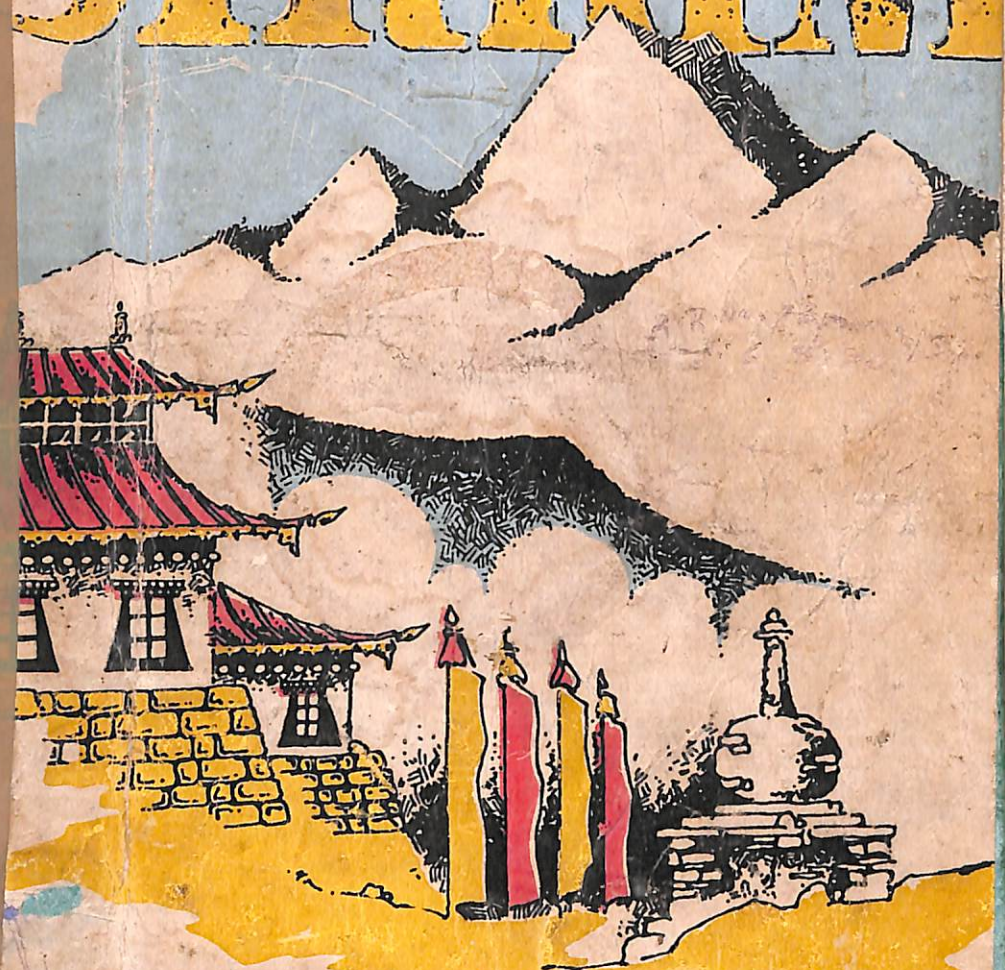


A GUIDE TO

SIKKIM



SUNILA VERMA

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PREFACE

This book has been written to cater to the interests of a wide spectrum of readers. For the tourists, it provides information on the physical features, route distances, cultures and customs of Sikkim. In fact for the tourists this guide is a must as it will help the traveller to move about in the state with the least difficulty and savour what it has to offer.

For those historically inclined, the guide gives a panoramic perspective of the history and cultures of Sikkim in a condensed form. It gives a picture on how different cultures co-exist in a state so small.

Even for the students taking competitive examinations, this book provides finger-tip information on all aspects of the state.

I am grateful to my husband Rajesh for collecting information on various aspects of Sikkim and giving the manuscript the final form.

I am sure that this ready reference guide will be found useful by the readers.

Gangtok

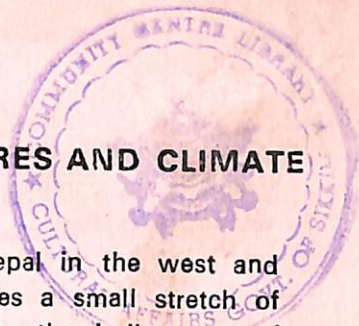
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THE LAND-ITS PHYSICAL FEATURES AND CLIMATE



Sandwiched between the kingdom of Nepal in the west and the kingdom of Bhutan in the east lies a small stretch of rugged land just 40 miles by 70 miles - the Indian state of Sikkim. On its northern border towers the plateau of Tibet whereas it shares its southern border with West Bengal which is another state of India. On the world map it is just a speck with an approximate latitude of 27 degrees North and longitude of 88 degrees East but its size belies its richness of culture, customs, heritage, flora and fauna.

