

*Smash
and
Grab*

Annexation of
Sikkim

Sunanda K Datta-Ray

In this fascinating narrative, the author recounts how Sikkim was taken over in a "smash and grab" raid (in the words of the Chogyal). This "chronicle of a passage in history" reveals how the protected kingdom of Sikkim was converted into an Indian state, and also highlights the dangerous ease with which public opinion can be whipped up into chauvinistic acquisitiveness. The author expresses concern over the fact that the substitution of innuendo for evidence, and propaganda for proof, was accepted by the media and public, and seeks to present a balanced and objective analysis of the events leading to the "annexation" of Sikkim.

As the story proceeds, at a gripping pace, the developments culminating in the "final act" are unravelled in the context of Sikkim's historical past, constitutional rights, geopolitical location and ethnic and cultural variety. The major Indian and Sikkim personalities who influenced the course of events are cited. In addition to documentary evidence, the author relies on interviews, eye-witness accounts anecdotes and also on secret agreements and previously unpublished letters in order to substantiate the description.

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Smash and Grab

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Prof. N. C. Sirohi

Sunanda K Datta-Ray



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Preface

This is not the story of the Chogyal's life. Only he could have written that. Nor does it pretend to be a comprehensive account of Sikkim's Buddhist polity. It is an observer's chronicle of a recent passage in the subcontinent's history. Describing what happened, and how, will not change the present or future. But it may serve some purpose if, in truly recounting how law, usage and promises were ruthlessly set aside to destroy one of the last surviving fragments of a cultural empire that once straddled the heart of central Asia, it also reveals the dangerous ease with which public opinion can be whipped up into chauvinistic acquisitiveness.

Governments the world over sometimes have to take morally indefensible action to protect national interests. But seldom are such measures clothed in the righteousness that seemed to sanctify every excess in Sikkim. So successful was the propaganda that no one in India deemed it necessary even to question the official picture of an enslaved people struggling against a tyrannical king. Nor did anyone think of asking at the end of the painful saga when the king had unceremoniously been removed and the kingdom ceased to exist, whether the Sikkimese had gained any freedom under an Indian governor who was far more powerful than the Chogyal had ever been.

He may have been an evil oppressor. His subjects may have had every reason to revolt against the throne. But even if, for argument's sake, we accept these postulations, they do not justify outside intervention to extinguish a country's identity. Only S. Dutta Chowdhury, the police commissioner and Tarachand Hariomal, the judge, sustained faith in Indian justice.

We tend to forget that when the British left the subcontinent in 1947, they wiped the slate clean of all traces of colonial political

and administrative arrangements. They explicitly refused to transfer paramountcy to the new government in New Delhi. For all the glaring disparity in size and every other attribute of nationhood, the two countries emerged with unimpaired sovereignty. An independent Sikkim placed herself under India's protection in 1950, entrusting only certain aspects of her governance to New Delhi while retaining the essence of sovereign authority in Gangtok. Whatever we may think of the Sikkim durbar or of the Chogyal, who was ill-served at the end by sycophantic advisers, grasping relatives and meddlesome lawyers, the fact of juridical parity cannot be gainsaid. Even if the British had been masters of Sikkim, India could not claim to exercise their imperial prerogative.

This book has been inordinately delayed. It was started when the 1975 coup was still fresh in the public mind, and would have been completed long ago but for a series of domestic interventions. But time does not alter basic principles. Delay is of even less consequence here since earlier publication would have had as little practical impact. The odds are that any contradiction of the official version will be denounced as further evidence of the ingenious Chogyal's ability to expound his case even after death.

I must admit that it would have been difficult to write this account if he and his sons had not generously placed their records at my disposal, allowing me access to a great deal of unpublished correspondence with the political officer and chief executive in Gangtok, and with the Indian government in New Delhi. The late Crown Prince Tenzing enthusiastically supported my labours; his younger brother, Prince Wangchuck Namgyal, now thirteenth Denzong Chogyal in the eyes of legitimists, continued with information and assistance.

Nor would I have appreciated the personal flavour of Sikkimese politics but for the exuberance of Kazini Elisa-Maria Dorji Khangsarpa of Chakung, to give her the full honorific she so revels in. Kazini never failed to enliven my holidays in Kalimpong with titillating descriptions of people and events, all of which bore the unmistakable stamp of her vividly imaginative personality. It was a matter of deep regret to me when she apparently decided some time in 1975 that my sympathy for Sikkim made me uncomfortable company.

Many others—members of the royal family, civil servants, politicians and diplomats—helped in almost equal measure. At some

time or other during the last two decades and more, I have discussed the situation with almost every one of the actors who play some part in this story. Even those who might appear in a less than favourable light—and this cannot be helped for their actions, not my personal relationships, shape the tale—were always ready to hold forth on the subject.

K.S. Bajpai, for instance, was never anything but warmly hospitable as was his successor, Gurbachan Singh, the last of the proconsuls. B.S. Das must have been one of the most easily accessible administrators ever to be sent to Gangtok. I drew a blank only with B.B. Lal. But then, I was not the only one. Even Kazi Lendhup Dorji, the first chief minister without whose cooperation Sikkim would never have been absorbed, stood in awe of Lal's abrasive tongue and overbearing demeanour. The Chogyal he treated like dirt.

Nearer home, my thanks are due to D.P. Simpson for typing the preliminary draft, and to Mrs Mercy Sam who spent many laborious hours painstakingly making the almost illegibly corrected manuscript presentable for the publishers.

It needs to be added that my account may seem to rely rather heavily on Sikkimese sources. The fault lies entirely with the Indian authorities. Even a simple query to the Lok Sabha secretariat about M.C. Chagla's clarification of Sikkim's separate status was evasively referred to the external affairs ministry. In public, New Delhi still clings to the defence that it merely responded to spontaneous local developments. Privately, Indian officials hint vaguely at the Chogyal's intrigues. But no allegation has ever been substantiated. Even B.S. Das's admirably candid description of his tenure does not go beyond suggesting that the Chogyal's desire for revision of the 1950 treaty and recognition of his country's status were somehow an intolerable affront to New Delhi's dignity.

The absence of any credible Indian explanation, coupled with all that I saw and heard while reporting the story, conveyed its own lesson. The Chogyal would undoubtedly have been acclaimed as a freedom fighter if he had been engaged with the Americans, British or French; he became a conspiring monster only because he had the misfortune to be pitted against democratic, anti-colonial India. To be pro-Sikkimese was to be anti-Indian.

The Sikkim durbar, as it then existed, was amateurish, overly trusting and incorrigibly timid. Some of its luminaries were always more careful of private interests than of their national cause. It

totally lacked the resources to cope with a crisis of this magnitude. Nor was it ever able to abandon faith in Mrs Indira Gandhi's innate sense of justice, or in the sanctity of legal commitments. But, at least, it had nothing to hide.

SUNANDA K. DATTA-RAY

Contents

<i>Prologue</i>	<i>xiii</i>
1. Smash and Grab	1
2. Belgium of Asia	18
3. Separate but Together	45
4. Burra Kothi	64
5. War of Nerves	80
6. Eightfold Way	93
7. Spider's Web	110
8. Poised in Time	123
9. Shorter Leash	144
10. Vote for Freedom	158
11. The Birthday Party	171
12. Foot in the Door	196
13. Death Warrant	215
14. Against the Law	241
15. Winner Takes All	261
16. Last-Ditch Stand	282
17. Thumb Impression	298
<i>Index</i>	<i>327</i>

Adinba
22.12.84

Prologue

Prof. A. C. Singh

Palden Thondup Namgyal, Chogyal of Sikkim, died more of a broken heart than of throat cancer. *The Voice of Sikkim*, 5 February 1982.

If India believes that it is a democracy, if it believes in democratic principles, if it believes in the principles of Panchsheel, I think it should do justice to us. Prince Wangchuck Namgyal, *Sunday*, 18-24 April 1982.

A tubby little man in a grey lounge suit bustled into the crowded drawing-room, bowed low before the carved and gilded table, *choksey* in Sikkimese, behind which Prince Wangchuck Namgyal sat, laid a *khada* (the flowing white scarf symbolizing purity that is presented on all ceremonial occasions) on the vast heap, and folded his hands to murmur: "We hereby recognize you as the thirteenth consecrated Chogyal of Sikkim."

The wheel had turned full circle. This was Bhim Bahadur Gurung, prominent among the *batisey chor* (thirty-two thieves) of Kazi Lendup Dorji's party, a leading architect of the throne's dissolution and the kingdom's destruction. In the distant past, Gurung had enthusiastically defended his king's demand for independence; but he had recanted his loyalty to become one of New Delhi's most loyal adherents in Sikkimese politics. As speaker of the assembly before the 1979 elections, and as legislative leader of Ram Chandra Poudyal's opposition Congress (Revolutionary) Party afterwards, Gurung had not allowed any memory of national sentiment to influence his actions.

