

SIKHIM & BHUTAN
TWENTY-ONE YEARS ON THE
NORTH-EAST FRONTIER

1887-1908

BY

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WITH ILLUSTRATIONS AND MAP

VIVEK PUBLISHING HOUSE
18-D, KAMLA NAGAR, DELHI-7 (INDIA)

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SIKHIM AND BHUTAN

CHAPTER I

THE GEOGRAPHICAL POSITION AND GENERAL FEATURES OF THE STATES OF SIKHIM AND BHUTAN

SIKHIM and Bhutan are two adjoining countries covering between them an area of about 22,000 square miles, lying to the north and east of Darjeeling, and to the north of the British districts of Jalpaiguri, Goalpara, and Kamrup. Their northern boundary is that portion of the Himalayas which forms the watershed between the Tibetan province of U and India; on the east boundary is the State of Tawang, subject to Tibet, and on the west that of Nepal. Both countries lie entirely in the heart of the Himalayas between $26^{\circ} 30'$ and $28^{\circ} 30'$ north latitude and $88^{\circ} 0'$ and $92^{\circ} 15'$ east longitude.

The northern boundary of Bhutan has hitherto been defined by an imaginary line drawn eastward from Chomolhari to Kulu-Kangri, but my explorations prove that Bhutan extends much further to the north; as far as the snow ranges east of Kala-tsho and south of the Nelung Valley with the Wagya-la situated on the frontier, and in my map I have shown the correct boundary.

The Chumbi Valley, formerly a part of Sikhim, but now belonging to Tibet, forms a wedge which divides the northern portion of Sikhim from Bhutan, while Sikhim itself lies within the watershed of the river Teesta.

Western and Central Bhutan may conveniently be divided into three zones :

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(1) The outer or foot hills, adjoining the plains of India.

(2) The central belt lying between these hills, and—

(3) The uplands immediately under the high snow ranges on the Tibetan frontier.

The first zone includes the whole of the outer ranges for a depth of twenty to thirty miles. They rise sharply and abruptly out of the plains and are cut into deep valleys or gorges by rivers liable to sudden floods, sometimes rising 40 feet to 50 feet. The annual rainfall is excessive, from 200 inches to 250 inches, and the hill-sides are densely clothed with vegetation, forests as well as undergrowth. In this zone the valleys are unhealthy and very feverish in the rainy season, hot and steamy, while the higher hills rising in places to an altitude of 12,000 feet are cold, wet and misty.

The second, or central zone, consists mainly of valleys of an elevation varying from 3500 feet to 10,000 feet which, with their dividing ridges, extend northward behind the first zone for about forty miles. These valleys are healthy, comparatively broad and flat, with a moderate rainfall and fairly well populated and cultivated. They have not yet been worn into the narrow gorges so noticeable in the outer hills, and still bear evidence of their glacial origin; the rise of the rivers is moderate, according to the marks on the banks not more than four feet to six feet, and the slopes of the mountains are much more gradual and to a certain extent, cultivated.

The third zone comprises the high valleys, of an elevation of 12,000 feet to 18,000 feet, running down from the great northern barrier of snow, with snow ranges between them, the peaks of which attain occasionally a height of 24,000 feet. These valleys are only used for grazing of the summer months, when the hardy Bhutan cattle are taken up to 12,000 and 14,000 feet and yaks and sheep even higher.

This division is particularly noticeable in the tract

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where the outer hills, rising to high elevations near the plains, intercept the south-east monsoon, and is markedly exemplified in the valleys of Hah, Paro, Tashi-cho-jong and Bya-gha (otherwise known as Pumthang) in Bhutan and in Chumbi.

But in the deep-cut valleys of the River Teesta in Sikhim, and the Lobrak or Kuru River in Bhutan, the above division does not apply. The outer hills are lower, the monsoon current penetrates much further north, through deep valleys which run nearly to the foot of the highest mountains, and consequently the wet zone extends as far as the snows. In the case of the Teesta the elevation of the valley a few miles from Kangchen is not more than 2400 feet above mean sea level, while the Lobrak cuts through the barrier of the Himalayas, at an elevation of only 10,000 feet.

Sikhim, owing to its proximity to Kangchenjunga, to the fact that it lies in the direct path of the monsoon and to the direction of its valleys, is much the wettest portion of the whole area, and has a heavy annual rainfall, about 50 inches even in the dry upper valleys of Lachung and Lachen, increasing to about 140 inches in other districts.

In eastern Bhutan the rainfall is appreciably less as the monsoon current is diverted up the Assam Valley and does not strike the hills directly. Consequently there is a diminished rainfall, and the effect is noticeable in the vegetation which is not nearly so dense.

