

SIKKIM'S RAJ BHAVAN



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SIKKIM'S RAJ BHAVAN



Published by:
DEPARTMENT OF INFORMATION & PUBLIC RELATIONS
Government of Sikkim
www.sikkimipr.org



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FOREWORD

I WAS SWORN-IN as Governor of Sikkim on 9th July, 2008. My wife, Karuna, and I were lodged in the annexe building as the Raj Bhavan was already declared unfit for human habitation and could not be restored. Work on construction of the new Raj Bhavan building within the complex too had commenced. I, however, did not accept the position that Raj Bhavan cannot be restored. Fortunately, experts yielded to my line of argument and we initiated the work in this behalf. Once this existential crisis was within the sight of resolution, Karuna and I concentrated on restoring the gardens.

I set before myself two intellectual challenges as well, namely: (i) to prepare a monograph on biodiversity of Raj Bhavan; and (ii) to formulate the history of Raj Bhavan. The first task was ably accomplished by three experts on Bio-diversity, namely: Smt Usha Lachungpa, Shri Sudhizong Lucksom, and Ms. Dechen Lachungpa. The book on Sikkim's Raj Bhavan prepared under the leadership of Shri Sonam Wangdi, former Chief Secretary of Sikkim, is in your hands.

The book gives an interesting account of the history of Sikkim including that of the houses of the Chogyals; a detailed portrayal of the physical aspects of the Raj Bhavan ranging from architecture to bio-diversity; narrates the story of the transformation from Residency to Raj Bhavan, and describes the

role that the Raj Bhavan has been playing in the development of Sikkim. The book also gives glimpses of political upheavals as it portrays Sikkim's evolution from monarchy to democracy and the nature of relationship of the Chogyals with that of the British Government and the Government of India.

Raj Bhavan has been a silent spectator to the winds of change blowing over Sikkim's political landscape for over a century now. It was John Claude White, the first British Political Officer, who built the Residency in 1890 to implant British presence in this geo-strategic location primarily to gain access to Tibet, China and the Central Asian region. Today, Raj Bhavan is a heritage building representing and symbolizing an institution that witnessed many a change spread over three centuries. This magnificent edifice of history has been the residence of British Political Officers of colonial past to Indian Political Officers and to the post-merger Governors of a vibrant democratic nation.

Unfortunately, the lack of any authentic documentation of this historic building spanning across post and pre-merger periods, was most surprising to me. Of course, individual books written by many former incumbents exist and succeed in throwing invaluable albeit subjective light on the role of Raj Bhavan during different periods of history. However, no attempt had been made, prior

to this, to gather the loose yarns of its history and weave a seamless narrative of historical sequence. It is this glaring vacuum that this book seeks to fulfil and hence its importance. For me, Raj Bhavan Sikkim, notwithstanding its all too apparent colonial architecture and antecedents, symbolizes democracy and the triumph of the people's aspirations towards achieving it. However, the book does not seek to extol democracy at the cost of discrediting monarchy. It confers upon each one its due place in history and recognizes both as indispensable to the evolutionary cycle of history.

The core idea was to record the evolution of the physical and spiritual development of this building, protracted history of political negotiations, intrigues and diplomacy, transformational change to democracy and modern governance system, modernization of social and political firmament, development-led benefits and description of aspirations of people of Sikkim. This book chronicles them.

I am happy to mention that the articles in this book have been contributed by eminent local intellectuals representing the bureaucracy (past and present), educationists, researchers, nature lovers and legal luminaries, most of whom have deep knowledge of the land and its history; people who have flowed with the tides of times and have had a taste of both monarchical and democratic form of governance. They have covered a wide spectrum of topics spanning across history of the rulers of yesteryears to the influence and impact of British India and free India on Sikkim in terms of socio-economic development, art and cultural milieu, progress and development of games and sports, rule of law including the role of press and media in transforming a monarchical state to a happening democratic State.

Sikkim's Raj Bhavan is a product of excellent research work. The chapters, drawn as they are, from the deep well of experience of these individual Sikkimese writers with historical narratives and individual lived-in experience (in some cases) make for an interesting reading. The book provides a historical perspective to the developments that have taken place in the past to transform the State to its

present moorings. In all, the Raj Bhavan has played a central role in ushering in far-reaching changes. The hard work put in by the writers and the editorial team shines throughout this book.

To a rapid reader, the narration might unwittingly give the impression that Governors were a kind of successors to the Political Officers. Political Officers, of course, lived in this sprawling complex upto 1975. But the similarity ends there.

The campus has, at places, dominated the dialogue. The story might have been cast differently if the Raj Bhavan were housed in another building. It needs, however, to be asserted that this campus was the best choice then and is even now.

The remembrances of my predecessors are another important component of this book. As Governor, I, too, have concerned myself with wider issues of security and development. And to my surprise, it has been a success story.

Thanks to the Chief Minister of Sikkim Dr. Pawan Chamling and members of the Council of Ministers, I took a number of initiatives. The following few issues I would like to touch upon:

- (i) Alternate road route from Siliguri to Gangtok;
- (ii) Construction of Airport at Pakyong;
- (iii) Railway connectivity from Sivok in West Bengal to Rangpo in east Sikkim; and
- (iv) Strengthening of the telecommunication network including the Internet services in Sikkim.

I took up these concerns of the State in my meetings with the Prime Minister of India. He not only supported these efforts but also spoke to the concerned Union Ministers to facilitate follow-up action.

The Government of India sent a team of officials led by the Union Cabinet Secretary to Gangtok. In a luncheon meeting held at Raj Bhavan on 7th November, 2008, it was decided to recommend to the Government of India that a double-laned highway may

be built from Chalsa in West Bengal to Menla near Nathu La in east Sikkim as an alternate route to the existing 31A national highway. The Union Cabinet approved this proposal. The cost of the construction for the 176 km stretch will be around 400 crores.

The construction of an airport at Pakyong was pending for long. At our intervention, the Ministry of Civil Aviation moved rapidly and the construction work at Pakyong began with the laying of the foundation stone of the airport on 28th February, 2009. Earlier, a power point presentation on the airport was made before me on 2nd January, 2009.

The matter concerning the rail link from Sivok to Rangpo too was held up for clarity of approach. As a result of Raj Bhavan's interventions, a sum of 10 crores was earmarked in the railway budget for the year 2009-10; the total cost of this broad-gauge railway line of 44.39 km being 3380.40 crores. The foundation stone was laid by the Vice President of India on 30th October, 2009 during his visit to Sikkim, again for which, Raj Bhavan had taken the initiative. The survey work is in progress and we have reasons to believe that the railway line will be completed upto Rangpo by 2015.

I had taken up the matter regarding unsatisfactory telecom services in Sikkim with the Union Minister of Telecommunications, Government of India vide D.O. letter dated 12th November, 2009. The Union Minister responded positively and the work has begun.

Another idea of far-reaching significance is in respect of urban planning. With the airport under construction at Pakyong and the existing 20 km road from Ranipool to Pakyong being double-laned, I thought, opportunity has come our way to develop Ranipool and Pakyong stretch as Naya Gangtok as a model city of the east. I felt that land on both sides of the highway would facilitate planned infrastructure creation which would cater to business centres, residential areas, hotels/resorts, cultural centres and eco-friendly industrial hubs as well to provide linkages to recreation and economic sustainability. On 24th October, 2009, I wrote to Chief Minister

in this behalf. And the work commenced. I have also requested the North East Council and Department for Development of North East Region to adopt the DPR of Naya Gangtok and to earmark suitable funds for this project.

I would like to mention that the retrofitting and restoration of the Raj Bhavan building and conservation of its gardens in a record time was indeed a major achievement of the first year of our stay. For the decay and eventual destruction of the Raj Bhavan building and its gardens would have constituted the most uncomfortable chapter of the first decade of Sikkim's 21st century.

As I reflect, in the solitude of Raj Bhavan, upon Sikkim's journey on the path of progress and development during the last thirty-five years, I have felt that Sikkim's geographical isolation has not led to this State being overlooked or in making our people paranoid. Why? A variety of reasons account for our happy state of affairs- the foremost being harmony between Culture, Democracy and Good Governance. The primacy of the rule of law and secular values as enshrined in the Constitution of India have helped the Sikkimese people march confidently on the path of progress and development. This is a unique phenomenon in Sikkim and it needs to be analyzed in depth. But that will be the subject matter of another book. Sikkim's Raj Bhavan then will be remembered as a precursor of such an intellectual endeavour.

I am most grateful to each scholar and lover of history who has contributed articles and photographs for *Sikkim's Raj Bhavan* and for the time and effort they have invested in making the book which I hope will be something of a treasure for the people of Sikkim. This book is also likely to serve as an important source of information to researchers and all those who carry with them the eternal thirst for more knowledge.

Raj Bhavan
Gangtok
16 May, 2011

Balmiki Prasad Singh





*His Excellency, the
Governor of Sikkim,
Balmiki Prasad Singh,
with the Raj Bhawan
family.*

Chief Editor's Note

The Raj Bhavan of Sikkim is a historical edifice that has witnessed the advent of British influence in Sikkim at the turn of the 19th century, the dawn in 1947 of Indian Independence from imperial shackles and also the merger of Sikkim with India in 1975.

