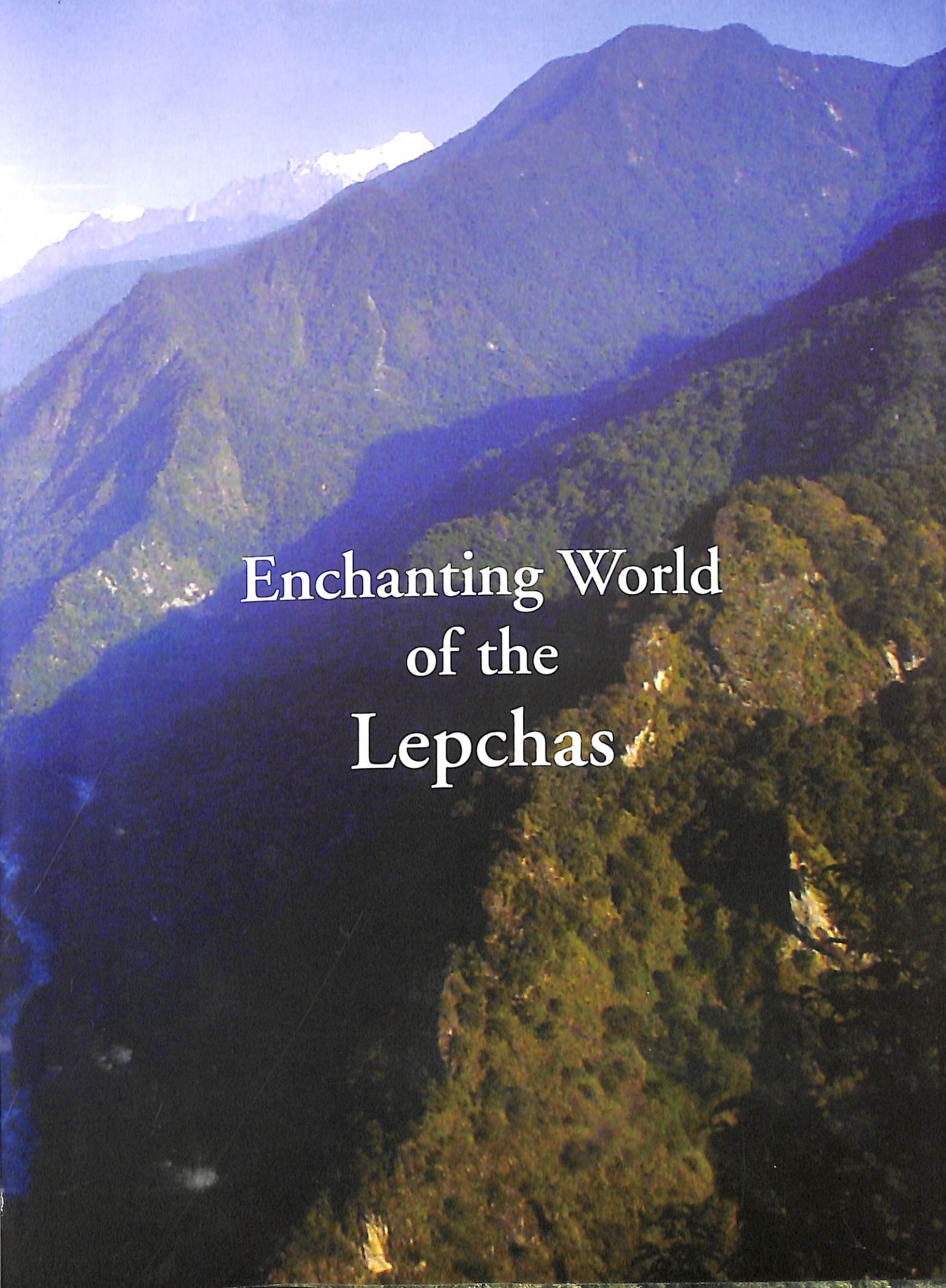


Enchanting World of the Lepchas



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An aerial photograph of a vast, lush green mountain valley. The terrain is covered in dense, vibrant green forest. In the lower-left corner, a river winds through the valley. In the background, several mountain peaks are visible, with the highest ones covered in snow under a clear blue sky. The overall scene is one of natural beauty and tranquility.

Enchanting World
of the
Lepchas

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Sikkim

The 22nd state of the Indian Union, Sikkim is a small mountain state in the eastern Himalayas. The erstwhile kingdom of Sikkim is located between 28° 07' 48" and 27° 04' 46" north latitudes, and 88° 00' 58" and 88° 55' 25" east longitudes. It is bounded by Tibet on the north, Nepal on the west, Bhutan on the east, and the Indian State of West Bengal on the south. Strategically, Sikkim is important for India as it lies astride the shortest route from India to Tibet and is bounded on three sides by international borders.

Sikkim itself is divided into four districts, North, South, East and West. As per the 2001 census of India, the total population of the state is 5,40,493, whereas in 1991 it was 4,06,457 only. The overall density of population in the state is 76 per sq. km. The East district is the most populated while the North's density with only 7, is the least populated. The State (at national level) has a literacy rate of 69.68%.



