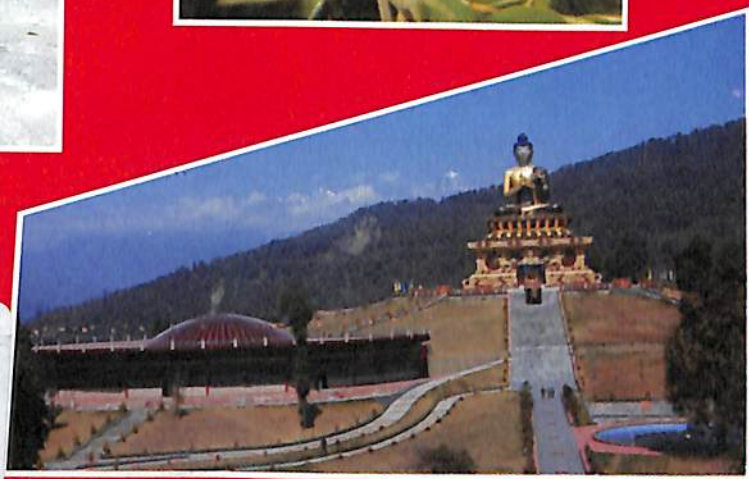
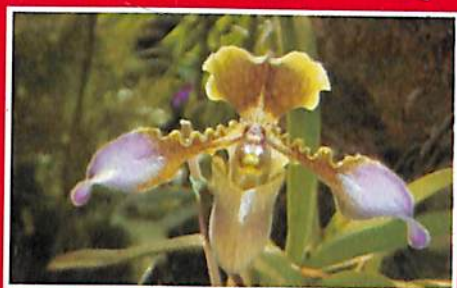
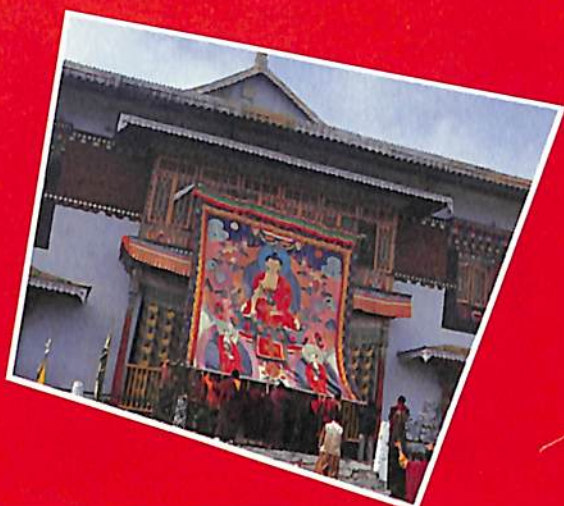


SIKKIM

A Guide and Handbook



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RAJESH VERMA

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SIKKIM

A GUIDE AND HANDBOOK

(with road, town and trekking maps)



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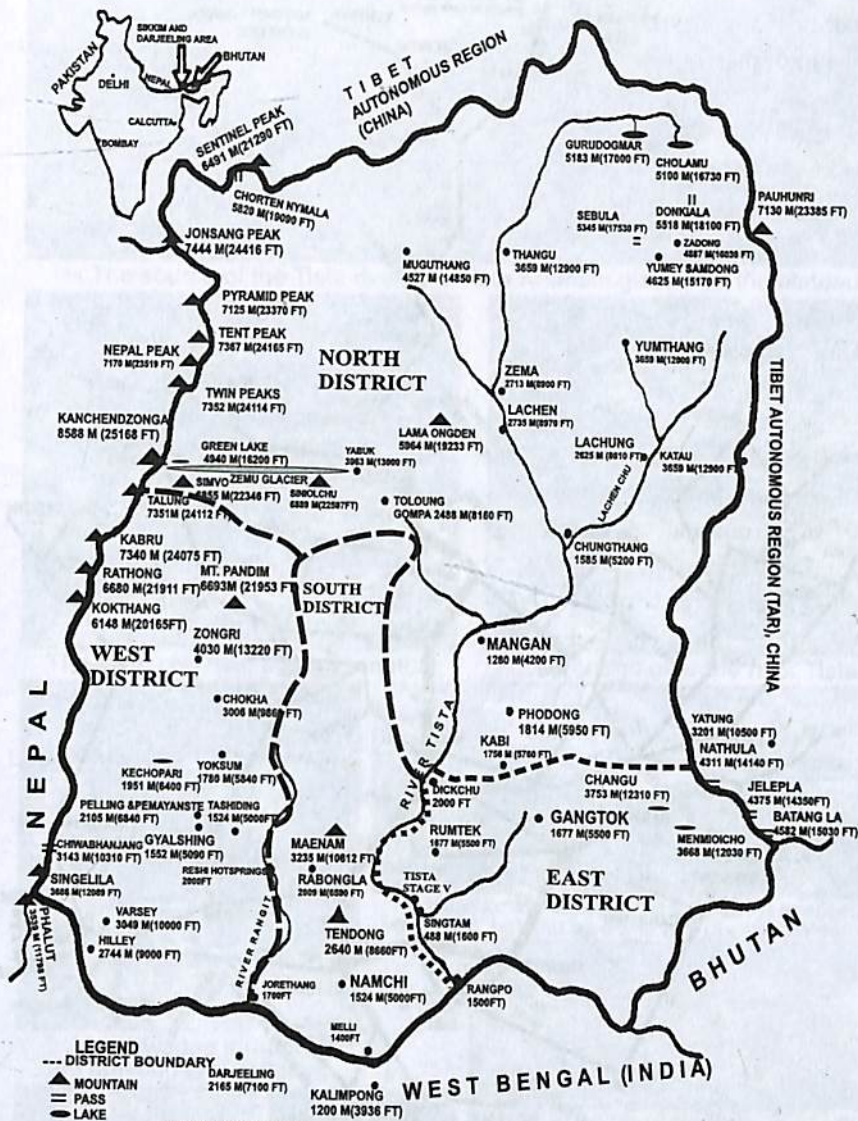
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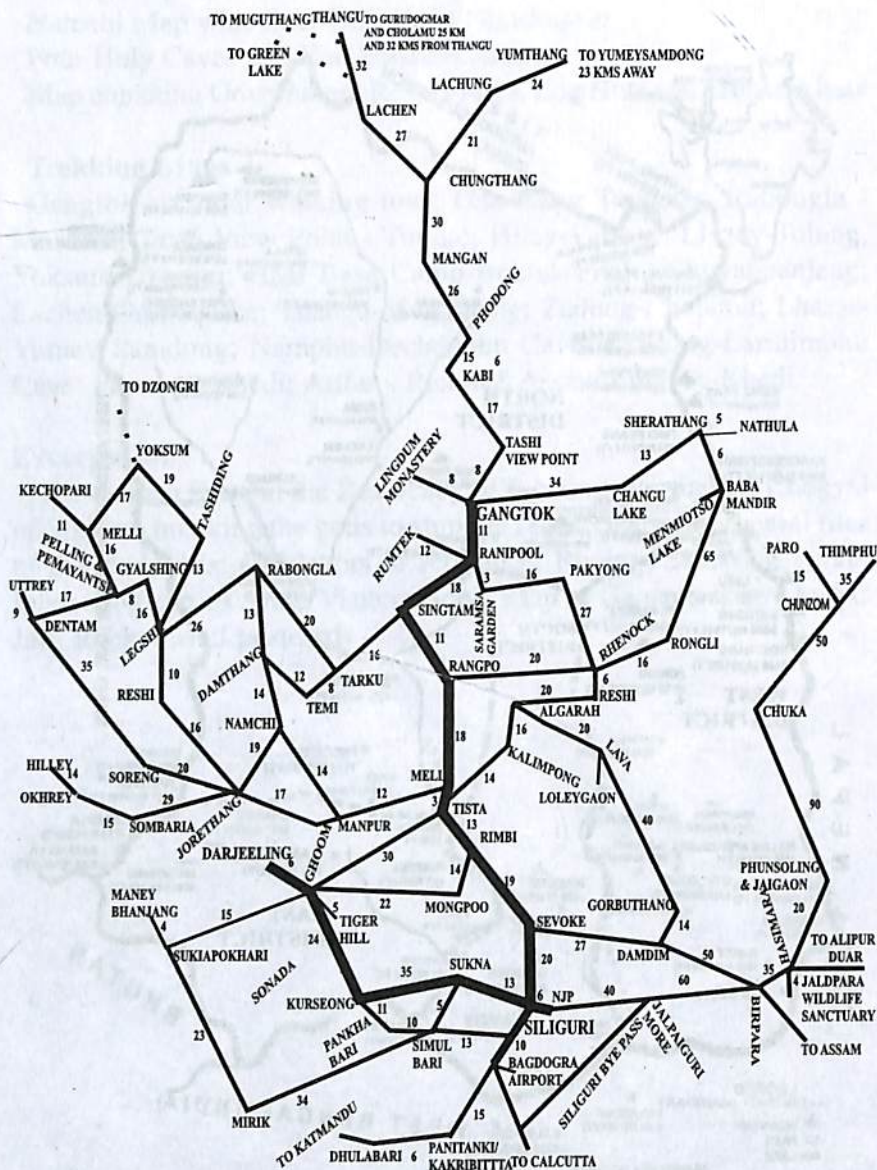
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MAP OF SIKKIM