After surviving for a century, this heritage building was declared structurally unsafe in February, 2006 and a new Raj Bhavan building was planned. His Excellency the Governor of Sikkim, Shri Balmiki Prasad Singh personally spearheaded retrofitting works at the Raj Bhavan and thus not only saved this heritage structure but also ensured its preservation and use.

The Governor went one step further in commissioning this book on the history of Raj Bhavan of Sikkim and has thus filled a longstanding need to do justice to this British-designed building and all that it has represented through the centuries.

Since no entity can be viewed in isolation, efforts have been made to elaborate on the history and other aspects of Sikkim, the macro-environment within which the Residency of the British Political Officer metamorphosed into the Raj Bhavan of today. Eminent writers have contributed their papers to make this book as comprehensive and authoritative as possible.

I must put on record the hard work put into this book by Tenzin C. Tashi, Member, Editorial Board of this book and Pema Wangchuk, Editor, Sikkim NOW!, Gangtok, Sikkim.

It gives me great pleasure to present what I feel is a definitive book for reference.

Gangtok
10 May, 2011

Sonam Wangdi



PART -I

RAJ BHAVAN, SIKKIM



Above: The Residency in 1921 photographed by Sir Charles Bell. Collection of the Liverpool Museum.

Facing page: The former Residency, now the Raj Bhavan of Sikkim, as it exists today, circa 2011. A comparison of the two photographs shows minor alterations made over the years to its original structure.



From Residency to Raj Bhavan

TENZIN C. TASHI

IN 1888, DURING the outbreak of the Anglo-Tibet war, the British sent John Claude White as Assistant Political Officer with the expeditionary force. White was a civil engineer employed with the Bengal Public Works Department. He was appointed Political Officer of Sikkim in 1889, a position he held until his retirement in 1908.

It was White who built the Residency, what is today the Raj Bhavan at Gangtok. He gives a vivid account of how he personally selected the site, why it appealed to him and his travails in building it in his memoir, *Sikkim and Bhutan: Twenty-One Years on the North-East Frontier*, first published in 1909.

“One of the first things to be done on my appointment to Sikkim was to build a house, not an easy task in a wild country where masons and carpenters were conspicuous by their absence, where stone for building had to be quarried from the hillsides and trees cut down for timber. In my jungle wanderings around Gangtak, I came across a charming site in the midst of primeval forest which seemed suitable in every way, so I determined to build on it, felling only the trees which might possibly endanger the safety of the house, a necessary precaution, as many of them were quite 140 feet high, and in the spring the thunderstorms, accompanied by violent winds, were something terrible

and wrought havoc everywhere. By leveling the uneven ground and throwing it out in front, I managed to get sufficient space for the house, with lawn and flower beds around it. Behind rose a high mountain, thickly wooded, which protected us from the storms sweeping down from the snows to the north-east, and in front the ground fell away with a magnificent view across the valley, where, from behind the opposite hills, Kanchenjunga and its surrounding snows towered up against the clear sky, making one of the most beautiful and magnificent sights to be imagined, and one certainly not to be surpassed, if equaled, anywhere in the world. The site selected, my real troubles began; trees had to be felled and sawn into scantlings; stone quarried, lime burnt, and, most difficult of all, carpenters and masons imported. I was fortunate in my carpenters, as I had already in my employment a Panjaubi, Moti Ram by name, the best carpenter and carver I have ever come across, and through him I got other excellent men from his native village, but the masons were distinctly bad. They seemed to find it impossible to build a wall plumb or a corner square- faults that impressed themselves on us later on, to our cost, when the time came for paper-hanging. More than that, too, owing to earthquakes, faulty building and heavy rains, part of the anxiously watched edifice came down, and I began to think my house would never be finished. But, in spite of all difficulties, at Christmas 1890 we were able to move in, about eighteen months after commencing work.

Next came furnishing and finding staff of servants. Furniture had either to be made on the spot by our Punjaubi carpenters or imported from England; and the neighbouring hill-man caught and trained to service, as, with the exception of one or two old servants, no plains-man could be induced to penetrate into such wilds where they declared there was always war and where they would certainly be killed. One little lad, Diboo by name, eventually became head bearer and major-domo of the establishment, and only left when we went on board at Bombay on our final departure.”

White deliberately chose the location for his house which when completed, straddled a ridge higher than that on which Maharaja Thutob Namgyal's Palace was built. It was a tacit declaration that here lay the real seat of power in Sikkim, reinforced physically by the intentionally higher elevation.

White's construction was radically different from local construction practices prevalent at that time. He recounts an argument he had with Maharani Yeshe Dolma of Sikkim with regard to the thickness of the Residency walls: *“While the house was building, the Maharani came several times to see how it was getting on, and told me I had built the walls too thin and it would never stand. In their own houses and monasteries the walls are very thick, from 3 feet to 4 feet 6 inches, and have always a small camber. However, later on, I had the best of the argument when, in the earthquake of 1897, the palace, notwithstanding its thick walls, collapsed entirely and had to be rebuilt, while the residency, though badly cracked, remained standing.”*

The Residency when completed was a revelation, an entity of much curiosity for the Sikkimese hitherto not exposed to such a house. They would apparently often call on the Whites and request permission to wander around the house. White recollects that they never touched anything but liked to see how the Whites lived and what European furniture was like.

The Residency was, in a nutshell, an English house built by an Englishman for himself, a slice of home during his tenure in remote Sikkim. It had bay windows and a

A bird's eye view of the sprawling Raj Bhavan complex reveals how it is perfect in all ways, which is exactly what compelled J.C. White to hone in on to this spot to build his house. A veritable oasis ensconced in primal greenery, the Raj Bhavan complex is today one of Gangtok's few green lungs.



round dining table. This really fired the collective imagination of the local Sikkimese gentry who also incorporated bay windows and copied the round dining table for their own residences. Some of the old landed gentry's houses like Mazong House and Khenzong House, both on Kazi Road, are still standing proud in the modern skyline of Gangtok, their bay windows a silent testimony to White's mini-architectural revolution in Sikkim over a century ago.

Interestingly, the proliferation of the bay windows in these houses also gave the local parlance a new word- *gol kamra*- or round room, which is an obvious reference to the rounded shape of the bay windows.

Many remarkable events that unfolded and moulded Sikkim's history had the Residency as the springboard. The Residency was the official pivot from which several administrative, political and social changes were brought about in feudal Sikkim and outlying areas. It was the Residency that, for a little over half a century, was a sort of a ground zero or base camp for the British Political Officers and all their official dealings.

Perhaps the singularly most radical event for which the Residency was the fulcrum was the successful Younghusband expedition and the subsequent signing of the 1904 Lhasa Convention that had far-reaching consequences. It finally gave the British imperialists their long-coveted and much-cherished foothold on the roof of the world. It also nipped in the bud, the fledgling Russian influence in Tibet and thus put paid to their nascent aspirations there. The opening of three Trade Marts- in Gyantse, Yatung and Gartok- with British personnel stationed there meant that there were finally British footfalls on Tibetan soil.

While White retired in October, 1908, the Residency he built was a lasting legacy. Half a century later, it was still a landmark building in Gangtok as is evidenced in the 1956 writings of Rene de Nebesky-Wojkowitz who recollects: "*Gangtok, a collection of wooden stalls, Marwari shops and a few stone-built houses, numbers some two thousand inhabitants. Its only sights are the Royal Palace, rebuilt a few decades ago; the villa-like Residency of the Political Officer; and the lama temple, situated in the immediate vicinity of the royal dwelling.*"

Nebesky-Wojkowitz also observed that "*At first sight the Royal Palace looks just like a European house.*" What he was referring to as the Royal Palace was actually the European-style guest house built by Chogyal Thutob Namgyal. Situated below the Old Palace, it was completed in 1907. Obviously inspired by and modeled on the architecture of the Residency, right down to the familiar bay windows, it has also been described as a Victorian doll's house. It was this guest house that the next ruler, Sidkeong Tulku, adopted as his residence.

Sidkeong Tulku was the Oxford-educated 10th Chogyal of Sikkim who died under mysterious circumstances inside a year of his coronation in 1914. The Old Palace was destroyed by a fire and the 11th Chogyal, Tashi Namgyal moved into his predecessor and half-brother's bungalow, deferring construction of and ultimately opting not to build a new Palace. This bungalow is what we know as the Gangtok Palace today.

An autographed photograph of John Claude White, the first Political Officer of Sikkim, Tibet and Bhutan (1889-1908) in full ceremonial regalia.



London, Edward Arnold

John White

After White, all successive incumbents of the post of Political Officer of Sikkim, Bhutan and Tibet occupied the Residency he had built. They were Sir Charles Bell, Major W.L. Campbell, Lt. Colonel W.F. O'Conner, Major F.M. Bailey, Major J.L.R. Weir, Frederick Williamson, Sir Basil Gould and Anthony J. Hopkinson. Three officers-David Macdonald, Capt. R.K.M. Battye and Hugh Richardson - also temporarily held the post.

The Political Officer was a member of the Political Service of the British Empire in India, which served in the native states and in areas beyond the frontiers. Though the Political Officer was resident in Gangtok, he was also responsible for official dealings with neighbouring Bhutan and Tibet. .

