



ANDREW DUFF

VINTAGE

'Masterly and accessible'
Prajwal Parajuly

SIKKIM

REQUIEM FOR
HIMALAYAN KINGDOM

'A remarkable piece of detective work . . . exceptionally
well-written' Michael Burleigh

This is the incredible true story of Sikkim, a fairy-tale kingdom in the Himalayas that survived the end of the British Empire in India only to be annexed by India in 1975. *Sikkim: Requiem for a Himalayan Kingdom* tells the remarkable story of Thondup, the handsome last King of Sikkim, and his young and beautiful American queen, Hope Cooke, thrust unwittingly into the spotlight as they sought support for Sikkim's independence after their wedding in 1963. But as tensions between India and China spilled over into war in the Himalayas, Sikkim became a pawn in the Cold War ideological battle that played out in Asia during the 1960s and 1970s.

Rumours circulated that Hope was a CIA spy. Meanwhile, a shadowy Scottish adventuress, the Kazini of Chakung, married to Sikkim's leading political figure, coordinated opposition to the Palace. As the geopolitical tectonic plates of the Himalayas ground together, Sikkim never stood a chance. Thondup died a broken man in 1982; Hope returned to New York; Sikkim began a new phase as India's twenty-second state.

Based on exclusive interviews and new archival research, this is a thrilling, romantic and informative glimpse of life in a lost paradise.



Andrew Duff is a freelance journalist based in London and Scotland who writes on India and related subjects. In the UK, his work has appeared in *The Times*, the *Financial Times* and the *Sunday Telegraph*, and in India in the *Times of India* and the *India Quarterly*. He travels frequently in India and East Asia.

SIKKIM

REQUIEM FOR
A HIMALAYAN KINGDOM

ANDREW DUFF



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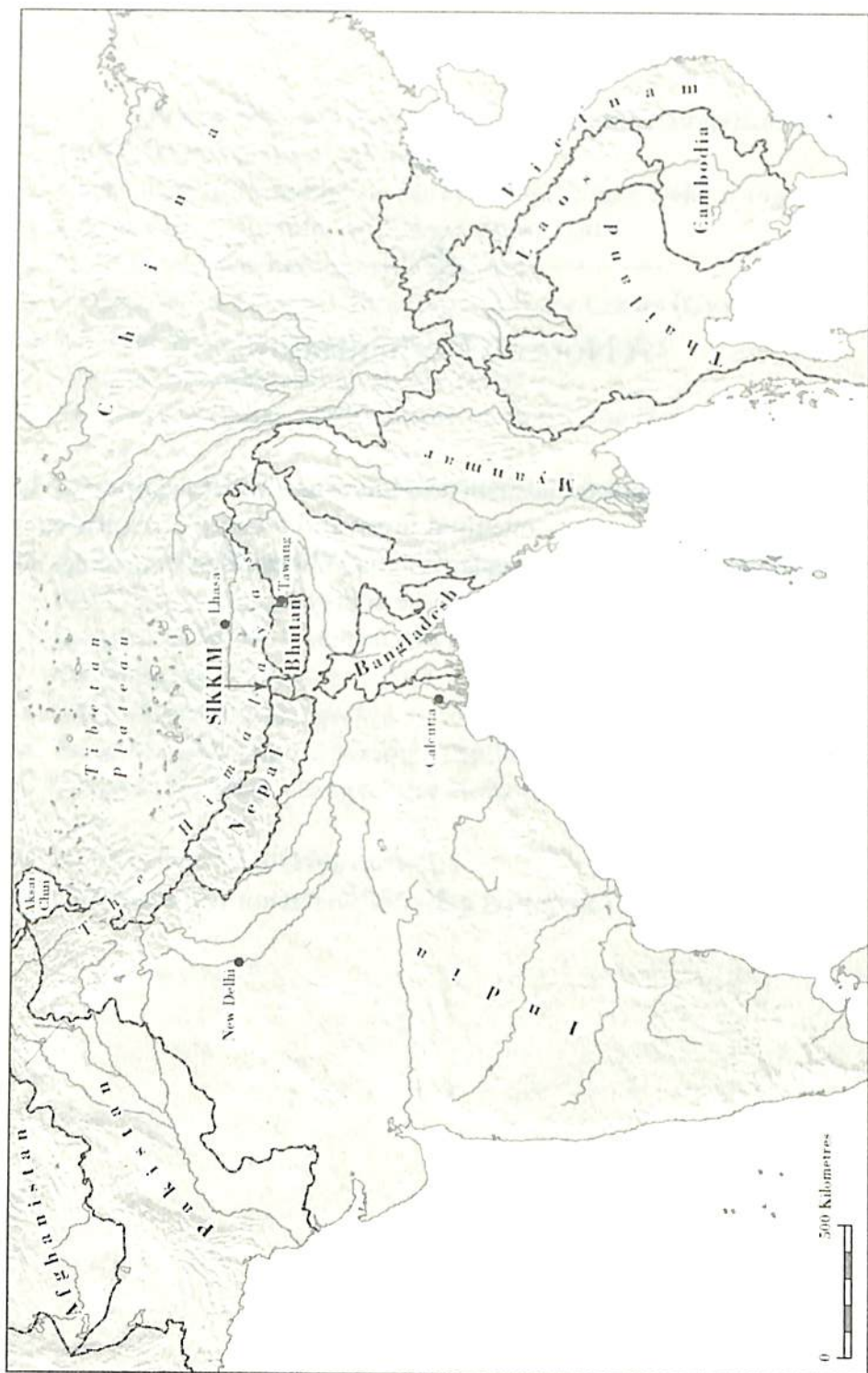
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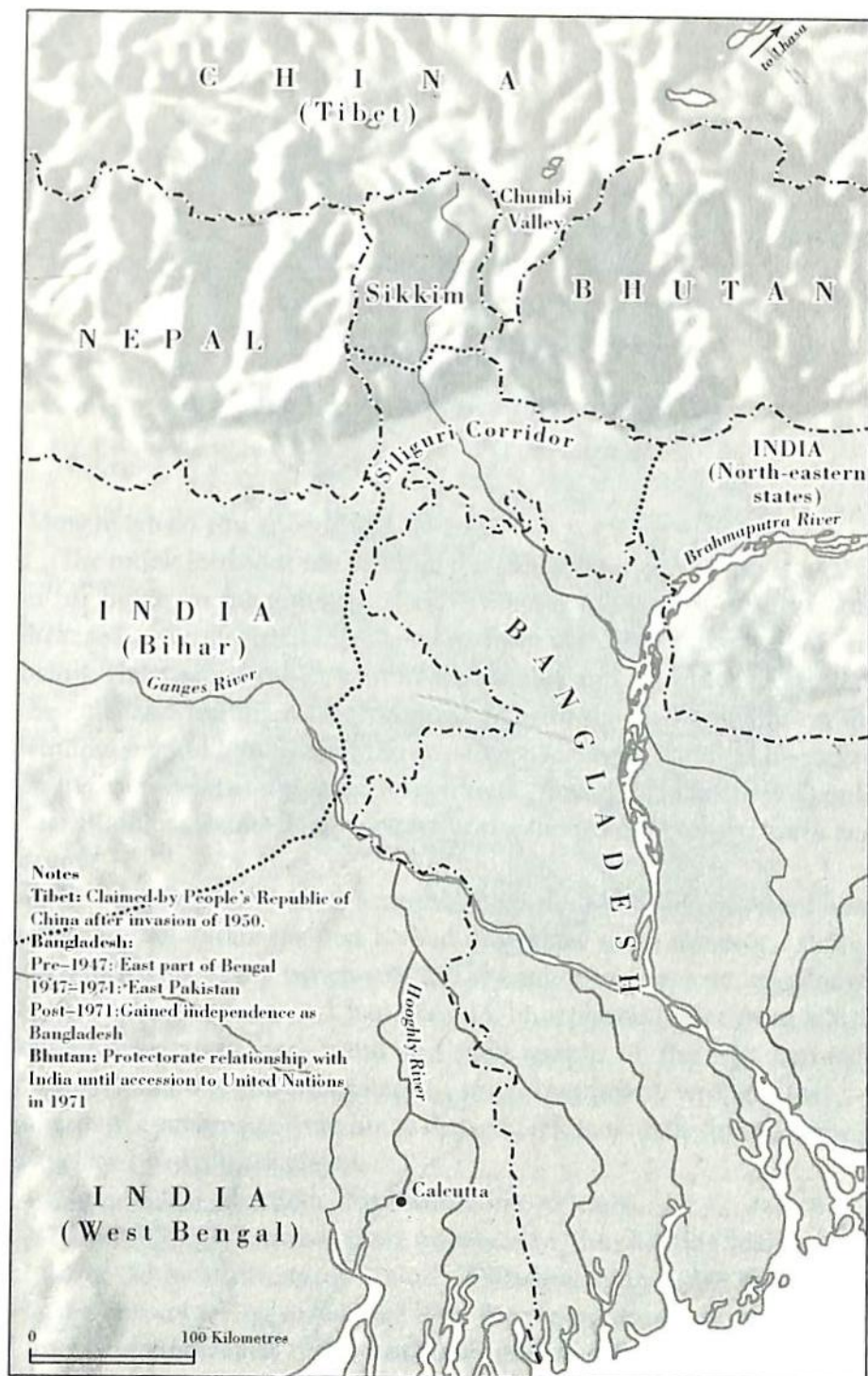