Boundaries are only approximate and not accurate
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The source of the Tista river: the Tista Khanste glacier on the plateau



The Roro chu river below Gangtok



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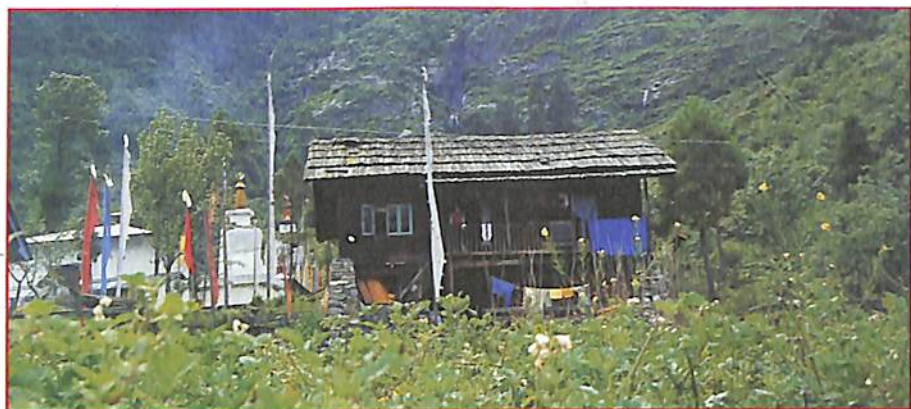
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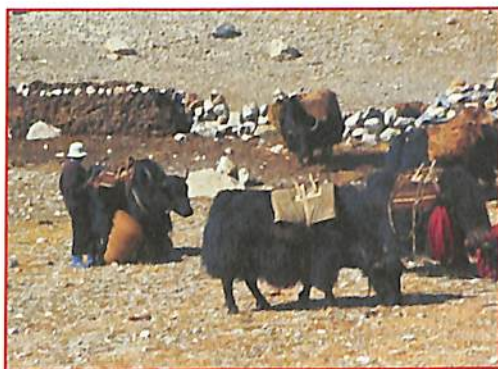
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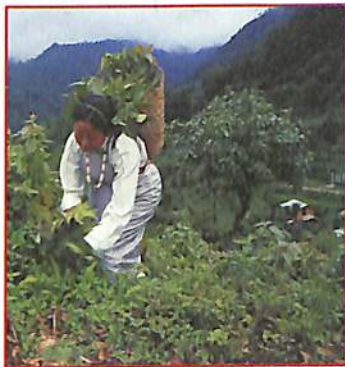
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A Tika ceremony



A Nepali Rai girl



A Lepcha girl



A Nepali Subba lady



A local made carpet



A local face



A Lepcha priest

PREFACE

Long sequestered in the laps of the Himalayas, Sikkim has evolved into a favourite destination with new tourist attractions being added every year. With Sikkim now listed as the best place to visit by Lonely Planet, more and more people specially foreigners want to know about this hidden paradise. This book has been written keeping in mind the increased requirement for information on Sikkim.

My earlier job of installing radio-communication equipment, solar panels and wind generators for the Police Department took me to the remotest corners - some involving days of walking through lush green valleys and over high passes like Donkiala, Sebula, and Lungnala bivouacking in caves - and enabled me to experience Sikkim's rustic splendour and village life and study the local way of living closely which has been described at many places in this book. I am grateful to many people - yakherders, porters, monks, villagers, police personnel and foresters posted in remote areas - who regaled me with stories of local beliefs and folklore during my travels and have indirectly contributed to this book by providing a wealth of information.