Besides, thanks to the fact that the Residency was a typical English house complete with verandahs and a beautifully landscaped garden, it was not an unfamiliar dwelling for his successors. That White was a civil engineer by training further ensured he not only built a technically sound house but one that was comfortable, well-planned and complete with modern conveniences as well, all of which went a long way in making the Political Officers and their families feel at home right away.

Margaret 'Peggy' Williamson, wife of the much-loved Political Officer Frederick Williamson recounts it best in her 1987 *Memoirs of A Political Officer's Wife in Tibet*,

Princess Pema Choki, second daughter of Chogyal Tashi Namgyal, 11th consecrated ruler of Sikkim, converses with former British Trade Agent, Libing Athing Sonam Tobden at a function at the Residency. Collection of Sem Tinley Ongmu Tashi.



Sikkim and Bhutan: "At first sight, the Residency struck me as looking just like an English country house, except that it had a corrugated iron roof of a dull reddish colour. The verandahs, where meals were taken when the weather was suitable, were hung with wisteria. The grounds were extensive and descended in three tiers to two lily ponds. On the top terrace there were spacious lawns, a fish pond and the great flag-pole where the Union Jack fluttered proudly when the Political Officer was in residence. The flag went with him on tour, when it was hoisted at each camp. A hill rose at the back, concealing the servants' quarters. All around there were masses of flowers, trees and tree-ferns. But the crowning glory was the magnificent view that it commanded of the Kanchenjunga range to the west."

Life at the Residency in the times of the British Political Officer was perpetually busy with a steady stream of visitors, as recounted by Peggy: "I looked after the social side. As the only other place in Gangtok, where Europeans could stay was the dak bungalow, we had to put up many of them up at the Residency. Indeed, an endless stream of visitors seemed to flow through the house during our time there. As well as our friends, Government officials, Army people and even the occasional foreign ambassador were delighted to be able to find sanctuary with us from the heat of the plains.

All visitors to Sikkim in those days had to get official passes from the deputy Commissioner in Darjeeling, so he could tell us who was coming and would often suggest the degree of entertainment appropriate, which was a great help in avoiding faux pas. Also friends from Lhasa stayed with us, like the Tarings and the Tsarongs, while en route to India to do shopping or to visit their children at school in Darjeeling. Rani and Raja Dorji from Kalimpong were regular visitors too. We entertained the members of the 1935 Everest Reconnaissance Expedition; I have a vivid memory of them all setting off down the garden with ice-axes and umbrellas, with those two great mountaineers, Eric Shipton and H.W. Tilman, carrying between them a wooden strong box full of cash to cover all the expedition's expenses. Frank Ludlow and George Sherriff were fairly frequent guests, and we also entertained the other great plant hunter, Frank Kingdon Ward. Among our visitors in 1934 was Sir Charles Bell, who had done so much to foster good relations between Britain and Tibet when he had been Political Officer, Sikkim in the years around 1920. While Sir Charles spent three months in Tibet on a private visit, Lady Bell and their daughter Rongyne stayed with us in Gangtok. A rather more unusual visitor was a man named Stephen Smith, who at the time was pioneering a rather farfetched scheme for sending letters across Himalayan valleys by rocket. However, only one of his rockets managed to travel as far as a hundred yards. And there were many other visitors- so many, in fact, that sometimes there barely seemed enough time to change the sheets between one set of visitors and the next."

The story of the 1935 Everest Reconnaissance Expedition led by Eric Shipton remained long untold until the diaries of team members were recently discovered and used to recount the story. Tony Astill's *Mount Everest: The Reconnaissance 1935* (2005) makes mention of the team's stopover at the Residency at Gangtok: "Shipton had motored to Gangtok the previous day from Kalimpong and Karma Paul had also arrived by car. Eric and his mother, Mrs Haly, were found waiting at the bungalow and gave the pleasant news that everyone was to be put up at the 'Residency' with Major

Williamson, the Political Officer in Sikkim. In 1933 Williamson had been 'the soul of hospitality' and Rutledge wrote that his party had 'spent many happy hours with him at the Residency, admiring everything; his collection of Tibetan religious banners, arms and brass-work; his lovely garden and the Sikkimese uniform of his official and domestic staff. He knows all about the country and often stays at Lhasa and Bhutan.'

Having been 'invited to this fine house for more meals than we shall have for many days or have had in the last 3', they lunched at 1.45 p.m. The Residency was a delightfully charming house set well above Gangtok with a great view, weather permitting. Spender saw for the first time the Himalaya and Kangchenjunga from his bedroom window."

Inside the Residency, "there was an absolute mass of wonderful Tibetan and Bhutanese curios, odds and ends and beautiful thangkas [a Tibetan painting of Buddhas-not to be confused with the Tibetan coinage, *tangka*] brass, silver and so on."

These first-hand recollections help conjure up images of life in the Residency during the times of the British Political Officers as being a fine melding of east and west, of a British officer living in Sikkim, his dealings with the people of Sikkim, Bhutan and Tibet reflected in the many oriental curios and bric-a-brac decorating his English home in Gangtok, and his many, mostly European, guests served by domestic help dressed in Sikkimese uniform.

In fact, the uniform of the domestic help of the Residency is almost a legend in itself. The kit of traditional Lepcha hand-woven cloth, the *Thakro dum* worn in a kilt-like style, a red jacket with black edging, topped by a bamboo hat with a peacock feather stuck jauntily in it and the official badge showing they worked at the Residency gave another new word to local parlance, *Atali*, or the more familiar British orderly. The *Atali's* uniform was very similar to that of the Sikkim Guard, the private guard of the Chogyals but distinguished by his badge.

The subsequent British Political Officers shared a cordial relationship with the ruling family. Sir Charles Bell, another towering figure, was a mentor for the young Maharaja Tashi Namgyal who lacked the maturity and experience to govern the country when he was anointed the 11th Chogyal in 1914. He was placed under Bell's tutelage and in June 1917, Bell recommended that he was given full administrative powers.

Nari Rustomji, Dewan of Sikkim, offers another instance of how the Political Officer helped nurture Tashi Namgyal's children in his 1987 book, *Sikkim: A Himalayan Tragedy*. "Sir Basil (Gould) took pains to see that the young princes and princesses should be well-equipped to feel at home in western-style society as well as in their own, and took a personal interest in their upbringing. An English governess was engaged to supervise the children in the palace and they were invited frequently to the Residency so that they should grow out of any feeling of awkwardness or embarrassment in meeting people of a different culture."

Towards the middle of the twentieth century, the Residency again witnessed significant history in the making. In August, 1947, India regained her independence from British imperial rule. Sir A.J. Hopkinson, the serving British Political Officer of Sikkim at that time, was thus the last British Political Officer in Sikkim. This critical

Interior of Raj Bhavan.
From the collection of
Sem T.O. Tashi



juncture in India's history also signaled the end of the first phase of the Residency's history, the era of the British Political Officer. Interestingly, A.J. Hopkinson has the distinction of being the only British Political Officer who also served as the Indian Political Officer in Sikkim for about a year till the final pullout of the British from India.

The Residency then entered the second phase in its history, the era of the Indian Political Officer. From 1948, when Harishwar Dayal took over as the first Indian Political Officer, until 1975, when Sikkim became part of India, the Residency became the official residence of the Indian Political Officer. The other incumbents of this post were Balraj Krishna Kapoor, Apa Parshuram Rao Pant, Inder Jeet Bahadur Singh, Avtar Singh, Vincent Herbert Coelho, Nedyam Balachandran Menon, Katyayani Shanker Bajpai and finally, Gurbachan Singh. Locally it continued to be known as Bara Kothi or the big house. It is not known exactly when it came to be known as Bara Kothi but it was definitely from the times of the British Political Officers, perhaps from the inception of the house itself. It was, of course, a reference to the powers of the principal occupants of the house rather than its physical size.

It is a commonly held belief that the Residency came to be known as India House after the lapse of British paramountcy in 1947. But the name change was effected during Indira Gandhi's visit to Sikkim in 1968. B.S.K.Grover offers the following insight in his book *Sikkim and India: Storm and Consolidation* (1974): "*The name Residency was considered by many as smacking of colonialism.*"

Facing page: The famed wisteria still clings tenaciously to the structure and, in full bloom, sends forth a profusion of the delicate blue-mauve flowers in a paean to the gardening skills of Beryl White who planted it over a hundred years ago when she was the mistress of the Residency. Claude White describes it as 'while on the house the wisteria was a cloud of delicate mauve'.

August 15, 1947. On the historic occasion of the regaining of India's freedom from the Imperial Empire of the British, the jubilant Marwari traders of Gangtok took out a procession which also vended its way to the Residency, carrying the tricolour. Collection of late Chiranjilal Khatri.







Facing Page: Shri Apa Saheb Pant, Indian Political Officer of Sikkim, awaits the arrival of Chogyal Tashi Namgyal who was calling on the Indian Prime Minister, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru at India House during Nehru's visit to Sikkim in 1957 en route to Bhutan.