There were more surprises in store. Beyond the gilt trellis of the palace windows echoed the haunting strains of *Dela Jong Sil lee Gee Yang Chagpa Chilo*—Why Is Denzong Blooming So Fresh and Beautiful?—the national anthem that no one had dared sing for nearly a decade. It had continued for hours as an endless stream of

ragged peasants, many of whom had tramped over hill and valley for days, filed before the prince to measure the ground three times with their bodies in token of submission to his sovereignty; not the abbreviated homage of bowing from the waist, fingertips touching the ground three times, but the full-length prostration with knees, palms and forehead flat on the carpet that Bhutiya-Lepchas call *cha*, and the Nepalese *dok*. Each visitor added to the pile of *khadas* before Wangchuck until his pale bespectacled face, wan from the strain of living in public for days on end, could barely be seen. The array of silver sacramental dishes holding rice, millets, butter tea, *chhang* (millets fermented in hot water) and other auspicious symbols, laid out before his seat under the drawing-room's *thankas* (religious scroll paintings mounted on antique brocade and watered silks) had disappeared long since.

As the last notes of the anthem faded into the silence of the Himalayas, there rose a more militant throb: hundreds of feet stamping round and round the palace to the resonance of "Long Live Denzong Chogyal!" Bhim Bahadur Gurung produced his final trump to that defiant accompaniment, a sheet of court paper with a one-rupee stamp, on which was typed:

On the Nineteenth day of February, Year Nineteen Hundred and Eighty-two, Tibetan calendar Chya-Jya and Chu-Khy, the people of Sikkim have decided to offer traditional scarf to the thirteenth consecrated Chogyal of Sikkim, Tobgyal Wangchuck Tenzing Namgyal, at the Tsuk-la-khang of Gangtok at 3.00 p.m.

There were minor inaccuracies. The presentation was in the palace and not the Tsuk-la-khang chapel royal, a square double-storey building with a gleaming yellow roof across the lawns, where the Chogyal's coffin had lain in state for 19 days. It was late in the evening after the funeral, and the shadows were closing in, when Gurung was finally able to edge into the seemingly unending queue. The prince's correct names are Tenzing Topgyal Wangchuck Sisum Namgyal. But the mistakes passed unnoticed; what everyone talked of was the incontrovertible fact that thirteen men in public life had invited India's wrath with that affirmation of loyalty.

Gurung and two others represented the Congress (Revolutionary) Party in the assembly. Dugo Bhutia, once active in Nar Bahadur Khatiawara's militant Youth Congress, sat as an independent

Six legislators belonged to the chief minister's own Congress (Indira) Party. The three remaining signatories enjoyed less formal political prominence. P.B. Subba, president of the Tsong Association, had shared Nar Bahadur Bhandari's imprisonment during the Emergency. Rinchen Wangdi was an impetuous young man married to the Chogyal's niece; he had recently been won over by Kazi Lendhup Dorji's devious and mischievous appeal to Bhutiya-Lepcha youth to stand up and fight for its rights against the ethnic majority. Finally, Sonam Yongda, the Sikkim Guards captain who had paid dearly for his patriotism, and returned to the monastery whence he began; clad in the lama's maroon, Yongda acted as general secretary of the Lhadi Tsokpa, the monks' body.

For them and for 30,000 others, the death of a *chogyal* was the birth of another. The mantle of monarchy had fallen on 29-year-old Wangchuck, educated at St Paul's school in Darjeeling and Harrow, with an honours degree from the Ealing School of Business in London, and nearly three years of working experience in the Heinz factory in England, which had put him off baked beans and tinned soup for life. "The succession is automatic," said the heir, realizing only too acutely that no matter how softly he spoke, every word was clearly audible in New Delhi. The reserved young man, with no previous experience of responsibility or a public role, had almost overnight acquired confidence and maturity.

Prince Wangchuck dismissed a coronation as an unnecessary state ceremony. "It is for the people to accept and acknowledge me as the new *chogyal*, and you can see for yourself the support I have been shown by the people," he told reporters. The monks of the Pemayangtse (the sublime perfect lotus) monastery had already formally recognized him as the *gyalpo* (king) who upholds the *chhos* (righteousness), whence *chogyal*. So had Lhatsun Chempo, the monastery's founder, consecrated his ancestor Phuntsog Namgyal "ruler of the southern slopes" 341 years ago. That was enough for the Sikkimese, Buddhist Bhutiya-Lepchas and Hindu Nepalese alike. The *khada*, symbol of purity, token of allegiance, solemnized their acceptance of a new king. No mute gesture could be more expressive.

Gaugtok was swathed in *khadas*. An American woman, Buddhist and bull-fighter, had even brought back the scarf that the Chogyal had placed in the private altar of her French chateau: reverently,

she laid it on his bier. A cord strung between a scarlet and gold lacquered pillar and the heavy droop of a brocade banner in the Tsuk-la-khang was piled high with skimpy strips of gauze offered by the poor. Villagers who had come unprepared could buy a scarf for a rupee. Superior fabric cost five rupees. The money helped to pay for invocations by more than 30 lamas in the capital alone during the 49 days of mourning; prayers that testified to the profound faith of a king who had only his religion to sustain him during eight lonely years of humiliation and persecution.

Once there were ivory lengths of watered silk from China. But the Nathu-la-trade had been cut off many years ago. Proud clans like the Rhenock Tashis and the Densapas of Barmiok still treasure bolts of antique Chinese silk carefully preserved in aromatic herbs, but most have to be content with the glossy manufacture of Indian factories: Sikkim received everything, from *khadas* to constitutions, readymade from India, Karma Topden once told curious reporters at Dum Dum airport.

The ritual survives from a time when Denzong, the rice bowl, called Sukhim or happy house by Tsong refugees, was a fragment of a vast spiritual empire that extended from Ladakh to Arunachal Pradesh, from the Mongolian steppes down to the Ganges plains. Though Bhutan is also an offspring of that disappearing civilization, a certain sturdy individualism separates the martial Druk race from the heartland of Tibetan culture. Ladakh, where still survive the descendants of Tibet's ancient kings, was more nearly related. But Sikkim was the closest of all, seeking Lhasa's guidance in its worship, social customs and political institutions.

Immigration has so heavily diluted that ethos that the last census revealed that Bhutiya-Lepchas, now reduced to being a protected tribe in their own homeland, constitute less than 24 per cent of the population. Hindu settlers from Nepal and India comprise the overwhelming majority. Therein lay the country's weakness: the vulnerable Achilles' heel through which the Chogyal was wounded and brought low. His durbar could not stand up to the onslaught of manipulated ethnic strife.

But the Great Leveller also heals. There could have been no more inspiring embodiment of racial integration than Khatiawara, the rebel politician who had once vowed to gorge on the Chogyal's blood, making the strenuous ascent to the royal cremation ground as his private act of expiation. His gesture was just as dramatic as

Gurung's testament. More expectedly, the young chief minister, afflicted by a painful back ever since the Indian police beat him up in 1975, waved away his jeep, also to follow the cortege on foot. Pressed by Darjeeling to take more immigrants, Bhandari retorted that Sikkim had merged but would not be submerged.

It was the passing of an age for them, as slowly the procession of monks and mourners climbed the windswept heights of Lukshyama cradled in a distant ring of snowcapped peaks. A richly caparisoned riderless pony preceded the coffin as the Chogyal's own Mercedes had done on the drive from Gangtok's Libing helipad to the Tsuk-la-khang. Wangchuck led the royal mourners: his sister Yangchen and her English husband, Simon Abraham, his half-brother and half-sister, children of the Chogyal's American second wife. Upright young Palden, uncanny in his striking resemblance to the dead crown prince, stocky little Hope Leezum, phlegmatic as any Tibetan.

It took them four hours to cover the distance of about six miles, the final lap steeply up a stone and boulder strewn bridle path to the last resting place of the Namgyals where thousands of grieving Sikkimese already waited. The metal trident of Apa Sahib Pant's Hanuman temple shone down from above. Indian soldiers drilled in clearances below, and the old mule track to Tibet meandered away through the mountain ranges. Thick grass covered the slope and a tree with a curiously hollow bole provided a perch for hundreds of spectators.

Three *chortens* (the receptacle for offerings), stupas in which relics, or sometimes, prayers are enshrined, on a higher ridge marked the cremation sites of Sir Tashi Namgyal, the eleventh *chogyal*, and of his parents, the hare-lipped Thutob Namgyal and his domineering Tibetan *gyalmo*, Yeshi Dolma. There were two newer stupas lower down, for Sangey Deki, the Chogyal's beautiful first wife who died in 1956, and for Crown Prince Tenzing, killed in 1978 when his Mercedes, swerving to avoid a truck speeding up the hill, was hurtled into the ravine below Deorali. The vigorous young crown prince was only 28, glowing with robust health, when he perished so cruelly, a fate that seems to befall all first heirs to the Sikkimese throne.