During a recruitment examination in 1991 in which I was a member of the Interview Board, many local candidates knew more about Indian and European History than about say the Chogyals of Sikkim. This prompted me to write a chapter on Sikkim Quiz and it became the hall mark and Upper Selling Point of my book for candidates appearing for examinations.

As a member of a local environment group "Green Circle", I was intensively involved in ecology related work in Sikkim - organising environment and afforestation camps, workshops, quiz programmes, cleaning up fragile areas like the Tsomgo lake of garbage and implementing the AUSAID funded Litter and Spit Free Zone on M.G. Marg (Gangtok's Main Market)- which involved organising street plays, workshops and putting up dust bins. The spick and span pedestriained M.G. Marg is the result of our efforts. As a part of our advocacy programme we took initiatives like getting the authorities to agree to make it compulsory for all vehicles plying to Alpine areas to carry small garbage bags so that passengers do not throw out wrappers and vitiate the landscape. Thanks to my "Green Circle" friends with whom I enjoyed working.

My association with the Syari Government Employees Welfare Association gave me an opportunity to use innovative methods to resolve

parking problems in the locality. Door to door collection of garbage was initiated by me. These initiatives resulted in creation of jobs: parking attendants and garbage collectors. By viewing parking and garbage not as problems but opportunity and resource we opened up whole of avenues. On the anvil is an initiative to make the locality Zero Waste.

As Vice President of National Association for the Blind, Sikkim Branch and also member of various other organisations dealing in disabilities, I was involved in use of Information Technology tools to make the disabled acquire skills that would make them employable and not reliant on compassion and charity. What could be more fulfilling and satisfying in life than picking up disabled children languishing at home from remote areas of Sikkim, putting them through a vocational training programme and then getting them employment. The outcome of my experiences with these associations gave me an insight on various issues dogging Sikkim and have been reflected in the book. It also prompted me to add a chapter on NGOs and Community Initiatives.

Thanks to all those with whom I was associated. These experiences contributed in making me a strong advocate for social re-engineering; using community initiatives and change management to benefit the citizens

And finally, I am grateful to my wife Sunila and daughter Vernica for their immense patience and bearing with my rather irregular routine while I was preparing the manuscript. Thanks also to Ashish Pradhan who has helped me with the maps.

They say even the height of Mount Kanchendzonga is increasing a couple of centimeters every year. Therefore in order to keep abreast with the changes, I endeavour to take out an edition every year so that all the facts and figures are updated. Twice or thrice every year when I realise that the only exercise that I am getting is pushing files from the IN tray to the OUT tray in the office, I put on my trekking shoes and go out exploring and this enables me to add new trekking routes to the book. This edition particularly has many new maps and sketches. What began as a 80 page booklet in 1990 as Sikkim's first guide book has now evolved into a few hundred pages and keeps growing with every edition.

I am sure this information packed book will be found useful by the readers.

Rajesh Verma
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SIKKIM - INTRODUCTION AND PHYSICAL FEATURES

Sandwiched between the kingdoms of Nepal in the west and Bhutan in the east lies a small stretch of rugged land just 115 kilometres by 65 kilometres - 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 small size of 7096 sq km belies its richness of culture, customs, heritage, flora and fauna all telescoped into one. By travelling a few hours within Sikkim one can traverse from sultry tropical to temperate and then to alpine climates - and from almost sea level to 18000ft. Although Mount Kachenzonga at about 28000 ft is the highest point in Sikkim, there are places like Melli at 1100 ft which have a lower altitude than say Hyderabad (1700 ft) and Jaipur (1400 ft). A couple of hours of travel can take you from the almost the rainiest region on earth to a cold desert where clouds do not dare to venture and where it hardly rains. No wonder Sikkim is a bio-diversity hotspot - Sikkim has only 0.2percent of the area of India but has 26 percent of its biodiversity- species of flora and fauna -wild animals like marmots and the red panda, a wide range of flora from primulas to orchids. The pristine and unspoilt natural beauty includes alpine landscapes and thick luxuriant tropical forests, rivers in torrents and peaceful lakes - a true Shangrila and a veritable kaleidoscope.

By travelling a few kilometers, one can leave a city like Gangtok with all modern amenities and reach a quaint village that seems anachronistically from a different age and having names like Bringbong and Passingdon.

Sikkim is a nice place to be in. It is not dogged with the social problems and economic problems like discrimination against women being faced by other states. Crime is negligible. Although Sikkim is a part of North East Council, it does not share its border with anyone of the of the other seven North Eastern States and mercifully the state is not troubled by insurgency that has come to be associated with the other North East states. There are hardly strikes and bandhs in the state. Even when there is an All India Strike, life in Sikkim goes on as normal. Sikkim also has been the first state to ban the use of plastic carry bags and use of fertilizers and pesticides as a step towards becoming an organic state. With a literacy of 82%, the Government has also launched a Total Computer literacy programme.

Every year new destinations keep being added - Chardham, Kanchandzonga Amusement Park, Tathagata Tstal etc and this has resulted in increasing the number of tourists visiting the state.

Sikkim was earlier a protectorate of India with a monarchy government but in 1975 it metamorphosed as the Twenty Second state of the Indian Union. The population of the whole state is only 5,40,000 as per the last census - less than a populated colony of Delhi. It is well connected to the rest of the country by rail and air through Siliguri about a 100 kms away from Gangtok.

Surrounded by three countries, Sikkim has a 220 kilometres long border with Tibet, 100 kilometres with Nepal, 30 kilometres with Bhutan and 80 kilometres with West Bengal. Because of absence of habitations on both sides of the international border there is hardly any infiltration.

Within the state there is a good road network and more roads are being constructed at a frenzied pace. It is possible to reach Gangtok from places as far flung as Lachen and Okhrey within four hours making hardly any place in Sikkim remote. There is a good and reliable shared Taxi- Jeep facility from all places in Sikkim to and from Gangtok. Language communication for outsiders also poses no problems. Although Nepali is the most widely spoken language in Sikkim, everyone seems to know Hindi and English. In spite of rapid development, Sikkim continues to be a small place and everything about it is simple including the names of its four Districts: North, South, East and West. Everyone seems to know everyone.