Even the role of Political Officer has changed since the British left India in 1947. Though the title has been carried forward from the days of British influence and control, but the functions of this office are now of a radically different nature. It is principally an office of liaison between the Government of India and Sikkim and assists the Sikkim Darbar in relation to the many efforts being made towards the economic and social development of the country. To call it the Political Office is perhaps a misnomer in view of the changed circumstances.”

Sunanda Datta-Ray explains in his book *Smash and Grab: Annexation of Sikkim* (1984) that when ‘visiting Gangtok in May 1968, Mrs. Gandhi agreed to rename the Residency India House.’ In any event, the sphere of influence of the Political Officer had slowly been diminished; responsibilities in Tibet ended after 1950 when India accepted China’s suzerainty over Tibet while Bhutan also slipped out of his jurisdiction in 1971.

The Residency in its new avatar as India House continued to be mute witness to further Himalayan winds of change, in more ways than one, blowing over tiny Sikkim. In 1975, the institution of the Chogyal was abolished and Sikkim was formally inducted into the Indian Union as her 22nd state. India House morphed into the Raj Bhavan, the official residence of the Governor of Sikkim. Gurbachan Singh, the last Indian Political Officer had to make way for Bipin Bihari Lal, the first Governor of Sikkim.

This change in scenario also heralded the last phase of the Residency’s history, the era of the Governor of Sikkim. Several distinguished incumbents after Shri B.B. Lal: Shri Homi J.H. Taleyarkhan, Shri Prabhakar Rao, Shri B.N. Singh, Shri T.V. Rajeshwar, Shri S.K. Bhanagar, Shri R.H. Tahiliani, Shri P. Shiv Shanker, Shri K.V. Ragonath Reddy, Chaudhury Randhir Singh, Shri Kidar Nath Sahani, Shri V. Rama Rao, Shri R.S. Gavai, Shri Sudarshan Agarwal and the present incumbent, Shri Balmiki Prasad Singh, have since held the post of Governor of Sikkim and resided at the Raj Bhavan. Many of them have reminisced affectionately about their stints in Sikkim, the warmth of the people and the incomparable sight of the sun rising over the Khangchendzonga as viewed from the Raj Bhavan first thing in the morning.

Throughout the history of the Residency, there is always a silent, central character. The house itself has been mute witness to so many vicissitudes faced by Sikkim. From shrinking geographical boundaries, shrinking powers and jurisdiction, political upheavals, new political dispensations, the house has seen it all. For over a hundred years, the Residency has seen not just the changing political fortunes of Sikkim but also the growing urban sprawl of Gangtok from its vantage point ridge. Since Sikkim is located in a seismically active zone, earthquakes rather than time have wrought more damage to the Residency over the years.

Former Governor T.V. Rajeshwar recollected, “During my days as Governor of Sikkim, (1985-89) there was a serious earthquake which registered 6.2 on the Richter scale. The old Raj Bhawan was shaking and creaking dangerously. We hurriedly moved out of the first floor and till repairs were carried out, stayed in the ground floor bedroom adjacent to the drawing room. It was at this time I discussed with the CPWD authorities about constructing a quick getaway passage from the Governor’s bedroom in the event of an emergency. The stair case adjacent to the Governor’s bedroom leading into the garden

Facing Page: Shri Apa Saheb Pant, Indian Political Officer of Sikkim, awaits the arrival of Chogyal Tashi Namgyal who was calling on the Indian Prime Minister, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru at India House during Nehru’s visit to Sikkim in 1957 en route to Bhutan.

was then constructed. This was so designed as to merge with the overall architectural design of Raj Bhawan.”

The deadly Valentine's Day earthquake of 14th February, 2006 - the third big earthquake faced by the former Residency more than a century after the 1897 one - that ripped through Gangtok's bowels badly damaged the Raj Bhavan. It was declared structurally unsafe. Fortunately, the then Governor was in his winter camp at Rangpo. A camp Raj Bhavan was organized at the Circuit House. In December 2007, the camp shifted to the old Raj Bhavan Annexe which had been completely renovated in 2003.

Work started on building a modern Raj Bhavan in the Raj Bhavan compound, the idea being that it was time for White's heritage building to take a final bow. However, the present Governor of Sikkim, Balmiki Prasad Singh has had the epiphany that of all the priceless treasures inside the Raj Bhavan, the most priceless of them all is the heritage building itself.

Accordingly, His Excellency has personally spearheaded retrofitting of the Raj Bhavan. The retrofitting process has done more than just restore the old building to its former glory; the introduction of modern technology has undoubtedly injected new life into the building and kept alive the continued chronicles of a still-significant facet of Sikkim's history that would have otherwise morphed itself for the last time into an anachronism.

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An Architectural Perspective



Buildings & Housing Department, Government of Sikkim,
with inputs from K.C. PRADHAN

The Raj Bhavan is still a quintessentially English house in the growing urban sprawl of Gangtok.

THE RAJ BHAVAN, the official residence of His Excellency the Governor of Sikkim in Gangtok, is perched on the ridge above Gangtok town, the Raj Bhawan, nestled within the lush woods with a splendid view of Mt. Khangchendzonga. It is one of the surviving sentiments of the British Colonial-style architecture; truly one of the oldest and most beautiful structures in Gangtok.

The imposing building located in the north-east corner of Gangtok is a sprawling complex covering a total area of 75 acres (23 hectares) approximately.

White and his wife, Jessie Georgina (called Nina) shared the English passion for gardens and gardening. Their first love was roses, White recounts that the Residency garden was *“a great joy and an everlasting source of amusement and employment”* for both of them.

He comments on the beautiful green lawns they enjoyed even in winter, the profusion of early spring bloom “seldom seen in England”, the delicate mauve of the abundant wisteria on the house-which still stands rambling on the walls with a profusion of cascading blooms in spring- and the wealth of roses that “*flowered in such profusion, thousands of blooms could be gathered without making the smallest impression.*”

He also recollects how his office was covered in roses and was an exceptional sight: “*Perhaps the most beautiful sight was my office, a building a few hundred yards from the house, which was completely covered, roof and chimney included, with roses, and was a sight worth coming miles to see.*”

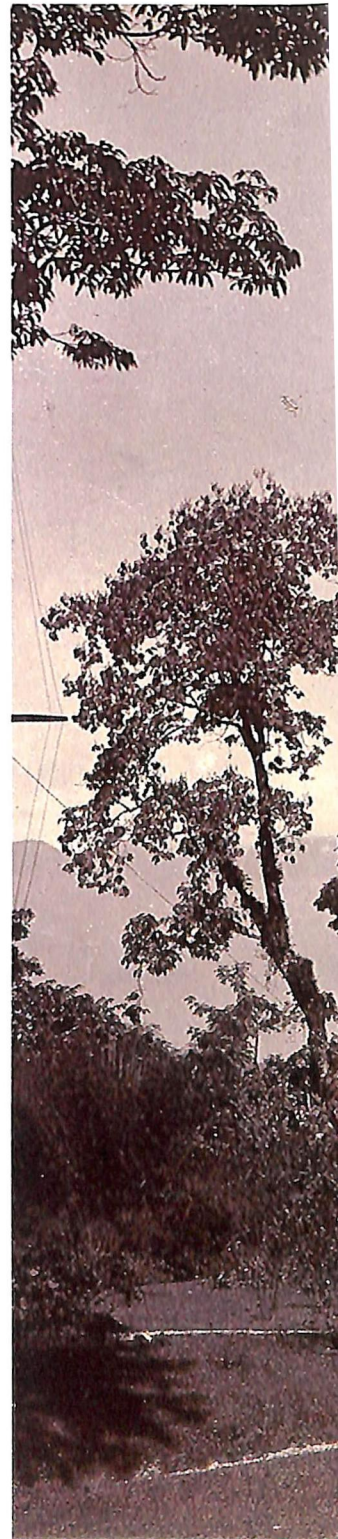
White introduced large cultivars of roses from France that found their way to many a home, rest houses and monasteries in Sikkim besides gardens in Yatung, Gyantse and Lhasa in Tibet, the royal house of Bhutan and the nearby houses of Kalimpong and Darjeeling. He also sourced the Sikkim lily (*Lilium wallichianum*) from Dzongu in North Sikkim. This draped the hillsides in breathtaking beauty every summer with its nodding, glistening, white, fragrant flowers.

Perceval Landon, reporter for the *Times of London*, wrote about visiting the Residency in 1904: “*Through the tree ferns and the bamboos of the drive one emerges into the English roses and clean, short turf of Mrs. Claude White’s home-made Paradise. The Residency brings a whiff of English into this far distant country. It is a substantial and handsome little building of stone, roofed in red of such a well-remembered tint that it is some time before one realizes that tiles are impossible at Gangtok. Hitherto it has been the end of all northern travel in India, and it must have been curious for the rare travelers who made demands on Claude White’s famous hospitality, to find this dainty gem of a house, furnished from Oxford Street within, and without encircled with the tree ferns and orchids of this exquisite valley. It is a perfect spot. Far off to the west rise the pinnacles of Nursing and Pandim; to the north there hangs in heaven that most exquisite of peaks of earth, Siniolchu.*”

The Residency stood out in the local context. John Claude White remembers it piqued much interest in the local population, many of whom had never seen European furniture and were keen to see how Europeans lived: “*Almost every market day little bands of women dressed in their best clothes would arrive with a few eggs or a pat of butter to make their salaams to my wife and a request that they might be allowed to go over the house, and their progress was marked with exclamations and gurgles of laughter at the strange ways of the Sahib-log.*”

Kurt W. Meyer, Swiss-American architect and Fellow Emeritus, American Institute of Architects reminiscences: “*In 2001, the Governor of Sikkim invited me to tour the interior of the Residency and to stroll its spacious grounds. An extra wing has been added but the building is still today a handsome English manor house that retains the character which Mr. and Mrs. Claude White was so proud to share with visitors.*”

Interestingly, it has now become apparent that the house was modelled on the lines of an English country house in Ambleside in the English Lake District where Claude White spent some of his childhood days with his grandmother, Mrs. Claude while his parents were away in India. He and his wife, Jessie Georgina, spent their honeymoon in the Lake District in September 1876 and would have seen, perhaps even visited, this house which is now a hotel named The Rothay Garth.