They brought his battered body here to be burned by his mother's memorial. The two *chortens* stand side by side, the cube for earth,

the orb for water and the cone for fire; each topped by the wooden finial of a crescent and circle signifying air and ether. They were modest monuments, commemorating the humility of a dynasty that had never sought the ostentatious grandeur of India's maharajas, relying only on native dignity. And now the Chogyal too had followed that doleful route. A small new stupa awaited his body, its whitewash still damp from the rains. His permanent memorial was to be in Tashiding (the elevated central glory), a monastery built in 1716 whose sacred Thongwa Rangtrol *chorten* promises nirvana of sight. As a high incarnate lama, the Chogyal was entitled to share this honour with two of Sikkim's most revered ecclesiastics, Jamyang Khentse Rimpoche and Gyaten Rimpoche.

It was the end of a tragically star-crossed life. Posterity may one day be able to explain why—and the precise moment when—fate turned against Palden Thondup Namgyal, the twelfth consecrated Denzong Chogyal. But few men can have known such extremes of fortune. Sir Tashi's second son was recognized at birth as an incarnate of the eighth *chogyal* Sidkeong Tulku, and through him, of a legendary king of Tibet as well as of the monk, Aen-Tul Karma Rinchen of the Kargyu-pa sect of Kham. In his person, therefore, the Chogyal united the Nyingma-pa sect to which the royal family belongs, and the more widespread Kargyu-pa faith. The Dalai Lama had identified his early mentor, Lingbu Rimpoche, from the monastery of that name near Gyantse, as an incarnation of Lhatsun Chempo.

He was elected president of the Mahabodhi Society of India; ✓ invited to Buddhist conferences in Burma, Japan and Kampuchea; sent on a delicate mission to Lhasa as New Delhi's confidential envoy; and asked to lead India's delegation to a Moscow conference of Orientalists. Britain admitted him to the Order of the British Empire; France created him a Commandre de l'Ordre de l'Etoile Noire; and India made him a Padma Vibhushan, an honorary major-general, and colonel-in-chief of the Eighth Gurkhas. Jawaharlal Nehru was paternally fond of the active and imaginative prince so bubbling with enthusiasm for his country. Diplomats and academics enjoyed his illuminating discourses on Himalayan fauna or the religious rituals and political traditions of the border marches. Even the humblest caller enjoyed his hospitality. He was feted in European capitals and the USA; an admiring world regarded him as the beau ✓ ideal of an enlightened executive monarch.

Sikkim's transformation from a primitive mountain principality into a modern nation was due entirely to the Chogyal's vision and effort. A streamlined administration, thrusting economic plans, an impartial system of justice, and a finely balanced political dispensation that reconciled tradition with democratic expectations were the achievements of his reign. Roads, bridges, industry, modern farming, schools, and hospitals bore witness to his efforts. His career blossomed between the late forties and the middle sixties: they were the most fruitful years of his life. The Chogyal was ambitious even then, but it was admitted that his ambitions were all for his people's welfare. Those who met him during those years of fulfilment paid tribute to his gentle charm, classical Tibetan scholarship, progressive administrative ideas, and scientific interest in contemporary forms of advance. They also recognized in him a staunch ally of India's democratic leadership.

Suspicion set in only when, under his rule, the kingdom seemed likely to break out of the strict limits laid down by the protector; when economic growth and social awareness coalesced in a political awakening that threatened to take Sikkim out on a tide beyond the reach of control. The Chogyal did not try to hold back the nascent forces gathering in his country; he saw the new impulses that provoked unreasonable fear and hostility, strong enough to eventually swamp him and his ideas, as the natural culmination of the process that India had helped him to start. No man should be pilloried for seeking freedom, he pleaded, but he pleaded in vain. Tactically, his failure was to allow detractors to portray the higher status he sought for Sikkim as personal, not national, ambition. The propaganda might not have been possible if the Chogyal had ensured that more ordinary Sikkimese understood and shared his aspirations.

And so he was publicly reviled and rejected in the closing years of his reign, depicted as a tyrant and a monster, painted as India's implacable foe. The sad, shy man with his gentle ways and crippling stammer, his soft speech and quiet thoughtfulness, was lost to view under an avalanche of pejorative propaganda. The ludicrously unreal image that emerged was of a sinister schemer who exploited the poor, squandering the kingdom's revenues and Delhi's development assistance on his own extravagances, conspiring with India's enemies, relentlessly pursuing his wanton pleasures amidst the smoking ruins of his country. It was a cruel, wicked distortion. But it served its purpose. Sikkimese officials who had earlier striven for

his patronage carefully shunned the palace; Indians who had been flattered to claim royalty's acquaintance would no longer risk communication with the deposed ruler. The American woman he had raised to the throne, who had offered so many irritants in Gangtok's uneasy relations with New Delhi, dragged him through the US courts over her financial settlement and custody of their children, even gracelessly disputing their right to visit their father in Sikkim, until the union, disastrous for king and country, ended in divorce. It was too late by then for the severance to help his blighted career.

Tenzing's untimely death was the final blow. He was Sikkim's vibrant young hope, and the Deorali accident extinguished the faint glimmer that all that the Chogyal had so ceaselessly striven for would one day be vindicated through his son's restoration. The triumphs of earlier years were forgotten in the lonely twilight of the shabby genteel palace. But his bold experiment of blending the best in Sikkim's past with the demands of emerging nationhood did not deserve to fail, just as this son of Khampa princes did not deserve to forfeit the promise and goodwill with which he had set out.

The cremation was the end of a pilgrimage, the fall of the last outpost of a civilization whose totems have carefully been preserved in an alien ambience. Central Asia's influence was evident in the chain of *khadas* attached to the bier, the other end held by the lama who preceded the pall-bearers: relic of the Chinese *hurin-fan*, the soul's banner. It was reflected in the umbrella over the coffin, yellow being royalty's colour according to the antique rituals of the Ch'ing court, and in the *cha* or *dok*—recalling the imperial *ko-tow* of Manchu China—with which wave upon wave of subjects, rediscovering their true allegiance in a moment of sorrowful clarity, bade farewell to their departed king and paid homage to his successor.

Matrimonial pacts reinforced the old alliance. The Chogyal's mother and wife were Tibetan. Two of his sisters had married into the Lhasa aristocracy. His younger brother's wife had been chosen from the Dalai Lama's exiled entourage in Dharamsala. The Densapas and the Tashis followed the precedent. Even Kazi's richly endowed first wife had originally been married to one of the Panda Tsang brothers, warlords of the Kham marches. More to blame than anyone else for the kingdom's disappearance, Kazi was busily

lobbying in New Delhi on the day that Sikkim nursed its grief; but everyone else was there to acknowledge that the siege was over, the garrison had capitulated, that a nation's umbilical cord had been cut.

Tashiding and Pemayangtse are obvious expressions of the connection with Tibet. The Nyingma-pa sect reveres the Mindolling monastery, which had reared Lhatsun Chempo. The Kargyu-pa faith is rooted in Tolung, north-west of Lhasa. These tokens of the past dominated the day as the Chogyal made his last journey with far greater pomp and pageantry than he had ever done in life.

Mrs Indira Gandhi's government had arranged to have his body flown back from New York, laid on an air force Avro to transport the coffin to Bagdogra, and an MI-8 helicopter for the last lap to Gangtok. With uncharacteristic generosity, she had promised to pay the cost of the funeral, agreed to full ceremonial honours and official mourning. Perhaps this was making a virtue of necessity; Gangtok had spontaneously responded with a 500-member citizens' committee under Sonam Tshering, the veteran speaker, and Bhandari had made it clear that his government looked on the cremation as a national occasion. But Mrs Gandhi chose to be lavish beyond the exigencies of politics. "He had suffered a great deal and was quite ill. He was a sensitive man with concern for his state," she announced with unconscious mockery, though still doggedly talking of "Shri Palden Thondup Namgyal". India's president, home minister and army chief sent empty condolences. Nihar Ranjan Laskar, a junior minister in Mrs Gandhi's cabinet, flew into Gangtok to represent her government; New Delhi's governor of Sikkim, Homi Taleyarkhan, echoed his prime minister to praise "Namgyal-ji" as a "highly polished and refined gentleman".

With such pious protestations to mark the death of the man they had robbed and ruined, Kazi too managed dutifully to produce a *khada* and tell the press: "I may have battled against him, but Sikkim is the poorer by his death."

The irony of these attentions was not lost on Gangtok. "I shall never forget the time when they took Jungkhyang" (the customary honorific by which he was known) "aside at Bagdogra and subjected him to a thorough body search," recalled Simon Abraham. It was not the Chogyal's only taste of petty offensiveness. They took away his distinctive car number plates, removed the Namgyal name from institutions that he had founded and fostered, would not allow

visitors to call on him, forbade him the use of airport VIP lounges so that he had to queue with his suitcases like any passenger, refused to let him go abroad, and seized most of his property. Taleyarkhan would not even allow him to accompany Palden, Hope Leezum and an American school friend holidaying in Sikkim on a trekking expedition in the west just a few months before his death.