Sikkim is located in the eastern part of India and therefore the time seems to be slightly skewed as Indian Standard Time(IST) is infact the local time of Allahabad. . It dawns early (as early as 3.30 am in June) and also becomes dark early (as early as 4.30 pm in winter)

PHYSICAL FEATURES

Sikkim may have a small size, but this is amply compensated by formidable physical features. It are the physical features like the rivers and mountains that define the boundaries of the state with its neighbours. The edge of the Tibetan plateau more or less demarcates the northern border of Sikkim with Tibet. The eastern boundary with Tibet is represented by the Chola range whereas the border with Bhutan is constituted by the Pangolia range. In the west the Singelila range forms the watershed as well as the border between Nepal and Sikkim. Parts of the rivers Rangit, Tista, Ramam and Rangpo-chu combine to define the border of Sikkim with West Bengal. Because of the relatively low latitude of Sikkim (27 degrees north) and its proximity to the Tropic of Cancer, the snow line above which permanent snow is found is about 20,000ft. Habitations are found till altitudes of 17,000 ft. This is in sharp contrast to Europe where the Alps at a latitude of approximately 45 degrees north comparitively are tiny tots and the highest Mt. Blanc at an altitude of 15,000 ft remains perenially under snow.

The humidity in Sikkim is relatively higher because of its proximity to the Bay of Bengal and also due to the rich rain forest coverage. Therefore a temperature of 25 degrees celcius at Gangtok is considered terribly hot whereas the same temperature at Delhi is considered mild and pleasant.

With the change in seasons, the mountains and rivers change colours like a chamelon: the mountains are dark green in summer and brown in winter and the rivers muddy brown in summer and green torquise blue in winter.

Mountains, Glaciers and Passes

Sikkim has a very rugged and formidable topography and flat lands are difficult to come by- from the air Sikkim looks as though someone has run a giant plough thourgh the land. If these mountains are flattened the size of

Sikkim would triple. The towering mountains that define this paradise of nature also create a barrier to efficient agriculture. It are these mountains that fall directly in the path of the monsoon clouds making the state one of the wettest in the country. In some areas the peaks are as jagged as primitive spearpoints and in others they look like the top of icecones. There are even mountains that have the shapes of huge canyons.

Most of the peaks above 6100 metres (20000 ft) lie towards the western border of Sikkim. On the western border lies the third highest mountain of the world- the Kanchendzonga, 8588 metres (28168 ft) high- the very name suggests majesty and challenge. It is a huge mass that straddles Nepal and Sikkim but its summit lies in Sikkim. To see Kanchendzonga from base to summit, one should go to Singhik near Mangan. Other peaks that stand at altitudes of above 6100 metres (20000 ft) are Kabru, which is also the second highest mountain in the state, Siniolchu, Pandim, Rathong, Kokthang, Talung, Kanglakhang, Simvo and Jonsang. On the eastern border the most imposing peak is Paunhri, at an altitude of about 6700 metres (22000 ft). The other imposing mountains that are slightly less than 6100 metres (20000 ft) are Masthonangye, Yabukjakchen, Narsing and Lamaongden.

Viewed from different locations, the mountains adopt various shapes. For instance Mount Siniolchu from Gangtok has a shapeless ugly profile. But from the Green Lake area this very mountain is an epitome of perfection and is completely symmetrical. Similarly Mount Kanchendzonga from Gangtok looks like a volcano, but from Pelling it looks very different. Also obviously mountains that are closer look deceptively look higher than the ones that are further away. For instance from many places in Sikkim Mount Pandim seems higher than Mount Kanchendzonga.

Through the centre of Sikkim runs another mountain ridge in the north to south direction. This mountain ridge separates the Tista and Rangit Valley and ends at the confluence of the two rivers. The peaks of this ridge are Tendong at 2640 metres (8660 ft) and Maenam at 3235 metres (10612 ft). Most of the peaks of Sikkim have remained unscaled because the Sikkimese consider them sacred and feel that they will lose their sanctity if climbed. From the Sikkim side, Kanchendzonga 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. Kanchendzonga itself means Houses of the Five Treasures and it is believed that holy treasures have been kept by the Gods on the summit. The gnarled topography tends, however to smoothen out in the upper reaches of the Tista river in the Lachen Valley where the Tibetan Plateau juts into Sikkim. The Tibetan plateau gets hot during the summers and as a result an area of pressure exists over it that draws monsoon clouds over the plains of India resulting in their fertility but sometimes being the cause of floods.

A glacier, simply put, is a slow moving river of ice. It flows from high mountain peaks through rocky valleys, carrying off unmelted snow that has compacted over many years into a solid, creeping ice stream. Glaciers also carry with them rocks and these are deposited in the form of small mountains called

moraines. There are many glaciers in Sikkim but the most important ones are the Zemu Glacier, Rathong Glacier and the Lonak Glacier. Of late the shrinking glaciers because of climate change has been making news. The status of glaciers has become a sort of barometer for measuring climate change.

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 at 4242 metres (14140 ft) and Jelep-la at 4305 metres (14350 ft) and Bhutan-la at an altitude of about 4509 metres (15030 ft) - the first two lead to the Chumbi valley in Tibet and the third to Bhutan. Another important pass on this range that also leads to the Chumbi valley is the Chola pass. On the west between the border of Sikkim and Nepal, the most important pass is Chiwabhanjang which has an altitude of 3090 metres (10300 ft). The other pass on the west is Kang-la. In the north the important passes are Chorten Nyimala, which at 5730 metres (19100 ft) is also the highest usable pass in Sikkim, and Kongra-la. Lungnala connects the Lachen valley to the Lonak valley in North Sikkim. Donkiala pass is another pass in North Sikkim that links up the Lachen valley to the Lachung valley.

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. They also form the source of many rivers. On the highway between Gangtok and Nathu-la, 34 kilometres from Gangtok lies the serene Changu (Tsomgo) Lake at an altitude of about 3693 metres (12310 ft). Two other lakes nearby are the Bidang cho and the Menmecho. Kechopari lake is another well-known lake that lies on a bifurcation of the route between Gyalshing and Yoksum. The highest concentration of lakes is on the Western border north of Chiwabhanjang towards the Base Camp. Laxmipokhari, Lampokhari, Majurpokhari, twin lakes of Ram-Laxman are a few of the lakes in this area. Dud Pokhari and Samiti Lake are two other lakes situated in this area. Gurudogmar, which is the largest in Sikkim and Cholamu are some other beautiful lakes and are in North Sikkim. The state also has many unnamed emerald glacial lakes cupped in towering folds of rock walls.