The Residency, by Charles Bell.
Liverpool Museum



Claude White studied engineering for two years (1874-76) at the Royal Indian Engineering College at Cooper's Hill in Staines, near London, where architecture and photography were offered as optional subjects. Taking these courses would account for his impressive photographic ability and would also have ingrained in him the concept of building that he drew on when constructing the Residency.

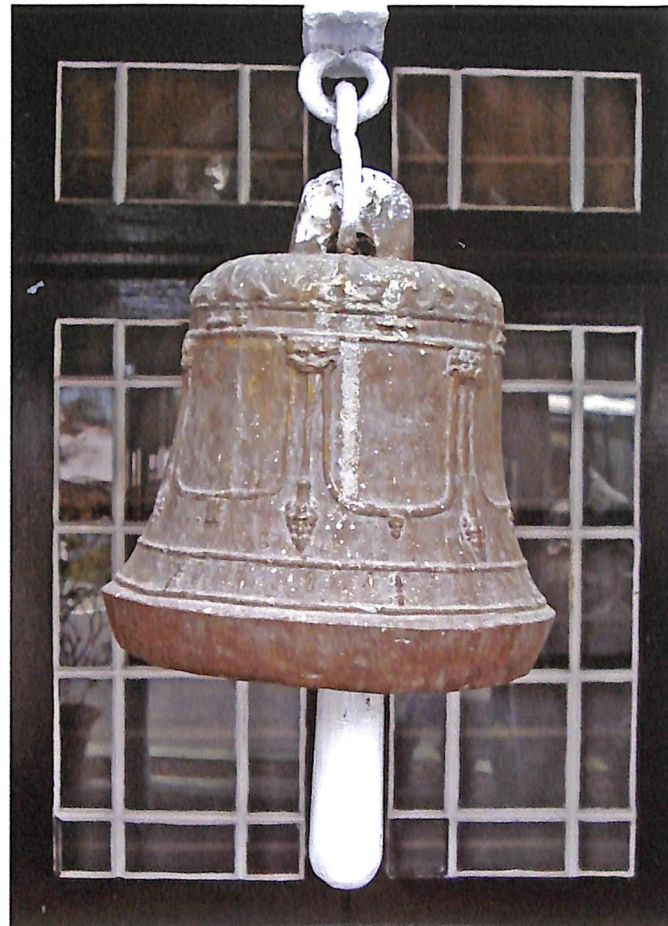
This meticulously planned structure is magnificently-proportioned. This is a two-storied building with a small part of it in single-storey.

The well-manicured lawn in front of the building and towards the East and South adds to the grandeur of the structure. During 127 years of its existence, the structure has undergone some additions and alterations towards the north-east and west sides although no significant changes have been carried out on its natural decorations, lighting and furniture and fixtures.

The details as described hereunder are exclusive of the later additions and alterations. The two-storied structure's steep gable roofs, finely dressed stone façade and large windows highlight its distinct architectural style, resembling a small English country house. It was constructed mostly of locally available materials: chisel-dressed stone masonry, load-bearing walls with mud reinforced with jute as mortars (not so much of a binding material but as filler for cavities), timber flooring along with open-gable roof trusses, doors and windows and tin-sheet roofing. The other elements of interest in the building include fire places, lintels and wooden panels covered with traditional designs, roof underlay of timber splits etc. The inside plaster could possibly have been originally of lime mortar which has now been replaced with cement plaster.

The ground floor consisted of an entry porch and a covered verandah- that still exists- where Mrs. White planted a Wisteria which is now of immense proportions, with the front door leading to a large hallway and a grand wooden staircase facing the entrance. A door to the right lead to the large drawing room which is presently the Governor's office. A fireplace dominated this room and the bay windows overlooked the lush gardens. A rear door lead to the dining room which is presently the library. In those days, the kitchen was normally built as a separate structure with a covered verandah connecting to the dining room in the main building which must have been the case here. The side door lead to a corridor with a pantry and a toilet. A guest room (presently the drawing room) opposite the old drawing room entrance, had an attached bathroom (presently the waiting room). The smaller room behind could have been the laundry and store.

The first floor, reached by the grand staircase, contained another large drawing room (presently the living room), entered from the landing. A large fireplace dominated this room. A rear door lead to a bedroom (presently the master bedroom) with its own bathroom. Directly opposite to the drawing room entrance was the master bedroom (presently the additional bedroom) with an attached bathroom.



The bell is a constant fixture in all the old photographs of the Residency and still survives to this day at the present Raj Bhavan.
Photograph: Pema Wangchuk

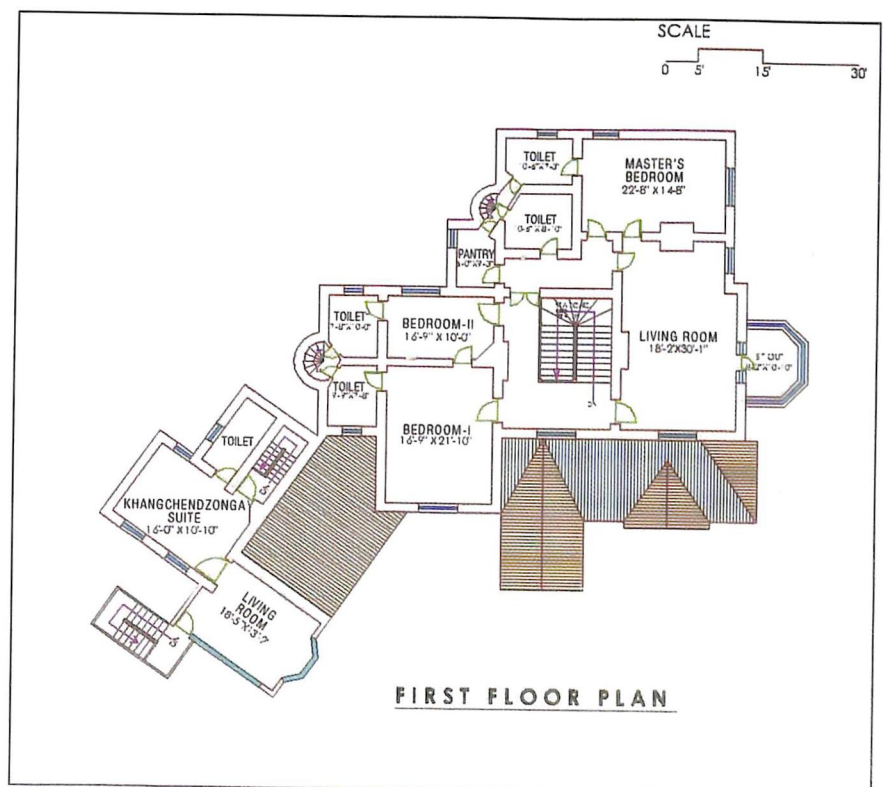
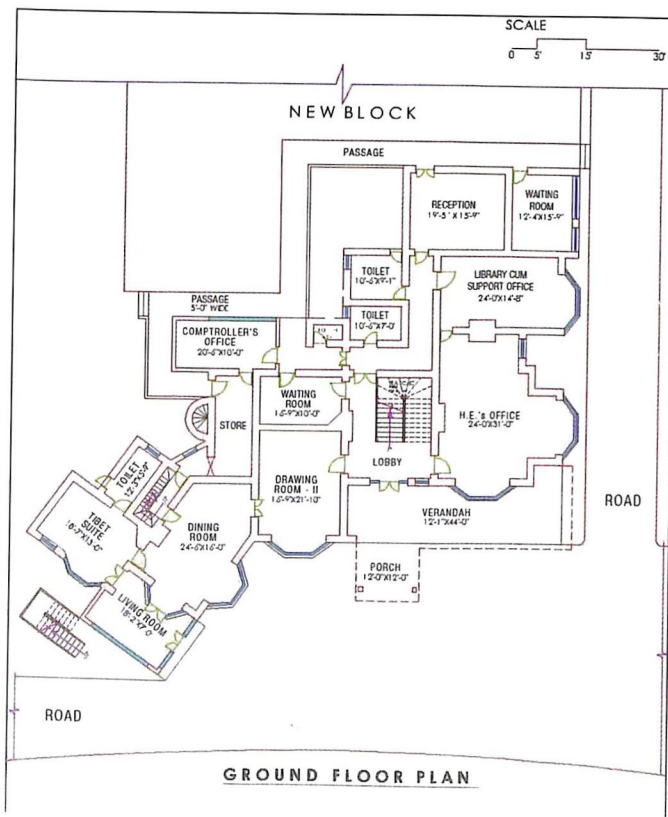
The smaller room behind this (also a bed room at the moment) also had its own bathroom. Perhaps the Whites' daughter, Beryl, slept here. The small room behind the staircase could have been the linen store room and a smaller pantry connected by circular stairs from the ground floor. The British were fastidious about segregating the movement of the servants from the household and built such ingenious service connectivities.