Surveillance was most harsh during the Emergency. Very few people could see him then; and a formidable circle of intelligence officials surrounded him always on visits to Calcutta or New Delhi. They kept constant watch at the door of his Wood Street flat, drove dinner guests away from his table in the Grand Hotel, and set up a watching post when he ate in the Calcutta Club. The Chogyal was a prisoner even during that tormented crisis when, goaded beyond endurance he took an overdose of sleeping pills.

My mother was allowed to ask him to dinner just after that nightmare ordeal in 1976. But the police descended on us in impressive force half an hour earlier to search the house and question servants. Livid with fury when told that a young West German diplomat and his wife, who were leaving Calcutta and whom the Chogyal had met before, had also been invited, they threatened not to allow him to get out of the car if the Germans did not leave at once. They obeyed, and the Chogyal came in; but it was a dismal evening. The principal jailer, a special branch inspector, demanded that the Chogyal should not be let out of his sight for a moment, even to the extent of following him into the lavatory, muttering dark imprecations as he sat glowering at the despondent ruler throughout the meal, which he refused to share, clearly taking a venomous delight in being as obtrusive and unpleasant as possible. Such torment was a feature of his daily existence.

This harrowing vigilance was relaxed when the Janata government came to power. "I had maintained that the merger was undesirable and I maintain that," announced the new prime minister. But Morarji Desai's morality never rose above political convenience, and he bluntly told the Chogyal that he would not undo what had been done. Such courage as he had, ebbed away when his mild disapproval, confided to the *New York Times*, provoked a furore in press and Parliament. But Desai offered generous compensation, and Charan Singh promised to make him the governor of an important Indian state if only he would ratify the takeover. The Chogyal thanked them politely and declined the offers, not caring to explain that his

conscience would not allow him to swear to uphold India's Constitution. The solemn bond of his own coronation oath sustained him in his impecunious isolation. "He lived always for Sikkim", says Wangchuck.

Hope flared up again in October 1979 when Kazi and his men, by then sailing under the Janata flag of convenience for their politics changed with every shift in New Delhi, were roundly trounced in all the 32 Sikkimese constituencies. It was a spectacular victory for Bhandari's Janata Parishad, denied recognition as a formal party, deprived of its familiar voting symbol, and handicapped by all manner of other crippling restrictions imposed by Bepin Behari Lal, the governor, and the Indian election commission. "We have always said and we still say that the manner of Sikkim's merger with India was not legal and constitutional," said Lal Bahadur Basnet, the winner from Gangtok and deputy speaker in the new assembly. But the chief minister prudently rationalized that the limited autonomy he was able to secure for the Sikkimese was preferable to New Delhi's stranglehold, which would be the inevitable outcome of open defiance.

Even this muted independence did not survive long after Mrs Gandhi's return to power in 1980. The new Indian government again picked up Kazi, ready to lend himself to any stratagem to regain office, and rather than be outmanoeuvred, a panicky Bhandari, hoping to live down how much he owed to the Chogyal's blessings, merged his party with Mrs Gandhi's Congress.

Some of the old restrictions were reimposed, at least when the Chogyal was in India: my wife and I again received a police visitation when he dined at our flat in the summer of 1981. But the Chogyal was able to shrug off persecution with resignation and even wit. When security men invaded his taxi in New Delhi, he gently suggested that if they were inviting themselves to sharing the journey, they might also consider paying part of the fare.

Nevertheless, the new chief minister made life easier in Gangtok. Princess Yangchen's wedding in 1979 was almost a state occasion, government departments and employees helping out with arrangements. All the officials who had once basked in royal favour flocked back to court when Bhandari let it be known that, dethroned and dispossessed though he was, the king remained the first gentleman of Sikkim. The Chogyal welcomed them back without a trace of recrimination; indeed, with something of his former wistful charm

But he had few illusions left and had ceased to expect anyone to place patriotism above prospects. For himself, short of money, obliged to beg favours of people whom he looked on as usurpers, forced to travel on an ordinary Indian passport, still hemmed in by all kinds of niggling little restraints, and frequently having to suffer Lal's rude outbursts, the knowledge that he could be a free and rich man if only he acquiesced in the annexation must have been a source of considerable private solace.

✓ The Chogyal had very little interest left in what was happening, or even in himself. Often, he would be sunk in gloom for hours on end. He could hardly eat because of a painful throat when we stayed with him in Gangtok in July 1981: it was probably pharyngitis, he said, possibly something worse, not seeming to care much. It was too late by September when he was finally persuaded to go to New York and able to coax some foreign exchange out of the Indian government. But the American doctors were hopeful to start with. He wrote to me in October to say that though the tumour had shrunk under chemotherapy, an operation would cost his voice. "So I will be dumb until I learn to speak anew which takes about six months, but I cannot stay here that long. Hence you ✓ are likely to meet a dumb man when you see me next."

They brought his body back instead, embalmed in the lotus position as befits an incarnate lama, the *dorjee* (thunderbolt) in his right hand and the bell in his left, sealed in an upright coffin wrapped in the kingdom's forgotten flag that had for years flown only in the palace and on the terrace of his Calcutta flat. Rain, sleet, and snow had scourged the land ever since it arrived: the unusually inclement weather betokened Sikkim's pain, they said. It also signified the restlessness of an anguished soul that found peace as elusive after death as it had in life.

The coffin was placed in the Tsuk-la-khang where a policeman in a black arm band stood at each corner, head bowed over his rifle, and rapidly mounting piles of *khadas* had to be cleared away every so often. Dozens of butter lamps twinkled under the ornately embellished ceiling as lamas chanted the liturgy, cymbals clashed, and bells tinkled. The deep notes of a thigh-bone trumpet and the re-sounding throb of leather drums—beaten by Tsongs ever since the reign of Chador Namgyal, the third *chogyal*—rose above the incan-

tations.

They served his dinner on a tray exactly as he had always had it in the palace, replete with wine glass and poignantly familiar little stone sauce jar. Prince Wangchuck stood erect on the high seat where his father had sat in frosted brocade and fur hat during Yangchen's glittering wedding, as the congregation burst into the lost strains of the national anthem. If anything was more moving, it was the beseeching plaint of *Om Mane Padma Hum*, the powerful resonance of hundreds of voices pleading for compassion. Many broke down and wept as they paid their last respects; Ashi Kesang, Queen-Mother of Bhutan and his first cousin, bent her head to the polished wooden floor; and in Sikkim's now moderately loyal assembly, which in Kazi's time had churlishly refused to acknowledge Tenzing's death, they mourned the man who had "lost his kingdom but gained a martyr's halo."

The heavens cleared two days before the funeral. It was in the cold, dry sharpness of dawn that the coffin was brought out and placed in an appliqué tent. The soul had found its haven, all proclaimed; some gave praise to monks credited with miraculous control of the weather. More *khadas*, more full-length prostrations, a sadly rousing farewell by the Sikkim police, and then, after they had circled the chapel royal three times with the coffin, Wangchuck and the other pall-bearers set out for the hills—a vast, slowly surging sea of humanity. Old women festooned in turquoise jewellery whirled their prayer wheels in endless rotation, lamas counted their beads in silent prayer, young children clutched the red and white national flags that policemen tried to snatch away. Bhandari and Khatiwara, yesterday's bitter enemies, walked side by side in the unity of bereavement, Nepalese peasants, Bhutiya-Lepcha patriarchs, civil servants and politicians, traders and shopkeepers, everyone, in fact, who dimly grasped that an era in history was over.

The fire was kindled in the *chorten* on Lukshyama some five hours later under clear azure skies. The faithful counted seven vultures—the Chogyal's guardian bird—circling protectively above.

Into that solemn magnificence, the like of which Sikkim will never see again, intruded pathetic gestures of honour emulated from the West. The Chogyal had all his life craved for the contemporary trappings of sovereignty, not for personal grandeur, for he was an utterly simple man, but as recognition of his country's status. They were his in death in profligate abundance: flags at half mast, mourn-

ing bands of black, the Dead March in Saul, bugles ringing the Last Post through the hills, guards of honour with drawn swords and three crackling salvos. But the Eighth Gurkhas, of which he was colonel-in-chief, and the army in which he held the rank of major-general, were conspicuously absent. If Laskar was present in regulation black coat and trousers, Taleyarkhan, who had begrudged foreign exchange during his last fatal illness in New York, was resplendent in a flamboyant scarlet-lined cape and hood of vivid blue, thickly covered in braided embroidery, gaily taking photographs like any casual tourist at a fair.