Sikkim was earlier a protectorate of India with a monarchy Government but in 1975 it metamorphised as the Twenty Second state of the Indian Union. The population of the whole state is about 3.5 lacs as per the last census. The state consists of four districts-North District with the district headquarter at Mangan, South District with the district headquarter at Namchi, West District with the headquarter at Gyalshing and East District with headquarter at Gangtok-which also is the capital of the State of Sikkim.

Physical Features

Sikkim is a land of monumental mountains that seem to touch the heavens. These mountains form a part of the long range-the mighty Himalayas. The Kanchendzonga, the third highest mountain in the world, majestically towers all over the mountains in its vicinity like a god surrounded by smaller dieties. The Kanchendzonga, serene and tranquil in its presence like a saint in transcendent meditation, can be seen from almost any part of Sikkim. Criss-crossing the topography are gushing streams and brooks that plummet

down into the deep green valleys as tributaries of rivers. These rivers combine to form the Teesta which thunders down towards the Bay of Bengal. The Teesta receives water from many tributaries the most important of them being the Lachen-chu, Lachung chu and the Rangit.

Lakes : On the face of it, one would not expect to find lakes on such a rugged terrain. But surprisingly, Sikkim does have lakes though not very large in size. These lakes are both spring fed as well as river fed. On the highway between Gangtok and Nathu-la, 34 kilometers from Gangtok lies the serene Changu Lake at an altitude of about 12,000 ft. Khechopari lake is another well-known lake that lies on a bifurcation of the route between Gyalshing and Yoksum. Green Lake, Menmecho, Samiti and Lampokhari are some other beautiful lakes,

Rivers : One of the rivers that almost flows right across the length of Sikkim is the Teesta. Its major tributary is the Rangeet which originates from the Rathong Glacier and meets it at the border between Sikkim and West Bengal. Teesta itself originates from the Cholamu Lake and the confluence of two small rivers-Lachen Chu and Lachung Chu at a place called Chungthang in North Sikkim.

During the monsoons the otherwise innocuous looking rivers of Sikkim become swollen, swift, muddy and dangerous. The rivers are narrow, serpentine and full of rocks and hence are not navigable. However the Teesta river as it approaches the border between Sikkim and West Bengal becomes quite wide and clear of rocks and it is possible to raft across it. The Teesta finally joins the Bramaputra in Bangladesh.

The rivers are fed by snow melting on the mountains as well

as rain that accumulates in the catchment areas during the monsoons. Human settlements usually exist much above the level of the rivers and hence even if flooding takes place life and property remain safe.

Mountains, Glaciers and Passes : Sikkim has a very rugged topography and flat lands are difficult to come by. The two principal mountain ranges are the Singilela on the Western border and Chola on the Eastern border. These ranges form an almost impregnable barrier. On the Western border lies the third highest mountain the world-the Kanchendezonga, 28,168 ft. high. Other peaks that deserve a mention are Siniolchu, Pandim Narsing, Pyramid peak and Nepal peak.

Most of the peaks of Sikkim have remained unscaled because the Sikkimese consider them sacred and feel that they will lose their sancity if climbed. From the Sikkim side, Kanchenzonga has been scaled a few times but the climbers have returned back a few feet from the summit in deference to the religious feelings of the Sikkimese.

Glaciers are moving mountains of ice. There are many of these in Sikkim but the most important ones are the Zemu Glacier, Rathong Glacier and the Lonak Glacier in North Sikkim.

The mountain ranges are interspersed with passes which can be used to cross from one side to another. On the eastern Chola range the most important passes are the Nathula and Jelep la both at an altitude of about 15,000 ft. and Bhutan la at an altitude of about 13,000 ft,-the first two lead to Tibet and the third to Bhutan.

At Nathula, the Chinese and Indian troops face each other almost at breathing distance. It was in the news quite a lot when skirmishes between the two countries occurred on this pass. Nathula and Jelep la passes formed a part of the trade route between India and Tibet till 1962.

On the west between the border of Sikkim and Nepal, the most important pass is Chiwabhangjang which has an altitude of 10,300 ft. The other pass on the west is Kang la. In the north one of the important passes is the Kongra la.