Studying the old photographs of the building, it is obvious that all other parts of the building as it stands today are later additions after the British ceased to live there. Knowing the taste and style of the officers of the British Raj, the furnishings and decor of the interiors could have been splendidly done befitting the high rank of the Political Officer whose influence extended to Bhutan and Tibet beside Sikkim itself. John Claude White's residence stood out proudly to illustrate the dominance and strength of the British Raj of the times - as it still does.

The Raj Bhawan

The total plinth area of the building is now 9135 sqft. There is a large sitting room towards the north-east and office for the Governor to the south of the grand wooden staircase in the ground floor. The other rooms in the ground floor include support office/library for the office of the Governor, large dining room adjacent to the sitting room, small waiting room, office rooms for junior staff, store and waiting areas. One residential suite, known as Tibet Suite, is on the ground floor. There are three bedrooms in the first floor, named Teesta, Bhutan and Lachen. There are many washrooms on both floors.

Floor plans of the Raj Bhawan as it exists today.



The Governor's 661 sq. ft office is on the ground floor. An antique gun and a photograph of Mahatma Gandhi in golden frame adorn the walls. Like all the rooms, it has wooden floors and ceiling and pristine white walls.

Adjacent to the Governor's office is the library-cum-support office, also painted white and with a wooden floor and ceiling. A large wooden rack stacked with books and records dominates the 498 sq. ft room.

Also on the ground floor is the sitting room where the Governor receives visitors and holds small meetings. This boasts a traditional Sikkimese décor with wooden panels on the walls and local woodcraft designs on the doors and walls which imbue the room with a warm welcoming feeling. The walls are adorned with numerous photographs. It is finished like other rooms and is 400 sq. ft.

The simple and elegant dining room, which is 473 sq. ft., is adjacent to the small sitting room. It is used for hosting dinner and lunches.

The Tibet Suite is located in the north-east corner of the ground floor. This suite is reserved for the use of visiting dignitaries of VVIP status like the President, the Vice-President and the Prime Minister when they are on tour to the State.

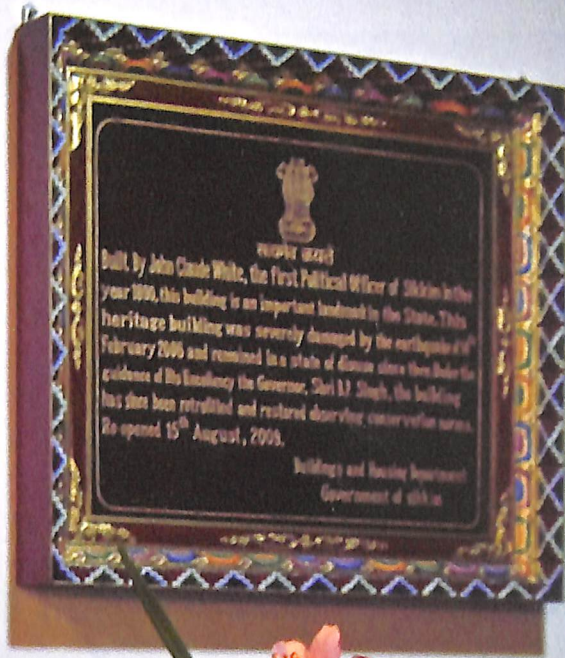
Two of the three guest rooms– the Bhutan and Lachen guest rooms- are located in the north-east corner of the first floor. The Bhutan and Lachen guest rooms are 365 sq. ft. and 163 sq. ft. respectively. The Teesta suite, located in the west-south wing of the first floor, is for the private use of the Governor, and has a sitting and dining room. All three guest rooms have wooden floors and ceilings and the masonry walls are plastered and painted white.

There are two small waiting rooms located adjacent to the visitors' waiting room and office of the house hold on the ground floor. These rooms are used for visitors other than the special invitees.

The structure of the house was severely damaged by the earthquake of 14 February, 2006. Extensive retrofitting works were carried out by M/s Building Diagnostics & Solutions, a Mumbai-based firm and the historic building has now been restored to its former glory.

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Retrofitting



THE EDITORIAL TEAM

ON 14 FEBRUARY, 2006 a major earthquake shook Sikkim, gravely damaging the Raj Bhavan, rendering it structurally unfit for further habitation. As a temporarily measure, the residence of the Governor was re-located to the State Circuit House. Meanwhile, based on the assessment done by some technical experts, the State Government took a decision to construct a new Raj Bhavan.

However, when Shri B.P. Singh took over as the new Governor of the State in July 2008, on his advice and guidance, a fresh assessment of the damage to the Raj Bhavan was done. His Excellency was very keen that the old building be preserved with all its history intact. The State Government too agreed to the proposal and subsequently took a decision (vide Cabinet memo. 124/GOS/B & H (Raj Bhavan) 2008-09/II/997 dated 09.02.09) to retrofit and restore the old Raj Bhavan in a most scientific manner to give it a fresh lease of life.

The Raj Bhavan before the 14 February 2006 earthquake that damaged it, resulting in it being called structurally unsafe.



Facing Page: Retrofitting of the Raj Bhavan was undertaken to restore the structural health of the heritage building which was fragile and deficient in many places, particularly in and around the openings.

Prior to retrofitting works, the roof was leaking in many places. Roof sheets were replaced with 18BWG galvanised sheets of TISCO.

To initiate and advise the retrofitting work, an Advisory Committee with technical experts was constituted. The Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage (INTACH) was also involved in the process.

The retrofitting works entailed two main efforts- first, the retrofitting of Raj Bhavan and second, heritage conservation of Raj Bhavan. The latter work was taken up by the Buildings & Housing Department, Government of Sikkim while the retrofitting work was entrusted to M/s Building Diagnostics and Solution, a Mumbai- based company. A consultant, Professor Abhijit Mukherjee of Thapar University, Patiala was also engaged to make the retrofitting work technically and economically sound duly keeping intact the original design and shape of the building.

One member of a team of 100 workers that worked 18 hours a day in December, 2008 on the retrofitting of the Raj Bhavan. Carbon laminates were provided below the lintels of doors and windows.



The strengthening and restoration work involved the following:

1. Construction of a RCC diaphragm slab on the top.
2. Creation of bands on the roof and lintel level aided by CFRP wraps.
3. Strengthening the damaged walls and replacing the fractured stones.
4. Stress concentration in pillar strips.

The conservation work included construction of RCC diaphragm, concrete cornices mixed with micro concrete, dowel bar, wire netting and wooden cornices, parquet flooring with melamine finish checkered tiles, construction of drainage system, external and internal paintings, sanitary fittings, firefighting equipments, installation of Head Pump variable refrigeration flow (VRF) and air-conditioners and marine board ply with high density polyethylene (HDPE) sheet below slab.

The Raj Bhavan is the first building in Sikkim to incorporate total seismic retrofitting. Analysis done using sophisticated computer software reveals that the newly restored building can now withstand much greater seismic pressure. Concurrently, maximum care was taken to preserve and retain the originality of the Raj Bhavan.

It is to the credit of Shri B.P. Singh, present Governor of Sikkim that we now have the old building still standing in all its majestic grandeur with its history and heritage still intact. Had the building been dismantled as per the earlier decision, the State would not only have lost a heritage building but its links to the past would also have been severed. After the completion of the new Raj Bhavan, certain section of this historical edifice may possibly be converted to a heritage museum based on the Tamil Nadu model and in keeping with existent heritage laws of the country.

Facing Page: The newly spruced-up Raj Bhavan after the completion of retro-fitting works. His Excellency's brief was that 'the life of the upgraded structure should be for at least another 100 years.'



Her Excellency, Smt. Pratibha Devi Singh Patil, President of India planting Rhododendron during her visit to Raj Bhawan, Sikkim on 16th April, 2010



View of Raj Bhavan campus

Flora & Fauna

USHA LACHUNGPA and SUDHIZONG LUCKSOM



Indian Tortoiseshell on *Magnolia campbelli*.
photo: Usha Lachungpa

THE VERY WORD '*Biodiversity*' means the 'variety of life'. Sikkim is famous world-wide as a renowned hotspot of biodiversity and, despite its small size, perhaps the richest anywhere in various life forms. Few realize that the survival of humanity is not possible without the diversity of other life on this planet. Biodiversity is life insurance for life itself. We need this diversity to feed, clothe and shelter us as well as keep us sane and healthy.