A Note on Romanisation

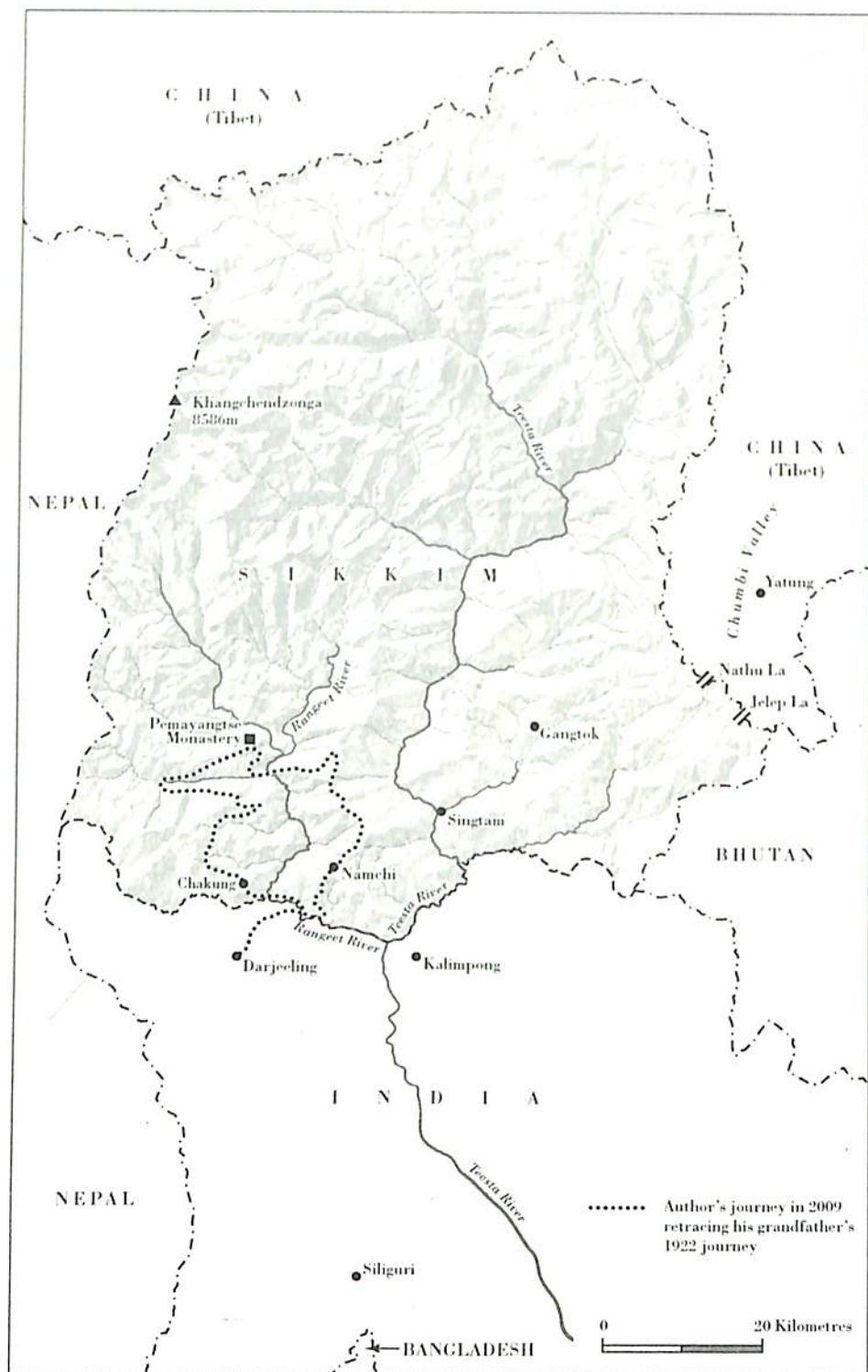
For non-English words in the main text, I have used what I consider to be the most usual up-to-date romanised forms and focused on consistency rather than following one particular system. Where different spellings are included in quoted text, I have left these as they stand.



Sikkim: at the heart of Asia



Sikkim's complex geopolitical position



Sikkim



Introduction

April 2009, Pemayangtse Monastery, Sikkim

‘How much do you know about Sikkim?’

The monk looked at me through the fading light, across the low table in his home on the grounds of Pemayangtse Monastery. A single bulb flickered as the electricity struggled up from the valley thousands of feet below. His maroon robes, trimmed with blue and gold brocade around the cuffs and buttoned front, contrasted with the peeling paint on the window behind him. He left the question hanging in the air as he picked up his soup bowl and slurped its contents. Through the window I could hear Buddhist chants floating out over the sounds of cymbals, horns and drums.

The words, spoken in an accented English unlike any I’d heard elsewhere in India, were the first he had spoken for some minutes. I shifted uncomfortably in my bench-seat as I thought of my sparse knowledge. On the table between us I had placed a blue plastic folder from which spilled my grandfather’s notes and photographs of the trek he made through Sikkim to this monastery in 1922. I supposed, wrongly, that my inheritance gave me permission to discuss Sikkim with the monk. Now it was clear I had miscalculated.

‘Not much,’ I admitted. ‘But I would like to learn . . .’

His hooded eyes rested on me impassively. The chanting had stopped and I could hear the steady sound of his breathing above the hum of electric current trying to feed the bulb. He picked up a book from beside him. I could just see its title: *Smash and Grab: Annexation of Sikkim*.

He tossed the book to me. 'Read this. It is banned in India. We speak tomorrow.'^{*}

Looking back now, it seems a bit odd that I didn't know more about Sikkim. By the time I met the monk, the place had been in my consciousness for over two decades.

My journey to the beautiful hilltop monastery of Pemayangtse started in the 1980s. I was a teenager, living in Edinburgh. As my paternal grandparents' minds began to fade, my parents moved them from St Andrews to live five doors down the road from us. I was happy: as their youngest grandchild, I had become close to them. Besides, they had around them the glow of something other, something different: they had spent most of their lives in India.

The move prompted a house clearance in St Andrews. Among the belongings that found their way into our house were a number of albums of photographs from India. I was captivated by all of them, but there was one album in particular that I would spend hours poring over. There was something physically pleasing about the weight and feel of this album. It was large and sturdy, about 18 inches wide by 12 inches tall. Inside the stout mid-brown leather cover, marked with over half a century of scratches, were two and a half inches of bound grey linen pages. It was, as my grandfather explained in a short note inside the front cover, 'strong rather than artistic' on account of its provenance: it had been made in Gourepore, the jute mill outside Calcutta where he worked in the 1930s.

The photographs inside were absorbing: most were from my grandfather's early bachelor years in Calcutta. Others showed by grandparents newly married in the 1930s. My father and aunt also featured, as small children soon to be sent home to Scotland as the prospect of war loomed.

I wanted to talk to my grandparents about the stories behind the photographs. I felt there was something deeply unfair about the way they were declining just as I became a curious teenager. It was clear that my grandfather cared deeply for India, in his own way. Every image on every page had been carefully outlined in ink with hand-drawn geometric designs. But it was the carefully inscribed titles for each photograph that fired my imagination. I wanted to know what it felt like to jump from the

^{*} In fact, the book was never banned, although, as the author Sunanda Datta-Ray explains in a new 2014 edition of the book, it was cleverly sidelined by the Indian authorities.

back of a canoe and swim in the river at Falta, to watch the monsoon break at Parasnath, to mess around burying his best friend J. E. Osmond in sand to look like Tutankhamun at Gopalpur. I wanted him to tell me about the elephants on the tea estate in Bhooteachang, about bathing naked and picnicking on fish in the Sunderbans. I wanted to ask him about the Garhwal Himalayas, the Pindari Glacier, about places with strange names like Shillong, Kalimpong, Darjeeling, Ranchi, Phalut.

But there was one word I wanted to ask him about more than anything else: Sikkim.

Each time I opened the album, it was the first word that confronted me. On the right-hand page, encased in elaborate stencils, was a single black-and-white photograph of a river rushing under a flimsy-looking bridge. On one side of the photo in large letters was written 'Sikkim'; on the other, 'Pujahs 1922'. On the facing page six typewritten sheets of yellowing note-paper had been carefully glued by their edges so that they overlapped. At the top of the first sheet: 'Notes on a Tour in Sikkim Oct. 1922'. The notes contained an account of a journey – a holiday – walking a ten-day circular route into the Sikkim Himalaya. The first eight pages were photographs of that journey, made when my grandfather was only 22 and had been in India for less than two years, but there had been other journeys through Sikkim, too, after my grandparents had married in 1929. There was a trip in 1932, again in 1934, and – perhaps most remarkably – one in 1938, when they trekked together over a 14,000-foot pass into Tibet.

But it was the 1922 journey that captured my imagination most. I must have read the matter-of-fact opening a hundred times: 'Our party consisted of four: Sinclair, who made most of the arrangements, Ewan, Ryrie and myself. We left Darjeeling after tiffin on October 15th, and arrived back there on the 25th.' There were details of costs, kit, the maps they used, even the stores they took (supplied by the Army and Navy stores in Calcutta). As I read the notes and built an impression from the photographs, I felt as if I was venturing with them deep into the Himalayas. Soon I knew the route description by heart. Place names such as Chakung, Rinchenpong and Dentam became embedded in my memory. I loved reading about the physically challenging landscape: there were constant reminders of 'steady tiring climbing', 'steep descents', more 'stiff climbs', descents of 5,000 feet that were described as 'likely to

be very tiring to the walker'. But the rewards were spelled out, too: rows and rows of tea plantations ('very pleasing after Bengal'), roaring rivers with 'the jade green water rushing amid massive boulders between the mountainous banks on either side', 'the snows peeping over the hills to the north' and finally, as they progressed deeper into the Himalayas, 'a magnificent view of the sun peeping over the whole range'.

It was the description and the photographs of the hilltop monastery that was their final destination – Pamionchi – that took the firmest hold on my mind. After five days of arduous trekking, the final approach at dusk – 'through dark and eerie woods, wind and silent', with monkeys 'the only animal life of any kind' – had clearly spooked my grandfather and his companions. That night they had been able to see 'the twinkling of the lights in Darjeeling . . . a pretty sight'. But it had not been till the following morning that they had fully appreciated the spectacular location of the monastery. They could see for miles in every direction. Most spectacularly, to the north, not more than a dozen miles, lay the peaks of the third-highest mountain in the world, Khangchendzonga, sacred to the lamas of Sikkim. The monastery, too, had made an impression – of a slightly different kind. They had found the temple a 'weird place' and the wall paintings 'extremely crude and pagan'. Nevertheless, it was clear from the black-and-white pictures that the imposing building, the monks and their houses had sparked the young men's curiosity – although there were limits: the monks failed in their effort to entice them into the upper floors of the monastery to see the 'treasures' for a fee of ten rupees: 'Remembering we were Scotch, and had a reputation to keep up, we contented ourselves with seeing downstairs only.'

The four men spent two days at the monastery before returning together to Darjeeling, staying in the Government of India-owned dak bungalows that the British had built across the Himalayas to allow a sufficient level of control. It had taken less than a fortnight. But the notes and photographs survived to fire my imagination more than half a century later. When my grandparents died within three months of each other in 1988, a seed was planted in my mind.

It took two decades for that seed to germinate.

In late 2008, I decided it was time. The first thing I needed to do was to look for Sikkim once again in the atlas. I almost missed it.

Nestled in between Nepal and Bhutan, Sikkim is tiny, about a third

of the size of Wales. In most atlases, the space is not even big enough to hold the six letters of Sikkim's name. It lies about two-thirds of the way along the Himalayas, the great white crescent of mountains that stretches for more than 1,800 miles from the steppes of central Asia to the tropical forests of Myanmar and South-east Asia. As I peered at the atlas I could see one very good reason why it had appealed to my grandfather: Sikkim lies almost due north of Calcutta.

In early 2009, I packed photocopies of the notes and photographs into my rucksack and set off for northern India. From Calcutta I travelled up to Siliguri, the junction town from where the Darjeeling Himalayan Railway snakes up into the hills, chugging gently into the mountains, covering no more than 50 miles in six hours. By the time we reached Darjeeling, the heat of the plains had been replaced by a persistent drizzle and a penetrating chill in the air, part of the attraction for the inhabitants of steamy Calcutta. Today the hill station still retains a few signs of its colonial past, managing somehow to stay just the right side of faded grandeur.