These hill states are drained :

Sikhim by the Teesta and its tributaries, the chief of which are the Rungeet, the Rungnu-chhu joining at Ringen, and the Lachen and Lachung rivers.

Bhutan by :

(1) The Am-mo-chhu or Torsa draining the Chumbi Valley ;

(2) The Wang-chhu or Raydak with its tributaries the Hah-chhu and the Par-chhu draining the valleys of Hah, Paro, and Tashi-cho-jong ;

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(3) The Mo-chhu or Sankos, which with its numerous tributaries, drains the valley of Poonakha; one branch taking its rise on the southern slopes of Chomolhari and another in the snows to the east of Kala-tsho;

(4) The Monass, by far the largest river in this part of the world, with two main branches of which the Lobraak or Kuru-chhu rises in Tibet, its main source being in glaciers on the northern slopes of the Kulu-Kangri and its adjacent snows, while the second, the Dongma-chhu, rises in the snowy range to the east of Tawang. Other tributaries are the Madu-chhu, running past Tongsa and the Pumthang, draining the Bya-gha Valley.

I can best describe the Mountain System as a series of parallel ranges running in a general direction from north to south, springing from the vast snow-range which forms the southern buttress of the great Tibetan Plateau. These parallel ranges are again cut into innumerable smaller ranges forming a vast labyrinth of valleys running in every direction, while the main ranges, running down to the plains, divide the river systems I have already mentioned, and, as they have no distinctive local names, I have called them after certain peaks or passes.

Beginning from the extreme west there is—

(A) The Singli-la range, the crest of which forms the boundary between Sikhim and Nepal. This range runs from Kangchenjunga and on it are the well-known and often visited peaks of Sandukphu and Phallut, as well as the hill stations of Darjeeling and Kurseong. The principal pass between Sikhim and Nepal is the Chiabhanjan-la.

(B) Further to the east is the Chola range descending from Powhunri to the east of the Donkia-la and forming the water parting between the Teesta and the Am-mo-chhu. There are numerous passes on this range, the most generally used being the Jeylap-la and Natu-la, although, before the present roads were made, the Cho-la was much used, and I have crossed it myself as well by four others, the Yak-la, the Sibula, the Thanka-la and another.



The Source of the Teesta River

THE GEOGRAPHICAL POSITION

(c) Next the Massong-chung-dong range which runs down from Chomolhari, past Hah, to Buxa Duar in the plains forming the watershed between the Am-mo-chhu and the Wang-chhu. The passes on this range over which I have crossed are the Temo-la above Phari, the Hah-la on the main road through Central Bhutan and the Lome-la on the Paro-Dungna-jong road, while to the south there are many others.

(D) The Dokyong-la range, which, as I discovered in 1905, also runs down from Chomolhari, is the water parting between the Wang-chhu and the Mo-chhu. The pass on the main road crossing the range is the Dokyong-la, after which I have called the range. Other passes are the Zadu-la to the north of the Dokyong-la, the Biafu-la to the south, the Taga-la and many others as these lower hills can be easily crossed almost everywhere, and paths are numerous.

(E) The Black Mountain range, which divides the waters of the Mo-chhu from the river system of the Monass, has its rise in the snows near Kulu-Kangri; and practically divides Bhutan into two portions both administratively and ethnographically. The people to the east, who originally came from the hills to the north-east of Assam, are directly under the jurisdiction of the Tongsa Penlop, while on the west they are of almost pure Tibetan origin and under the jurisdiction of the Thimboo Jongpen and Paro Penlop. The main pass is the Pele-la, but there are many others both on the north and south.

(F) The Tawang range, to the east of the Monass river system, which probably has its origin in the snow ranges to the north-east of Tawang and south-east of Dongma-chhu. One of its many ramifications forms the eastern boundary of Bhutan and ends in the hills to the east of Dewangiri.

The minor ranges, or those which terminate before reaching the plains, are too numerous to mention, but the principal ones are the Moinam range between the Teesta and the Rungeet; the Chiu-li-la dividing the Hah-chhu

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and the Pa-chhu ; the Bei-la range between Pa-chhu and the Wang-chhu ; the Yoto-la range which springs from the snows to the east of Kulu-Kangri, dividing the Madu-chhu and the Pumthang-chhu ; the Radung-la between the Pumthang-chhu and Kuru-chhu ; and the Dang-la range springing from the snows near the Kar-chhu Pass and dividing the Kuru-chhu from the Dongma-chhu.