Such marks of official favour prompted more surprise than gratification. Not because these same agencies had hounded the Chogyal to the day of his death, but because alien formality means less in the Himalayas than their own timeless ceremony. There can be no improvement on the eloquent language of the *khada*. It can be used to brutal purpose as when Pende Ongmu, the third *chogyal's* scheming sister, was murdered with a scarf stuffed down her throat. It can also be the instrument of devastating reproof. When under New Delhi's stern command, some of the frightened signatories asked Wangchuck to return the document recognizing his accession, the prince said that he would also return their *khadas*. The request was at once withdrawn.

The *khada* is spread out for felicitations, such as Wangchuck received after his father's cremation. For condolence, the scarf is tightly bunched, often wound round a wad of notes to help with funerary expenses, its fringed edges neatly tucked in. It is presented then with butter, rice and *chhang*. Sometimes it is pleated into a fan, then flung out to stream away, and caught deftly from below before the floating silk flutters down. Traditionally, *chogyals* do not return the scarves of inferiors; they do not even touch them. A subject's *khada* is placed on a table as an offering to the throne, though the ruler may take and drape it round the giver's neck—never put it into his hands—in blessing. A person of equal rank, or someone who stands a shade higher, receives another in return, the exchange symbolizing trust and goodwill. Even then, the level at which hands are held can convey all kinds of meaning.

A seemingly simple gesture is in fact governed by elaborate protocol that often baffles understanding. In public, the Dalai Lama would produce a scarf in exchange for a *chogyal's*, deferring to the latter's spiritual and temporal position. In private, he might return

the Sikkimese ruler's *khada* with his blessings, placing it round his neck. Usage is not always synonymous with etiquette, the compulsions of custom and courtesy adding to the complexity.

The Sikkimese were charmed in the sixties by the grace and meticulousness with which Mrs Gandhi appeared to have mastered the nuances of this ritual. But times change, and tact and politeness vanished after 1975. "She strides down the receiving line snatching away our *khadas* without even looking at the giver," grumbled the old Densapa chieftain whose Lepcha ancestors held Denzong long before Khye-Bumsa, the first Bhutiyā king, came out of Kham in the thirteenth century. Himself the soul of politeness, Barmiok Kazi could think of no offence more grave than ungraciousness.

Khye-Bumsa's descendant was even more punctilious in treating all comers as equals. Sikkimese peasants, Indian officials and their wives, visitors from abroad, stood at the Kagyet or Phanglabsol dances, nervously clutching their little bundles of white cloth. For each there was a smile, a greeting, some word of personal inquiry. Each scarf was accepted with murmured thanks, kept for a while, then gently replaced in the giver's hands, no matter how lowly his station. So much was this egalitarian reciprocity a constant feature of the Chogyal's personal style that even senior Sikkimese officials, well versed in court rites, did not always grasp that he was breaking with custom to bridge the gap in status. Protocol impinged on his innate kindness only when high-born Tibetans, with their insistence on Lhasa's rigid etiquette, were present in the palace.

But in all these years, I never got round to presenting him with a *khada*. Our first encounter in 1960, when I had taken a taxi up from Kalimpong as a tourist and wandered curiously into the palace to find him sipping tea and poring over files on a carpet in the garden, was far too casual for ceremony even if I had known the drill. Later, ceremony would have grated on intimacy. An opportunity arose, or so I thought, when the Chogyal came down to Calcutta for our wedding reception. But he explained that bride and bridegroom take precedence on that one day and that he could accept no scarf from us; it was his privilege to give. First, a *khada* for my mother as hostess; then two round our necks; finally, two more over our palms. A rich haul of five lengths of silk, and none to

give back.

The omission of 22 years was repaired on 19 February as the shadows closed in on Lukshyama hill, and clouds of black smoke billowed out of the whitewashed *chorten* within which smouldered the funeral pyre.

CHAPTER 1

Smash and Grab

If we bring a small country like Sikkim within our fold by using force, it would be like killing a fly with a bullet. Jawaharlal Nehru, *The Statesman*, 3 June 1960.

I have no words when [the] Indian army was sent today in a surprise attack on Sikkim Guards who are less than 300 strong and were trained, equipped and officered by [the] Indian army who looked upon each other as comrades. . . . This is a most treacherous and black day in the history of democratic India in solving the survival of our little country by use of arms. The Chogyal to Mrs Indira Gandhi, 9 April 1975.

Gangtok was buzzing with rumour. Many people feared that Chinese troops, guarding the Nathu-la exit into Tibet about 45 miles to the north-east, were about to attack. Others whispered that Mrs Indira Gandhi's India, commanding the plains to the south and bound by treaty to protect Sikkim, was determined to teach the Himalayan kingdom a lesson. Relations between protector and protectorate had been strained for two years. The quarrel was avidly discussed in the bazaar where they stripped it down to its bare bones over cups of butter tea and long draughts of millets fermented in hot water, called *chhang*. For nothing remains secret in Gangtok. Everyone knew that 52-year-old Palden Thondup Namgyal, the twelfth consecrated Chogyal of Sikkim, had incurred the hostility of India's all-powerful prime minister.

Tension reached a high pitch as the sleepy little town, strung out at an altitude of nearly 6,000 feet, woke up to unaccustomed military frenzy on Tuesday, 8 April 1975. Gangtok might have been preparing

for war. Indian soldiers in full battle order manoeuvred trucks, jeeps, radio cars with tags on their aerials, and ambulances through the dizzily winding roads of the normally placid capital. Such mobilization had not been seen since 1949 when also India had flexed its military muscles to intimidate the Chogyal's father, Sir Tashi Namgyal. Assault ladders were dragged to the hill-top where in all its doll's house serenity stood the royal palace; a cream stone bungalow encrusted with scarlet and blue mythological beasts, with a painted tin roof and ornately framed windows, set in a gravel surround among three acres of terraced gardens.

The Chogyal was sipping tea under a blue and white appliqué tent by the vegetable patch at the back when they told him of the troop movements. Nearby was a cushioned swing; tubular steel chairs lay scattered about him; emblazoned rugs covered the green. Over the tent drooped Sikkim's thickly embroidered royal standard: the eight auspicious symbols of Buddhism caught in a circle of protective flame. Wind and rain had bleached the flag until the emblem was barely visible, the stout pole too was scarred with age. But it was a unique standard, not raised anywhere else in the kingdom. All other masts flew the national flag, a field of white for purity enclosed in a border of crimson strength and holding in its heart the yellow eight-spoked wheel of righteousness.

The tent was one of several garden retreats that allowed the Chogyal to receive officials and public delegations in an atmosphere of relaxed intimacy, his family surrounding him. The site also offered a good view of the hill outside the palace. A flimsy railing edged the lawn near where he sat; below it, the long drive sloped away to a triple gateway with sentry boxes on either side and a yellow upturned roof. The road beyond is called the Ridge, a straight carriageway flanked by sidewalks and fringes of flower beds. Descending from it on the right were the barracks of the Sikkim Guards, and further along on the left a colonial building called White Hall, used as a club for civilian officers. In the middle of the Ridge stands a circular pavilion, after which the road stretches to Mintokgang, a palace bungalow then occupied by the Indian chief executive B.B. Lal.

The road bifurcated at Mintokgang, the left sweeping up to India House, seat of New Delhi's representative, the political officer (PO). On the right, it rose steeply through straggling bustees, past the Enchey monastery about a mile to the north, to Tagongteng

plateau where Sikkim's hereditary noblemen, the *kazis*, are cremated. Above it lay Bhot-lha-solsa, the Tibetan prayer grounds, and, even higher, the sacred mountain known to Buddhists as Lukshyama and venerated by Hindus as Hanuman Tok. Sir Tashi and his parents were cremated there: three white *chortens* rearing out of the leech-infested bushes to mark the sites. The Chogyal's guru, who lived alone in a small hut, was for many years the only living being in this wilderness; now the area crawls with Indian soldiers whose camps and sentry boxes stretch along the road. For this is the old trade route to Tibet, a disused mule track now meandering into a lost horizon.

Viewed from the Rumtek (Our lady has left) monastery 12 miles across the valley, the entire hill resembles a crouching elephant. The palace stands on the beast's head, Mintokgang on the nape of its neck which is the Ridge, and the royal cremation ground on the higher swell of its haunches.

"They told me that troops were pouring down the hill from Enchey to command the Ridge," said the Chogyal. Others confirmed that the Indian army had taken over Tagongteng and set up positions on the old Tibet road. Medium machine-guns had been placed at Bhot-lha-solsa, and 81-millimetre mortars looked grimly down from the heights above Mintokgang. A battery of artillery monopolized Lukshyama. The palace was the obvious target, its only exit—the Ridge—cut off.

"Friends in the bazaar said the guns were pointed at the palace," recalls Captain Roland Christopher Chhetri, a Presbyterian officer in the Sikkim Guards. Chhetri's father had been a junior commissioned officer in the British Indian Gurkhas, his mother was an indigenous Lepcha of ancient family. He himself had been trained in the Indian Military Academy and seconded for two years to an Indian paratroop battalion. Chhetri had, therefore, many friends among the 25,000 Indian soldiers stationed in Sikkim ever since the fifties when Jawaharlal Nehru and Chou En-lai fell out over the Himalayan border issue. They told him that the army was only preparing for a routine exercise.