Virgin landscape

The origin of the name 'Sikkim' has its roots in the Limboo language though various ethnic groups have their own nomenclature. As far as the Lepcha and the Bhutia names are concerned, Dr. Waddel records that, "the Lepchas call it *Mayel Lyang*, which means 'the land of hidden paradise' or 'the delightful region or abode'. The Bhutias call it *Beyul Demazong* or 'the hidden valley of rice'." The Limbus called it *Su-khim* or 'bride's new house'. When the British arrived the anglicized distortion of local nomenclature, Sukhim became *Sikhim* (J.D. Herbert even called it *Siccim* in 1830) and later to *Sikkim*.



Prayer flags along the road to Dzongu

Road to hidden paradise



The Hidden Paradise

Sikkim is sheer magic. This is not just the most beautiful place in the world but the cleanest and safest too. If once the charms of the State were limited to mists, mountains, waterfalls, colourful orchids and butterflies, they are now complimented by tangible development and progress. With its unique culture and natural landscape, Sikkim is a picture of perfection and pristine purity. Nestled in an idyllic corner of the eastern Himalayas, Sikkim is endowed with exceptional natural resources and today has been identified the world over as a hotspot of biodiversity. Though small in size, Sikkim has over 350–400 species of orchids and 30 species of rhododendrons. Sir J.D. Hooker's own collection of flora, as recorded in the Gazetteer, amounted to 2,920 species which included 150 ferns and 20 bamboos. Sikkim also boasts an enviable selection of Himalayan fauna, (the Sikkim Gazetteer records 536 species of butterflies, and about



Hanging cane and bamboo bridge

500-600 species of birds alone!) which includes the adorable red panda and the barking deer. Perhaps, there is no part of the world, which offers such a spectacular vista with every turn of the road as Sikkim.

The capital *Gangtok*, (pronounced *Nga-toh* in the local dialect, meaning 'the cut hill'), is the principle urban centre, and is situated in the east district, in which more than one-third of Sikkim's population now resides. The capital of the state can be said to constitute the focal point of all socio-political and cultural activities. It is well connected by road links with all the four districts and with the rest of the country. Gangtok is also the main commercial centre of the state, and the seat of the government, making it the most important centre of administrative and political activities.

Sikkim is a land of rich and varied scenic beauty, majestic mountains, eternal snows, dark forests, green fertile valleys, raging torrents and calm, placid lakes. Her magnificent variety of flora and fauna are a naturalist's dream; the steep variations in elevation and rainfall give rise to a glorious multitude of species within a comparatively limited area. The scenic grandeur of mighty snow-capped peaks, the highest of which is the mighty Mount Khangchendzonga (28,162 feet) on the Nepal-Sikkim border, is a symbol of reverence and awe for all.

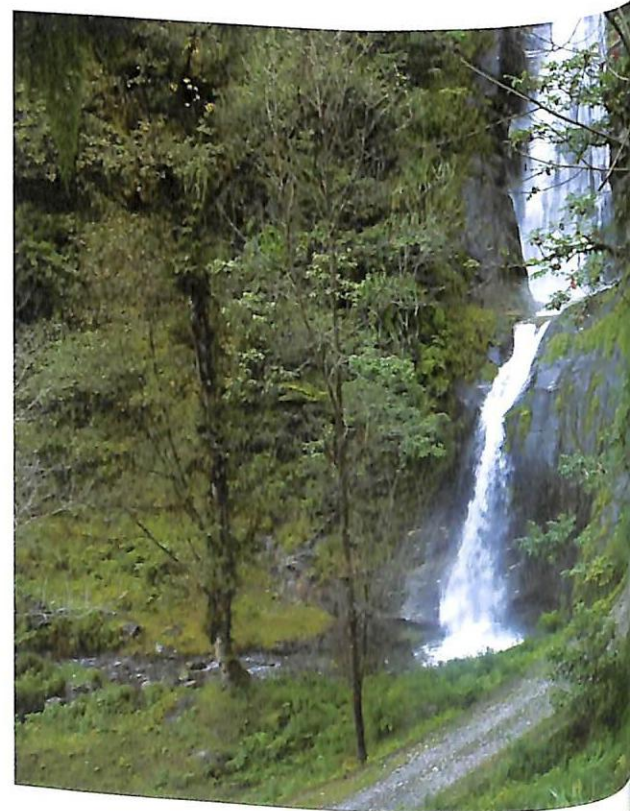
Prayers go up, blessings come down !





Blissful surroundings

Dominating both—legend and landscape of Sikkim, the mighty Khangchendzonga is the third highest peak in the world. But to the Sikkimese it is much more than a mountain: Khangchendzonga is the Guardian deity, whose benign watchfulness ensures peace, protection and prosperity for the land. The five peaks of Khangchendzonga are the Five Treasures of the Eternal Snow, a belief beautifully interpreted by the great Lama Lhatsun Chenpo : “The peak most conspicuously gilded by the rising sun is the treasury of gold, the peak that remains in cold grey shade is the storehouse for silver and other peaks are vaults for gems, grains and the holy books.” Each of the five peaks is believed to be crowned by an animal the highest by a tiger and others by a lion, elephant, horse and the mythical bird Garuda. “Its (Khangchendzonga) mystique has been partly reinforced by the inaccessible nature of the peak and the reluctance of the authorities to allow the mountain to be scaled, considering its sacrosanct nature.” (from Images of Sikkim). The divine status of the mountain, sanctified by legend, has been made





Makeshift bamboo structure in the forest

enduring by the widespread worship of Khangchendzonga by the people of Sikkim—Lepchas, Bhutias and Nepalese alike; offerings are made to this majestic presence, ceremonies are held in his name and dances consecrated to him. *Pang Lhabsol*, one of the major festivals of Sikkim is a thanksgiving celebration in honour of Sikkim's presiding deity, Khangchendzonga.