Flora

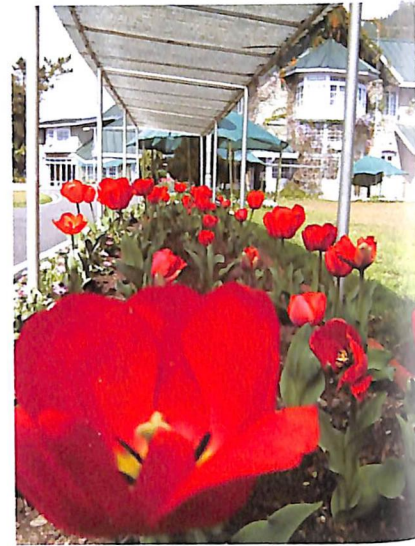
The biodiversity profile of Sikkim, both wild as well as domesticated, is enriched with more than 4,500 flowering plants, more than 523 species of wild, indigenous orchids, around 28 species of bamboos, seven species of canes, more than 350 species of ferns, around 600 species of

birds, more than 700 butterflies, possibly over 2000 moths, virtually- unaccounted-for beetles, and other insects, including micro-organisms both on land, in the very air and in water.

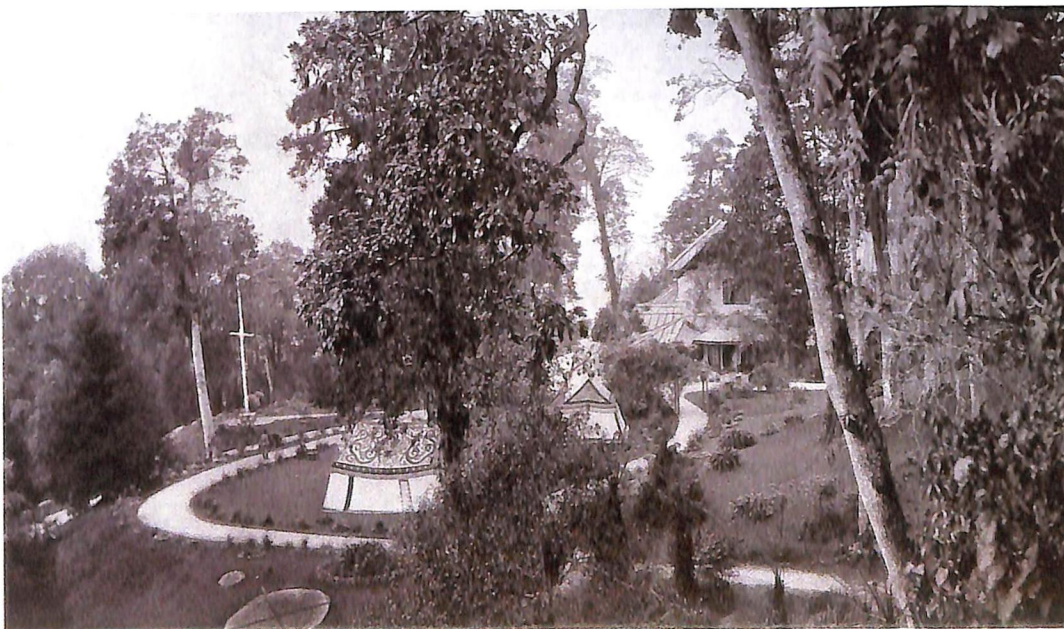
'Raj Bhavan', a name steeped in history for most and in mystery for the common man, is an exclusive area secluded from the hustle and bustle of daily life. Not many are privy to this part of Gangtok, hidden away behind a forested screen from the main road. The famed erstwhile Residency gardens still includes a trailing Wisteria with its blue showers of flowers planted by White himself 120 years ago at the entrance of the house he built. Later European occupants introduced bulbous flowers like Daffodils and Narcissus. Today, the area still has well-tended lawns and gardens with seasonal exotic flowers and hybrid orchids as well as many species of trees like Rhododendrons and Magnolias.

John Claude White sent Sikkim's Crown Prince Sidkeong Tulku to Oxford for higher education, which effort culminated with the formal demarcation of Sikkim's forests by the Crown Prince. Thus started the perhaps unparalleled era of modern forestry in Sikkim vis-à-vis the rest of the country. Sikkim has a long history of conservation and sustainable use of natural resources. The laws, policies and programmes of the later years are rooted in those strong conservation ethics responsible for the survival to this day of Sikkim's extensive forest and wildlife protected area network making it the best in the country. The documentation of the extant flora and fauna of Raj Bhavan is a long-felt need and will hopefully be put to good use by the readers.

The original biodiversity that existed over almost 300 acres of the Residency included, among others, large Oaks, Chestnuts, Michelias, the beautiful Ironwood (*Symingtonia populnea*) locally called 'Pipli', all useful for timber, fuel-wood and fodder; smaller trees like a native Olive (*Elaeocarpus lanceaefolius*) called 'Bhadrasey', fragrant shrubs like *Daphne involucrata* used for making a local paper and thick groves of bamboo useful for making mats as well as arrows. In the 1920s, British Political Officer in Sikkim, Lieutenant Colonel F. M. Bailey collected and planted many interesting plants. Interestingly, his predecessor, Sir Charles Bell, as far back as



Tulips provide a startling burst of colour in the Raj Bhavan greenhouse.



Photograph shows tents pitched on the Residency Lawns. Courtesy King's College, London.

1915, maintained a lot of green cover in the Residency Compound to keep the water supply pure.

As part of the lower edge of temperate forest, this area is the ideal zone for Oaks, Chestnuts, Indian Mahogany (*Toona*) and the Magnolia relative *Michelia*. These need to be encouraged as they are native to the area and help maintain biodiversity. *Katus* (*Castanopsis*), a fuel wood species, only needs protection from lopping or topping while *Toona* and the Walnut relative *Engelhardtia* are good for supporting scores of orchids, ferns, mosses and wildlife. In some places, judicious extraction of very tall trees of *Uttis* or Himalayan Alder (*Alnus nepalensis*), and *Dhupi* or Japanese Cedar (*Cryptomeria japonica*) would become necessary to give way to smaller plants more suited to maintenance of urban biodiversity. The existing flora marked for extraction, could be wisely utilized- *Toona*, *Castanopsis* for beams in place of Sal (*Shorea robusta*), planks of *Alnus*, and shuttering using *Betula* or Birch.

The diversity of life forms in the Raj Bhavan Complex is to be seen to be believed. The entire complex of almost 10 hectares at an altitude of about 1800m, is contiguous at its upper end and to its east with Ganeshtok-Pinetum-cum-Smritivan and the Himalayan Zoological Park at Bulbuley; this links further up with the Rately Chu

Rhododendron arboreum, known locally as Lali Gurañs, explodes with its characteristic blood red flowers against the backdrop of the Raj Bhavan. It provides firewood, the flowers provide juice and the wood is used to make handles of khukuris.



Reserve Forest (RF) almost all the way to the Cho La Range bordering the Chumbi Valley. At its lower end and to its west, it links up the last green lung of Gangtok, the Forest Colony at Balwakhani, going further down to the Rani Khola (River) separating it from the bird-rich Fambong Lho Wildlife Sanctuary (WLS). It thus forms a vital part of the forested Oxygen-Bank and more importantly, Water-Bank on which depends the very survival of the State capital, Gangtok. It is also part of an Important Bird Area, namely the Fambong Lho Wildlife Sanctuary – Himalayan Zoological Park – Ratey Chu Reserve Forest Complex and a vital link along the East-Asian flyway for migratory birds.

Floral Diversity includes various species of native and exotic trees like Oaks, Chestnuts, Himalayan Alder, Rhododendrons, Magnolias, Michelias, Japanese Cedar (*Cryptomeria japonica*), autumn-flowering Cherry (*Prunus cerasoide*); shrubs like the paper-yielding *Edgeworthia gardneri* with its attractive blossoms hanging in small yellow bunches, a magnet for various bird species; the thorny Yellow Himalayan Raspberry (*Rubus ellipticus*) bushes with tasty berries, and the inedible red and yellow varieties of the exotic Night Queen or 'Raat-Raani' (*Cestrum*) shrubs with their white and red berries respectively. Many varieties of attractive ferns including the large primitive Tree-Fern and fern-allies like *Selaginella*, *Lycopodium* and *Equisetum* green the edges and untended nooks of the complex. Many of the large old *Engelhardtia spicata* trees with their long inflorescences and winged seeds can be seen festooned

Tree Fern in the
Raj Bhavan complex
photo: Sudhizong Lucksoo





Rhododendron arboreum
in bloom at Raj Bhavan.
photo: ND Bhutia



Himalayan Squirrel.
photo: Usha Lachungpa



with varieties of epiphytes like the orchids *Pleione*, *Dendrobium*, the red-flowered *Agapetes serpens*, climbers like *Raphidophora*, the itchy *Mucuna*, large and small ferns, mosses and lichens.