It took me a few days to arrange for an Inner Line Permit* and to establish that I would be able to follow my grandfather's route into Sikkim. Numerous guides tempted me with offers of trekking along the Nepali border to see Mount Everest, but slowly I started to piece things together. There was one thing that still puzzled me, though. I could not find any reference to the monastery that had been the apex of their journey: Pamionchi.

The turning point came when I found a 1917 book that mentioned it. I cross-referenced the book's map with a 1981 military one I had acquired in Calcutta. Everything fell into place: Pamionchi, I realised, was an early twentieth-century effort to anglicise the word Pemyangtse – this was the modern name for the monastery that was now my destination. The following day I met a guide willing to help me find accommodation along the way. I knew there was little chance of staying in the government-owned dak bungalows that my grandfather and his friends had used.

The landscape turned out to be even more spectacular than I'd expected. The first day and a half consisted of a steep knee-crunching descent of over 5,000 feet to reach the river Rangeet, which separates modern West Bengal from Sikkim. Crossing the river, the footbridge that I had looked

* Regulations governing access to Sikkim today are remarkably similar to those introduced by the British in 1873.

at so many times in my grandfather's album was still there, spanning the glacial water. I used the photocopied notes and photographs that I carried with me to help navigate my way into the Himalayan foothills. After following the river upstream for a few miles, I finally entered Sikkim on 4 April 2009.

Over the next three days I covered more than 50 miles on foot, ascending and descending a few thousand feet each day to cross the concertina of ridges that define the southern area of Sikkim. As I passed through every hill pass, I could see, less than 30 miles away, the magnificent massif of Mount Khangchendzonga and the other snow-capped ranges that separate India from the Tibetan plateau.

It was hard not to feel a sense of destiny as I retraced my grandfather's footsteps from 87 years before. At times the challenging terrain almost defeated me. His party had numbered more than 20 (including all the porters). They had even taken a pony – my grandfather had made an aside that 'it is a help in climbing to hang on to the pony's tail if someone else is riding'. As I zigzagged up steep slopes by myself, I could understand what he meant.

Finally, as dusk fell on the fifth day, I walked high along the side of the Kulhait Valley, climbing up the steep road to the hilltop monastery of Pemayangtse, and my meeting with the monk.

For the first four days of the trek, my guide had managed to procure rooms in the most unlikely of places: among others, a concrete cell-like room above a village bank, and a bed in the house of a local postmaster. In the village below the monastery, I struck gold. I was told that a former monk, who now ran a school offering a Buddhist-based curriculum, was willing to let me stay in his house, right by the monastery. It was on the first evening in his house that he tossed me the book, telling me we would speak the following day.

That night, in a small wood-panelled room at the top of his house, I opened the book and began reading. At first I found the story hard to follow – it seemed to be an account of the funeral of the king, or 'Chogyal', of Sikkim. One thing was clear: the author was convinced that a great wrong had taken place against the king in the 1970s. Tiredness began to get the better of me. With the freezing air making the skin on my face feel numb, my eyes drooped and I struggled to focus on the page.

Then I suddenly became alert. A few pages in, amid an account of the funeral procession, I read the following: 'Finally [came] Sonam Yongda, the Sikkim Guards captain who had paid dearly for his patriotism, and returned to the monastery whence he began. . . clad in the lama's maroon.'

At first I told myself it was a coincidence. I had learnt in Pelling, the small village below the monastery, that my host's name was Yongda. Surely there must be more than one Yongda with connections to a monastery in Sikkim. But curiosity took me to the index. There were multiple references under 'Yongda, Captain Sonam.' I turned to the first:

Captain Sonam Yongda . . . had passed out with distinction from the Indian Military Academy and had trained for more than a year with an Indian Gurkha regiment. The son of a senior lama at Pemayangtse Monastery, where he himself had also been ordained, Yongda came of sturdy Bhutiyastock.

The odds were narrowing: this Yongda had been at Pemayangtse too. Another passage hinted at a man of some courage: 'With Yongda behind bars, the Sikkim Guards were deprived of the only officer who could have forged commitment and fervour into resistance.'

Curious, I returned to the main story and read on. It was obvious that the author held the king in high regard and was convinced that he had been badly mistreated, abandoned by all but a few loyal supporters, including this 'Captain Yongda.' It was a compelling story of tragedy and intrigue. Even the piercing cold could not stop me reading till the small hours of the morning.

I woke early and dressed quickly, donning fleece layer after fleece layer. I told myself again it must simply be a coincidence: the military man in the book *must* be a different Sonam Yongda, a brother or a cousin of the monk who was my host at Pemayangtse, nothing more.

I made my way downstairs and into the kitchen area, past the wooden bed frames, towards the low tables and benched seating. Three girls were bustling around the kitchen, filling bowls and pouring tea. The monk was at the table, hunched over a bowl of porridge. He was dressed in an extraordinary outfit – it was hard to reconcile him with the maroon-clad monk of the previous evening. His monastic robe was gone, replaced by a turquoise shellsuit over which he wore a thick, dark-blue down bodywarmer. He had

a bulky woollen hat pulled down over his brow. He glanced up from the bowl of porridge and nodded a greeting to me. I took a seat beside him. One of the girls brought over a mug of steaming tea and a bowl of porridge sprinkled with chilli flakes. The three girls also took seats at one end of the low table with their own bowls. I tucked in to the delicious porridge and, with no idea what to say, I waited for the monk to open the conversation.

'So. How you sleep?'

'Yes, well, thank you.'

'Did you like the book?'

I looked over at him but couldn't read his face in the morning gloom.

'Yes, I did.' I decided to chance it. 'I came across references to someone called Yongda from this monastery. I wondered if he might be a relative of yours.'

I noticed that the girls were all suppressing giggles. I glimpsed the slightest of smirks as Yongda looked over at them.

'You?' is all I could think to say.

He nodded, the hint of a shy smile on his lips, which quickly disappeared. It seemed barely believable that this was the man in the book. I could not hide my curiosity. I blurted out, 'So you were the King of Sikkim's personal bodyguard?'

He nodded again, then looked up at me. 'You must read the whole book. It is a very important story. A terrible story, terrible what they did to the Chogyal.'

His face turned impassive again. 'But that was a long time ago. And I am now late,' he said, standing up. He gathered his things and left.

When I set out on the journey, my intention had been to write about my reconnection with my grandfather's years living in India and his love for the Himalaya, particularly Sikkim. But the book that the monk gave me contained such an extraordinary story of political intrigue and wonderful characters in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s that my horizons soon broadened. I stayed in the monastery for a further three days, talking to Yongda about his memories of the king, and reading the account of the final days of the Himalayan Kingdom of Sikkim. I read how this tiny part of the world had survived as an independent entity after India gained its own independence; how King Thondup, the last Chogyal, had married an

American woman, Hope Cooke, once talked of in the same breath as Grace Kelly, and how together they had believed they could revive the ancient kingdom; how (the author of *Smash and Grab* alleged) Indira Gandhi had used her intelligence services to bring that dream to a close, surrounding the palace with troops as she annexed the kingdom in 1975. And as if the drama of the story were not enough, the cast of supporting characters had names worthy of a James Bond novel: the Kazini, a shadowy Scottish woman who orchestrated events on behalf of her husband, the leading politician in Sikkim who harboured a lifelong grudge against the king; the improbably nicknamed Princess Coocoola, the king's sister, who Heinrich Harrer (of *Seven Years in Tibet* fame) believed to be the most beautiful woman in the world. The most astonishing revelation was that Sonam Yongda, the monk who had given me the book, had played an important part in the climax of the story as a captain in the Sikkim Guards, the small body of military men who protected the king. In hour-long sessions, he slowly revealed the details of his role in this remarkable tale.

It took me four days to trek back to the Sikkimese border. At one point I found myself walking along old moss-covered cobbled bridleways through ancient forests of deodar. Finally, I reached the river and climbed 5,000 feet back up to the ridge that Darjeeling straddles, returning to where I had started a fortnight before. I spent a week trying to process what I had read, looking for other accounts of Sikkim's story in the best bookshop in the hill town, the Oxford Stores. I discovered that Sikkim's name stemmed from a word meaning 'happy home'. But in the few slim volumes that mentioned the events of 1975 most referred to it as a 'merger' between Sikkim and India, a triumph for 'democratic forces', the culmination of a popular rising by the Sikkimese people themselves – against a feudal monarch. Some even referred to Hope Cooke as a CIA agent. And of the few people I found willing to talk about their recollections of the time, none gave me the same account. The story seemed slippery, full of nuance and complication. Versions seemed to proliferate like subdividing cells.

From Sikkim, I travelled through Nepal and into Tibet, where I began to understand the delicate political and religious connections and tensions between the countries across the Himalayan region. But it was Sikkim's tale that now obsessed me. When I eventually returned to my home in Scotland, I immersed myself in finding out what I could about the place. I

discovered that there was a small group of academics researching its early history. I learnt that Sikkim's ties to Tibet and its position alongside the biggest chink in the Himalayan massif had made it geopolitically valuable for centuries.

Most importantly, I understood that the history of Sikkim's demise could not be seen in isolation. The British involvement in Sikkim and Tibet in the early twentieth century had set up many of Sikkim's problems. After the British left in 1947, the Himalayan region had been at the centre of a period of international intrigue across Asia, a second front for the Cold War. I began to realise that Sikkim never stood a chance.

But I still felt I was some distance from getting under the skin of what happened in Sikkim. *Smash and Grab* was a valuable first-hand account, but the author was open about his close friendship with the Chogyal. I wondered if that had coloured his narrative. I longed for another perspective. My first break came when I was introduced to Martha Steedman (née Hamilton) by a friend of my parents. Martha, a bright, energetic Scottish woman in her late seventies with a distinguished teaching career behind her, had been headmistress of the main girls' school in the Sikkimese capital, Gangtok, between 1959 and 1966. Sikkim was a small place, and she had direct access to the Palace. She showed me extraordinary photographs of the royal couple, of their wedding and coronation. The turning point came when she asked if I'd like to see the weekly letters she had written to her parents from Sikkim. Far from being 'of little interest', as she had suggested, the pale blue aerogrammes provided a unique perspective on the world of Sikkim. Life in the palace burst into full Technicolor. I began to discover references to Sikkim in travel memoirs and articles in magazines such as *Time*, *Newsweek*, *National Geographic* and *Paris Match* that illuminated matters further.