The most important passes in this area are *Jelep-la*, *Nathu-la*, *Cho-la* and *Thanka-la* in the east; *Donkiala*, *Kongralamu* and *Naku* in the north and *Kanglanangma* and *Chiwa Bhanjyang* in the west. The two main mountain ranges in Sikkim are the Singalila Range and the Chola Range, which start in the north and follow a more or less southerly direction. Between these ranges are the principle rivers—the Rangit (called *Rung-nyit* in Lepcha) and the Teesta (*Rung-nyo* in Lepcha), forming the main channels of drainage that are fed by



monsoon rains as well as by melting glaciers. Sikkim's climate varies from the tropical heat in the valleys to alpine cold in the higher altitudes. The tropical climate prevails in the deep valleys with an elevation up to 5,000 ft. The temperate climate zone comprises areas having elevations between 5,000 ft and 13,000 ft. Above 13,000 ft are the alpine climate zones reaching upto 16,000 ft which marks the beginning of the perpetually snow-bound zone.

Sikkim is a region of heavy rainfall. On an average, Sikkim receives 125 cm of rain annually, but the rainfall varies widely between various regions like sheltered valleys, foothills and high mountains.



Stone supported house: Timbong

The People

The population of Sikkim is primarily composed of the Lepchas, the Bhutias, the Nepalese and the plainsmen. These different ethnic groups have their own distinctive languages and cultural patterns. Over centuries, the narrow fertile valleys of the inner Himalayas and the rugged hill tracts of the greater Himalayas have been settled by the Tibeto-Burmese, Tibeto-Mongoloid and Indo-Aryan races who have adjusted themselves to the rigorous climate of this state. Thus Sikkim has become a state of multi-racial inhabitants. The oldest inhabitants are the *Rongs* or the Lepchas. Next came the *Khampas* from the Tibetan province of Kham, now known as the *Bhutias*. The Limbus, considered by some as belonging to Lhasa gotra are believed to have migrated from *Shigatse, Penam, Norpu, Giangtse* etc., of the *Tsong* province of Tibet. These Limbus and other *Magar, Rai, Gurung,*



