes the great spiritual perfections. Together with the Bodhisattvas were worshipped the images of the Taras, regarded either as consorts of the former, or in their own individual capacity. The name means the saviouress and is translated as *Dolma* in Tibetan. Tara is usually represented as a bejewelled young Indian woman of green complexion seated on a lotus. In her demonical manifestation she resembles Durga.

The image of Mahakala is often seen mostly as a colourful mask. He is the fierce representation of the Hindu God Shiva in his destructive form. He is the cosmic dancer who commands the rhythm of universal time.

Buddhism came to Sikkim through Tibet, and not from India. But it was from India that the great teacher, Guru Padmasambhava went to Tibet in the eighth century where he consolidated and propagated Buddhism; he is the revered figure known as Guru Rimpoche whose images are so frequently seen in the monasteries and who, according to legend, prophesied that Buddhism would come to Sikkim. This prophecy was dramatically fulfilled in the middle of the seventeenth century by the remarkable Tibetan Lama Lhatsun

Chenpo, who is the patron saint of Sikkim.

The life and work of Lhatsun Chenpo have the same other-worldly dimension we see again and again in Sikkim. The account is part legend, part history, a soaring, inspiring and sometimes fanciful chronicle of faith and kingship. "I must go and open the northern gate of *Bemyul Denzong*, the hidden valley of rice," said Lhatsun as he journeyed with his disciples to the border of Sikkim. His first attempt to enter Sikkim was unsuccessful, for he could find no path, and he remained for many days in a cave. Here he was visited by the mountain god Khangchendzonga, who had transformed himself into a wild goose and who instructed him about his future province. Lhatsun used his own magic powers to fly to the top of the mountain Kabru, from where he perceived the best route to Sikkim. Lhatsun did not forget the aid he had received from Khangchendzonga; the following autumn he made an offering to the mountain god which has been repeated every year in the same season ever since. A century later Chador Namgyal enriched this offering by choreographing a great religious masked dance which is performed even today.

When Lhatsun Chenpo entered from the north, two other Lamas entered from the west and the south. The three met at Yuksam, which means "(the place of) the three wise ones", and held a council there in which they decided to search for a king. The prophecy, said Lhatsun, decreed that "four noble brothers shall meet in Sikkim and there arrange for its government. We are three of these, having come respectively from the north, west and south. Towards the east, so it is written, there is at this time a man named Phuntsog, a descendant of the brave people of Kham from Eastern Tibet; and according to the prophecy of the Master we should invite him to join us."

Thus was the prophecy fulfilled. Phuntsog was given Lhatsun's own surname of Namgyal and the additional title of "The Great Religious King" and exhorted to rule the land wisely and in accordance with the tenets of the faith. The Lama dedicated himself to the foundation of monasteries or *gompas* and shrines. These were situated at strategic locations and in

subsequent years played a crucial role in consolidating the kingdom and giving it a distinct cultural identity. Today there are two important sects of Buddhism in Sikkim – the Nyingmapa and the Kagyupa, both of which have their roots in Tibet. Well over one hundred monasteries and temples in Sikkim testify to the deep and abiding faith of the people.

Nor is this faith confined to the precincts of religious places. The spirit of Vajrayana Buddhism is everywhere, best typified in the omnipresent *mantra* “Om Mani Padme Hum” – O Jewel in the Lotus – whose syllables can be interpreted as the most profound metaphysics or the simplest seeking for blessings. It is repeated endlessly: embossed outside temples, on *medong* walls where each flat stone placed on top of the next bears the sacred *mantra* in rough cut characters, on prayer flags that flutter in the breeze, on copper cylinders and on prayer wheels turned innumerable times through the day by the hands of the devout. Wind and air waft the *mantra* across the land, and the water that spins a prayer wheel in some rural brook or stream blesses all those who drink from it with the message of the Compassionate One.