That was also the bland explanation given when the Chogyal telephoned India House. Sardar Gurbachan Singh, the PO, suavely assured him that there was no cause for alarm. "It's only a military exercise, Your Highness," he burred. "A dry run without ammunition."

Within 48 hours—at about 12.45 in the afternoon of Wednesday, 9 April—an entire Indian brigade swung into action against the unsuspecting ruler of a state that was under New Delhi's protection. The meticulously planned offensive included simultaneous assaults from three directions. "The First Paratroopers, Thirteenth Jammu and Kashmir Militia, and Sixteenth Jats attacked the palace with an artillery brigade in support and the Seventeenth Mountain Division standing by," says Captain Chhetri. "About 5,000 men had been mobilized."

But first a clumsy attempt was made to lure away the Chogyal. Gurbachan Singh telephoned him early on that fateful Wednesday apologizing profusely to say that he had forgotten to read a high priority telex message from the Indian government received late the previous evening. Mrs Gandhi was waiting to see the ruler in New Delhi on Thursday morning. There was no time to lose. He would have to set out at once. The journey from Gangtok is neither short nor easy. There is first a four-and-a-half-hour drive down to Bagdogra in the West Bengal plains to catch the 45-minute flight to Calcutta; then a tedious wait of several hours for the night aeroplane to Delhi. But to cut it short, the PO offered an Alouette army helicopter for the first lap to Bagdogra.

The Chogyal explained that he would need to take his trusted secretary, Jigdal Densapa, and his legal adviser, Yale-trained Princess Bhuvanesh Kumari of Patiala, who was on a visit to Gangtok and staying in the palace. But Singh felt that three would be too many for an Alouette, whereupon the Chogyal suggested that a second Alouette be provided. Singh then demurred at a woman travelling in military aircraft; the army would never allow it he said though India House had no objection. The Chogyal at once telephoned Mountain Division headquarters and talked to the GOC, Major-General Harmendra Singh Kullar, who agreed to fly the princess. But when he heard of the sanction, the PO apologized that the second Alouette was being serviced and would not be available. So it went on, conversation after conversation over the telephone, until the Chogyal "asked for one of those big Soviet helicopters, MI-4s I think." Again Singh prevaricated, eventually explaining that none of them was free.

So the Chogyal agreed to fly alone, though considerably surprised at this sudden imperious summons from a woman who had many times before kept him cooling his heels in New Delhi's

Ashok Hotel before condescending to a meeting. But the sense of impending disaster in Gangtok left him little choice. He was also perhaps flattered by the urgency of her invitation, and anxious to grasp at any straw that was likely to placate Mrs Gandhi. Densapa was asked to report to the palace at once, the drivers told to get the Mercedes ready, and an ADC sent across the lawns to the Tsukla-khang royal chapel to consult the lamas on the precise moment when the party should set out. The palace was plunged into a flurry of sorting out papers and packing. The Chogyal's stenographer had not yet arrived, but he himself sat down at a typewriter and hammered out a letter to the PO which expressed a nagging sense of unease:

Since I am asked to go to Delhi to meet the Prime Minister of India tomorrow morning, I am leaving as per your arrangements. However, I have reports of bazaar talks that there is to be a concerted organized demonstration to storm the palace and the Sikkim Guards from today. It is also rumoured that this is likely to bring in Indian army intervention. I am sure that these are not correct and would request you to please ensure that nothing untoward happens during my absence in Delhi.

He still could not bring himself to believe that the army would directly be involved in any form of aggression. "We never dreamt that India would attack us. After all, the Sikkim Guards were trained and armed by Delhi. We looked on the Indian army as our comrades and gurus." The Chogyal held the honorary rank of an Indian major-general; he was also colonel-in-chief of the Eighth Gurkhas. He enjoyed military society, was a regular visitor to army messes and even more frequently entertained Indian officers at the palace. Field Marshal Sam Manekshaw was a particularly close friend. The Chogyal also believed them when Indian officers assured him that even if political relations soured, the military would prevent New Delhi from doing anything drastic. His faith in the army's goodwill was complete.

Two hours after the note had been sent round to India House, around 9.30 in the morning, Singh was back on the line to cancel the appointment as abruptly as it had been made. He pleaded that the flight to Calcutta was fully booked. "I thought it funny at the time because there's always a VIP quota on this plane," reflected the

Chogyal who had never had difficulty getting a seat, even at the last moment. He later understood that the meeting with the prime minister was only a blind. They were anxious to get him out of the way in case the Sikkim Guards, getting wind of what was afoot, had taken up defensive positions. "When they discovered that we were quite unprepared, they didn't bother."

The Sikkim Guards were a tough little fighting force, recruited from sturdy peasant lads, mainly Nepalese Magars, in their late teens or early twenties. They were dedicated to their monarch and proud to wear his uniform, worthy descendants of the soldiers who had fought the British in the nineteenth century and of the brigade of about 5,000 men that Sikkim raised during World War II. They were proud cousins too of some 2,000 Sikkimese volunteers in the Indian army. A succession of Indian officers did their job well; not only did they impart skill and discipline to raw recruits, but by themselves always wearing the ankle-length *kho* (*baku* in Nepalese) that is the kingdom's national dress, they stressed the force's Sikkimese identity. Young men like Chhetri had been trained and commissioned in India to eventually take over the command.

But the army was not at its best in 1975. Constantly attacked by the chief minister, Kazi Lendhup Dorji Khangsarpa, accused of wounding another Congress legislator, Ram Chandra Poudyal, and of all kinds of murderous conspiracies, resented by Gurbachan Singh and B.B. Lal, criticized by New Delhi and harried in the Indian press, its morale was understandably low. Though the Guards had never been used in any civil disturbance, had in fact given valuable assistance to the Indian army in the 1965 conflict with China, they were projected as a feudal ruler's private thugs. In one of his many haughty ultimata to the palace, the PO demanded that guardsmen should be withdrawn from sentry duty at the homes of the Chogyal's mother, the aged Gyalum, and of his brother and sister.

Nor did the latest batch of seconded Indians contribute anything to esprit de corps. The total strength in 1975 was four officers and 272 men; of them, the commandant, Lieutenant-Colonel Kishen Singh Gurung, the adjutant, Major R.K. Jagota, another officer, four JCOs and 61 men were Indians. Unlike earlier deputationists, they were not integrated with the force, choosing to remain at an emotional distance from their Sikkimese comrades. Of the rest, 25

bullets, as well as Rs 600. The Indian government spokesmen in New Delhi embellished the story to add that the confession accused both the Chogyal and Sikkim's auditor-general, Madan Mohan Rasaily, of "masterminding" a series of arson and looting outrages in addition to murder. When I asked to see the statement, Lal promised that the document was on its way from Gyalzing and would be released in Gangtok the next day. It never was. Yongda admits to signing only two documents, both petitions complaining of unlawful arrest and wrongful confinement. He did not even know of the alleged confession until 22 April, when the Gangtok Central Court ordered the police to release him on bail. It was a short-lived reprieve, for the Bhutiya captain was at once taken into military custody.

His imprisonment had been carefully timed. With Yongda behind bars, the Sikkim Guards were deprived of the only officer who could have forged commitment and fervour into resistance. Failing him, the burden of leadership devolved on the engaging young Chhetri who could not match the older man's resolution or perspicacity. Those who had played this master stroke had shrewdly gambled on the temperamental difference between the two captains.

Yongda's clan attachment to the Namgyal dynasty and his faith in the kingdom's religious identity made him acutely conscious of the throne's importance if Sikkim were to survive as a separate entity. Though also devoted to the Chogyal, Chhetri was just a cheerful young soldier, happiest playing volley-ball with his men or singing lilting Nepalese melodies on picnics in the hills. His Gurkha father, his mother's Lepcha heritage, even his Christianity, were expected to dilute his sense of political identification.

But even the virtually leaderless Guards formed a bulwark against annihilation. Captain Chhetri may have been young, care-free and uninvolved; but he had taken a soldier's oath. Both he and his men had to be immobilized before the Chogyal's sacerdotal office could be touched.

The burden of the arrangements for the journey—before it was cancelled—fell on Chhetri who was down in the Guards area, below the Ridge, arranging for the royal escort. Colonel Gurung should have seen off the ruler, but pleaded an urgent summons from the Indian army's divisional headquarters. "He asked me to present a *khada* for him and make his apologies," says Chhetri. "I think he was warned."

The captain had other reasons for unease. An Indian havildar clerk whom he had ordered to make out contingent bills three days earlier had shrugged and mumbled something about it being pointless. Chhetri had also intercepted strange looks and heard echoes of enigmatic remarks. All the deputationists were behaving secretly. Most of them had stopped doing any work and merely smiled mysteriously when told to get on with their tasks. The sudden rush of leave applications was equally bewildering.