Dzongu suburbs

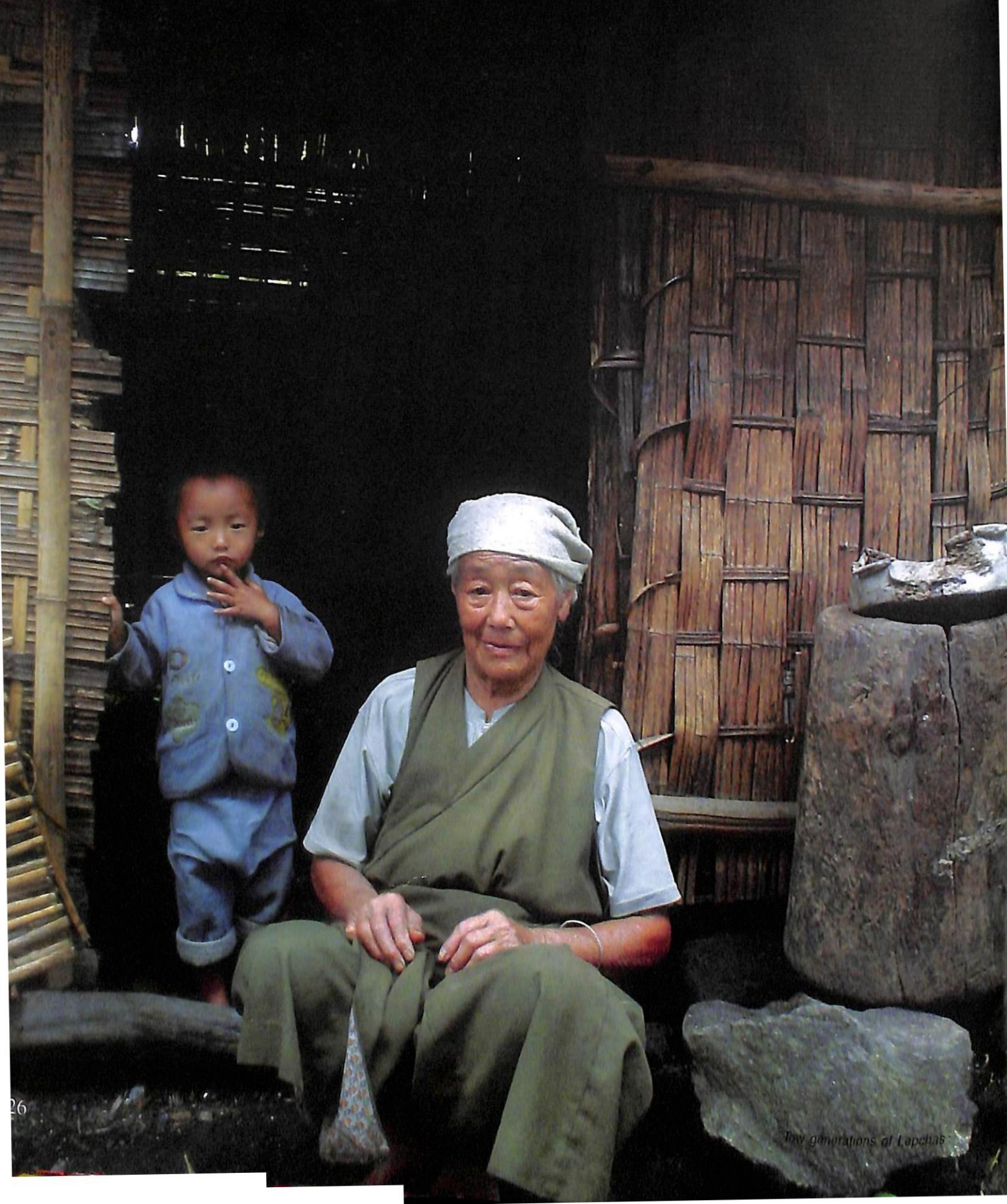
A Dzongu road



Murmi etc., are allied races and in fact belong to the *Kirati* sub-cultural stock of the Nepali race who migrated to Sikkim from Nepal in the west.

English is the official language of Sikkim. The *lingua-franca* is, however, Nepalese. High priority has been given to education in Sikkim and education has been made free up to the primary school level.

The Lepchas



"... high up among the clouds, in the Himalayas, the abode of the gods, legend says that there was a country known as *Mayel Lyang* and there lived in it a tribe of simple folk who called themselves '*Mu-tanchi-Rong kup*', meaning the '*mother's loved ones*'. The mother for them was *Itbu-Debu Rum*, the great creator and sustainer whose favourites they considered themselves to be. These people believed that the *Mother-Creator*, after creating everything on land and in the sky and sea for them to enjoy, fashioned *Kongchen Konghlo*, the range and cluster of mountains known to the outside world as the *Khangchendzonga* group of mountains, and placed them as gods for them and as guardians of the tribe and their country..." (from *Lepcha, My Vanishing Tribe* by A.R. Foning).

Known as the *Rongpas*, the Lepchas are the original inhabitants of Sikkim and comprise about 13 percent of the total population. As one of the main scheduled tribes of indigenous origin, the Lepchas were recently awarded the Primitive Tribe Status by the Government.

At one point, it was believed that the Lepcha tribe was a very ancient colony from southern Tibet. In appearance, the Lepchas are fair with slightly accentuated Mongoloid



Skilled hands weaving a bamboo basket

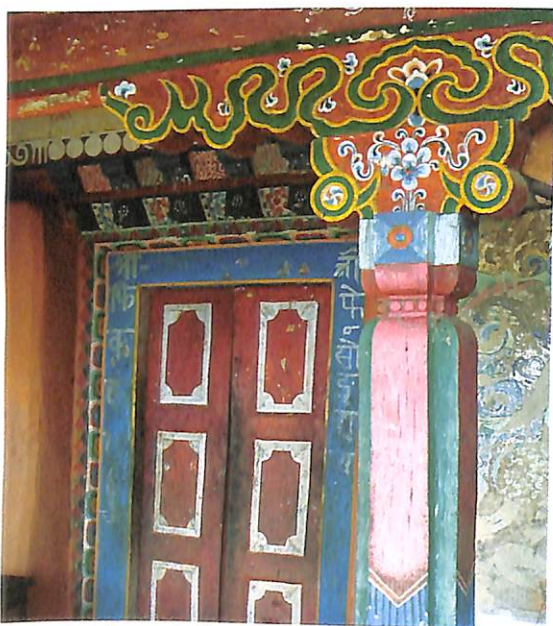
features, that frequently creases into the inimitable Lepcha smile. An undocumented but charming folk tale says that it was the gentle laughter of the Lepcha that wafted up to the heavens to be transformed into twinkling stars !

Conjectures apart, it is interesting to note that there exists wide ranging similarities of culture and customs between the Lepchas and some tribes of northeast India like the Nishi, Adi, Apa-Tani, Miri and Mishmi. For example, the Lepcha word for salutation is *Kham-ri*. In Meitei, one of the ethnic languages of Manipur, it is *Khurum-jari*. Similarities can also





Prayer flags greeting the mountains



Decorated door and pillars of Lepcha Monastery in Fikkal, Eastern Nepal

mentioned prominently in Lepcha lore. Most of the rivers, mountains and locales, not only in Sikkim but in the surrounding areas of Darjeeling, Kalimpong, Kurseong and eastern Nepal have Lepcha names and find mention in their folklore.

