

# GARUDA & WINGED HORSES

A JOURNEY THROUGH SIKKIM



Somnath Guha

GARUDA  
&  
WINGED HORSES  
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## Ripples in the Sand

“When I was born, Sikkim was an independent country”, said a young man to me at Rangpo, the ‘gateway’ to Sikkim’. We were talking at the *haat*. It was market day at the border-town and people came from Melli, Kalijhora, Teestabazar and elsewhere to sell their wares - vegetables, groceries, sweets, cheap clothes, pakoras etc. Decibels were high and the river gurgled at a distance. To our right was a wooden house past its prime and yet vintage. On the first floor hung a variety of orchids. A lady, emaciated, almost invisible, sat in an armchair, her pale melancholy face glowing in the setting sun.

“You were seeing the orchids”, the young man asked.

I didn’t reply. I was still immersed in what he had just said : “when I was born, Sikkim was an independent country”. How old would he be? Hardly 28-29. And yet deep within him there is anguish, an emptiness of a kingdom lost, a subtle resentment of an identity mutilated and hopelessly submerged. It is a feeling that he

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stubbornly refuses to admit, that it is there at all even if wrapped in the remotest corner of his consciousness. Like when I asked him about his nationality he replied that he is a Nepali but that first of all he is an Indian. Well adapted in the art of denying one's own feelings he had allowed himself just that one moment of indiscretion - just that one - and the snail had again withdrawn into its shell.

His father was a collector of orchids and watches. He was a contractor by profession. He even stood in an election and like the man he was, his symbol was rose. Outsiders who stop over at Rangpo enquire about his orchids.

"I have little knowledge about orchids nor do I have much interest", I admitted.

"Maybe he wants to photograph her", I said pointing to Suvendu.

Karki, the young man, took us into his house. There was no electricity. Creaky stairs, dark rooms, watches gleaming out of glass-framed cupboards, handicrafts peeping out of antique almirahs. As the shutter clicked, I drank squash.

It began to rain again. Vendors scurried for cover. Some pulled polythene sheets over their heads. The crowd thinned, the bazaar quietened, a stray dog whined unable to find room anywhere and repeatedly shook off

rainwater from its body. Rain had accompanied us from the SNT bus stand at Siliguri. SNT is the acronym for "Sikkim Nationalized Transport" which came into existence in 1944 and which today is the largest source of revenue for the state. From here there are frequent bus services to Gangtok and other less frequent ones to Pelling and other places in the state. Rubbing shoulder with it is a trekkers' stand from which perilously packed vehicles, stumble out every now and then and nonchalantly head for scenic locations across the hills. Our destination was Ravang, which hardly anyone was interested in. If you were to go to Sikkim, Lachen, Pelling, Dzongri are the places to be in. Why waste time in a place where the sun is barely ever seen? There is a one o'clock service we were told. And in the same breath cautioned that it is often cancelled owing to the lack of passengers. There are also maruti vans. "800 Rupees, off season price saab", chipped a twenty year old. Provocatively irreverent : jeans, cap, sneakers, key-ring-twirling-in-the-finger. We were on a shoe-string budget and could hardly afford to fritter our limited resources on such luxuries. Feeling the desolation of our pockets we recoiled under the shade pulling our luggage alongside. It was almost pouring by then. The day had turned murky and even the main road just ahead seemed to be in the distant horizon. Pelted by rain the trekkers'

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stand had turned into a mess. A few tourists who were hanging around had disappeared. The drivers and their staff were cocooned in their vehicles. Some slept, while some struck up a lazy conversation. A solitary trekker stood in the middle of the rectangle, half-full, its passengers bored with waiting. An equally bored driver sat at the wheel occasionally revving up the engine while a helper-boy had struck his head out crying "Gangtok, Gangtok". It was only ten o'clock then and the Ravang service three hours later seemed ages away. We had a terrible train journey, both of us sharing a berth and hardly having been able to sleep. What do we do? Wait and be damned? Or leave for Gangtok?