Troubled, but unable to pinpoint the cause of his misgivings, Chhetri began to lock up just after noon on 9 April. Since the Chogyal was not leaving, he had no more work that day. In any case, the barracks always shut down for maintenance on Wednesday afternoons. None of the Indians was to be seen as the captain finished his tasks and went to his quarters where his wife waited with his lunch. "I took off my belt and cap and then some instinct made me look up through the window." At once his nameless fears crystallized into a sharp comprehension of danger.

Two rows of men in CRP uniform stood on the Ridge above. Bowling down the road from India House was a steady stream of one-ton military trucks and jeeps with lowered hoods. Soldiers in battle fatigues crammed the vehicles. The convoy stopped at the pavilion where men poured out to begin the advance. One file doubled towards the triple gateway. The other branched off to clamber down the ravine into the Guards area from where Chhetri watched in horrified disbelief. "I heard the charge order covering fire from Bhot-lha-solsa about 800 yards from the palace gates."

They were no less incredulous within the 20-room palace where the Chogyal, showing little sign of the constant strain he was under, conferred with Crown Prince Tenzing, his 25-year-old heir. Tenzing was a handsome and ebullient youth, popular among the ordinary townsfolk, and increasingly viewed as the one person who might be able to bring together Sikkim's king and disgruntled politicians. Realizing his son's public appeal, the Chogyal had lately begun to rely on the young man's advice. They had drawn closer together since the Gyalmo (formerly Hope Cooke), the Chogyal's American consort, had returned to New York the previous year.

Densapa had also joined them, bringing a suitcase just in case he had to accompany his master. So had Rasaily. The staff consisted

of two young civilian ADCs and about 16 servants, including two or three aging women. They were under Emil Manuel, the Goan housekeeper who habitually wore a lugubrious expression but had an acid wit.

No house could have been less prepared for a siege. The Guards did not even have live ammunition. Trenches dug during the 1973 riots had long ago been filled in. The sandbags that then lined the drive had all been kicked aside. There should have been two non-commissioned officers and six men at the gates. Instead, just an NCO and a guardsman kept casual watch.

Servants and master were aghast as they huddled by the lawn railings, taking turns to peer through a pair of binoculars. "Guns pointed directly at the palace from only about 600 yards away," said the Chogyal. "When they saw us watching they swung the guns sideways." Infantrymen marched down the mule track. As they emerged on the Ridge, they began running along the pavements on either side. The Chogyal wondered why they did not use the road. "It still did not enter my head that the palace could be attacked. But I was beginning to feel apprehensive for the first time."

A sudden burst of machine-gun fire broke the tense silence. "The column on the north under a Sikh NCO had reached the gates and fired at the sentries. I couldn't see it all but realized that they were trying to take over the two sentry boxes. The eastern column opened fire on the quarterguard."

The action was brisk and bloody. It was also entirely one-sided. One of the two sentries, Basant Kumar Chhetri, only 19, levelled his rifle at the attackers, but did not live to pull the trigger. He was shot in the chest and killed in the first volley. His 18-year-old partner, Nima Sherpa, stumbled out of the guardroom in surprise and was at once hit in the right arm. It had later to be amputated. When Naik Lal Bahadur Limbu, who was at lunch in his billet, came out to see what the noise was all about, he too was caught in the fire, but escaped unhurt. It was all over in less than three minutes, a numbing nightmare, macabre and bizarre.

"There was no ultimatum to lay down arms. No formal surrender either. It was just a smash and grab raid," mused the Chogyal.

Nothing made sense to Roland Chhetri who looked on in wonder and dismay. "We were not at war with India. They were our protectors. We had done nothing wrong. Why should they attack our king's palace and wound and kill our men?"

The press were later told that the Sikkim Guards had been asked through a loudspeaker to lay down their arms, that disregarding the order, they first opened fire and that the Indian army had to retaliate in self-defence. The defendants vehemently deny this version. "Had we been given even that much warning, we would first have taken a few lives!" exploded a bitter young guardsman. But the most convincing refutation of India's official line came from the PO's wife two days later. "You can't know the Chogyal at all if you think he would have responded to an ultimatum", she snapped when I deplored the bloodshed. "Surprise was the only way of taking the palace." "But darling, he knows the Chogyal much better than we do," warned her husband, strolling into the India House sitting-room, and the outspoken Sardarni was silenced. The indiscretion was not repeated.

The Chogyal was too dazed at the beginning to understand what was happening. But the crackle of gunfire sent him running into the ADC's cottage from where he dialled India House. "What the hell do you think you're doing?" he demanded, and the PO, for once flustered and at a loss for words, jabbered incoherently and shoved the receiver at General Kullar who was with him.

"Sir, your men must lay down their arms and surrender," demanded the general, though not with disrespect.

"I must go and talk to them."

"All right, but you must come alone, unarmed, and speak to them only in Hindi because our chaps don't understand your language."

The phone rang as soon as it was replaced. Captain Chhetri reported that the quarterguard was under fire. His commandant was still mysteriously absent. Two other officers—the Indian adjutant and Major B. Tsering, a Sikkimese—were also missing. The area had been stormed. Lance Naik Man Bahadur Lepcha had been shot in the leg. Indian soldiers were searching every house in the nearby Tatangchen bustee where palace servants and the married guardsmen's families lived. Most of the men had been rounded up at lunch in the canteen and placed under close guard.

It was left to the young Nepalese officer to defend the land of his adoption and save the honour of his regiment. But there was no panic. Remembering his military manual, Chhetri suggested mustering the few guardsmen who had still not been caught to form a defensive perimeter. It was a daring and courageous plan in the

face of formidably superior power, but the Indian operator manning Gangtok's telephone exchange intervened before the Chogyal could discuss such a desperate last-ditch stand. There was a click and the line went dead. It was just past one in the afternoon.

Unable to get orders and refusing to yield, Chhetri tried to make his way to Colonel Gurung's house in a last attempt to explain to the commandant that his men expected loyalty and leadership. But Indian soldiers watched the house. They also guarded the officers' mess. The Indian army was everywhere, and in the distance, the captain could see his guardsmen lined up in the football field with their hands above their heads like criminals. Many had been resting and were in their underclothes. Suddenly, a rifle shot sounded from the direction of the mess. As the bullet whistled past his head, Chhetri leapt into a dry ditch about 20 feet below and began running, crouching low. He did not stop until he had placed at least 200 yards between himself and the quarterguard, and must have waited in the undergrowth for more than an hour before a bugle sang out the cease-fire.

There was no clear idea in his mind except a resolve not to surrender. He hoped to hide somewhere until nightfall, then slip out of Gangtok and take to the mountains. So the captain edged his way through the straggly jungle to the home of Ashoke Tsering, a leading National Party politician who could be trusted. He expected temporary sanctuary, an explanation of the day's baffling events, and mature advice.

But guessing her husband's destination, Mrs Chhetri arrived at the house at about five in the evening, driven by an Indian soldier in an army jeep. Tearfully, she explained that their house had been ransacked and was under guard. She had little food and no money; nor was she allowed to seek help from any of their friends. With two daughters, aged two-and-a-half years and a year, to look after, the young woman hysterically pleaded with her husband to return. The Indians had promised her that they would be well looked after if she could persuade the captain to give himself up; otherwise the entire family would be harassed. Unable to resist his wife's entreaties, Chhetri went back to find a crowd outside his door and two Indian officers lounging in the sitting-room. Laughing and chatting with them, though bereft of belt and cap presumably in token of his nominally captive state, was the elusive Colonel Gurung who had abandoned his post and left his men to fend for themselves. It was a cruel awakening

for Chhetri to find his superior so clearly ranged with the enemy. He had not till then consciously thought of the colonel as a foreigner with political allegiances that transcended his military honour and his responsibility to his command.

"Where the hell have you been?" one of the Indians burst out angrily, but the Guards captain cut him short: "Talk to me properly as one officer to another." Gurung intervened to say with patronizing jocularly that it was all part of the game. "It's the funniest game I ever saw!" retorted Chhetri, but his commandant was not abashed.

One more scene remained to be enacted. When all the Sikkimese soldiers had been assembled, an Indian officer played to them a recorded message from Kazi, urging surrender. The chief minister promised that no one would be dismissed, yet assured them of honourable re-employment. The guardsmen listened in contemptuous silence.

The prisoners were kept under watch until midnight when they were herded into trucks and driven out of Gangtok. Chhetri noticed that none of the 68 Indian deputationists accompanied them. The convoy headed south, and people in Singtam, an hour's drive from the capital, recall how the night was filled with song as the vehicles hurtled through the deserted marketplace. The swelling strains of the national anthem, *Dela Sil Lee Gee Yang Chagpa Chilo* (Sikkim, May It Always Be Blooming) and the livelier melody of *Teesta-Rungeet* spoke of defiance, for both tunes had been banned by Lal. "We will come back," they yelled from the speeding trucks. "We will come back one day and demand justice."