Dzongu the Final Frontier

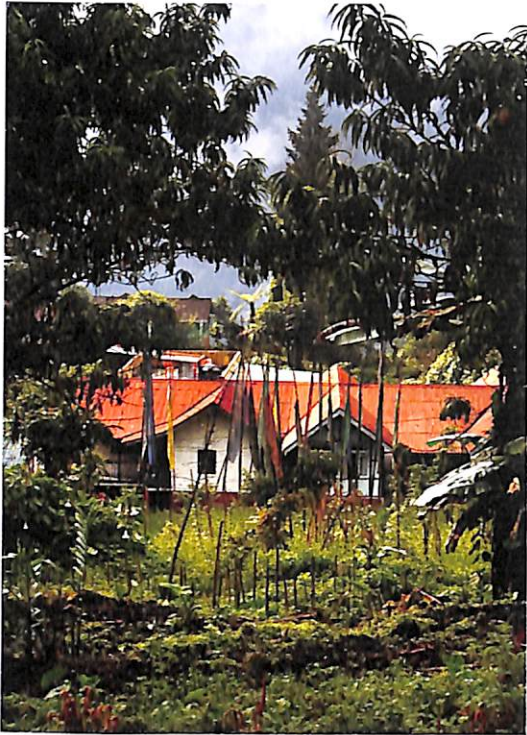
Today the Lepcha population is concentrated mostly in the Dzongu Valley in the central part of Sikkim. Long considered as the 'last bastion and cradle of Lepcha civilization', Dzongu comes under the North District and encompasses the area at the confluence of Rung-Nyu and the Teesta rivers. In the



Glimpses from Dzongu valley

early 1960s, in an attempt to protect and preserve the ancient practices and cultural heritage of Lepcha lifestyle, Dzongu was declared as an exclusive reserve for the Lepchas. Today, the local NGOs and citizens here are making conscious efforts to preserve and maintain their age-old customs and manners for future generations. Amiable and generally cheerful, communal consensus on matters of importance seems an enduring aspect of the Lepcha life.





Literature on the Lepchas

The earliest published European reference to Sikkim is probably that of Ippolito Desideri S.J., a missionary who visited Tibet in the first decades of the eighteenth century. He refers to the existence of *Bree-me-jong* (i.e., Sikkim) as a province of Tibet, paying tribute to Lhasa. However, it was not till the end of the century that the Britishers obtained more knowledge about this area through officials of the East India Company and later from British officers campaigning in the country during the first decades of the nineteenth century, but it was not until J.D. Herbert published *Particulars of a Visit to the Siccim Hills* in 1830 that the country and its inhabitants were introduced to the world of scholarship.



The Lepcha Language

The Lepcha language, according to General G.B. Mainwaring, is the oldest of all the hill dialects. The origin of the Lepcha script itself is one shrouded in myths and lore. Many tend to believe that the script was invented by *Thekong Mensalong*, a legendary Lepcha figure who is said to have lived towards the beginning of the 17th century. There is of course, the belief that the script was invented by the Mother Creator, *Itbu-mu*, herself.

Wealth of vegetation at Timbong





Another version claims that the script came Sikkim's way via Tibet along with Buddhism itself. Tibetan scholars hold the view that the Lepchas were given their script by *Lhatsun Chenpo*, one of the three great lamas (monks) who 'unlocked' Sikkim and then consecrated the first *Chogyal* at Yuksom in the West District. The generally accepted story of the script's genesis, according to the *Sikkim Gazetteer*, is that it was invented by *Chador Namgyal*, the third Chogyal (king) of the Namgyal dynasty, sometime in the eighteenth century. In this respect, a consensus of any sort is yet to be arrived at among Lepchalogs. Till then different views will continue to fuel the speculations.

According to philologists, the Lepcha language falls under the Tibeto-Burman group of languages spoken by tribes inhabiting the sub-Himalayan region of the Tibeto-Burman curve of the Himalayas. The language does not have its roots in Sanskrit like the other tribal dialects of India, Bhutan and Nepal and, as mentioned earlier, is unique because it is one of the few tribal languages with a script of its own. At present, the world's largest collection of old Lepcha manuscripts is found with the Himalayan Languages Project in Leiden, The Netherlands with over 180 Lepcha books.



Lifestyle and Creativity



A Lepcha kitchen garden

Lifestyle

Before adopting Buddhism or Christianity as their religion, the earliest Lepcha settlers were believers in the *Bon* faith or *Mun* faith which centred around worshipping nature. This faith was based on the existence of spirits, both benign and malignant. They worshipped spirits of the mountains, rivers and forests which was but natural for a tribe that co-existed so harmoniously with their rich natural surroundings.

During early times the Lepchas subsisted upon hunting and shifting cultivation in the dense Himalayan forests. Set amidst hillsides dotted with orange groves, the farms cultivated cardamom, barley and buckwheat amongst others. Clearing new forest lands every few years, the Lepchas cultivated two types of dry-land paddy called *Dumbra* and *Ongrey-Zo*. *Mongbree*, a kind of millet, and *Kunchung*, or maize eaten in different forms, were other main agricultural products. *Zo-Mal* or rice was meant only for important occasions like weddings, house warming and celebrating the *Nambun*, the Lepcha New Year. The large cardamom that flourished on the misty slopes later became a major source of revenue, and today is one of the main cash crops of the State.