Rivers

The river that flows right across the length of Sikkim is the Tista snaking through the deep gorges taking tributaries as it goes. Its major tributary is the Rangit which originates from the Rathong Glacier and meets it at the border between Sikkim and West Bengal. The river Ramam a tributary of Rangit, a part of the river Rangit itself and Rangpo chu a tributary of Tista define the Southern border between Sikkim and West Bengal. Tista originates from the Lake Cholamu where it is hardly a stream. No one can imagine that this innocuous looking stream would transform into a thundering mighty river less than a hundred kilometres downstream. From an altitude of almost 5400 metres (18000 ft), the Tista plummets down in less than 80 kilometres to 1620 metres (5500 ft) at Chungthang - a veritable waterfall. From Chungthang on-

wards till the border with West Bengal the Tista descends just another 900 metres (3000 ft) over a course of about a 100 kilometres. The other smaller tributaries of the Tista river are Zemu chu, Lonak chu, Lachung chu, Talung chu, Bakcha chu. While the river Tista flows in the North-South direction its tributaries tend to flow in the South West or South East directions.

Fed by runoff from glaciers and copious snow and rain, Sikkim's rivers flow fast and furious - a tempting source of hydropower. Because of their natural steep gradient, these perennial rivers have a potential of generating thousands of megawatts of electricity. Many hydroprojects have come up in the state which are selling power to the neighbouring states bringing much needed revenue to Sikkim.

Hot springs

Sikkim has many hot-springs known for their medicinal and therapeutic value. The most important are the ones located at Phurchachu (Reshi), Yumthang, Borang, Ralang, Taram-chu and Yumey Samdong. All these hot springs have high sulphur content and are located near the river banks. The average temperature of the water in these hot springs is 50 °C

CLIMATE

The widely variable topography of Sikkim and windflows has resulted in Sikkim having many microclimates.

Temperatures

The temperatures that a particular place experiences varies considerably with altitude. At places of low altitude, like Singtam, Rangpo and Jorethang, the temperatures vary between 4 °C to 35 °C. Places like Gangtok with moderate altitudes of about 1800 metres (6000ft) experience temperatures between 1 °C and 25 °C; it is very rare that Gangtok gets snowfall. At altitudes above 4000 metres (13100 ft), the temperature never rises above 25 °C and remains much below the freezing point during the winters and great part of the spring and autumn. At higher altitudes, temperatures can change for instance from + 25 °C to -25 °C within minutes

Rainfall

Sikkim is one of the rainiest regions in India. Because of the proximity of Sikkim to the Bay of Bengal and the fact that the mountains of the state come directly in the path of the monsoon clouds, most parts of Sikkim experience torrential rains during summers. Clouds weighed down with moisture gingerly lumber up the mountains, jettisoning barrels of rain. So much so that even a small depression over the Bay of Bengal triggers off a downpour in Sikkim. Even during spring moisture laden clouds formed due to local evaporation, continue to batter a greater part of Sikkim. By the last week of September the monsoon disappears but there is a nip in the morning air. It presages the onset of autumn and cooler days to come. It is only during October to March that there is hardly any rain and the weather remains more or less clear.

Rainfall however varies considerably from place to place because of the hill features. The northern border of Sikkim experiences comparatively low rain-

fall because the monsoon clouds dry out by the time they hit the northern barrier. For the sake of comparison, 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. Similarly Namchi in South District gets hardly 100 cm of precipitation annually as the Darjeeling hill feature obstructs the monsoon clouds.

Most of Sikkim does not experience high intensity winds. However, at many hill tops and passes, winds and blizzards having high speeds blow. Given below is the average maximum-minimum temperature and average rainfall over the last ten years at Gangtok and the probability of seeing clear skies.

Month	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
Max	13.5	11.9	16.6	20.7	22.3	21.5	22.5	22.5	21.8	19.9	16.1	13.0
Min	2.0	3.6	10.0	12.1	15.0	17.4	17.7	17.7	16.9	13.0	9.4	6.7
Rainfall cm	2.7	6.5	10.3	30.4	54.0	57.0	66.0	57.0	49.8	13.7	4.7	2.7
Chance of clear skies	90%	90%	75%	40%	30%	10%	1%	2%	5%	50%	98%	98%

Although the figures above pertain to Gangtok which is at an altitude of about 2000 metres it could be considered representative of the whole area after you make corrections based on the altitude. The rainfall would decrease at higher altitudes and so would the maximum-minimum temperature.

THE PEOPLE

Communities, cultures, religions and customs of different hues intermingle freely here in Sikkim to constitute a homogeneous blend and present a kaleidoscopic picture. Hindu temples coexist with Buddhist monasteries and there are even a few Christian churches, Muslim mosques and Sikh Gurdwaras. Although the Buddhists with monasteries all over the state are the most conspicuous religious group, they are in fact a minority constituting only 28% of the population. The majority, 68% profess Hinduism. The predominant communities are the Lepchas, Bhutias and the Nepalis. In urban areas many plainsmen- Marwaris, Biharis, Bengalis, South Indians, Punjabis- have also settled and they are mostly engaged in business and government service. Because of development and construction activities in the state, a small part of the population consists of migrant labourers from the plains and from Nepal: plumbers, masons and carpenters from Orissa, Bihar and West Bengal and Sherpas who are hired by the army to maintain the roads at high altitudes. There are also a few thousand Tibetan Refugees settled in Sikkim. Many locals have names that are indistinguishable from those of Hindi speaking states in India: Singhs, Sharmas, Bhandaris, Pradhan etc. The communities celebrate an eclectic range of festivals which mean a lot to rural folks who normally do not have any other means of recreation.

Of the violent invasions that Sikkim had to face over the centuries from Nepal and Bhutan, there is hardly any trace today; but a quieter invasion is taking place; that of cultures from outside at the cross roads of Gangtok and other towns of Sikkim. Cultural and economic forces are reshaping the way of life of the Sikkimese. This can be seen by taking a walk down the M.G Marg of Gangtok: boys and girls sporting the latest fashions probably picked up from a new Hindi movie or BBC's Clothes Show gaily tromp up and down. An open Jeep carrying jubilant footballers who have won a match passes by - they are singing Daler Mehndi's popular Punjabi song "Ho Jaygi Balle Balle" at the top of their voices. A Domino Pizza Bike buzzes past. And a Bhutia politician turned philanthropist and Guru every morning teaches Yoga to participants mostly from the plains - a sign of true national integration.

Something prosaic and inexorable is also happening. Jobs in urban areas appeal to local young people more than traditional livelihoods tied to land like agriculture, yak rearing etc. Farming communities have shrunk and therefore it is not the wildboars or yaks that are headed for extinctions but the wildboar hunters and the yakherders themselves.

The cable TV is definitely attempting to remould the cultural landscape of Sikkim. You should not be surprised if you come across a village girl somewhere in the wilderness dressed in a Punjabi Kurta Pajama singing a Hindi number "Didi tera dewar diwana" while tending to her herd of cattle. In spite of such powerful external influences, Sikkimese have proved to be resilient accepting the benefits of progress while retaining their ethnic identity.