With the help of Martha Hamilton's letters, I started to piece together the story. But she also gave me my second break. Perhaps, she suggested, I might like to speak to her successor as headmistress at the school, Ishbel Ritchie, another Scot, who had served in Sikkim between 1966 and 1996. A fortnight later I was walking out of Ritchie's home in Dunfermline laden with another box of weekly letters home. As I put them into order, I realised I had stumbled across another treasure trove. Ritchie's letters (which she had to hide from the Indian censors operating in Sikkim) were

just as insightful as Hamilton's. I now had first-hand, contemporaneous accounts of the years from 1959 to 1975, during which Thondup and his queen, Hope Cooke, had tried to reinvigorate the Kingdom of Sikkim.

A project that I thought would take a year had already taken 18 months. But there was one big problem. I was now so immersed in the local story of Sikkim in the 1960s and 1970s that I had missed the other vital part of the story – the geopolitical context within which Sikkim had existed, located on the frontier between India, which had emerged from British rule in 1947, and Tibet, occupied by China since 1950. I began to delve into the motivations of the Indian and Chinese governments in this period, understanding that they were deeply influenced by the Cold War politics swirling around Asia at the time. I realised that understanding the motivations of one woman in particular – Indira Gandhi, the Indian Prime Minister from 1966 to 1977 and then again from 1980 to 1984 – was critical in telling the story of Sikkim.

Suspecting that official records of the UK government might also shed light on the story, I turned to the Foreign Office records in the National Archives. Every year, under what is called the '30-year-rule', the UK government releases secret files from three decades previously. I realised that files from the 1970s would be available. I discovered a remarkable set of documents demonstrating that the UK government had shown a keen interest in the events in Sikkim, a place that was clearly dear to many Foreign Office mandarins, some of whom had been intimately connected to Sikkim's royal family. Secret reports and memos added to the sense of intrigue in the story.

Meanwhile I returned to Sikkim on a number of occasions, tracking down some of those who had been involved in the events I was writing about. As they entered their seventies and eighties, some welcomed the opportunity to unburden themselves, talking openly of their role in the events of the time, often admitting to a sense of embarrassed guilt.

Finally, in early 2013, just as I thought I had completed the final draft of the book, Wikileaks released a tranche of US government cables from the early to mid-1970s. With some trepidation (I had by now had enough of 'revelations') I decided to do a word search within the documents for 'Sikkim'. The computer revealed 500 secret cables that brought to life the extraordinary Cold War background to Sikkim's demise. It was the last

piece of a complex puzzle, putting the events of Sikkim into their proper global context.

At last, I felt I had a complete story to write.

The story of Sikkim is a cautionary tale of what can happen when a small kingdom tugs at the tailcoats of the Great Powers. But it is also an intensely human story – about King Thondup and his wife Hope Cooke. He was the scion of a Buddhist ruling family; she, 17 years his junior and a teenager when they first met, the orphaned granddaughter of a New York shipping company president. That they met at all was remarkable enough; the way their relationship developed – often in the public eye – I found fascinating. As I researched their story in Sikkim, no one I spoke to was shy about giving an opinion. Navigating through those opinions was never easy.

Thondup died in 1982, but Hope Cooke still lives in New York today. I contacted her in 2010. At first she offered to talk about the ‘cultural context’ to Sikkim, but then decided (after consulting with her children) that she should leave her 1981 biography to stand as her record of the period. Although this was initially disappointing, as time passed I understood that decision. I was pleased that we reestablished contact in 2015. Her enthusiasm for Sikkim remains undiminished.

This tiny piece of land, no more than 70 miles by 40 miles, has dominated my life for five years. The pursuit of the story has taken me back to Sikkim and India many times, drawing me into fascinating corners and cul-de-sacs I never dreamed of visiting. I have researched in Gangtok’s Institute of Tibetology, the Tibetan Government-in-Exile’s archive in Dharamsala in northern India, the Bodleian Library, the British Library and the London Library. I have interviewed former Indian diplomats in Delhi, and former (and current) Sikkimese politicians in Gangtok. But the keys to unlocking this story were the letters of Martha Hamilton and Ishbel Ritchie. Both have been unfailingly generous.

On my desk as I write this, there is a small cardboard head-and-shoulders cut-out picture of my grandfather taken in India. He is wearing a shirt and pullover, a pipe hanging out of his mouth. It may even have been taken in Sikkim. It is strange for me to think that without him none of this would have been written.

To him, and to my parents, enormous thanks.



Prologue

On 15 May 1975 a curious letter appeared in the pages of *The Times*. The title was 'Chogyal of Sikkim' and it was signed by 'JOHN CLARKE, G8KA, Tanyard, Frittenden, Kent'. Clarke's letter was in response to a flurry of correspondence about Sikkim that had appeared in *The Times* over the past month, which had caused him to recall a bizarre conversation he had overheard a month earlier in April.

Clarke was a 56-year-old local solicitor and county coroner, looking forward to an early retirement. It was common knowledge that he would slip away for odd afternoons in the local garden centre to catalogue the rhododendrons,¹ but his other hobby, amateur radio communications, was less well known to his colleagues and friends. The G8KA in his signature on the letter was his callsign.

At 15:18 hrs GMT on 11 April he had just finished chatting with a fellow enthusiast in Australia, callsign VK2DA, when another station broke in saying there was an 'AC3' station on 14151 kilocycles making a distress call. Clarke could not resist returning to his radio set.

As he honed in on the right frequency he could hear a conversation fading in and out. He could only just make out the callsign of one side of the conversation: AC3PT. He immediately looked it up in his amateur radio callbook. Establishing that AC3 was the country code for Sikkim, he saw that only one name was listed, PT Namgyal. The address: 'The Palace, Gangtok, Sikkim'.

Intrigued, Clarke refocused on the signal. Through the static, he strained to hear the high-pitched voice speaking accented but very good

English at considerable speed. It was a weak signal, but the message was unmistakable.

AC₃PT was saying that his country was being invaded and urgently requested that someone tell the 'International League for the Rights of Man'.

Then suddenly the signal faded to nothing. Wondering if AC₃PT had moved to another frequency, Clarke called his Australian friend VK₂DA back on the line. Both tried to re-establish contact with the signal, but to no avail.

It was very strange. At 15:54 GMT it was just as if callsign AC₃PT had vanished into thin air.

Four and a half months later on 26 August, Oliver Forster, Acting British High Commissioner in New Delhi, put the finishing touches to a report on the events in Sikkim. The report had been urgently requested by the Foreign Secretary, Jim Callaghan, in London. With a state of Emergency still in place across India, it wasn't exactly priority number one, but it did present an opportunity for Forster to demonstrate his ability to see through the confusing mire of politics on the subcontinent. He titled it 'The Indian Takeover of Sikkim'.

His closing paragraph read:

All in all, the world may be a little worse off for the loss of a Shangrila, ruled benignly but in the interests of a small minority by a Buddhist prince with an American wife and a liking for alcohol. The Indian action may seem a little crude and Indian self-justification somewhat nauseating, but no British interests were involved, no deep moral issues were at stake and only one life was lost, probably accidentally. In the days of British India we would have done just the same, and frequently did with recalcitrant Maharajahs, though one may hope a little earlier and with fewer exclamations at our own virtues. In the event, we successfully kept out of the whole business and such support as the Chogyal has received in the correspondence columns of *The Times* has not been sufficient to offend Indian sensitivities.²

Sikkim, he reflected, was history.



A British Legacy

1941-9

- 1 -

In late December 1941, 18-year-old Prince Palden Thondup Namgyal, second son of the Ninth Chogyal of Sikkim, returned to his family's modest palace in Sikkim's capital, Gangtok, with a spring in his step. Coming home to his family's Himalayan kingdom always gave him a thrill, climbing steadily along the steep-sided valleys to the palace perched on a ridge above the tiny capital of Sikkim. But that December it felt particularly good to be back. Finally, after seven years at the Bishop Cotton School in Simla, he was free. He had enjoyed his time at the prestigious boarding school with its regimented life modelled on those in England; he had taken an active part in school life, showing academic promise and playing sports. But it had not all been easy. With his shy nature and slight stammer, he had been an easy target for the bullies. He had found it hard, too, not to fall under the shadow of his elder brother, Crown Prince Paljor, 18 months his senior. Now that Paljor was training with the Royal Indian Air Force, it was exciting to think that, at last, he might be able to carve his own path.

As he settled back into life in Gangtok, he started to think about what might come next. His teachers at Bishop Cotton had already helped him explore the possibility of studying science at Cambridge; perhaps, if the war eased, he might be able to travel in Europe or in the United States. If not, he could still travel across the mountain passes into Tibet, maybe

visit the remote monastery on the Tibetan plateau where he had spent three years as a child living with his uncle, training as a Buddhist monk. He could even visit Lhasa, the Tibetan capital, where his mother's family lived and where his younger sister had just got married. He could pay his respects to the six-year-old boy recently identified as the Dalai Lama, the spiritual head of his family's Buddhist faith. But first he decided just to relax and enjoy feeling genuinely carefree for the first time in his life.

It was only days after arriving home that the telegram arrived. The news contained in it – that Paljor had been killed while serving with the Royal Indian Air Force – changed everything. Over the following few days the details of what had happened filtered up the official channels to the British political officer in Gangtok, Basil Gould, who relayed them immediately to the Palace. It had happened on 20 December, he told the grieving family. They could be proud of their son. Number 1 Squadron, based in Peshawar, had been training in Westland Lysanders as they prepared to transfer to Burma, where they would fight the expected Japanese advance. Paljor's plane had crashed while coming in to land, bursting into flames on impact. The Crown Prince had been the Squadron's first casualty.

Thondup watched as his father, Sir Tashi, now 48 years old, tried to cope with this latest family tragedy. Some believed the Namgyals were cursed: in the family's 300-year history, the firstborn had rarely succeeded. A quarter of a century earlier, in 1914, Sir Tashi himself had been thrust unwittingly into the position of Chogyal after the untimely death of his own brother. Now, as he helped make the preparations for Paljor's funeral, Thondup knew the wheel had turned once more.

His life, he realised, was no longer his own.

The immediate problem facing Sir Tashi Namgyal, the Chogyal of Sikkim, was how to prepare Thondup for the role that he knew would now define his young son's life. He remembered how hard he had found it when he had been in the same situation. Sikkim was a more stable place now than it had been then; nevertheless, he wanted to give Thondup the best possible chance of success. As usual in matters of state, he turned to Basil Gould, the Political Officer.

Gould was one of a remarkable group of no more than a few dozen

men, known collectively as the 'Frontier Cadre',* who had run the operations of the Empire in this region since an official British Residency had been established in Gangtok in 1890. By 1941 he was already in his late fifties and had known Tashi Namgyal for nearly three decades; he had briefly been political officer in Sikkim in 1913, when he had been the leader of an extraordinary social experiment, taking four sons of Tibetan nobles to England to be educated at Rugby School. The project had not been a success (one of the boys had died of malaria and the careers of the other three were somewhat blighted by their involvement in the project when they returned to Tibet), but it was an indication of the underlying attitude of the British in the region. The Residency in Gangtok acted as the political officer's base, but it was the desire to open trade relations with and gain political influence in Tibet that was the primary reason behind Britain's presence in the Himalayas.