Hot Springs: Sikkim has many hot-springs known for their medicinal value. The most important are the ones located at Reshi, Yumthang and Ralang.

Climate

Small though it may look, one would be surprised to learn that Sikkim possesses all the climates right from the tropical to the tundras. Go to the northern, eastern and western borders and you will find the earth blanketed with snow almost throughout the year because of high altitudes. Elevations of 16000 ft. and above remain snowbound throughout the year whereas places as low as 8000 ft. come within the snowline during the winters. Move to the southern border and you will find altitudes plummeting down to as low as sea level full of rich tropical forests.

Places in Sikkim with a moderate altitude (4000 ft. to 10,000 ft.) have a more or less good climate. During the spring (March-May) autumn (September-November), the weather is particularly pleasant. During the monsoons (June-August), there are torrential rains sometimes for days together and in winters (December-February) it tends to get rather cold.

Temperatures. The temperatures that a particular place experiences varies considerably with altitude. At places of low altitude, the temperatures vary between 4 degrees celcius to 35 degrees celcius. Places like Gangtok with moderate altitude of about 6000 ft. experience temperatures between 1 degree celcius and 25 degree celcius whereas at altitudes above 10,000 ft. the temperature never rises above 15 degree celcius and remains much below the freezing point during the winters and a great part of the spring and autumn.

Because of the moderate to low temperatures, woolens are required in Sikkim almost throughout the year.

Rainfall : Rainfall during the monsoons is very heavy in most parts of Sikkim but because of the hill features the average rainfall from place to place in Sikkim may vary considerably. The northern border of Sikkim experiences comparatively low rainfall because the monsoon clouds dry out by the time they hit the northern barrier. Gangtok registers an average of 325 cm rainfall per annum whereas Muguthang in the extreme north experiences an average rainfall of only 60 cm per annum.

Most of Sikkim does not experience high intensity winds. However, at many hill tops and passes, winds having high speeds blow. At high altitudes, during winters, these winds blow up ice particles which cause blizzards.

COMMUNICATION AND TRAVEL IN SIKKIM

Indian nationals do not require any permit to visit unrestricted areas in Sikkim. However to visit restricted areas under army control, Indian Nationals are required to obtain an Inner-Line Permit (ILP) from Gangtok. Foreign nationals would require an inner line permit from the Ministry of Home Affairs to visit even unrestricted areas in Sikkim. However, according to a latest Ministry of Home Affairs notification foreign nationals are permitted to visit Gangtok, Rumtek, Phodong and Pemayangste on the basis of their visas for a period of fifteen days. Foreigners are also permitted to trek to Zongri provided they are in a group of four or more. This has been done to promote tourism in Sikkim. These permits can be obtained from the Indian Embassies, Sikkim House at Delhi, and Tourism Offices at Siliguri and Gangtok.

How to get to Sikkim : The primary means of communication within Sikkim is by road : there is no railway. However Sikkim is well connected to rest of the country by rail and air through Siliguri in West Bengal which is about 120 kms from Gangtok and forms the railhead of Sikkim. To get to Sikkim you must reach Siliguri first. Siliguri incidentally is an important nerve centre also for Bhutan, the eastern part of Nepal and Darjeeling, another picturesque hill station 80 kms away. There are no direct routes from Sikkim to Nepal or Bhutan by road one has to travel via Siliguri.

Siliguri has two railway stations: the New Jalpaiguri Railway station on the Broad Gauge and the Siliguri Junction on the Meter Gauge Railway line New Jalpaiguri Railway station in Siliguri is connected to almost all parts of India by train. There are three daily trains to Delhi which cover

the distance in about 30 hours. These trains originate from Guwahati. Many daily trains are also available for Calcutta covering the distance in about 10 hours. Southern bound trains to Cochin, Trivandrum, Madras, Bangalore and Bombay are also available although these are not daily.

The airport of Siliguri is known as Bagdogra. Daily Indian Airline flights for Delhi, Calcutta, Guwahati and Imphal are available.

Many buses both State Government and private ply the route between Siliguri and Gangtok and some other important places in Sikkim. Buses to Gangtok are available from 6.30 am to 3.30 pm from bus stands of the Sikkim Nationalised Transport (SNT), opposite the Siliguri Junction and the Private Bus stand near the Mahananda Bridge. Private taxis can also be hired to travel to Sikkim. From Siliguri, buses to Darjeeling (80 kms), Guwahati (550 kms), Calcutta (600 kms) and some other important places in Bihar, West Bengal and Assam are available.