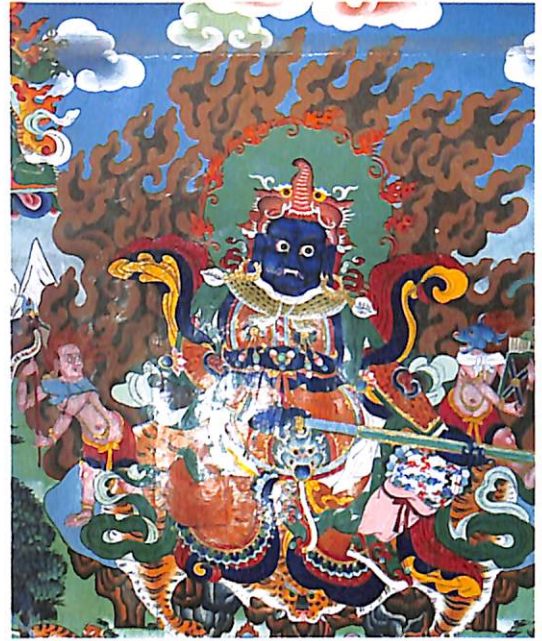
Traditional bread



Loads of fodder carried by Lepcha young men

Religion

While most Lepchas are now Buddhists, a sizeable number of them still follow their original faith, *Bon*. Their belief sees them worshipping nature in all its forms—rivers, lakes and mountains. Many aspects, like the worship of Khangchendzonga, have also been included in Sikkimese Buddhism. Christianity, too, has found many converts among the Lepchas and the religion is now into its third generation in Sikkim. Although Lepchas have no caste system, they are particular about their clans which are patrilineal. They are particular, one might add, but not paranoid about it since not only do they marry into other clans, but of late they have been progressive about marrying into other communities too.



Phodong Monastery, North Sikkim



Creative use of stones

Creativity

The Lepcha house is a sturdy one-storey wooden building, traditionally built entirely of bamboo, usually about four or five feet above the ground and rectangular in shape. The versatile bamboo, used by the Lepchas for almost everything from bridges to musical instruments, is the chief material used. The huts are supported on thick stems of bamboo fastened to stones placed just below the ground. The open space between the ground and the floor of the house generally shelters the domestic animals of the hut's owner. The plaster used on the walls of the hut is made from bamboo stem mixed with mud, while the steps leading up to the rooms are just a notched bamboo trunk. The thatched roofing is made of split small bamboo.



Tree trunks



Wedding photograph of
ace national footballer Sherap Lepcha
and his wife Choden Lepcha

Marriage

Marriage among the Lepchas, is a fundamental and very important institution with far-reaching social, legal and economic consequences. The marriage is normally negotiated by the parents and obedience to parental wishes still prevails. When the parents have decided on a prospective wife for their son, they discuss the matter with a *byek-bo*, or the go-between, usually the maternal uncle, who sets out to meet the girl's parents with a load of *ci* and a rupee tied in a white *khada*, the ceremonial scarf. The marriage is negotiated between the families of the bride and the groom, where the preliminary offer of marriage is made. Here, the maternal uncles on both sides of the proposed union play vital roles. If the marriage deal is settled, the parents of the would-be bride touch the load of *ci* and the *khada* with the tip of their middle finger as a token of acceptance, and a favourable date for the *pa-nol*, the first wedding ceremony is decided on. This is ascertained after a careful study of the horoscopes of the boy

and girl. On the wedding day, the groom and his family leave for the girl's house with gifts of cash and kind, which are handed over to the bride's maternal uncle.

Upon reaching the destination, the traditional *Nyomchok* ceremony takes place. After fulfilling certain conditions, the bride's father arranges a feast for relatives and friends and the marriage is then publicly solemnized and celebrated with much feasting and merriment. This seals the wedding between the couple. The entire process of the wedding takes place in three stages, detailed intricately by Halfdan Singer in 1967 in his book *The Lepchas—Culture and Religion of a Himalayan people*.

With agriculture, especially the much-in-demand cardamom being a decent source of income, the Lepchas find enough opportunity for revelry, and participating in one of their festivals is a wonderful experience.



Abode of clouds



Lepcha Folk Dances

Zo-Mal-Lok

This is a popular folk dance of the Lepcha community depicting the sowing, reaping and harvesting of paddy. The farming folk, mostly relatives and friends of each family—the old and young folk alike—join hands in the process of singing and dancing which also helps to lessen the toil...



Chu Faat

This age-old folk dance of Lepchas is performed in honour of the Mount Khangchendzonga and its four associate peaks, Mt. Pandim, Mt. Kabru, Mt. Simbrum and Mt. Narsing. These five snowy peaks are believed to be the repository of five hidden treasures such as salt, medicine, minerals, sacred