The convoy passed on, not stopping until it reached Sirwani some 20 miles to the south-east. The guardsmen were told that it was only a transit camp; they would not be detained there for more than four or five days. But hope faded as they entered Sirwani's forbidding outer perimeter of barbed-wire under the watchful eyes of the Ninth Madras Regiment. Arms at the ready, soldiers manned the barrier. The Sikkimese were stripped naked in the pitiless glare of spotlights, searched and individually questioned before being thrust through a second cordon, again with hands above their heads. "We have orders to shoot if you try to run away," coldly warned the commandant who boasted that he had guarded Pakistani prisoners after the 1971 Bangladesh war. The register described Sirwani as the Sikkim Guards Prison Camp. Captain Yongda joined them there about two weeks later, suffering with the rest for four months the

full humiliation of an enemy force captured in ignominious defeat.

But the world was only told that the Chogyal's palace guards had peacefully been disarmed. Casualties were never mentioned.

It did not take more than 20 minutes to disarm them. The Chogyal could not see the action from his garden post, but he had begun to guess something of what was happening in the quarter-guard. More alert to what might follow, Tenzing, meanwhile, set about collecting whatever weapons there were in the palace. There was no armoury, and individual pieces, most of them old and rusty, had to be brought together from attic and cellar. There were 18 in all: eight .303 rifles left over from World Wars I and II, several hunting rifles and shotguns that had been presented by visiting potentates, two or three broken-down carbines, and three sub-machine-guns. Somewhat foolishly, the crown prince buried some of the weapons in a flower-bed. He had no plan in mind, save an instinctive desire to prevent the family's arms being confiscated.

The operation was probably watched, for a little later Colonel Sudarshan Singh of the First Paratroopers stalked up the drive with about a dozen soldiers and, without even saluting the Chogyal, demanded that all firearms should be handed over. He had brought a metal detector and knew exactly where to look. The Chogyal tried to plead that private weapons were not part of the Guards outfit, but his explanations were brushed aside. All 18 pieces—including the few that had been hidden—were taken away. They were never returned.

Having searched the house, Colonel Singh wanted to inspect the grounds, and, to snap out of the paralysis that seemed to grip him, the Chogyal climbed into the driver's seat of a jeep and himself drove his uninvited guests around the lawns. There was little to see, but sentries with Sterling submachine-guns and seven-millimetre self-loading rifles were stationed every 50 yards along the paths. "It was gradually sinking in that it was the end of everything. Sikkim was lost and I was a prisoner."

But there were no recriminations when he received an apologetic and deferential General Kullar in the back garden tent. Curtly ordering his escort not to approach, the general walked up alone to the defeated monarch and came smartly to the salute. "Sir, you are my senior general," he said, "What am I to say? I am very sorry

for what has happened. I have been trying to avoid this for the last year. But the PO and Lal worked on Delhi and I was overruled.”

The Chogyal understood. Later he was not surprised to learn that the brigade commander of his own regiment, the Eighth Gurkhas, Brigadier Dipender Singh, Dippy to his many Sikkimese friends, had queried his orders. Apparently he agreed to carry them out only when warned that a less sympathetic officer would be far more ruthless. Lieutenant-General J.F.R. Jacob, Eastern Command's GOC-in-C, was also subsequently to claim that his moderating influence had avoided greater bloodshed; Indian civilians who planned the attack would probably have been happier if the Chogyal had fallen.

His own safety did not then worry the ruler. His thoughts were for those who had risked their lives. The Chogyal asked that the Sikkim Guards be treated with the courtesy due to soldiers who had acquitted themselves bravely in battle, and that the army's colours be marched up to the palace with the proper escort of an officer. “We'll give you not just an officer but a full contingent,” was General Kullar's generous promise. It was not kept.

In contrast with the Chogyal's dignified restraint, Bhuvanesh Kumari petulantly exclaimed, “I suppose this means another medal for you, general?” Kullar ignored the tantrum. But Major Arjun Katoch of the First Paratroopers was, in fact, awarded the Seva Medal.

The Chogyal's self-control broke only when Gurbachan Singh breezed into the library that afternoon. Hope and furnished the room with fitted bookshelves along all the walls, deep leather sofas from Heal's in London, transparent Perspex chairs and pendant lights in wicker shades. Autographed photographs of Indian dignitaries in crested silver frames thickly covered the one expanse of wall that was free of books. The carpet was cluttered with chess and Scrabble pieces, magazines, and family photographs. It was a comfortable lived-in room. The PO was brimming over with solicitousness as he paid a surprise visit, but his host was livid.

“You have the bloody gumption to show your face here after what you've done...,” blazed the Chogyal, red in the face, his stammer becoming more pronounced as it always did under stress.

“If you want me to leave, I will,” was the stolid reply.

“Please do.”

Gurbachan Singh turned on his heel and walked out.

The palace had been turned into a prison. No one could leave or enter. The telephones were all dead. But attacked, abused, immobilized and isolated, the Chogyal still retained a sense of kingly obligation. He was at the mercy of his country's sworn protector, but that was only one more betrayal in a life that had been tragically star-crossed, was yet to bear a far greater burden of grief. Many of the men he had trusted most had in the end preferred reward to loyalty; the wife he still loved had packed her bags and gone as soon as the queenship she had hankered for had lost its savour. The Chogyal's relations with his family, even with his mother, were more dutiful than affectionate. Many of his relatives, and certainly most of his circle of official friends, professed fondness only for its returns. His generous hospitality was most frequently enjoyed by Indian politicians and civil servants who thought nothing of running down his labours the moment they returned to Delhi. Intimacy he lacked, and also genuine companionship; his position condemning him to loneliness. Even Tenzing was sometimes persuaded to wonder if his father had not jeopardized his rightful heritage. The clash of arms within his compound only added to the disappointments of the sad, shy gentle man who had known so little satisfaction in private life or public career. But self-pity was not allowed to impinge on what he still saw as his function as anointed king.

When the last of his visitors had gone, the Chogyal changed from bush shirt and slacks into the crisp khaki of colonel-in-chief of the Sikkim Guards. Tenzing did not know his father's purpose, but still unnerved by the shattering experience they had both shared, sought a part in it. The Chogyal refused. "He had just received a captaincy in the Guards, and the whole force was under arrest. I didn't want to give them the chance of seizing him too." The crown prince had to stay back as his father set out on his last lonely mission.

He did not himself know what to expect as, fending off anxious retainers, the Chogyal walked across the gravel and turned left into the drive. A small *chorten* stood among the flowering bushes and behind it were the palace garages under which the Dalai Lama's gold had been buried for safety after the historic flight from Tibet. As he strode down the slope to the gates, the Chogyal saw that the tarmac streamed with blood. He did not know why, for the triple archway was not fully visible from the lawns, and no one had mentioned fatalities. He thought that the Guards had only succum-

bed to superior firepower. The PO had volunteered no details. Neither had General Kullar.

The posse of Indian soldiers at the gates looked on curiously, but would not reply to questions. Perhaps they had instructions not to. Wanting to ask Gurbachan Singh what exactly had happened, the Chogyal remembered that there was a battered old field telephone in one of the sentry boxes. Only when he had swung aside its door did he stumble on Basant Kumar Chhetri's rigid corpse. Someone—probably an Indian soldier moved by fellow-feeling for another's valour—had draped the body with the Sikkimese flag. Patches of blood stained the coarse white fabric.

The Chogyal was curtly to be refused permission to attend the young guardsman's funeral. The national flag was soon debased into a personal totem for Kazi and his ministers, gracing their cars and bungalows, until it was altogether proscribed. But it was sadly appropriate that before it was so degraded, the flag should perform a final duty as shroud for a brave young defender. It was apposite too that his master's last kingly observance was to honour the sacrifice of a Nepalese Hindu who had given his life to protect the Buddhist kingdom.

There, under the arches of the gateway, in full view of generals and jawans of the conquering army, the Chogyal knelt down to dip the forefinger of his right hand in the dead guardsman's congealing blood. He then smeared it on his own forehead.

In that instinctive gesture he momentarily shed the present to revert to the most valiant of his legendary ancestors, the mighty Khye-Bumsa, "the superior of ten thousand heroes". Khye-Bumsa was the first Tibetan prince to make his way into Sikkim in the thirteenth century, when he swore blood brotherhood and eternal friendship with Thekong-tek, chief of the indigenous Lepchas. Kabi, just north of Gangtok, where the pact was sealed, is still the most poignant of Sikkim's many places of pilgrimage. It enshrines a hallowed memory.

Hushed into awe, watchers well understood the significance of the Chogyal's action. Such rituals are familiar to all ancient civilizations. It was an act of homage to the dead. It was also a solemn vow to avenge a pointless murder.