Nevertheless, successive British political officers had got to know the Namgyals well. Gould, who had been appointed to Gangtok as political officer for a second time in 1935, had developed a particularly close relationship with the children. Shortly before Gould's return, relations between Sir Tashi and his wife had reached breaking point; she had recently returned from a visit to Tibet pregnant with the child of a monk.† It had fallen to Gould to shield the children from the fallout of the scandal. He had done so by taking them to the sea for the first time and allowing them to travel with him on official journeys to Bhutan, becoming something akin to an uncle to them. 'I remember a hot afternoon,' he wrote later in his memoirs, 'when, bumping along a dusty track on the Bhutan border in a motor lorry, we passed the time singing "Ten Green Bottles", a hymn, "The Grand Old Duke of York" and a carol or two.'

Gould felt qualified, therefore, to help Tashi, who now wore curious round, tinted glasses on account of his myopia, to decide on the best route for Thondup's future. The aim of the political officer in an Indian state, one of his colleagues had once said, was to be 'the Whisper behind the Throne, but never for an instant the Throne itself'. Gould agreed wholeheartedly: he believed his job to be 'to interfere as little as possible, but

* A term coined by historian Alex McKay in his book *Tibet and the British Raj*.

† Thondup's mother lived in a separate house in Gangtok for the rest of her life, where she brought up the child who over time became an integral part of the extended family.

to be able to give sensible advice if it was asked for'. The present situation was one in which he felt he could offer such sensible advice. Thondup, he suggested to Sir Tashi, was certainly an able boy, but he might benefit from attending the Indian Civil Service administrative course. It just so happened, Gould reminded Sir Tashi, that Thondup's cousin Jigme Dorji, a member of the family who held the hereditary post of prime minister in neighbouring Bhutan, was due to attend the course starting in February.

It seemed too good an opportunity to miss.

A few weeks later Thondup arrived at the ICS school in Dehradun. Renowned as the training ground for aspirant Indian bureaucrats with an eye on the day the British would finally hand over the reins of the administration of their country, the school had also become popular with rulers of India's Princely States keen to ensure their children learnt the 'fundamentals of administration'.²

The tented camp, situated in the Doon Valley not more than a couple of hundred miles from Bishop Cotton in Simla that he had left only a few weeks earlier, was very different from the spires of Cambridge that Thondup had been hoping to attend. There was one consolation: his cousin Jigme Dorji would be on the course with him. Thondup loved Jigme, or 'Jigs' as he had been known at Bishop Cotton, where he had excelled, earning a place as a member of the school's hallowed 'Spartan' club.

As the two settled down in the mess tent for lunch on the first day, they found themselves sitting next to a young Indian diplomat, Nari Rustomji. Rustomji, like Thondup and Jigme, had a strong affinity for the British Indian heritage. A ramshackle young man with an innate sense of fun and a deep love for European culture, Rustomji had been educated at Bedford School in England, and then at Cambridge, before passing the ICS exams in London. 'My early influences were Plato and Beethoven,' he wrote later. 'It was through Beethoven, I think, that I was prepared, made ripe, for receiving the Compassionate Buddha's message.'³

The three men immediately struck up a friendship. Jigme, Rustomji noticed immediately, was an 'out-and-out extrovert', but it was the young Crown Prince of Sikkim to whom he felt more 'temperamentally akin'. For Rustomji, Thondup appeared an endearingly 'shy, timorous fawn, lost and lonely in the vast Indian subcontinent';⁴ for Thondup, Rustomji's

love of antics and buffoonery was just what he needed. The two soon became firm friends. They spent most of the course riding and listening to Mozart and Beethoven on Rustomji's old gramophone. Thondup was, Rustomji recalled, 'quickly infected by my passion for music . . . It was not long before he asked me to select a nucleus for a collection of classical records of his own.' In the evenings Thondup would regale Rustomji with tales of Sikkim's colourful history; Rustomji in turn would conjure up the dreaming spires of his years as a Classical scholar at Christ's College, Cambridge. Together they constructed a life of 'little extravagances' ('I confess,' Rustomji later wrote, 'it used to give me quite a thrill to smoke his gold-tipped State Express 999's'), as they made their way through the course. It was the start of a close 30-year friendship during which Thondup would often turn to 'Uncle Rusty' (so-called because he was the older of the pair by a year) for advice and guidance.

During the summer break of 1942 the Prince invited Rustomji back up to Sikkim. They took the train to Siliguri, where Thondup, bursting with pride, picked up his gleaming new Sunbeam Talbot and drove his friend through the foothills of Sikkim to Gangtok. Rustomji was immediately struck by the unpretentious lifestyle of the Palace, where the two men listened to music, read, wrote letters and relaxed. No less striking were Thondup's two beautiful and improbably nicknamed younger sisters, Coocoola and Kula, who 'captured every heart, mine included'.

But it was the wilderness of Sikkim's peaks that Rustomji loved most. As the pair trekked through deep valleys and up steep mountains, there was, he noted, 'none of the pomp and fanfare of the "democratic" leaders of today. We slept in bamboo shacks hastily erected within minutes of our arrival at our halting-place and ate the homely fare provided by the villagers amongst whom we happened to be travelling.'

Rustomji was utterly captivated by the simple lifestyle of the people of Sikkim and the Tibetan traders who passed through on 'gaily decorated mules with tinkling bells' heading up into the mountains with their goods bound for Lhasa. The troubles of the European war seemed a distant nightmare.

At the end of the summer the two returned to continue their course, this time to an army base in Lahore. Word had got around the city about the handsome 'young Sikkim' who 'was considered, in the matrimonial

market, to be quite a catch'. Rustomji noticed that all too frequently 'objects of delight were put in his way, with studied casualness, and he had to tread warily to steer clear of entanglement'.⁵

At the end of the course the two bid each other a sad farewell. Twelve years would pass before Rustomji would be reunited with Thondup, serving as dewan (prime minister) in the tiny Himalayan kingdom at Thondup's request; by that time, Sikkim would be in very different circumstances – the British would be gone, replaced by representatives of a very different India; and there would be a communist regime on Sikkim's doorstep.

But in 1942, as Rustomji headed for a posting in Assam,* Thondup returned to Gangtok a more confident young man.

-2-

Life for Sikkim's royal family in Gangtok in the 1940s was, as Italian writer Fosco Maraini† put it, something of a 'fairy tale'.

The place had an otherworldliness that captivated and entranced the 'travellers, mountaineers, geologists and plant-hunters' – Americans, British, Italians, German and French – who made their way up to the Sikkimese capital. Even if they were just passing through, perhaps heading to Tibet via the neighbouring Chumbi Valley (at that time the preferred approach to Mount Everest), they invariably dined at the Palace with the Namgyals. It was hard not to be fascinated by the combination of a simple lifestyle and complex religious beliefs set against the awe-inspiring beauty of the landscape.

Most could not help noticing the inherent contrasts and contradictions in Sikkim. 'In this Himalayan landscape, with its dizzy extremes and excesses,' Maraini wrote, 'it is appropriate that by way of contrast there should be a toy capital, with a toy bazaar, toy gardens and toy houses, set among tree-ferns and wild orchids on a hillside among the clouds.'⁶

Gangtok in 1942 was, indeed, still tiny, a suitable capital for a miniature kingdom. The town, nestled into a hillside against a majestic landscape,

* Astate in India's north-east, south of Bhutan, and not far from Sikkim.

† Maraini, author of *Secret Tibet*, visited Sikkim twice in the 1930s and 1940s on his way to explore Tibet.

consisted of not much more than a few hundred buildings and a bazaar strung out across one side of a wooded valley. A smattering of houses crept up to a low-slung ridge that stretched up towards the mountains on one side and ended in a promontory on the other, beyond which the ridge fell away steeply.

The highest building on the mountainside, set back in the trees looking down over the ridge and the promontory, was the British political officer's Residency, deliberately emphasising the pecking order in the Kingdom over which the British had established a loose protectorate. The role of political officer in Sikkim was a complex one (the officer was responsible for relations with Tibet and Bhutan as well as Sikkim), but it was never taxing. As a result, it was highly sought after by a certain type of British administrator. Sikkim itself was the attraction: one PO, Arthur Hopkinson, thought the Kingdom 'altogether too good to be true, with its lovely country, its charming people, including such a charming family at the palace . . . such friendly relations between the communities.'⁷

But it was the Residency – and its garden in particular (recognised as one of the finest in British India) – that made the posting so unique. The brick-built house, constructed in the 1890s by local labourers under the guidance of Sikkim's first political officer, looked as if it could have been transported to Sikkim from England's Home Counties. To the political officers, it was a 'divine place . . . beautifully furnished, terraced garden, full of lovely trees, trim beds, all sorts of roses, hydrangeas, a wild cherry in blossom . . . ponds with fountains and goldfish, a lovely aviary full of shrubs, a peculiar brace of geese, Dalai Lama birds, grouse, partridges, pheasants.'⁸ By the early 1940s it was even possible to get BBC broadcasts in the isolated Residency, when they weren't 'distorted by atmospheric.'⁹

Further down the ridge, on the promontory below the Residency, sat the 'small and rather simple' Royal Palace of the Namgyals. Constructed in the 1920s, it was, at first glance, no less 'a corner of old England', with its 'fine great timber beams, panelled walls, period furniture and lovely garden stocked with the homely flowers of England'. By contrast, the rooms inside were full of Buddhist decoration. The walls of the formal entertaining rooms downstairs were lined with vivid Tibetan tangkas from Kham in Eastern Tibet (the Namgyals had migrated to Sikkim in the 13th century and were established as rulers in the 1640s). The floors were

covered with a large beige carpet, 30 by 35 feet and bearing the Namgyal arms, in the centre of which stood an 'exquisite . . . small, round white lacquer table, supported by three finely carved male skeletons, thirty inches high.'¹⁰ Even in this Himalayan Buddhist atmosphere, however, British influence had deeply permeated. Life in the Palace was run 'on European lines – morning tea in bed, with breakfast, lunch and dinner as family meals in the dining room . . . Hot scones, strawberries and cream, Cheddar cheese, apple sauce and the illusion was complete.'¹¹

By 1942, this curious mix of Tibetan and British influences was considered perfectly normal. During his reign Thondup's father, Sir Tashi, had developed into the perfect example of a submissive British Indian ruler, presiding over a gradual blurring of the lines between his own position and that of the British political officer. The British had maintained a constant presence in Sikkim since 1890 and increased cooperation had evolved naturally between two parties whose interests had unexpectedly converged. The British needed an acquiescent ruler in this vital part of the Himalayas; Tashi had learnt to value the protective cover and stability that the British presence provided. Successive political officers treated the Namgyals with respect and affection, while Tashi and his family in turn admired (and adopted) many elements of the British imperial system, and the lifestyle that went with it. The king's birthday was celebrated each year; the dead from the Great War were commemorated with two minutes' silence; a large hall had been built to commemorate the first British political officer in the region. Just as in other Indian Princely States, Sir Tashi was showered with honours to bring him further into the fold. In 1918, he was made a Commander of the Indian Empire; in 1923, he was elevated to a Knight Commander. On the eve of the Second World War he received the Star of India, the highest honour available in the Indian imperial honours system. Relations between the Palace and the Residency were warm, friendly and civilised. Tashi positively encouraged Thondup and his brothers and sisters to develop an understanding of the British way of life to complement their Buddhist heritage. There was an English governess; they all attended British-run boarding schools; Thondup and his sisters had even attended a college run by Jesuits in the late 1920s. 'Their parents took the view,' Gould wrote in his memoirs, 'that if they went to chapel services at school they would be all the better Buddhists.'