Festivals

Namsoong

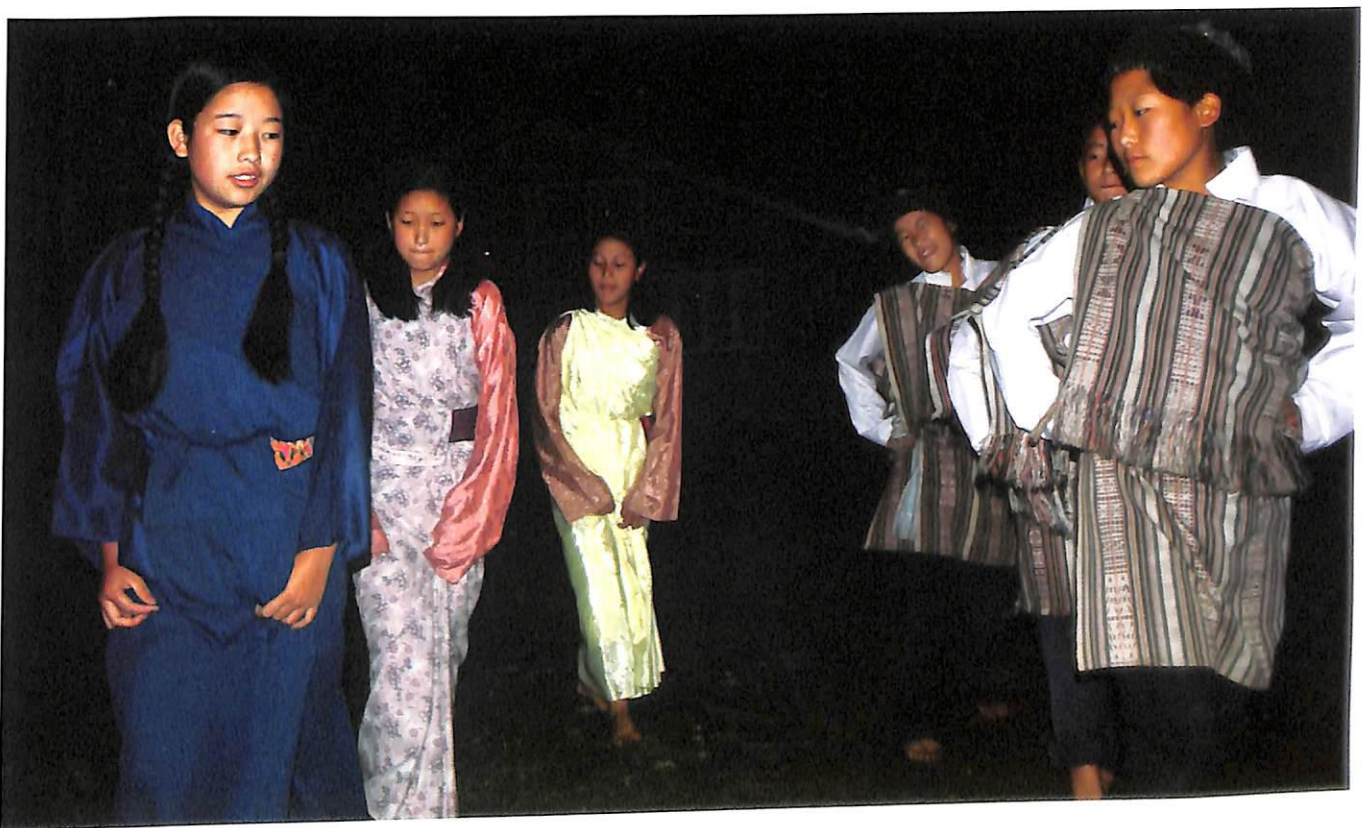
One of the major festivals of Lepcha is *Namsoong* or *Nambun*, also known as *Lossong* among the Sikkimese Bhutias, which marks the beginning of the New Year. According to the *Dungkit Karchu* the Lepcha Calendar, the *Namsoong* festival begins from the first day of the *Kurneet Lovo*, corresponding to the month of December/January every year. This is usually the time when the farmers rejoice and celebrate their harvest, and make offerings to the gods and deities. The new moon during this period marks the beginning of the *Namsoong* celebrations, which, while being essentially community ceremonies, are also celebrated privately among family members and friends. There is an air of festivity all around. The festival continues for seven days with much merriment and feasting.

“...when we see the ‘tuk-po pot-boor’, or the peach blossoming, we know that our Nambun, or New Year’s Day celebration is approaching, and we look forward to it expectantly...”



Pang Lhabsol

Pang Lhabsol, one of the main festivals of Sikkim is celebrated to worship Mount Khangchendzonga which is considered the guardian deity. This festival is held on the fifteenth day of the seventh month of the Tibetan calendar, corresponding to late August and early September. The chaams (ritual dances) are performed by splendidly costumed masked dancers representing the mountain spirits. The God is depicted as being red in colour, armed and mounted on a white snow lion. Offerings are made to this majestic presence, ceremonies are held in his name and dances consecrated to him. Dancers portray the guardian deity, its supreme commander *Yabdi* and the God *Mahakala*. The *Pangtoed Chaam*, is unique to this particular festival. The only warrior dance of Sikkim, *Pangtoed Chaam* is performed exclusively during this festival. The dancers are chosen for their physical strength, quick reflexes and skill in swordsmanship. With their richly attired brocade costumes and agile leaps and twirls, the dancers add to the visual and impressive spectacle of the festival.



Kabi Long Chok

This is the Lepcha name of a historical place of great importance near Gangtok, where the Lepcha-Bhutia covenant was solemnized in around 1592 between *Thekong Tek*, the High Priest of the Lepchas and *Khye Boomsa*, the Tibetan Chieftain. *Khye Bumsa* had come seeking the powerful *Thekong Tek*, to ask for the boon of a son. It is said that *Thekong Tek* not only blessed him with three sons but also prophesized that his lineage would rule the land. According to Lepcha lore, a bull was sacrificed and a solemn oath was sworn over the blood that the Lepchas and the Tibetans would never fight each other but live as blood