"Avail it. Get down at Singtam from where there is a regular service to Ravang", said the man at the counter as if he was reading our thoughts. "But you will have to pay the Gangtok fare". We found this to be an extra twenty rupees only and thus readily agreed. Even as we bought our tickets, small boys appeared from nowhere and deposited our luggage at the top of the trekker. We scurried behind and were told to occupy front seats. Suvendu sat by the window making room for his unwieldy legs. I rubbed water off my head, lit a cigarette and felt satisfied that somehow we had conjured up plump seats, which in Calcutta office-goers' parlance are "balcony ones". There were six others already seated out

of which was a Bengali couple who by the look of their age were probably on a honeymoon trip. The young lady was worried. She was convinced that despite the polythene covers over her luggage, water was seeping into her bags. She prodded her husband to do something about it. She complained to the driver and occasionally turned towards us hoping we would help her. This went on for quite some time till her complaints got hysterical and a Hindustani trader was jolted into action. A couple of boys went up, did the necessary and assured the lady in mocking Bengali that everything was all right. Though she wasn't entirely convinced, her nagging stopped and silence fell in the courtyard apart for the constant pattering of rain.

Gradually the trekker filled up. Suvendu having mortgaged the window - side our monopoly of the front seat was attacked from the right. A man snuggled in beside me from the driver's side positioning his legs on either side of the gear. Soon the driver got in and the helper squeezed in on his right. By the time our vehicle lurched forward to clear a bump and take off for the highway, it was crammed with sixteen people with two at the back literally perched on the others. The euphoria over balcony seats was soon over. I felt my legs join, my body shrivel as if I was put to the grind in a compressor. Thankfully, inspite of the load our trekker raced past army



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camps on the outskirts of Siliguri, a railway crossing and began its climb towards the hills. The rain had lessened but it was still drip-dropping steadily. Arrows of light pierced through the horizon and sunbathed the road ahead. This is the national highway. Immediately ahead is Sevoke, the 'gateway of the wind' from where it branches off towards Guwahati, itself rising serpentine towards Gangtok.

'Careful on my curves' read a 'Border Roads Organisation' graffiti along the highway. Someone in the BRO obviously has a cute sense of erotica. Of course he also has an idea of the vagaries of travel in this hilly state. From the foothills itself the river Teesta meanders alongside the road and the symphony flows past Gangtok, past Mangan, Lachen and Lachung in north Sikkim to Cholamoo from where it originates and from where Tibet is a whispering distance away. It runs the entire length of the state and the story of Teesta is the story of Sikkim. It twists and turns, rises and falls, hurtles over rocks, negotiates curves. At Berrick it is deep into the ravines, a silver lining, and yet menacing as it rumbles against the hills. At Kalijhora it is quietly flowing by, purring over obstacles, soft and sublime. At Goangaon in the north it metamorphoses into a glacier, a deadly and stealthily moving expanse of ice.

It's amazing to see the multifarious activities that

take place on a river-bed. Dhobis thrashed and washed clothes on stone slabs, rinsed them and hung them on ropes tied to bamboo poles dug into the sand. Trucks stood parked by narrow streams as the driver and the *khalasis* enjoyed a much needed wash. A little distance away women labourers quarried stones while some others dumped them into the truck's behind. At one point a billboard announced river-rafting at another a placard announced eco-picnic-spots. Come winter the entire stretch of the river-bed from Sevoke to Kalijhora is under siege. Revellers from the plains, from the towns of Siliguri, Jalpaiguri, Coochbehar, gather in hordes, in buses, trucks and tempos and transform the area into a veritable joyland. The highway is then thick with vehicles. The Sevoke temple crowded with devotees. The monkeys along the road have more to eat then, what with the picnickers disposing of loaves of bread and bananas, their staple breakfast, to the waiting langoors. Shamianas are put up all over the river bank. Durrees are spread on sand on which ladies seat, gossip and play housey. Their menfolk play rummy and the more adventurous fish in the Teesta. Soon the air is filled up with delicious aromas ——— *bhetki* being fried, chicken roasted, benign brinjals turned into crisp, munchy *begunis*. The air is also heavy with the smell of liquor and as microphones blared out the latest popular numbers, the young and the old