It was a satisfactory arrangement for all concerned and, for the British political officers, represented the very best of what could be achieved through *laissez-faire* rule. Each year the incumbent PO would file a short report on the progress in the kingdom. It always contained the same short paragraph. The system of governance in Sikkim, the report stated with some admiration, was 'based on the good old patriarchal monarchy of ancient days of oriental civilisation where subjects stand as children of the Ruler; and with the simple hill people unaffected by the virus of democracy and elections, the system works excellently'.¹²

For the ruling family of Sikkim, and for the political officers in Gangtok, life in Sikkim in 1942 was, as Fosco Maraini put it, 'something of a fairy tale'.

It was this 'fairy tale' kingdom to which Thondup returned from Dehradun in 1942. But underneath the surface it soon became clear that Tashi had been deeply affected by his eldest son's death. This small, thin, delicate man, who had coped so admirably with becoming Chogyal unexpectedly in 1914 when he was only 21 years old, now retreated into himself, finding comfort only in meditation and painting. By the time Maraini dined with him in the late 1940s he was 'small, thin and elderly, as delicate as a little bird and as noble as a coat of arms, draped magnificently in his brown silk Tibetan robe'. The Italian watched the Chogyal 'bend over his plate, peer through his spectacles, and follow – with notable ability, it cannot be denied – some peas which tried to escape the point of his fork'.

In this 'exquisite, microscopic struggle' lay the seeds of a sad, gradual withdrawal from public life in the last two decades of Tashi's life, during which he spent much of his time painting visions of Khangchendzonga, the mountain worshipped by the people of Sikkim.

Almost immediately on his return, therefore, Thondup took over the reins of power in Sikkim. He had matured quickly in Dehradun and now felt ready to act as head of the State Council, the unelected body that ran the affairs of the country. In 1943, when the Scottish missionary-run girls' school in Gangtok was renamed the Paljor Namgyal Girls' School (known as the PNG), it was Thondup who gave the address. 'I happened to make my speech quite well,' the 23-year-old prince wrote to his friend Rustomji. 'No boasting and long words – and did not stutter more than twice.'

In 1945, a new British Political Officer, Arthur Hopkinson, arrived in

Gangtok to replace Basil Gould. He could not help but think of the parallels between Thondup and his own King George VI. Both men had reacted with great maturity when thrust into a role they had never expected. It seemed uncanny, too, that both men were able to suppress their stammers when in front of a microphone. But it was Thondup's open and generous manner that Hopkinson admired more than anything, as he recorded in a letter home:

The charming Maharajkumar,* in his purple Chuba, spent most of the evening playing bridge with the old folk in the bridge room – not because he didn't want to romp, but to get the bridge going and help the old people too. He is so nice, he reminds several people of our King. In a way in looks. Young & pleasant, clean and keen looking, with a charming smile. Young-minded and youthful, but intensely keen on his work. Tactful, doesn't rub up the old state servants. A slight stammer. Very intelligent face, & good features. Charming manners, & v considerate. Well groomed, always nicely dressed, and not ostentatious.¹³

All these qualities, Hopkinson felt, would assist the young prince as he tried to modernise Sikkim, something that Hopkinson noticed Thondup seemed painfully aware he needed to do. But what impressed Hopkinson most was that he seemed willing to roll his sleeves up and do something about it personally. In early 1946 he expressed his pleasure at seeing Thondup and his cousin Jigme, the heir in Bhutan, spend 'two whole days sweating in Tata's scrap-yard scrounging all the scrap iron required for road shovels etc, personally. Not many Indian "Maharaj Kumars" elsewhere would get down to it with personal sweat like that.'

-3-

Apart from Paljor's tragic death, the war had not greatly affected Sikkim. Its end, however, brought with it the prospect of great change.

The Second World War had merely postponed the inevitable British retreat from Empire. In late 1945 the new prime minister in London, Clement Attlee, confirmed via the King's Speech that the UK government

* This was the Indian name for the Crown Prince in common usage in Sikkim at the time.

planned 'the early realisation of full self-government in India.'¹⁴ The words were carefully chosen. How it would happen was by no means clear. Less than half of India was directly administered by the British government; the rest of the country consisted of a patchwork of independent kingdoms, known collectively as the Princely States. These states – around 600 of them – played a vital part in Britain's imperial rule in India, but their status was a legal minefield. While each was nominally sovereign, each also accepted the principle that the British Raj rule over them was 'paramount'. In return the British provided public services on their behalf and collected taxes. It was an arrangement that generally worked well for the Princes and for the British, but everyone knew that, since no two agreements with Princely States were alike, the transition to 'full self-government' in these semi-autonomous areas would be far from simple. Thus, while India's leading politicians – Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru and Mohammed Ali Jinnah – led discussions with the British about what a successor Indian government might look like, the rulers of the Princely States looked very carefully at their own arrangements in preparation for the inevitable negotiations to come.

When Sikkim had been admitted to the Indian 'Chamber of Princes' in 1935 it had been expressly recognised that Sikkim was a 'special case'. The reason noted was that, unlike any other Princely State, Sikkim was 'bounded on three sides by foreign territory and only on one side by British India.'¹⁵ But there were other reasons that Sikkim could be considered an exception. Religiously and culturally, Sikkim was very different from the other Princely States. Across the subcontinent the Princely rulers were mostly Hindu or Muslim. Sikkim, like neighbouring Bhutan, was a Buddhist state with strong religious ties to the theocracy of Tibet and its spiritual leader, the Dalai Lama.

Most importantly of all, the historical process by which Sikkim had become part of British India had – astonishingly – left the British presence with no formal footing for being in Sikkim at all.

Sikkim had only ever been a means to an end for the British. The country had first come to the attention of the British while they were looking for allies around the fringes of Nepal during the Anglo-Gurkha war of 1814–16. They had discovered the tiny Kingdom of Sikkim, nestling

conveniently between Nepal and Bhutan. The Sikkimese, who had suffered harassing raids from the Gurkhas for most of the previous century, had readily assisted the British in the hope of regaining lost territory. When the Gurkhas were defeated in 1816, the British and the Sikkimese signed the mutually convenient Titalia Treaty in 1817: the Namgyals regained the land they wanted, while the British gained political influence through asserting that they would arbitrate in the case of further disputes with the Gurkhas, which they found cause to do a number of times.

In 1835, the British had secured a permanent presence in the region by persuading the Chogyal at the time, Thondup's great-grandfather, to sign over a small ridge of Sikkimese land, Darjeeling, nominally as a sanatorium or 'hill station'. The initial deal was undoubtedly underhand (the renegade British Officer had deliberately ignored the Chogyal's request for land in exchange), but by the time the Chogyal and his advisers realised they had been misled it was too late. They lodged a formal complaint to Calcutta, who accepted in 1846 that Darjeeling had been 'acquired in a very questionable and unsatisfactory manner', but by then the town was already a thriving hub of commercial activity in the hills. For the British, it was the start of a concerted effort to open up trade through the land trading route that they had discovered lay alongside Sikkim: the Chumbi Valley.

Although his great-grandfather had been granted an annual payment in recompense, the 'Darjeeling Grant' remained a bone of contention for Thondup's ancestors and their advisers. Matters soon came to a head. The Namgyals had always relied on strong dewans, chosen from the Sikkimese nobility, to complement their own role as defenders of the Buddhist faith in Sikkim. In 1849, the so-called 'Pagla' ('Mad') Dewan kidnapped two British travellers (one of them the renowned botanist Joseph Hooker) near the Tibetan border. The kidnap caused a major panic in Darjeeling. Although the two were released within a few weeks, the British immediately sought to avenge the insult. Lord Dalhousie, the Governor-General in Calcutta, felt that his government had been put in 'a very humiliating position' with regards to 'the hill savage'. Military retaliation, however, was quickly ruled out on account of the mountainous terrain. Instead the British had settled for the banishment of the Pagla Dewan and the cessation of the annual payment to the Namgyals for Darjeeling.

For a decade, there was an uneasy peace. But in 1860 the Pagla Dewan

returned, harassing the British once more. This time the British did not hold back. A force of 1,800 troops marched into Sikkim and enforced a punitive treaty in 1861, the Treaty of Tumlong, by which the British won trading rights through Sikkim. They now focused on opening up Tibet to trade. A succession of moustachioed trade commissioners made their way up to windswept 14,000-foot passes between Sikkim and the Tibetan Chumbi Valley to try and open the way for British manufactured goods. Time and again they were rebuffed: the influential Tibetan monasteries (who largely controlled trade in and out of Tibet) jealously guarded the secrecy and privacy of Tibet and did not want the British in their country. The Namgyals in Sikkim found themselves caught in the middle between the British pushing to open the Chumbi Valley, and the Tibetans seeking to keep it closed.

In 1888, the Tibetans occupied a small part of Sikkim, just across the 14,000-foot Jelep La pass on the Sikkim–Tibet frontier, to try and halt what they saw as steady encroachment by the British in the region. By now Darjeeling, not more than 30 miles from the pass, had become the centre of an extremely valuable British Indian tea industry. The British therefore decided they could not countenance such Tibetan insolence and sent a force trudging up to fight a minor war. The Tibetans were routed in what one British officer called ‘a unique and rather tiresome hill war.’*

The British were now determined to consolidate their gains. Rather than negotiate with the Tibetans, they signed a convention with the Chinese government, who claimed a vague overlordship of the Tibetans. The Anglo-Chinese Convention was very significant for Sikkim. In it, the two governments effectively agreed to recognise each other’s rights in, respectively, Sikkim and Tibet.† Clause Two specifically recognised the

* It was not a popular war with the troops; Lt Iggulden’s account continues: ‘... unique because it took place at altitude and under climactic conditions unparalleled in the history of British frontier wars, and irksome on account of its long duration and the negative and indecisive action of the British government, due to fear of complications with China.’