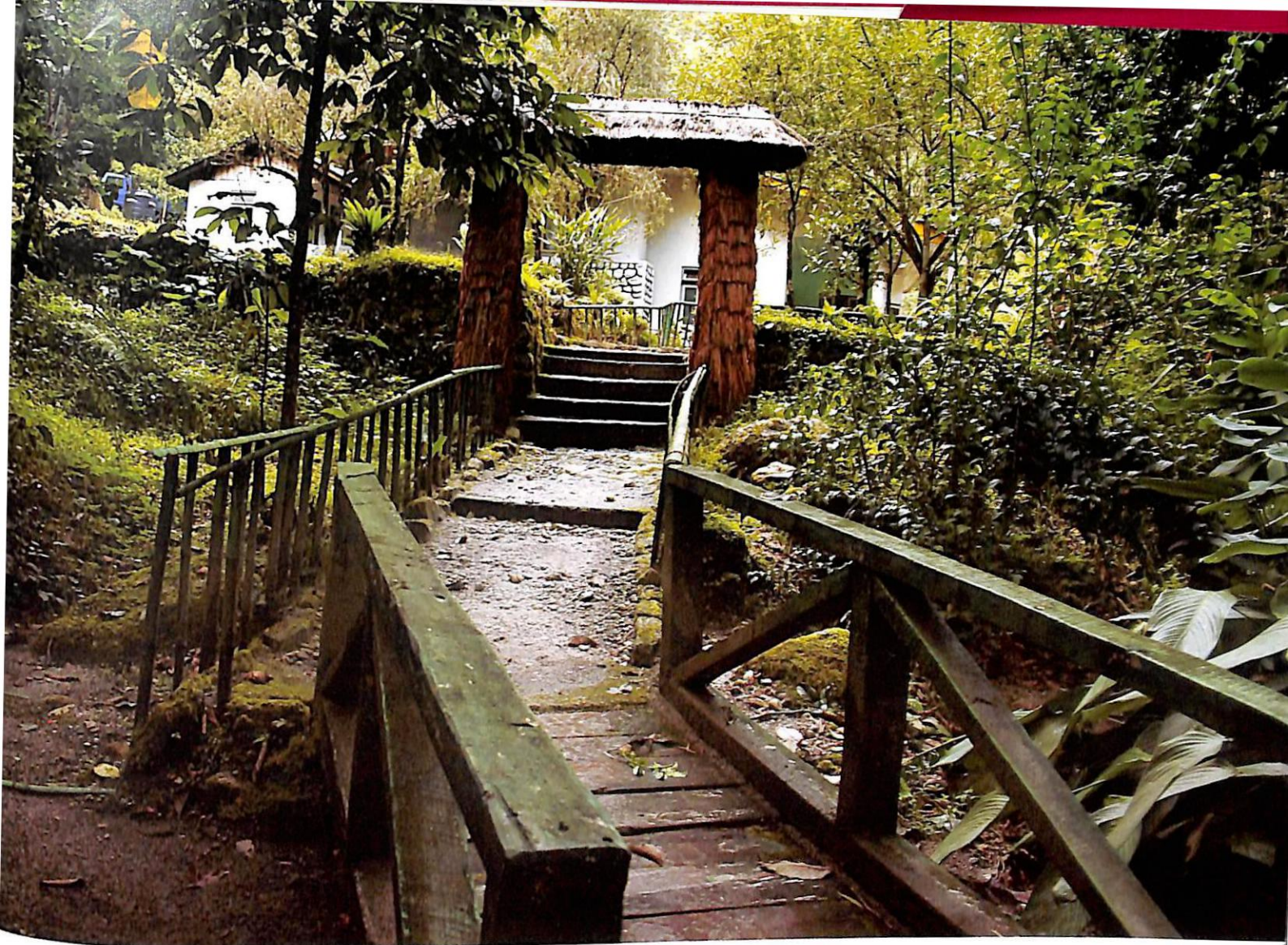
Glimpses—Kabi Long Chok



Folklore

Lepcha folklore is rich with myths and legends. In the beginning the Himalayas were created, and two of these mountains, the *Tang-sheng* and the *Narem* were husband and wife. The *Anden-chu* is their son who is a snow mountain, and lying at his feet just below is a table-land called the *Saburancho* where the first man and woman lived. So runs a tale told by Toonget Sharap Dorje, a lama at the Ling-them Monastery, and recorded in 1927 by Mrs. C. de Beauvoir Stocks in her book on Lepcha folklore. *Rum-Lyang*, is the country of the Gods, while *Mayel-Lyang* is the country of the Lepchas. Believing that they were lovingly created out of Mother Nature, the Lepchas proudly call themselves *Mutanchi Rongkup* or 'Mother's Loved Ones'. The Lepchas, who have carried their ancient tribal social culture over to the present age, have a rich repertoire of romantic folklore. Their folk-lore abounds with tales of mountains, lakes, fairies,





Bamboo gate

animals, birds, flowers and insects. These ancient tales throw further light on the Lepchas' ever simple life fashioned by their unpretentious outlook and uncomplicated philosophies, though, apart from their legion of fabulous folklore, authentic information on their historical background is still a rarity. Ms. Beauvoir in her book on Lepcha Folklore (1925) writes, "The most difficult task is to separate the pure Lap-cha beliefs from the 'loan myths'. In this country not only Tibetan Buddhist ideas are disseminated, but with them probably the motives of Tibetan folk-lore have also spread. To these must be added the natural borrowings of tales from the peoples of Bhutan and Nepal, with whom the Lap-chas have now much mixed. Perhaps some of the ideas were imported from India, directly or indirectly, and of late, Christian missionaries even can be ranked among the contributors."