The monasteries are called *gompa*, which means a solitary place. Isolation from the world was essential to escape mundane temptations. Buddhist monks sought such isolation and the solitude of the monastery or *gompa* is comparable to that of Alpine monasteries in Europe. Tradition maintains that a monastery should look out towards the east to catch the first rays of the rising sun. The building should lie along the long axis of the hill and it is desirable to have a lake in front. Following these prescriptions the sites occupied by monasteries in Sikkim are usually commanding and picturesque.

The monastic buildings cluster round the temple which is used as an assembly hall. The outer detached buildings provide dormitories for the monks. Lining the approach to the monastery are tall prayer-flags and *chortens*, structures built in the shape of a *stupa* which enshrine holy relics or texts.

The temple is referred to as *Lhakhang* or God’s house. It is also called *Dukhang* – a meeting place and *Tsuglakhang* – an

academy. A monastery in Sikkim combined all these functions of a chapel and a school.

The interior is divided by a double row of pillars into a nave and aisles. Rows of low platforms covered with thick rugs provide the seating for the monks. The icons and fresco-painted walls are seen in the dim golden glow of the butter lamps, a mass of rich colours subdued by the diffuse lighting. Above the altar are placed images of the holy triad: Shakyamuni, the Buddha, in the centre with Guru Rimpoche (Padmasambhava) to his left and Cherishi (Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara) to the right. In many Ningma temples, the chief place is given to the Guru; at other places the image of Shakyamuni is replaced by that of Amitabha or Amitayusa. Ranged on either side of this triad are the other divinities, Dorji Phagmo (Vajravahni), Dolma (Tara), Chakdor (Vajrapani) and Lhasun Chenpo.

The walls, almost invariably covered all over with painting, are a remarkable sight. The Tibetan term for painter translates literally as "Writer of Gods" and across the temple walls are seen an art expressed within defined liturgical and iconographic rules. To paint or sculpt was to invoke a divine presence which had to be recognised in precise forms; the colours, the postures and the gestures laid down for the figures all express something definite. But within the prescribed rules – certainly in painting – the painter's inventive faculty expressed itself in a wealth of detail added from his own experience: sun-dried white houses, enchanting curled clouds floating across an azure sky, waves of peaked and craggy mountains, birds in flight or a solitary tree. And as the butter lamps flicker and glow, the figures and the vivid colours seem to come alive, the serene lotus-throned Buddha and the radiant features of the Bodhisattvas contrasting with the seething throng of the ferocious protectors who, faces contorted with rage and crowned with skulls, trample on the prostrate bodies of sins and passions.

Among the monasteries, Pemayangtse occupies the pride of place, all other Ningma monasteries being subordinate to it.

The word means 'the Most Perfect, Sublime Lotus'. Pemayangtse commands a breathtaking view of Khangchendzonga. It is an incomparable repository of religious art. The 108 monks in the monastery represent the leading Bhutia families of Sikkim. The Kagyat dance was choreographed by the third Chogyal; this and the other dances in honour of Khangchendzonga continue to be performed in the palace chapel of Gangtok by the monks of Pemayangtse. It used to be the prerogative of the Head Monk of Pemayangtse to crown the Chogyal. Of all the monasteries in Sikkim, Pemayangtse best retains an aura of solemn grandeur. It exudes subtle but strong vibrations conducive for meditation. The place has an air of tranquility and in spite of its proximity to Geysling – a district headquarter – preserves splendid seclusion.

Situated atop a wooded hill, the monastery is surrounded by a small cluster of traditional village houses. Their intricate wood work adds to the old world atmosphere. The moving aura of the 'Most Perfect, Sublime Lotus' is most palpable in early morning or as night falls. The nip in the air, the silence and stillness, the subtle variations of light magically transform the landscape and contribute to the mystic feeling. The atmosphere invites introspection. Even the most jaded tourist feels a pang when the time comes to depart.

Tashiding is another famous monastery. Legend has it that Guru Rimpoche once shot an arrow vowing to meditate wherever the arrow fell. The spot was marked by a small shrine. The present monastery was built much later by Pedi Wangmo, the murderous step-sister of Chador Namgyal. It is considered among the holiest shrines in all Sikkim, perched atop a thickly wooded hill, which rises sharply between the Rathong and the Lohit rivers.