Bamboo diversity can be seen in species like *Sinarundinaria intermedia*, *Sinarundinaria hookeriana* and *Dendrocalamus hamiltoni*. Many Japanese bamboos introduced by Crown Prince Sidkeong Tulku on his return home via Japan have been planted in the Residency compound. Many exotic shrubs have also flourished well over the century, providing valuable shelter to small birds and animals. The ground flora consists of varieties of grasses and herbs including some valuable medicinal plants like *Artemisia vulgaris* and *Astilbe rivularis*. Many seasonal flowering plants like Calendulas, Petunias, Asters, Marigolds, Primulas, Sweet Peas, Lilies, Roses, Hybrid Orchids, Tulips, Daffodils, Carnations and Calla Lily (*Zantedeschia aethiopica*) are lovingly maintained by the Raj Bhavan gardeners, providing splashes of colour on the lawns, while the heady scents of the large-flowered *Michelia doltsopa* trees flavour the air delicately. A rare annual treat is the *Rhododendron arboreum* in flower, its blood-red blossoms lighting up this lovely tree, truly an incandescent gift of nature. The place was a great plant introduction and experimental centre. From here, many plants of gardening merit found their way to Tibet and Bhutan as well as the nearby towns of

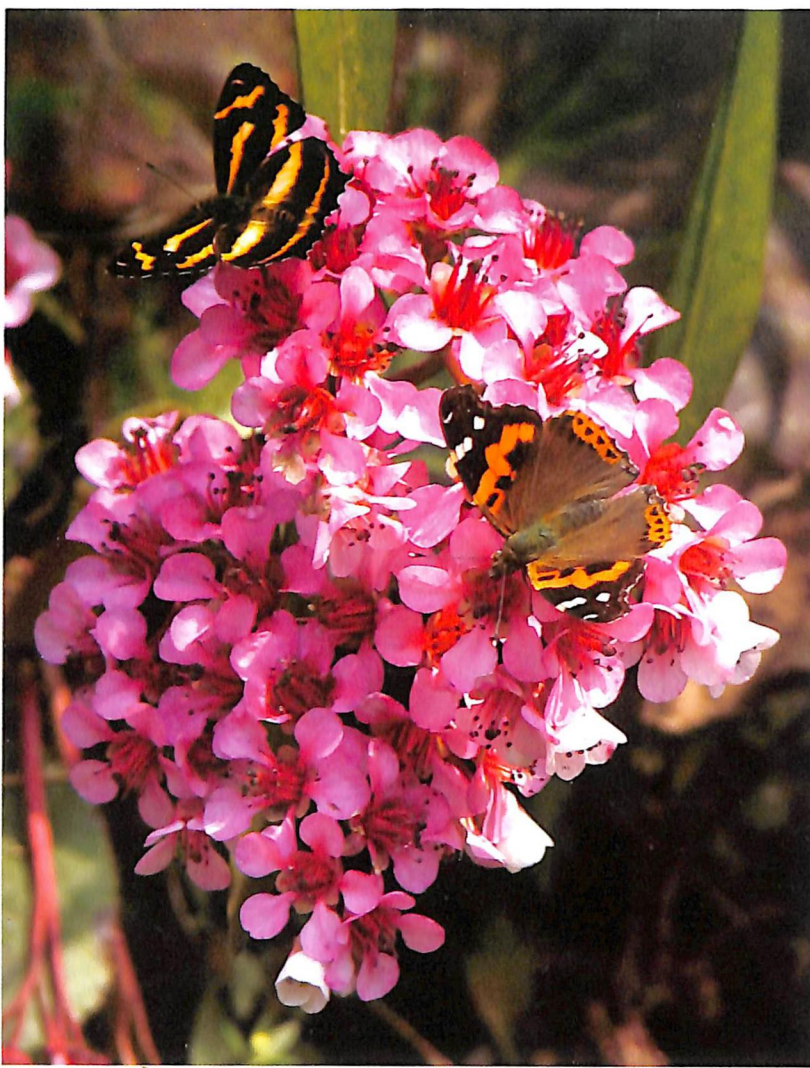
White-rumped Munia,
Lonchura striata
photo: Karma Zimpa



Crimson-tailed marsh Hawk.
photo: Usha Lachungpa



Blue-winged Minla
photo: Usha Lachungpa



Himalayan Jester and Indian Red Admiral on *Berginea ciliata*.
photo: Usha Lachungpa



Mrs. Gould's Sunbird. photo: Usha Lachungpa



Megophrid Frog. photo: Usha Lachungpa

Rufous Sibia *Heterophasia capistrata*. photo: Usha Lachungpa

Kalimpong and Darjeeling, reflected in the large number of cultivars of English and French roses that can be seen all over the region.

Fauna

Faunal Diversity includes a variety of small mammals, birds, reptiles, amphibians, butterflies, moths, beetles, dragonflies and many other insects that are part of this Important Bird Area or IBA which includes the Gangtok township. The most commonly seen animal is the Himalayan Squirrel *Dremomys lokriah*. The occasional Large Palm Civet (*Paguma larvata*) locally called 'Kala' can be seen clambering on the *Engelhardtia* trees. Yellow-throated Martens or 'Malsapro' have also been seen here as are the smaller weasels, which chase after small birds and mice. The most magnificent, however, are the rarer Flying Squirrels (*Petaurista magnificus*) locally called 'Rajpankhi'. Occasionally, some Barking Deer and Jackal also stray into the fringes of the complex from surrounding forested areas or can be heard at dawn or at night.

The most easily-sighted wildlife, however, is the large numbers of birds seen and heard within the complex and surrounding areas. The first bird that comes to mind when one thinks of Raj Bhavan is the bold and vocal *Rufous Sibia* locally called 'Charcharey' with its black cap, brick-coloured body and daring low-flying stunts. The earliest to call at around 4.30 am are at least four species of owls including the Himalayan Wood Owl, Collared Scops Owl, Jungle and Barred Owlets. These silent predators keep the complex clear of rats and mice providing a valuable but free service. As the sky lightens, the Raj Bhavan wakes to a dawn chorus of bird-song. The Great Barbet or 'Nyaul', Green-backed Tit or 'Chichinkotey', the blue-green Verditer Flycatcher or 'Hareni', the White-throated Fantail, various Laughing thrushes, Scimitar Babblers, Red-tailed and Blue-winged Minlas, Whiskered Yuhina, *Rufous Sibia*, Himalayan Treepie, Tree Sparrows, iridescent Sunbirds are but some of the glamorous birdlife. At least ten species of Cuckoos, a parasitic species of bird that lays its eggs in other birds' nests, can be heard in the spring season here. Some are easy to recognize by their distinct calls such as the Large Hawk-Cuckoo calling "Brain-fever, Brain-fever" incessantly. In February-March, one can hear Bar-headed Geese and other water birds flying overhead in the dark, on return migration to their northern breeding grounds across the mighty Himalayas. Their calls in flight give them the local name 'Karrang-Kuruung'.

As the day brightens and warms up, the manicured flowerbeds, lawns and other areas of the complex attract varieties of butterflies. The most common among these are the Indian Tortoiseshell, Indian Red Admiral, Himalayan and Common Jesters that breed on Stinging Nettle shrubs. Golden, Azure and Purple Sapphire butterflies fly like living jewels, giving little indication that their life cycles depend on underground dwelling ants, while the Common Five-Ring and other brown-coloured butterflies prefer the more shaded bamboo brakes and grassy patches. One can see the sun-loving Tortoiseshell, a territorial butterfly, chasing away the much larger Swallowtails like Red Helen and Spangle straying into their basking areas.

A sighting of the red and blue dragonflies and golden-green damselflies are a sure sign that the nearby water sources are clean and fresh. These 'tigers of the air' are

a wonderful biological control for mosquitoes in summer. The diversity of spiders, another of nature's marvels and silent predators of annoying flies and mosquitoes, is astonishing. This season is also good for various species of beetles, bugs, praying mantises like Stick-Insects, moths, grasshoppers and crickets.

Occasionally in the vegetation, one might be lucky to spot a Japalura lizard like a miniature green dinosaur or a shiny Skink chasing after insects. Other reptiles known to occur but seldom seen in the complex are Rat Snakes, Himalayan Pit Vipers and Cobras. One may also find the harmless but beautiful Glass Snake or Glass Lizard (*Ophiosaurus gracilis*) gracing the area, its back shining an electric blue pattern. These beautiful but shy creatures also provide silent yeoman service to humanity. Smaller snakes like the Guenther's Oriental Slender Snake or Rose-belly Worm-eating Snake (*Trachesium guentherii*) form valuable food for birds such as the Blue Whistling Thrush which is perhaps Raj Bhavan's best songster.

The most familiar amphibians in the complex are the Himalayan Bullfrog (*Paa liebigii*), Himalayan Broad-skulled Toad (*Duttaphrynus himalayana*), and some species of tree-frogs; the latter's 'tic-tic-tic' calls providing nightlong orchestras during the monsoon breeding season.

The entire complex being strategically located, one can get grand panoramic views of the mighty Khangchendzonga Range, India's highest and the world's third highest mountain peak, but more importantly, the abode of Sikkim's Guardian Deity. This, combined with the fresh clean air, calm serenity and soothing weather makes the Gangtok Raj Bhavan complex a perfectly hidden paradise worthy of all the care and love lavished on its maintenance. It is indeed a treasure and pride of Sikkim.

Many hidden treasures are lost to humankind simply because the general populace is not aware of their presence and hence not able to appreciate the need for their conservation. This hidden treasure needs to be brought to the notice of the layperson and added to the eco-tourism initiatives of the Government of Sikkim, besides highlighting the role of gardeners, foresters and the general populace in safeguarding this important piece of Sikkim's heritage.