## Sighs and Soul-Searching

We were jolted out of our seats at Rangpo. The driver got out ; he announced a break of fifteen minutes. Everyone headed for the café selling tea, coffee, cakes and biscuits. We were tired. We had had a terrible night in the train with both of us sleeping in the same bunk and neither getting a good sleep . We got out and stretched ourselves and looking back over our shoulders we saw the beautiful Tibetan-architected bungalow. It was past noon then and the sun still glistened over the canopy. I watched the luggage and Suwendu rushed to enquire if there was any accommodation available. The entire bungalow was empty and we checked into it. We had a nap and then wandered into the market and Karki's house when it began to pour again leaving us stranded for quite a long time. The lady who was being photographed looked unhappy. Her husband who stood at the door looked sick. An engineer who had graduated from Okhla, he stays well when he is in north Sikkim where he is posted. Down at Rangpo the heat gets to him. Karki himself looked depressed. Like his father he is a man of

the balcony which hangs almost precariously over the river. To the right is the arch that ushers one into the state. To the left are three petrol pumps and numerous liquor shops and bars and eateries. Just in front and almost under your nose is the river. It is the Rangpo river, Rangpokhola as the locals call it - *khola* meaning canal. It is a river lean and thin for most of the year. The river bed is largely barren : a sweeping stretch of chips, stones and boulders. Naughty and enthusiastic streams break away from the main course, form ponds and puddles and exhaust themselves in the unyielding expanse of sand. In them children play and bathe, women wash utensils, scrub clothes, dip their hair, and nonchalantly undress and slip into dry clothes. Down below on the western side the Rangpokhola meets the Teesta. It is a haven for fishing and bird-watching and one could drown in the silence of nature.

Next morning Karki came early and we went to the confluence of the rivers, walking through people's houses, alleys, playing-fields, sand-beds, rocks. To our left on the other side of the river is the Darjeeling district of West Bengal where the Gorkhaland agitation erupted in the nineteen eighties. Border areas like Rangpo were then good shelters for agitators wanting to avoid the police.

"I made some quick money then", Karki said with

## Highway Hiccups

Next morning we headed for Gangtok. The weather remained the same. The road was bad particularly at certain points between Singtam and Ranipool. Our journey was uncertain but nothing in comparison to the one we were to experience nearly 3 years later from Geizing to Siliguri. That was 15th August and only the previous afternoon we had learnt that the Pelling - Siliguri bus for the day had been cancelled as there were not enough passengers, and more importantly, as everyone would be busy in celebrations. That year being the 50th year of Indian independence festivities were more high key than usual. I had left my family with my in-laws at Jalpaiguri and we were to meet at the railway station and catch the evening train to Calcutta. I had planned to take the morning bus so that I would reach in time. That night as we returned to the PWD bungalow our driver gave us bad news. There had been a huge landslide at Teestabazar and the road to Siliguri was entirely blocked. Some people were making it by transshipment which too was very uncertain, he told us. I hardly slept that night.

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Occasionally when I dozed off I dreamt of the winged horses that I found on the crockery in the bungalow. I dreamt that those horses would take me flying to my destination, rather than vehicles which could slip any moment to the ravines below. We managed a lift to Geizing next morning. At that early hour the town looked ghostly. Nothing on wheels was going to Siliguri we were told by a group of shop-workers busy in their morning chores. We waited in the light drizzle. School-children in bright uniform ran by to attend the celebrations. Trekkers full of football players headed for Pelling to participate in a local tournament. Patriotism however was the last thing on my mind then. The situation was grim. After about an hour a trekker full with passengers arrived. It was going to Siliguri.

“Could we make it”, I asked the driver, a pencil-thin man who didn’t exude much confidence.

“We can at least try”.

“But the road is blocked”.

“Then we will try through Darjeeling”, he said making a last-minute check on his vehicle.

“Jai Srikrishna”, a Hindustani passenger chanted.

“No risk, no gain”, he winked at us.

We jumped in at the behind and the journey began.