Tashiding is famous for the *bumchu* festival. According to sacred lore, Gandak Chenpo blessed a little water on completing the chanting of the sacred *mantra* Om Mani Padme Hum five billion times. This consecrated the water and imbued it with miraculous properties. The water inside the ancient jar,

although three hundred years old, has neither evaporated nor lost its freshness. During the *bumchu* festival this water is used for divination. It is poured into 21 cups of equal size. A prophecy about the fortunes of Sikkim in the year to come is made depending on whether the water poured out is less than, equal to, or more than, these 21 cups.

The *chorten* at Tashiding called Thongwa Rangol, which preserves the relics of Manjushri, is considered to be most sacred, whose mere sight, it is believed, dissolves all sins. The devout circumambulate the *chorten* keeping it on their right. The walls are decorated with slabs of stone inscribed with the *mantra*, Om Mani Padme Hum. These stones are put up by devotees to earn merit.

The Rumtek Dharma Chakra Centre near Gangtok is in the vicinity of the original Rumtek monastery, built by the fourth Chogyal. The original monastery was ruined in an earthquake and has recently been rebuilt. The Rumtek Dharma Chakra Centre is the headquarter of the Kagyu order and was till recently the seat of the 16th Gyalwa Karmapa who headed the order. This lamasery seeks to replicate the colourful architecture of the original Kagyu shrine at Tsurphu in Tibet.

Phensang and Phodang are two prominent monasteries situated off the North Sikkim Highway. They are renowned for their *chaams* or masked dances. At both places the original monasteries have been rebuilt with tender care. Older mural paintings and frescoes have been painstakingly preserved. Tolung is the most inaccessible monastery in Sikkim. The faithful maintain that Lhatsun Chenpo had a premonition of the Gurkha invasion, and he despatched the most precious, sacred objects to Tolung for safety. Three days of hard trek through dense jungles and paths precariously clinging to steep ridges take the visitor from Mangan to Tolung. Only once in three years is the priceless collection taken out and shown to pilgrims. It includes a saddle and saddle cloth said to be that of Lhatsun Chenpo, altar vessels and vestments, and old costumes and ornaments.

The Enchay monastery – The High Peaceful Place – in

contrast is easily accessible. One can drive all the way up, just seven kilometres away from Gangtok. This 150 year old monastery, originally blessed by Lama Druptob Karpo renowned for his powers of flying, was rebuilt in 1909. The approach to this *gompa* is lined by white and coloured prayer flags which flutter serenely in the breeze.

No description of the *gompa* is complete without some reference to the *chaams* or masked dances performed on ceremonial or festive occasions. Though these dances differ from one another stylistically and often thematically, their origin lies in a dancing cult for exorcising malignant demons and human enemies. The *chaams* performed during the new year ceremonies expel evil from the land, while closing the old year and ushering in benevolence and good luck for the new. The Sikkimese celebrate their new year Losoong according to the Lunar Calendar and the festivities last for two days. The highlight of the celebrations is the *chaam* – the masked dance. On the first day Lord Mahakala, the protector of mankind, is worshipped and on the second day the black hat dancers keep the audience spellbound as they whirl in a trance-like state. The *chaam* is performed in all monasteries. The Tibetan new year Losar is also enthusiastically celebrated in Sikkim around February every year and is marked by the *chaam*. The most impressive *chaams* are performed at Pemayangtse and Rumtek.

The legend surrounding the origins of the *chaam* is fascinating, a story of violence and apostasy. In the ninth century, a devout and pious king in Tibet, Ral-Pa-Chen, devoted much of his time to Buddhism. He had many important scriptures and commentaries translated into Tibetan, and endowed the monasteries with grants of land. But there was also a malignant influence in the person of his brother, Lang Darma, who offered a reverse prayer to harm the faith. The treacherous prince instigated violence against the king and was instrumental in the murder of Ral-Pa-Chen, after which he ascended the throne. Once crowned, Lang Darma began his vicious efforts to uproot Buddhism. He desecrated temples and monasteries,

burned sacred scripts and books, and persecuted the Lamas relentlessly, forcing many to become butchers.