Foods and Drinks

The discovery of a new dish does more for the happiness of mankind than the discovery of a star - Althem



Sikkimese are essentially rice-eaters. Alcoholic drinks are popular both amongst men and women. Beef eating is common amongst the Bhutias. It is not uncommon to see Marwari plainsmen gulping down Momos and Thukpa and Bhutias partaking to Indian dishes like Puris and Dosas - a true sign of national integration. A typical diet of a working Sikkimese consists of dal bhat (lentils and rice) with meat for breakfast; a light lunch of momos; and an early dinner consisting of noodles. Some of the local cuisines are:



Momo

Momo is a very popular Tibetan delicacy in Sikkim. It is prepared by stuffing minced meat, vegetables or cheese in flour dough and then moulding them in the form of dumplings. These are then steamed for about half an hour in a three tiered utensil that has bone or tomato soup in the lowest compartment. Steam from the boiling soup rises through the perforations in the containers above and cooks the dumplings. Momos are taken along with soup and home made chilly sauce. It is available in most of the local restaurants.

Thukpa

It is noodle soup with vegetables. Thukpa is readily available in most of the local restaurants.

Phagshapa

Phagshapa is strips of pork fat stewed with radishes and dried chillies.

Sael Roti

This Nepali cuisine is prepared by grinding a mixture of rice and water into a paste. The paste is then poured into hot oil and deep fried. It is normally eaten with potato curry. Normally not available in restaurants but is widely prepared during parties.

Niguru with Churpi

Niguru is a local fiddlehead fern and its tendrils when light fried with churpi (cheese) forms an irresistible dish. Normally not available in restaurants but is prepared as a household dish.

Gundruk

Gundruk are leaves of the mustard oil plant that have been allowed to decay for some days and then dried in the sun. These dried leaves are then cooked along with onions and tomatoes and forms a tasty dish.

Chang (Thomba)

Chang is a local beer which is made by fermenting millet using yeast. It is sipped from a bamboo receptacle using a bamboo pipe. The receptacle which has millet in it is topped with warm water a couple of times until the millet loses its potency. Chang can sometimes be strong and very intoxicating indeed.

Kinama

It is fermented soya beans. Quite popular in villages.

In Sikkim, women are not confined to home and the hearth. You purchase your vegetables from a lady puffing away at her bidi (local made cigarette). And in the small local restaurant you go to, you are greeted by a burly woman behind the sale counter lined with bottles of beer who asks you in Nepali "Ke Khanu Honcha?" (What would you like to eat?). At a busy traffic intersection a smartly turned out woman police constable is busy regulating the traffic while another is issuing a ticket to an errant woman driver. On construction sites, women work side by side with men, carrying material in wicker baskets and pulverising stones. Women, even those belonging to the conservative Marwari community run many of the shops in town. In the Government Sector, more than fifteen percent of the employees are women.

Hindi movies are a craze with the locals here and Hindi music is invariably played at all functions here. Even traditional cultural programmes get eclipsed by the blare of Hindi songs.

The Lepchas

Lepchas are said to be one of the original inhabitants of Sikkim. It has not yet been established from where the Lepchas originally came to Sikkim. There are some theories which indicate that the Lepchas came from the border of Assam and Burma. Other theories speak of the Lepchas having migrated to Sikkim from Southern Tibet. No matter from where they have original roots, the fact that is clearly established is that they are of Mongoloid descent. The Lepchas are now predominantly Buddhists but many of them are also Christians having been converted to this faith by the missionaries.

Before adopting Buddhism or Christianity as their religion, the earliest Lepcha settlers were believers in the Bon faith or Mune faith. This faith was basically based on spirits, good and bad. Witchcraft and exorcism were very common. They worshipped spirits of mountains, rivers and forests which was but natural for a tribe that co-existed so harmoniously with the rich natural surroundings. The well-known deities of the Lepchas are Itbumoo, Rom, Itbu Debu Rom, Kongchen Konglo and Tamsang Thing, who is also said to have invented the Lepcha script. One major festival of the Lepchas is the Namsoong which marks

the beginning of the New Year. A highlight of this festival is the week long mela or fair held at Namprikdam at the confluence of Tista and Tolungchu near Mangan in North Sikkim. The Lepcha priests are known as Bomthing and they perform intricate ceremonies to invoke the blessings of the spirits.

The Lepcha (Dzongu) folklore is rich with stories. One of the very popular story has a parallel with the legend of the Tower of Babel. It describes that the Rongs or Lepchas once attempted to ascend to Rum or Heaven by building a tower of earthen pots. When Rum was about to be reached,



God thought he must put an end to this venture. He made them speak in different

Games and Amusement

Archery



This is a much loved outdoor game and is played during the festival months of December and January. The bows and arrows are made of bamboo and the targets each measuring about 30 by 100 cms are kept at the end of the range which is usually 100 metres in length. 11 archers constitute each team with each participant shooting 2 arrows. The method of calculating scores is quite complex as arrows that land close to the target also win points. The team that first scores 33 points wins the match. Spectators and team members stand along

the range and dodge misfired arrows with dexterity. During the break, the spectators partake to the local beer, chang and snacks in the lawns. The whole atmosphere is that of festivity. Archery competitions are held in which teams from as far as Bhutan participate.

Majong

Essentially a dice game of Chinese origin, it is very popular in Sikkim.

Chawri or dice

This is a very popular dice game and is played using two dices which are shaken in a wooden bowl which is then upturned on a leather strap with a loud thump and a shout. The score is kept using small sea shells which are known as chawris.

tongues with the intention of creating confusion. The man at the top of the tower shouted "Kok vim yang tale" (Pass the pole with the hook) but the men at the bottom heard the words "Chek tala" (cut it down). The tower was hacked down and its remains are still found in Daramdin in West Sikkim.

The Lepcha population is concentrated in the central part of Sikkim. This encompasses the confluence of Lachen and Lachung rivers and Dickchu. The terrain here is rugged and Lepcha dwellings are perched precariously on the steep hillsides. No wonder the word Lepcha means the Ravine folk. They mostly live on agriculture of paddy, cardamom and oranges.

Life in a Lepcha dwelling is very simple. In a Lepcha hut which is usually made of bamboo and is raised about five feet above the ground on stilts, there are usually just a couple of rooms.

Lepchas is very rich in vocabulary related to the flora and fauna of Sikkim.