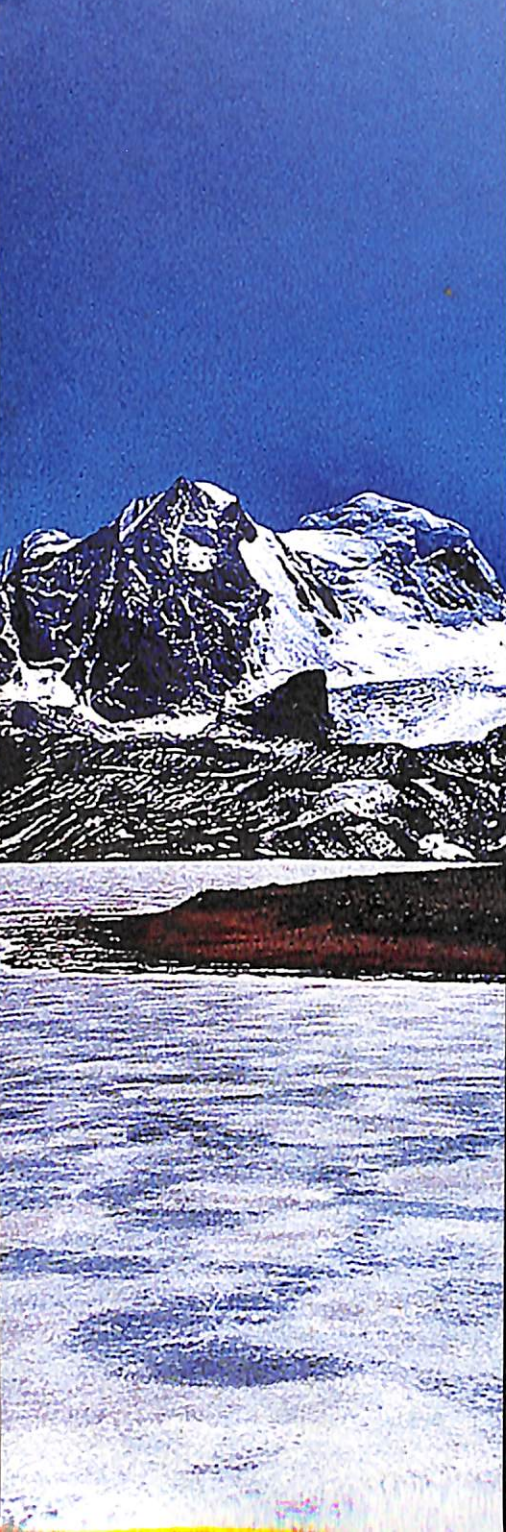
Occasionally we found buses and maruti cars and vans turning back. The road had become too narrow for

the buses and too slippery for the latter. Our commander had better chance of making it. Up to Legship the journey was uneventful, nothing to cause concern. Thereafter the road got worse. There were frequent stoppages and vehicles were negotiating the muddy roads with the narrowest of margins. At every point of alarm the Hindustani raised his chant and as our vehicle overcame it he flashed a winning smile at the rest of us.

It was just before Jorethang that we had the scare of our lives. The metallic road just vanished. Ahead for about 20 meters it was a thick pool of mud and slush, slippery and treacherous. The landslide had taken away half of the road leaving a narrow path just about enough for a vehicle to squeeze through. Slip an inch or two and you are straight into the ravines thousands of feet below. Some labourers worked hard at firming up this path lest its softness give away to the pressure of the vehicle. A maruti stood aside on the other side of the mess. It had been turned back. Two more vehicles waited behind ours at a distance. We were the first to cross the stretch since the landslide occurred.

Our driver got down, inspected the path, enquired something from the labourers and walked back to the vehicle with brisk steps barking orders for everyone to get down and walk on foot to the other side. Everyone hurriedly embarked. They took off their shoes. Some





This book is a journey through a land where everything is sacred; where peaks are worshipped; where lakes are held in awe; where tree-cutting is considered a sin; where birds carry the wisdom of saints; where Hindu, Sikh and Buddhist seers share the same pantheon; where politicians reconcile themselves to dharma; where independence of the soul rather than the body is paramount; where people belong to antiquity and eternally wait for that ultimate journey that will take them to their Promised Land .... the Bayul Denzong.



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COVER DESIGN: ART CREATIONS  
PHOTOGRAPHS: SUVENDU CHATTERJEE

ISBN 81-87075-22-8



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Rs.145