From Siliguri, a straight plain road takes you to the foothills of Himalayas - distance of about 20 kms. From here the road is serpentine and for most of the part runs along the river Teesta. At a place called Tista the road crosses over the river Tista. The road enters Sikkim at a place called Rangpo which is on the West Bengal - Sikkim border. Another drive of 12 kms takes you to Singtam from where Ranipul is another 18 kms away. Till Ranipul the road never touches any place above an altitude of 2000 ft. But from Ranipul to Gangtok, there is a steep climb of almost 4000 ft. in a distance of just 10 kms.

From Gangtok besides the bus services for Siliguri, there are also buses available for Darjeeling and Kalimpong in West Bengal.

Travel within Sikkim : Within Sikkim, roads reach to almost every nook and corner of the State. Buses of the Sikkim Nationalised Transport ply between various places in Sikkim.

The Tourism Department of the Government of Sikkim organises conducted tours to the Yumthang hot springs in North Sikkim and the Changu Lake. During the spring and autumn, the Tourism Department organises Treks to Dzongri from Yoksum in West Sikkim. As distances are small travelling within Sikkim is not expensive.

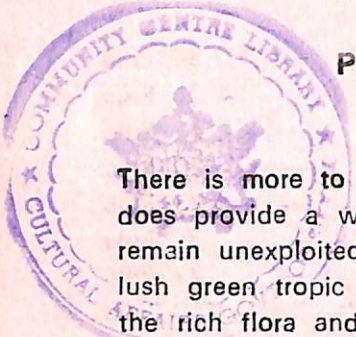
During the monsoons, due to heavy rainfalls, road communication is frequently disrupted because of landslides.

Distances of some important routes within and outside Sikkim are given below :

Gangtok	—	Siliguri / New Jalpaiguri	—	120 kms
Gangtok	—	Kalimpong	—	75 kms
Gangtok	—	Darjeeling via Pashok	—	97 kms
Gangtok	—	Singtam	—	28 kms
Gangtok	—	Rangpo	—	40 kms
Gangtok	—	Mangan	—	62 kms
Mangan	—	Chungthang	—	30 kms
Chungthang	—	Lachen	—	26 kms
Chungthang	—	Lachung	—	21 kms
Lachung	—	Yumthang	—	24 kms
Gangtok	—	Gyalshing	—	110 kms
Gyalshing	—	Kechopari lake	—	30 kms
Gyalshing	—	Yoksum	—	42 kms
Gangtok	—	Namchi via Namthang	—	80 kms
Gangtok	—	Jorethang via Melli	—	85 kms
Jorethang	—	Sombaria	—	29 kms

Jorethang	—	Soireng	—	34 kms
Jorethang	—	Darjeeling	—	21 kms
Jorethang	—	Gyalshing	—	42 kms
Jorethang	—	Namchi	—	20 kms
Gangtok	—	Rumtek	—	23 kms
Gangtok	—	Pakyong	—	30 kms
Pakyong	—	Rhenock	—	27 kms
Rhenock	—	Rongli	—	16 kms
Rongli	—	Nathula	—	90 kms
Rhenock	—	Kalimpong	—	45 kms
Gangtok	—	Changu lake	—	34 kms
Gangtok	—	Nathula	—	52 kms

The foldout depicts the route map of Sikkim and may be seen to obtain an indepth information on distances between various places.

A circular purple stamp with a central emblem of a person. The text around the emblem reads "COMMUNITY CENTRE LIBRARY" at the top and "CULTURAL CENTRE" at the bottom, separated by two stars.

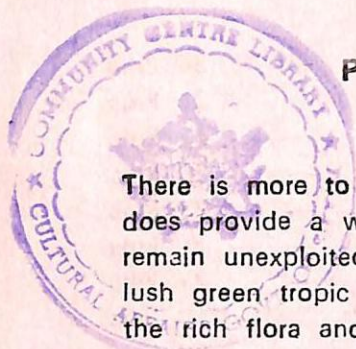
PLACES OF INTEREST

There is more to Sikkim than just natural beauty, Sikkim does provide a wide potential in tourism that has yet largely remain unexploited. The perennially snow capped mountains, lush green tropic and temperate forests, gurgling streams and the rich flora and fauna are all there for the tourist to savour. Besides the natural beauty that one continuously beholds while in Sikkim, there are many places that deserve a special mention. These are given below :

Research Institute of Tibetology : About a kilometer downhill from the main market of Gangtok stands the Institute of Tibetology. It is world renowned and it is one of the few of its kind. Its library is well stocked with rare books and documents on Buddhism. The museum at the Institute consists of rare collection of antiques like statues, coins and 'Thankas' which are scrolls with paintings on them. This Institute is a premier institute in the world that conducts research in the language and culture of Tibet. It has on its faculty eminent scholars. The library and museum of the Institute are open to the public on working days from 10 am to 4 pm and are closed on Sundays and other Government holidays.