Lepchas are very good at archery. Archery competition are held very frequently by the Lepchas. Hunting of wild animals using bows and arrows and fishing are favourite pastimes of the Lepchas. The male Lepcha wears a dress called a Pagi made of cotton which is striped. The dress comes down to the knees. It is fastened on the shoulder by a pin and a belt is worn round the waist. Lepcha men keep the hair in the form of a plaited pigtail. The Lepcha women wear two piece dress. The upper garment or the blouse is called the Tago whereas the lower part which resembles a petticoat is called Domdyan.

The polyandry marriages are permitted amongst the Lepchas although this is now becoming very rare. The nuptial customs are quite intriguing. After

Folk dances of Sikkim



Folk dances and songs are an ingrained part of Sikkimese culture. Most of the dances relate to the beauty of the natural surroundings, some depict the harvest season



and others are performed for good luck and

prosperity. Many of the musical instruments that accompany the dances are unique to Sikkim. Some of the popular dances are described below:

Nepali Folk Dance Maruni

Although this dance is associated with the festival of Tihar meaning "Festival of Light", because of its popularity it is performed even on occasions like marriages. Tihar is celebrated to mark the return of the Hindu god Rama from exile. During this festival Maruni dancers richly dressed in colourful costumes and resplendent with ornaments and noserings called "dungris" go on a house to house visit. The dancers are usually also accompanied by a clown called "Dhatu waray". Sometimes Maruni dances are performed to the accompaniment of the nine instrument orchestra known as "Naumati Baja".

Nepali Folk Dance Tamang Selo

Tamangs are a Nepali community and the "Tamang Selo" dance is performed to the rhythmic sound of the "Dhamphu" musical instrument which the dancers carry in their hands. This dance is therefore also called the "Dhamphu Dance".

Lepcha Folk Dance Zo-Mal-Lok

This dance portrays the sowing and the subsequent harvesting of paddy. The dance is performed by the Lepcha farmers to reduce the drudgery and monotony of working in the fields.

Bhutia Folk Dance Tashi Sabdo

This dance describes the custom of offering "Khadas" or scarves.

Tibetan Yak Dance

This dance is performed to honour the yak, an animal on which man is completely dependent upon for survival at high altitudes.

The other popular dances are Subba Chabrung Dance, Bhutia Talachi, Tibetan Singhi Chaam, the Sherpa Sebru Naach, Gurung Sorathi, Bhutia Lu-Khang-Thamo, Lepcha Kar Gnok Lok, Bhutia Gha-to-Kito, Lepcha Dhamra Jo, Bhutia Be-yul-mista, Lepcha Mon-Dryak-lok, Nepali Dhaan Nach and Bhutia Chi-Rimu

Western musical instruments like guitar etc are however steadily making inroads into folk music by way of remixes

ॐ Hindu festivals

Nepali Hindus constitute the majority community in the state. Some of the colourful festivals that they celebrate are described below.

Dasain

This fortnight long festival usually falls in the month of October. Also known as Durga Puja, this festival symbolises the victory of the Hindu Goddess Durga over the forces of evil. On the first day barley seeds are sown in the soil and their growth a few inches foretells a good harvest. The next important day, a week later is Fulpati meaning the "day of flowers". Maha Astami and Kala Ratri follow Fulpati. The next day is Navami. The 10th day of the festival is known as Vijay Dashmi and also marks the victory of Lord Rama over Ravana. During this day people smear their foreheads with coloured rice and the barley sprouts which were sown on the first day of Dasain are picked and placed over the ears.

Tihar

Tihar is the "Festival of Lights" and symbolises the return of Lord Ram to his hometown from exile after victory over Ravana and covers a period of five days. The festival honours certain animals on successive days. The first day known as "Kak Tihar" is dedicated to crows and they are offered rice and some if caught are even garlanded. On the second day, which is known as "Kukkur Tihar", dogs are garlanded. On the third day the cows are honoured with garlands and their horns are painted in bright colours. It is the turn of the bullocks on the fourth day.

Deepawali, which falls on the third day is considered to be the most important day when goddess Lakshmi comes visiting every home which is lit bright with candles and electric lights.

The fifth day is also known as Bhai Tika in which brothers visit the homes of their sisters and they apply tikas vermilion to each others foreheads. It is also an occasion for exchanging gifts. During Tihar, traditional carols called Bailo or Deusi are sung.

The genesis of Deusi and Bhailey is related to a Kirat King Balihang. It is believed that he fell seriously ill. The God of Death Yama came to take him but Balihang's sister, who was guarding him sent back the messengers with directions that Yama could take her brother after he fulfilled certain conditions. Yama was told to wait till Panchami i.e. Bhai Tika. He could take Balihang away only after the colour of the Tika had faded away, or the water she had sprinkled around him, dried or the flower which she had prepared his garland had wilted. Yama granted her wish. Balihang's sister was, however, much more ingenious than Yama had given her credit to be. She carefully chose the ingredients of the Tika to make sure that it did not fade. Rice grains, she knew would not lose their colour quickly giving her brother enough time to recover from his illness. She then mixed oil in the water and sprinkled around him to keep it from drying and on the third day she strung a garland made of Makhamali, a flower which does not wilt for years. The Tika did not fade, the water did not dry and the flowers did not wilt for days together and Balihang recovered. Balihang's sister sent messengers across the country to announce her brothers recovery. Dewsi and Bhailey are supposed to be these messages.

Dasain and Tihar means a lot to the local Hindus. Even in-patients in the hospitals leave to be at home with their families.

Continued...

Hindu festivals (continued)

Saraswati Puja

This festival falls in the month of January and honours the Hindu Goddess of Knowledge "Saraswati". School children place their study books in front of the statue and seek blessings for doing well in their studies.

Magh Sakranti

This festival takes place in mid January and marks beginning of the lengthening of days. Fairs are held on the banks of the confluence of rivers. It is an occasion for villagers to gather, meet each other and make purchases.

Maha Shivratri

Observed in the month of February, this festival commemorates the marriage of the Hindu God Shiva to Parvati. In temples dedicated to Shiva, day and night long prayers are held. Devotees of the god keep a fast on this day. The Shiva Lingam is worshipped by washing it with milk, curd and honey. Offerings of bael leaves are also made to the Lingam.

Holi

Although a festival that is observed mainly in the Hindi speaking areas of India, this festival is gaining popularity in Sikkim too. People visit homes of friends and relatives and smear each other with colour. Holi falls in the month of March and marks the advent of the spring season. This festival essentially celebrates the killing of the demoness Holika by Lord Krishna.