This apostate king was assassinated in the third year of his reign by Lama Pal Dorjee. The Lama disguised himself as an itinerant Devil Dancer; within his ample sleeves he concealed a bow and arrow. His dancing got him the attention of the king, who summoned him to his presence. As the disguised Lama drew near the king, he whipped out his bow and arrow and aimed the fatal shot. In the resultant tumult, the Lama sped away on a black pony which was tethered nearby and plunged through the Kyi-chu river. When the pony emerged from the other bank of the river, it was snow white – thus the Lama escaped his pursuers.

Within this apocryphal story are the elements of the masked dance itself – the rooting out of apostasy, or evil; the victory of good – all played out in a fierce and splendid drama whose echoes vibrate in the *chaams* of today. The commencement of the *chaam* is announced from within the *gompa* by the steady drone of the *kangling*, an instrument like a trumpet. These notes are reciprocated by the deep muted thunder of the *radong*, long copper horns, blown from outside the *gompa*. Cymbals clash, and ceremonial drums and gongs begin their rhythm; this is the prelude to the first sight of the dancers in their richly colourful costumes, who now descend in single file into the monastery courtyard from the eastern side. Incense bearers follow, their clouds of fragrant smoke wafting around the courtyard in a symbolic purification of the atmosphere. All this heralds the actual drama, whose principal figure is Mahakala, Chief of all the Guardians of the Faith, Overlord of all Spirits, Protector of Mankind and he who commands the rhythms of universal time. Mahakala is the presiding deity of the *chaam*, and it is his presence that invokes that of other protective deities.

Elaborate costumes and masks are the hallmarks of the Dance of the Masquerades – Sha-Yak and Nam-Ding – where the dancers assume animal faces. Here are the fantastically wrought masks of the stag, the yak, the tiger, the lion, the

mythical winged *garuda*; in slow and measured steps, to the clash of cymbals and the sound of the trumpets, the dancers act out the destruction of apostasy, symbolised by an effigy which is chopped to pieces and scattered. The scattered remains are not merely the annihilation of diabolical forces; they also constitute an offering, signifying the tantric union of wisdom, preaching and action and consecrated to the five Dhyani Buddhas.

Legend has it that the festival of Khangchendzonga was initiated by Chador Namgyal, the third ruler of Sikkim, after experiencing a vision. Part of this festival is the splendid Pangtoed, the warrior dance of Sikkim, choreographed by the Chogyal himself and traditionally performed by both monastery lamas and youths from noble families. The costumes hark back to those medieval times of Chador's wars with Bhutan. Swords, shields and helmets fluttering with banners are part of the ensemble. Bright silk sashes criss-cross the chests of the dancers; these originally served to distinguish the battle units and were also used as bandages. To the shrill call of the Tibetan war cry, the dancers go through the prescribed motions in a stately and majestic series of swoops and circles, brandishing their swords to annihilate invisible evil spirits and to prepare the ground for the dance of the mountain god. Khangchendzonga now makes an appearance in his red mask and skull-topped helmet. His heavy garments are of silk and brocade; and in his left hand, he holds the image of a flaming jewel, the symbol of the Five Treasures of the Eternal Snow. The ensemble dances rhythmically to the music of drums and the great trumpets. During the performance Lord Mahakala emerges dramatically and commands Khangchendzonga to bestow peace and prosperity upon the Sikkimese. At the climax, flowers and water are offered to the dancers who sprinkle it on the spectators, first throwing these upwards as an offering to the saints seeking their blessings.

In the Bhutia vernacular, the mask is known as *bhap*. Masks for the religious dances are carved out of the tough light wood of the giant parasitic climber called *zar*. They are fantastically

painted and varnished and provided with a yak tail wig. Among the masks found in Sikkim temples those of Mahakala and the fierce form of Guru Rimpoche are painted red, while the angry deity Kali is painted blue. Various animal faces are shown in different colours – the bull (black), the tiger (brown), the lion (white), the *garuda* (green), the monkey (brown), the stag (fawn) and the yak (black). All masks are of hideous appearance and huge size, having a vertical diameter of at least twice the length and breadth of an ordinary human face. Each has projecting tusks and three eyes. The central eye symbolises foreknowledge.