† The 1890 Anglo-Chinese Convention and a subsequent 1893 Sikkim–Tibet Convention have a good claim to represent the nadir of British imperial influence. Remarkably, the negotiators for both sides were British: Henry Durand, the Government of India’s Foreign Secretary, represented the British interests in India; James Hart represented the Chinese Maritime Imperial Customs service that managed the Chinese government’s relations with the Treaty Ports and other frontiers. Durand and Hart agreed that the two empires they represented (Indian and Chinese) would respect the other’s claims to ‘suzerainty’ over Sikkim and Tibet respectively.

British government's 'protectorate over the Sikkim State' and acknowledged that the British had 'direct and exclusive control over the internal administration and foreign relations of that state.' Although nothing had been signed directly between Sikkim and the British, there was now an international treaty stating that Sikkim was a British protectorate.

The convention marked a turning point in the British relationship with Sikkim. They sent a political officer to establish a Residency in Gangtok and temporarily banished the Chogyal (who had absconded to Tibet during the conflict) to live in British India. By the time the Chogyal returned in 1895, the British had set up a new administration packed with nobles to act as a counterbalance to the Namgyals.

By now the British had convinced themselves that there was another more strategic reason for establishing relations with Tibet. In the western Himalayas, the shady battle with the Russians for control of Afghanistan known as the 'Great Game' had reached something of a stalemate. But the bogey of Russian expansionism remained. Lord Curzon, appointed as Viceroy in 1899, was worried by rumours that the Russians had begun to forge relations with the Tibetan leadership in Lhasa. In response he mounted the extraordinary Younghusband Expedition, which bludgeoned its way to Lhasa, via Sikkim, in 1904.* The mission found little evidence of the supposed Russian threat, but they did manage to enforce a treaty, this time directly with the Tibetan leadership (with the Chinese as a signatory), which secured limited British influence in Lhasa.

Gangtok now became the main base for British attempts to influence Tibet and create it into a 'buffer state' to exclude Russian, and later Chinese, influence. Sikkim's importance in this respect was further emphasised after the Dalai Lama, escaping a final bid to subdue Tibet by the collapsing Chinese Empire, fled into the British political officer's arms in Gangtok in 1911. For nearly two years the Dalai Lama lived in Darjeeling, where the British carefully cultivated him; by the time he returned, he had become convinced of the value of British influence in Tibet – as a counterbalance to the Chinese.

* Despite Francis Younghusband's expedition being touted as a political mission, it had a military escort of 1,150 men. Younghusband was obsessed with getting to Lhasa and frequently and wilfully misinterpreted orders from London counselling restraint. In one terrible confrontation nearly 700 Tibetans were massacred with Maxim guns.

Nearly a quarter of a century had now passed since Britain had established the Residency in Gangtok. During that period the political officers had carefully brought the Namgyal family under their control. The eldest Namgyal son and heir, who had refused to return from Tibet, had been deftly sidelined by simply changing the succession; his younger brother, Sidkeong, had been educated at the best British Indian boarding school, sent for a year at Oxford in 1906 and taken on an extraordinary round-the-world tour to expand his horizons. The family were honoured at the Imperial Durbar of 1911 and officially given a 15-gun salute. In 1914, there had been a slight hiccup to the plans when Sidkeong had died after only ten months on the throne, but his replacement, Tashi, had proved equally malleable. In 1918, the British had restored full powers to him; in 1935, he had become an official member of the Indian Chamber of Princes.

During the 1920s and 1930s, no one had thought it necessary to consider the oddities of the nebulous relationship between Sikkim and the British Indian government. The British, who, as one post-independence diplomat would later put it, were 'past masters at manipulation without definition', were certainly not concerned.

But with the British announcement in 1945 that they were going to leave, Thondup realised that some sort of 'definition' was urgently needed.

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In early 1946, the British sent a Cabinet Mission to Delhi to decide on the future of India after independence. Thondup immediately realised that Sikkim's membership of the Chamber of Princes might be used to argue that Sikkim should be lumped in with every other Indian Princely State. For Thondup that was anathema: Sikkim was an independent Buddhist state and, despite the administrative and political connection with the British, had little if any cultural connection with India itself. His own family were Tibetan, and Sikkim's historical links were clearly to the north, with Tibet, rather than with India.

Thondup therefore wrote to Lord Pethick-Lawrence, the 70-year-old head of the mission, asking that:

no decision directly affecting Sikkim will be taken without due consideration of the position of Sikkim as a border state and without giving the Sikkim representative an opportunity of setting forth the peculiarities of the case before the Right Honorable the Cabinet ministers and seeking their advice.

He also politely requested a meeting with Pethick-Lawrence to discuss these matters. But for the commission, sweating under the Delhi heat as they tried to reconcile opposing factions in India, the Himalayan Kingdom of Sikkim was hardly a priority. The request was equally politely rebuffed.

Unperturbed, Thondup lobbied hard that summer, joining forces with his cousin Jigme in Bhutan, who faced a similar problem. In the Residency, British Political Officer Arthur Hopkinson looked on benevolently as 'the Sikkim heir-apparent charged off to Delhi' on a regular basis. Hopkinson felt that there would be consequences if Sikkim's status was not clarified, but knew he was no longer in a position to help. 'President Nehru,' he wrote in his diary that summer, 'if he is not careful, will have the Chinese Empire within three hundred miles of Calcutta. . . the Sikkim and Bhutan people are very worried, and I am not in a position to give them any comfort.'

Thondup was determined to ensure that Sikkim's separate identity was respected. He therefore turned his efforts to Nehru and the Indian Constituent Assembly that had been given the responsibility for shaping the future of India in 1946. As a Kashmiri, Nehru had some sympathy with the position of both Sikkim and Bhutan as Himalayan states. In early 1947 he therefore pushed through a resolution agreeing that Sikkim and Bhutan were 'not Indian States' and acknowledging that, since they constituted a 'special problem', their future should be negotiated separately.

For Thondup, still only 23, this felt like a major victory – all his hard work had paid off. Not only was it now in writing that Sikkim was different from the rest of the Princely States, but also Sikkim was to be classified alongside Bhutan. Unlike Sikkim, Bhutan had signed a specific 'treaty of perpetual friendship and peace' with the British Indian government and was thus in a stronger position to assert its international identity (legally

speaking) than Sikkim. If the two countries were treated as broadly similar, that could only help his cause.

In June 1947, faced with a deteriorating situation in India, the British decided to bring forward the date for the transfer of power from Britain to India. Originally planned for 1948, the Viceroy, Lord Mountbatten, decided that Britain needed to quit India by the end of August – within three months.

Across India the impact was immediate. Until that point the focus of negotiations had been on the main body of India and the question of partition or otherwise. Suddenly the unresolved question of the future of the Princely States became pressing. For Mountbatten the issue became something of a personal priority, a chance to demonstrate the Crown's ability to fulfil its promises in the face of intense criticism over their handling of the problems between India's core communities. He decided that, at the very least, he would deliver what he called 'a full basket of apples'¹⁶ (i.e. a solution that dealt with every one of the 600-plus Princely States) by 15 August, the date now set for Independence.

During July 1947, Delhi therefore became a feverish and colourful place, as hundreds of Indian princes were ferried back and forth to open (and sometimes closed) meetings. Thondup again travelled to Delhi to state his case, and again won a reiteration from officials in the External Department that Sikkim's position was 'different from that of any other ruler'.¹⁷

But Sikkim was not the only outlier. Four other states made their desire for independence clear, the most important being Kashmir and Hyderabad, both huge states with proud histories. As Mountbatten began to realise that he might end up with something considerably less than the 'full basket of apples' he had promised, he looked for short-term solutions. When it came to Sikkim and Bhutan, he told Hopkinson to inform them that it would be in their best interests to accept a continuation of existing arrangements: Hopkinson should stay in Gangtok after 15 August; he would be merely 'changing masters'. This, Hopkinson was advised, would be the best guarantee of continued recognition of Sikkim's 'special position'. Hopkinson passed the message on but remarked in a private letter that he felt sympathy for Sikkim, which he thought was being 'deserted' by the British.

Nevertheless, Thondup left Delhi for Gangtok satisfied. Although nothing had actually been agreed, Sikkim's special position had been recognised, giving hope that he could maintain a Sikkim outside of India.

In Sikkim, few people took to the streets to celebrate or commemorate the handover of power to India in 1947. Gangtok was significantly closer to Lhasa than to Calcutta – let alone Delhi. In fact, the town was so removed from the world of Indian politics that it took quite some time to locate the solitary Indian flag that was in the town.¹⁸

There were some Sikkimese, however, who recognised the momentous shift that had taken place. One such person was 22-year-old Chandra Das Rai, who was in Darjeeling at the time of the handover and felt a great sense of excitement at this new dawn.¹⁹ Born into a poor family in a small village near Namchi Bazaar in south of Sikkim in 1925, he had been sent to Darjeeling, paid for by a local kazi,* to be educated. As political consciousness grew in the hill town, Rai was swept up in the excitement. The hill town had become a symbol of the Raj and was an easy target for those seeking to highlight the excesses of the colonial project. In the central market the Union Jack was 'thrown down'²⁰ and the Indian tricolor proudly raised.

In late 1947, after witnessing the celebrations in Darjeeling, Rai set off back to his home town of Namchi Bazaar to help his comrades in Sikkim celebrate throwing off the shackles of British rule. What he found left him 'thunderstruck! There was nothing going on!' Despite being only a few miles from Darjeeling, Namchi Bazaar was almost entirely isolated from the political feelings being expressed there, so Rai moved on to the Sikkimese capital.

In Gangtok he found that a more urgent local political problem had sparked the agitation he sought. During the 1940s the antiquated system of land laws in Sikkim had come under pressure. The system was based on a simple feudal hierarchy: all land was ultimately owned by the Chogyal, who leased land to the kazis, who collected taxes and ran the estates on his behalf. At the bottom of the heap were the landless tenants, with few rights and many obligations.

* A Bhutia-Lepcha term for the local landowners in Sikkim.

Most of these tenants were Nepalis who had been brought in as part of a mass programme during the late nineteenth century. The British had made no bones about the purpose: at a time when relations with the Buddhist Namgyal ruling family were at a low ebb, the advent of the Nepalis had one purpose: 'Hinduism will assuredly cast out Buddhism and the praying wheel of the Lama will give place to the sacrificial implements of Brahman.'²¹ They were also said to be more industrious workers. In 1873, there was reportedly not a single Nepali in Sikkim. By the 1940s they constituted 75 per cent of the population, outnumbering the Bhutias (those who had come to Sikkim with the Namgyals) and the Lepchas (who were considered to be close to 'indigenous' in Sikkim), who together constituted the ruling minority.