Chaite Dasain or Ramnami

Observed to commemorate the birth of the Hindu God Rama, this festival is celebrated by holding Melas or fairs at various places. One place where a small Mela is held during this occasion is Tendong when villagers from surrounding areas undertake the arduous trek up to the peak. Of late this festival is being celebrated in a big way at Aitar lake near Rhenock.

For business-men, Ramnami marks the end of the financial year during which the books of accounts are closed.

Raksha Bandhan

Another festival that has its origins in the Hindi heartland of India, it is becoming quite popular with the people of Sikkim. Sisters tie threads to the wrists of their brothers and wish for their long and prosperous life.

Janamastami

This festival commemorates the birthday of Lord Krishna. Temples are decorated with colourful lights and prayers are held in various temples across the state. The birth of Lord Krishna took place in the mid-night of Janamastami.

Vishwa Karma Puja

This festival takes place on 17th September every year and honours Vishwa Karma - the God of Machines. Statues of this deity are put up in temporary sheds called pandals and worshipped especially by those who are involved in handling machines like drivers and mechanics.

Rangey Mela

A little known festival, it is unique to Namchi. Held in the month of July, an effigy of Rangey Bhoot (ghost) is burnt at Namchi Bazar, a day before the Mela.

both the parties have evinced interest in establishing marital relations, the boy's maternal uncle approaches the parents of the girl with some bottles of liquor, scarf and some money. The marriage can easily be ended but the husband has to pay some money to the girl's parents.

The Bhutias

These are people of Tibetan origin. They migrated to Sikkim perhaps somewhere after the fifteenth century through Bhutan. They are evenly distributed throughout the state of Sikkim. In Northern Sikkim, where they are the major inhabitants, they are known as the Lachenpas and Lachungpas. The Lachenpas and the Lachungpas who mainly inhabit the areas around Lachen and Lachung respectively have their own traditional legal system known as Zamsa to settle disputes. Zamsa means public meeting place and the village headman, who is also known as the Pipon metes out justice and is chosen once in a year by the villagers voting by the show of hands. The Pipon takes all decisions regarding the village life like when the crops should be harvested. The Bhutia aristocrats are known as the Kazis. The language spoken by the Bhutias is Sikkimese which is in fact a dialect of Tibetan language. The script is the same. Bhutias constitute about ten percent of the total population of Sikkim. Bhutia villages are large as those compared to those of Lepchas.

Marriage in a Bhutia family is arranged through negotiations by the paternal or maternal uncle of the boy who goes to the bride's place with gifts to ask for the hand in marriage for his nephew.

The traditional dress of the male member is known as the Bakhu which is a loose cloak type garment with full sleeves and is fastened at the neck on one side and near the waist with a cotton belt. They wear loose trousers. The ladies dress consists of a silken Honju which is a full sleeve blouse and a loose gown type garment fastened near the waist tightly with a belt. In the front portion they tie a loose sheet of multi coloured woollen cloth made of special design. This is called Pangdin and is a symbol of a married woman. Ladies are fond of very heavy jewellery made of pure gold.

The Nepalis

The Nepalis now constitute more than 80 percent of the total population of Sikkim. They introduced the terraced system of cultivation and this brought large tracts of hilly terrain to yield crops productively.

A major sub-cultural stock of the Nepalis are the Kiratis who include Limbus, and Rais. Originally most of them were hunters and shepherds and semi-nomadic. The Limbus who are also called Yakhthambas (yak-herders or traders) are divided into three sects: Kashigotra, Bhuiphuta and the Lhasagotra (Tsongts). Each Kirati sect has a dialect of its own. Some of the tribes of the Kiratis are animists (attributing the soul to non-living things like mountains), whereas the others are either Hindus or Buddhists. The deities of the Limbu community are Sri Janga, Tagyera Ningwa Poma and Yuma Shamma. The Rai community also constitute a sizeable population of the state. Some other communities of the Nepalis are the Newars, Sharmas, Basnets, Thakuris, Chettris Mangars, Kamis, Damais and Karkis.



Bhanu Bhakta, the Nepali poet

The language spoken by Nepalis is understood all over by the state. This language is similar to Hindi and uses the Devanagiri script. The great Hindu epic Ramayana has been translated to Nepali by a Nepali poet named Bhanu Bhakta who lived in the nineteenth century. The birthday of Bhanu Bhakta holds a special significance for the Nepalis. On this day, processions, debates and essay competitions are held in memory of the great poet and writer.

SOME VOCATIONS UNIQUE TO SIKKIM

Rotiwalas carrying blue trunks on their heads are literally walking bakeries and they are mostly Muslim Biharis who run home bakeries. You still find them in Gangtok and remote parts of Sikkim selling bread loafs, biscuits and other bakery products.

Chana and Churalwalas are again mostly Biharis found in street corners selling chicpeas garnished with onions They also sell Chura which is beaten rice with spiced potatoes.

Dahi walas They are milkmen going around the town selling curd. Curd is one of the most simplest things to make at home. Warm some milk and drop in a little curd and leave it overnight and the curd is ready. As someone aptly put it jokingly - milk sleeps at night morning gets tight. So why sell curd when it is so easy for anyone to make it at home. But Dahiwalas seem to have many customers: the curd sold by them tastes different - slightly rancid and bitter which seems to give it an edge over the one made at home.

Gai Nay are vocationally farmers by tradition but during the cold winters nothing grows on the Himalayan slopes bringing agriculture to a standstill. Hence to supplement their income and support their families they venture out with their Sarangis which is a bow stringed musical instrument to sing.

SAKEWA - AN IMPORTANT RAI FESTIVAL

The Rai community in Sikkim celebrate Sakewa to invoke the blessing of goddess Chandi for an abundant crop and favourable weather. Sakewa falls on baisakh purnay (fifteenth day of the fifth month of the Nepali calendar) coinciding with the sowing season. Sakewa can therefore also be interpreted as Bhoomi Puj. The Mangpa (priest) performs the prayer. One person beats the hongken (drum) loudly. The mangpa then dances to the single drum beat. The silis, as the dance is called consists of hundred and eight characters of various animals and birds. After the performance of the puja the worshippers partake to wachipa which is a dish made of chicken feathers.

The Rais also observe Sakewa in their homes. Three lungs (stones) are installed in the prayer room to make a furnace called Samkha. The lungs have unique names: Suptulung, Taralung and Shakhalung. While invoking the blessings of the goddess, a fire is lighted in the furnace and the names of the forefathers are called out aloud while offering food, millet, ginger and water. The pot used for the water is called Wabuk or Salawa.