The monastic dance costumes form an integral and fascinating part of the *chaam*. Rich brocade and satin with gold embroidery go into the making of the gown and cape. The latter bears the *dorje*, the thunderbolt sceptre which is a mystical symbol of Tibetan Buddhism. Down the back hangs the *gyab-dar*, a cloth which falls from head gear to ankle and is tucked in at the waist. The robe is said to resemble that worn by Lama Pal Dorjee when he killed the apostate king, and thus has a symbolic meaning, that of the Victory of Truth over Evil.

Such brief explanations of complex rituals tend, alas, to be simplistic. But even without delving into the esoteric and profound iconography and symbology, no spectator of the *chaam* can fail to be gripped by the air of fantasy, splendour and mystery that is part of the dance, or indeed, fail to be moved by this manifestation of a deep and abiding faith.

In Sikkim, as in Bhutan and Tibet, the execution of a work of art, the painting of a *thangka*, or casting of an icon is regarded as an act of creative meditation. The enjoyment of art and the contemplation of artistic work has traditionally been recognised as part of spiritual training. Buddhists value art as yoga and lay greater emphasis upon the quest for perfection rather than on perfection itself. It is not the subject that decides the value of a piece of art but the inspirational impetus and the spontaneous inner experience it

triggers off. The beholder is not expected to re-experience the vision of the artist but to recreate it in his mind until it takes a reality of its own.

The *thangka*, an elaborately painted scroll in brilliant colours, is thus not mere decoration, but a powerful aid to tantric meditation, a visual depiction to steady the mind and aid its focus. Fine examples of *thangka* art can be seen throughout Sikkim, in monasteries – where giant *thangkas*, applied rather than painted, are ceremonially unfurled during the great festivals – as also in homes and at the Institute of Tibetology in Gangtok.

The *thangka* painter stretches his cotton or canvas across a wooden framework. Having prepared the surface with an application of lime and vegetable gum, sketches are made with charcoal or Indian ink. The images are drawn to precise iconometric and hierarchical rules, the measurement and placement of the central or principal figure being done in regulated relationship to those of other subsidiary figures. The themes of the *thangka* depict Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, great saints, and episodes from their lives; historical personages; and even mystical or abstract concepts such as the Wheel of Life, the *mandala* and the Tashi Taggye, the eight auspicious signs of Vajrayana which include the lotus, the conchshell and the Dharmachakra. Within these set patterns, there is little scope for the painter to improvise: even details such as lotus thrones, eyes, trees and flaming halos are pre-determined. Yet despite its formalism there is nothing static about the *thangka*. There is boldness in the lines and delicacy in the details. The central figure sits serene of face, eyes inward looking; about him, adoring hosts turn their faces up in homage or wrathful deities vanquish evil, the whole brought to life by an inner rhythm and brilliance of colour.

The colours used have great symbolic power. The two primary colours, red and yellow, suggest the difference between fire and life, material and immaterial, emotional and intellectual; orange, which unites red and yellow, symbolizes knowledge of the highest form of spirituality. The complemen-

tary colour of blue with its passivity is of a very positive nature and is associated with depth, purity and infinity. Green represents the vegetable aspects. Violet combines the most active (red) with the most passive (blue). Organic and mineral materials traditionally provided the colours for the artist's palette.

Sikkimese art forms are closely related to those of Tibet. The Bhutias introduced the forms which have with the passage of time undergone change and absorbed local influences. There are practically no differences between the forms, iconography and technique of smaller statues and *thangkas*.