Phurba-Chorten : Just adjacent to the Research Institute of Tibetology, just a few hundred feet away, on a small hillock is located this religious monument which is in the form of a stupa. There is a small monastery close by and also a School of Buddhist studies.

Government Institute of Cottage Industries (GICI) : This Institute is located at about half a kilometer uphill from the main market of Gangtok. It was established with the



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purpose of promoting the manufacture and sale of local handicrafts, carpets and furniture. An emporium at the Institute sells handicrafts, 'Thankas' which are scrolls with paintings, hand carved wooden tables known as Choksees and exquisitely woven woolen carpets.

Deer Park : This park is located adjacent to the new Secretariat. In the park there is a big open enclosure in which different types of deer can be seen. There are also cages in which animals native to Sikkim like the Red Panda are kept. There is also a statue of Lord Buddha in the park premises. The park commands a good view of the whole city and the surrounding area.

White Hall : The White Hall only has historical value and is situated on the Ridge. It was built in 1932 in memory of the first Political Officer of Sikkim, Claude White to whom a reference has been made elsewhere in this book. There is an Officers' Club in the White Hall.

The Ridge : The Ridge is a small stretch of plain and flat road above the town of Gangtok. It is just about five minutes walk from the main market. The Ridge has the White Hall and the Chief Minister's official residence on one end and the beautifully designed Palace Gate on the other end.

Tsuk-La-Khang Monastery : This monastery is located in the palace premises near the ridge in Gangtok. It is two storied and was used during royal functions like weddings and coronations. The Phang Labsol and the Losang festivals are celebrated in the ground adjacent to the monastery once every year with the performance of 'Chaams' or the mask dances.

Changu Lake : The lake is situated 34 kilometers from Gangtok at an altitude of about 12000 ft, on the Gangtok-



MONASTERIES OF SIKKIM

There is plethora of monasteries in Sikkim. In fact there are about 200 of them. Besides the well known monasteries of Rumtek, Pemayangtse and Tashiding, there are many lesser known monasteries which have been spelt out below,

Sanga Chelling Monastery : Sanga Chelling means 'The Island of esoteric Teaching'. This monastery was built in 1697 and is situated about 7 kms from Pemayangtse. It is said to be the oldest monastery in Sikkim.

Dubdi Monastery : Dubdi means 'The Retreat' and this monastery was built in 1700. It is located near Yoksum on a hill top. One has to travel by foot to reach it.

Khechopari Monastery : This Monastery is located just above the famous Khechopari lake near Yoksum.

Melli Monastery : Melli basically means 'A Lepcha village'. This monastery is also located near Yoksum.

Sinon Monastery : Sinon means 'The Suppressor of intense fear'. The monastery was built in 1716 and is located about ten kilometers from Tashiding on a hill top.

Dalling Monastery : Dalling means 'The thunderbolt'. This monastery was built in 1840 and is situated near Kwezing in South Sikkim,

Yangyang Monastery : Yangyang means 'The ridge of fortune'. This monastery was built in 1840 and is situated at a place called Yangyang ten kilometers downhill from Rabongla.

Namchi Monastery : This monastery is located near Namchi, the district headquarters of South District and was constructed during the reign of Chogyal Gurmed Namgyal.

Kwezing Monastery : This monastery is located near Kwezing in South Sikkim. It was built during the reign of Chogyal Thutob Namgyal.

Simik Monastery : This monastery is situated in East District near Singtam town. It was built during the reign of Chogyal Tsudphud Namgyal.

Enchey Monastery : This monastery is situated in Gangtok on a hill top. It was built during the reign of Thutob Namgyal.

Hee Gyathang Monastery : This monastery is located in North Sikkim and follows the Nyingma sect of Buddhism.

Lingtem Monastery : This monastery is located in the Zongu area of North Sikkim.

Tolung Monastery : This monastery which is located in North District was built during the reign of Chogyal Chakdor Namgyal. It contains rare and valuable scriptures which were brought here for safety during the invasion of Sikkim by Nepal in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century.

Chawang Ani Monastery : This monastery is located near Pensang which is on the highway between Gangtok and Mangan. It was built during the reign of Chogyal Tshudphud Namgyal.

Rhenock Monastery : This monastery is located in East Sikkim about 63 kms from Gangtok.