Thondup had inched towards a process of reform of the land laws,²² but the basics of a feudal system remained.* In 1946-7, while Thondup had been darting back and forth to Delhi, the discontent had boiled over with a wide-scale 'no-rent' campaign involving the mostly Nepali tenant population of southern Sikkim. The kazis, many of whom in the south-west of Sikkim were Lepchas, came under intense pressure and were unable to perform their basic duties as tax collectors, provoking a minor crisis in finances in the country.

When Rai arrived in December 1947, therefore, he found a number of nascent political movements coalescing around the no-rent campaign. It was hardly an insurrection, but Rai was pleased to find that some of the leaders thought that the 'good old patriarchal monarchy of ancient days of oriental civilization' that the British had so consciously supported should be replaced with a system more akin to a democracy. A small group approached the British Political Officer, Arthur Hopkinson (who had 'stayed on' as directed, and was still regarded as holding sway), in the hope that he might support their call for change. But Hopkinson disappointed them: for years the British had upheld Sikkim's autocratic government, run by a small cabinet responsible only to the Chogyal, with not even a nod to the 'virus of democracy'. With no wish to upset what he saw as a perfectly

* One obligation that was nominally curtailed in 1945 was the despised *jharlangi*. This obliged locals to provide free portage for Sikkim government or British officials on tour.

good system, Hopkinson steered well clear of an awkward situation.* The small group turned their attention to the palace, organising a picnic gathering in Gangtok on the hillside near the top of the ridge, which quickly turned into a minor political rally. Rai wasted no time in getting involved. Someone read out a small tract entitled 'A few facts about Sikkim', which questioned the legitimacy of the current system of government. Rai, as one of the few educated Nepalis present, was asked to translate it into Nepali. He clambered onto a table and read it out. The very act of translation was political, bringing the disenfranchised ordinary Nepalis into the political arena in a way that had previously been unthinkable.

Thondup was astute enough to come out and meet the protestors, promising to consider reform. It was enough to break up the small meeting. But a flame had been ignited. In the days following the picnic, a political party took shape: the Sikkim State Congress (SSC) emerged, designed to be more representative of the real ethnic make-up of Sikkim – Nepalis, Bhutias and Lepchas. A new, more pointed memo was sent to the Palace with three more specific demands: first that 'landlordism' should be abolished; second that a 'responsible government' should be formed as a precursor to democracy; and third that Sikkim should agree to accede to India.

For 24-year-old Thondup the demands posed an irritating challenge. He could accept the first demand: he knew that the land laws needed to change, but he also knew that the problem was deeply ingrained and could not be addressed overnight.

As for the second demand, he was willing to consider change, but he also had grave concerns. For decades the ethnic make-up of Sikkim had been altered with the wide-scale immigration from Nepal. Any move towards more representative government would give the Nepalis more power. Thondup was deeply concerned by the obvious implication – that

* Fosco Maraini recalls a conversation with Hopkinson around this time, which brilliantly captures the mentality of the British withdrawal. In reply to an enquiry as to what he might do next, Hopkinson replied: 'My dear fellow, these are difficult times for us all. Now they are dismantling the British Empire, and I shall have to look for a job, what can one do when one is nearly half a century old and has spent the best years of one's life among official documents? I know several Indian languages, and I know Tibetan, but is that of any use? Do you think you could find me a job teaching in Italy, for instance? Just look at what we are reduced to, after being lords of half the earth! Apart from that I feel old already. You see India is a great lady, but she sucks the life out of you.'

his Buddhist community might lose its strong connection with the land in the face of the growing Nepali, and largely Hindu, population. Conferring with Hopkinson, the Namgyals came up with a clever compromise that seemed to promise much but in reality changed little. The Palace suggested that the new political party should send three representatives, one from each community – the Bhutias, Lepchas and Nepalis – to function as official ‘secretaries’ to the Chogyal. It was a shrewd move by Thondup and his father, calculated to ensure that the Nepalis (who were now more than 50 per cent of the population) remained in minority representation and that truly representative government was parked as an issue. It seemed to be enough to satisfy those who sought change – for now.

It was the third demand, however – that Sikkim should join India – that Thondup found most frustrating. He was certain that such a move was incompatible with Sikkim maintaining its identity separate from India. For Sikkimese Nepalis like Rai on the other hand, the demand made perfect sense: many were Hindus and did not feel the same sense of religious and cultural separation from India. Moreover, if accession to India would bring economic benefits – and increase the likelihood of political reform and more representative government – then most of the new members of the SSC believed this was in Sikkim’s interest.

For Thondup, it was quite different. Over the last five years he had become utterly convinced that he was laying the foundations for a strong Sikkim, and that its best chance of success lay in gradual political reform within the current monarchical system.

In the event, the issue was conveniently postponed. With the blood flowing from the tragedy of Partition, the Indian government was quite willing to put off engaging with the complexities of the issue of Sikkim’s future. On 27 February 1948, the governments of India and Sikkim signed a standstill agreement stating that existing arrangements would continue ‘pending the conclusion of a new agreement or treaty’ in due course.

None of the three issues raised by the SSC had actually been addressed, but, with the appointment of the three secretaries, the Palace had effectively bought off the leaders of the campaign for reform. Many in the SSC, including Rai, realised that the new set-up was nothing more than a sop and grew frustrated and distrustful of the situation. They were even more concerned by the emergence of what looked like a

Palace-sponsored political party, the National Party, the leaders of which wasted no time in issuing a declaration that 'Sikkim shall not under any circumstances accede to the dominion of India.' A further statement that the party intended by all means available to them 'to maintain intact the indigenous character of Sikkim and to preserve its integrity' was seen by some in the SSC as a thinly veiled anti-Nepali-immigrant platform. As a result, the SSC were able to attract sizeable crowds to a rally in the southern Sikkimese town of Namchi Bazaar in October.

In December, representatives from the SSC decided to approach Nehru himself (now undisputed head of the Indian polity following the assassination of Gandhi) to maintain some momentum. Three young politicians, including Rai, travelled to Delhi to meet with Nehru and present him with the same three demands.

Nehru received the three petitioners personally. He quickly brushed aside 'landlordism' as irrelevant: he was, he said, in the process of dealing with much larger landlords; there was no need to worry – as British influence receded so the influence of unscrupulous Sikkimese landlords would gently fade away. As for 'responsible government', he told the three men that he had been fighting for it his whole life and would happily continue doing so on Sikkim's behalf. But it was on the demand for accession to India that Nehru's response was unexpected. He told them not to push for accession to India. If accession was rushed through, Nehru said, 'we will be accused by international opinion that a small state like Sikkim has been coerced to join India. Sikkim, Bhutan and Nepal should all grow according to their own genius.' The three men, somewhat overawed by being in Nehru's presence at all, thanked him profusely and headed back to Gangtok none the wiser. Nehru had once more postponed any decisions on Sikkim's future.

Back in Sikkim the situation deteriorated in early 1949. Further demonstrations broke out in the south, leading to the temporary arrest of Rai and others, piling the pressure on Thondup and his three hapless secretaries. Thondup, aware of the mission to Delhi, was suspicious about the disturbances. Hopkinson had by now been replaced by a new Indian political officer, Harishwar Dayal; Thondup wondered if Dayal had a hidden agenda to promote political change that would threaten his own position. In April 1949 he wrote to his friend Nari Rustomji, now

an adviser to the government in nearby Assam, another equally troubled north-eastern state, revealing his frustrations:

I am in a hell of a spot as you may have learnt from your intelligence people. Sikkim is not what she used to be. These damn exploiters are raising hell. I am all for fulfilling the wishes of our Bhutia-Lepchas, the real wishes. But I will sooner be damned than let these mean conspirators and job-hunters have their way if I can. We are on the verge of getting independence of sorts like Bhutan and I think we have achieved a miracle in not having had to accede. Our greatest drawback is that the PO and the GoI seem to favour the other side, and we have to proceed so that we give you people no chance to butt in. The second trouble which I feel is common is the unruly Nepalese element against whom I cannot take action like I would like to have.²³

On 1 May the SSC organised a demonstration outside the palace. This time, far from the banal picnic of 18 months earlier, 5,000 agitators moved on the Palace. Thondup sensed real trouble. Running out of options, he approached the Indian Political Officer, Harishwar Dayal, for protection. Two companies of Indian Army soldiers in the state were able to disperse the troublemakers, but now the balance had tilted. Dayal advised Thondup to declare a new form of government. Thondup hurriedly agreed to a new arrangement – three SSC members and two appointees from the Palace would form a small ministry with a degree of independence from the Palace itself – hoping that it would bring some measure of calm to the state.

This 'popular ministry', set up on 9 May 1948, was a disaster. None of the members trusted each other. Meanwhile some in the SSC continued their agitation. Within days the divisions between the factions were severe enough to concern the Indian government, who had one eye on a tense regional situation. In West Bengal to Sikkim's south, the political situation was so dire that the state government had taken the extreme step of banning the communist party. To Sikkim's west, the Indians were also worried about the emergence of communism in Nepal. An official in the Indian government told a British official that they were 'classing Sikkim with Nepal as an area of communist activity'. Worst of all, the situation in Tibet, to Sikkim's north, was also unclear; with the Chinese communists all but victorious in the mainland, no one knew what might happen next.

The Indian government decided it could take no chances. In late May they sent the External Affairs Minister to visit the state and make an assessment. At the beginning of June, Dayal dismissed the government that had been formed only a few weeks earlier. It had lasted 28 days. Instead, Dayal announced, an Indian *dewan*, or prime minister, in Sikkim was to be appointed as a 'temporary' solution, pending a full-blown treaty between India and Sikkim. Thondup and his father were persuaded that this was the only way to guarantee stability – and the survival of the existing order. But for the young Crown Prince the whole episode smacked of underhand tactics. The Palace had requested assistance from the Indians to restore order in Gangtok. Instead they now had an Indian-appointed prime minister at the heart of the state. Thondup was convinced that the Indian political officer was working alongside the politicians in a bid to challenge Sikkim's separate identity from India. The official press organ in Sikkim, with Thondup's knowledge, put out an angry piece, emphasising what they called India's 'fascist policy'. Meanwhile the leaders of the SSC were equally suspicious of Dayal and the Indian actions but for different reasons – they were convinced that Dayal and Thondup were in cahoots, and that the new government had been dismissed in order to bolster the Namgyal family's position.

In London, the Foreign Office (which now had sole responsibility for policy towards India, Sikkim and Tibet) found it hard to keep up with events. At first they presumed that the Indian deployment in Sikkim meant that the state had been 'persuaded' to accede to the Indian Union; it was hard not to think of the forced accession of Hyderabad the previous year. In June, one baffled British diplomat wrote disdainfully of the Indian action:

It would now appear that Sikkim has *not* acceded to the Indian Union. If this is so, the action of the Government of India is a considerable extension of the theory of intervention which they have been developing during the past two years in relation to acceding states.

One thing was for certain: the British government no longer had the right nor the inclination to intervene.

Meanwhile the question of Sikkim's real constitutional status remained as elusive as ever.



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