Most Himalayan hill towns tend to be dwarfed by their surroundings and Gangtok is no exception, though it is redeemed by a certain prettiness and charm in its upper reaches where the road snakes towards the former palace. Under the impact of hectic construction the face of the town is fast changing and little, presumably, remains of the Namgyal capital seen by intrepid British explorers in the years of the last century. But it is not difficult to imagine it as it must have been a hundred years ago, a trading station with mud roads churned up by the caravans of horses and shaggy yaks starting their long and arduous journey across the high passes into Tibet. Only faint echoes of that time remain, most palpably in the Chini Bazaar (or Chinese Market) which runs raggedly at the back of a hill, a collection of sheds and lean-tos with a curious air of having existed in impermanence for a long, long time. It is still possible here to run your fingers across a bolt of brilliantly coloured brocade, or see porcelain bowls and spoons or the vivid flowered enamelware so beloved by campers – all from China. Just as fascinating is to watch the people whose costumes and headgear are a visual reference to the ethnic melange of Sikkim. Yak herders from the north with their heavy jackets and distinctive hats with furred ear-flaps jostle matronly housewives in typical long robes crossed over the

triggers off. The beholder is not expected to re-experience the vision of the artist but to recreate it in his mind until it takes a reality of its own.

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front. Young Nepali women wear brightly coloured saris, their huge nose rings flashing in the sun. Nepali men sport peaked caps as they cluster in groups for a cup of tea or a cigarette: peacock-like, the caps flaunt a variety of rainbow colours, red, orange, violet and green. Increasingly you are likely to see leather jackets and blue jeans, as much a sign of the times as the raucous movie music which shrills through the bazaar.

Away from the bazaar one of Gangtok's city roads is flanked by shops which sell all manner of handicrafts in copper, silver and other metals. Carved wooden tables, hand woven rugs, carpets and blankets are the speciality of Bhutia craftsmen; but the jewellery, votive lamps and religious objects seen in the Gangtok markets are the creations of the Nepalese Newars, famous for their carving in wood, stone or metal.

High above the town is the palace of the former Chogyal, where now visitors may see only the Royal Chapel. Not far away is the famous Orchidareum, where over 250 varieties bloom in spring and winter. But perhaps the most famous of Gangtok's buildings is that which houses the Research Institute of Tibetology, built by the last Chogyal to preserve Tibetan culture and now partly funded by the Indian Government. This remarkable institution houses a staggering collection of over 30,000 books on Buddhism, astrology, medicine and philosophy as well as *thangkas*, icons and votive objects. The library of books is particularly precious, bringing together texts from the various sects of Tibetan Buddhism, including the Ningma Treasury of Jewels, the Book of One Hundred Thousand Songs by Milarepa (perhaps the best-known work of Tibetan poetry) and works of an occult nature. The long narrow manuscript pages are hand printed on both sides, wrapped in silk and then tied between two wooden covers. Printed by hand blocks painstakingly carved from pieces of wood, one block to a page, the texts open out to reveal the strong line and nobility of the Tibetan alphabet. Rarer hand-

written books have decorative calligraphy and artistic drawings, and there are those whose black lacquered pages are inscribed with letters of gold or silver. Since thousands of blocks were required to print a single large book, each such text represented enormous time and labour given as a votive offering.

But here, as elsewhere, concepts of time have now undergone a change. Sikkim is no longer a Shangri-la; neither hidden nor forbidden, it has opened up to the outside world. Much effort has gone into the development of tourism, transport and communications. The acceleration of development and the inevitable social changes in its wake have brought to surface some strains and aroused unprecedented expectations. Progress has made many Sikkimese concerned about their future. They feel that the pursuit of pleasure and profit should not be undertaken recklessly. Although in deference to the sentiments of the people, mountaineers are made to give an undertaking that they shall not trample upon the sacred virgin summits, one does not discern similar ecological concern elsewhere. Deforestation and large scale road building triggering land slides are hazards to which no one can remain blind. The construction boom in Gangtok has put severe strains on the capital's civic amenities. Many Sikkimese are worried that with the advent of affluence traditional cultural values would be inevitably eroded.

These are, however, the shared concerns of all societies who must perform the delicate balancing act between their heritage and their future, safeguarding the former without forgetting the latter. The success of the balance in Sikkim is of vital importance not just to the state but the whole country, for its natural and spiritual wealth, the sombre magnificence of its monasteries and the dazzling splendours of the Five Treasures of the Eternal Snow, are the legacy of us all.