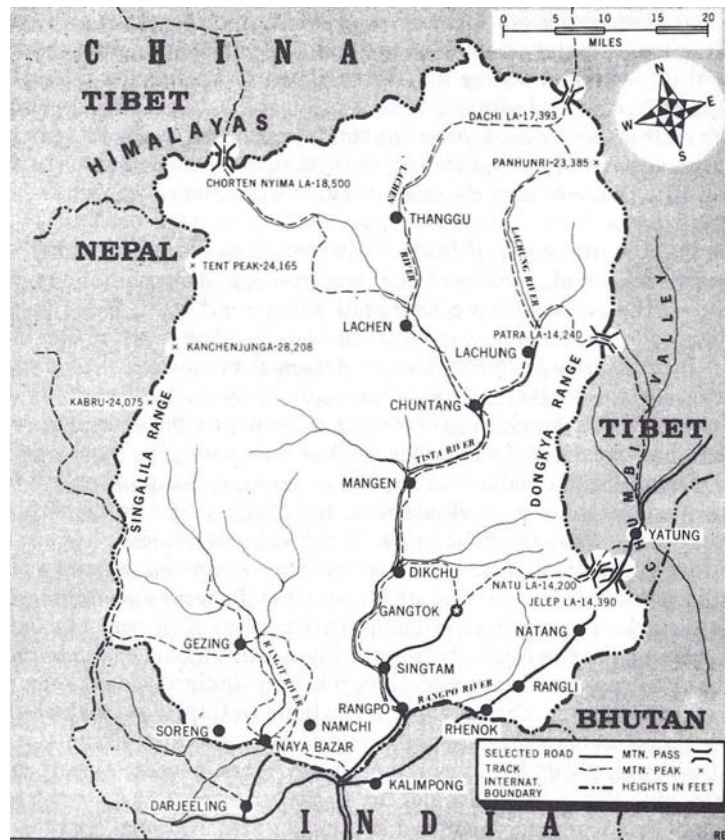


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1.1 Introduction

Records of Sikkim's early times are sparse and confusing. Their aim was not to preserve historical details but to entertain or enlighten. Fact and fiction are fused, individuals who lived centuries apart are conflated and the same stories are told about different people. I filtered those fables through better documented histories of Nepal and Tibet, India and China. They are the subject of later chapters. This chapter examines how Sikkim's geography shaped events, how Tibetan aristocrats turned the land of the animistic Lepcha and Limbu into a Buddhist kingdom and why it was taken over by India.

1.2 Geography



Scanned from "Area Handbook for Nepal, Bhutan and Sikkim"

Sikkim is roughly seventy miles long by forty wide, almost none of it flat. It is the watershed of the River Teesta. Water drains east from the Singalila ridge border with Nepal, south from the Himalayas, and west from the Dongkya ridge border with Tibet and Bhutan. The southern border follows the Rangit and other tributaries of the Teesta. Sikkim ranges in altitude from around 800 to almost 28,000 feet. Its climate varies correspondingly from subtropical humid to arctic. Much of the land is above 16,000 feet and is permanently snow-bound. Fast-flowing streams that feed the Teesta constantly carve the jumbled network of valleys deeper and transport great amounts of eroded material downstream. Avalanches, landslides and floods constantly reshape the land.

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Very few people lived in this fractured basin where only 40% of the land is habitable until events in Tibet led some to seek refuge over the relatively easy 14,000 foot passes from the Chumbi Valley. They established Sikkim as a Tibetan Buddhist kingdom. British coming from the south took control later. They established tea plantations, started an influx of Nepali workers, and saw the route to Tibet as a path for trade with imperial China or invasion by Tsarist Russia. India feared invasion that way by Maoist China.

1.3 History

Sikkim was inhabited in pre-historic times by the Naong, Chang and Mon. They were absorbed by Lepchas who are now considered Sikkim's native inhabitants but who came from further east, most likely mountainous Nagaland. They had no written language until the early 1700s so little is known of their history. It is said they were organized in the 1400s into a society with a king, Turve Pano, who died in battle and was succeeded by three hereditary kings followed by elected leaders. Whatever the events of those times, they had little long term impact. The important changes start with the 1642 consecration of Phuntsog Namgyal from Tibet as Sikkim's first temporal and religious king. What happened after that is well documented although Phuntsog's origin is obscured by myth aimed at legitimizing his right to rule. His ancestor is said to have founded the Kingdom of Minyang in eastern Tibet in the 9th century. Namgyal Kings who ruled the Chumbi Valley for three centuries before Phuntsog Namgyal became Sikkim's ruler probably came from that dynasty. It is said that in the second half of the 13th century one of them, Zhalnga Guru Tashi, had a vision that he should take his followers south to '*Denzong, the valley of rice*'. Sikkim was then known as Denzong. The kings reported to have followed Zhalnga probably did but his birth seems to have been predated a couple of centuries to incorporate a legend about his son, Khye Bumsa. There is a record of a Namgyal prince, Khye Bumsa, helping to build Sakya monastery in 1268. He was likely conflated with a later ancestor of Phuntsog Namgyal.

The legend is that Guru Tashi came to Denzong via Sakya where a monastery was being built¹. His eldest son raised pillars that several thousand men could not lift and was dubbed Khye Bumsa, '*the superior of ten thousand heroes*'. He settled there with the local leader's daughter. Lamas said he would only have children if he propitiated the Lepchas so he went to Denzong to find their leader. He saw an old wise-looking man tilling a field, followed him home and saw him worshipped in a robe covered with animal heads. The man was Thekong Tek the Lepcha chief. Khye Bumsa gave him presents and was promised three sons whose descendants would rule Denzong. When they grew up the eldest wanted to trade on the weaknesses of others. He was dubbed Kyabo Rab, the swindle. The youngest wanted to farm. He was renamed Langmo Rab, the ploughman. Only the middle son wanted to be a leader. He was hailed as Mipon Rab and his four sons founded Sikkim's leading families. Their feuds, starting with a daughter who had a child by her father's servant, are reminiscent of Icelandic sagas. The guilty pair was executed and the child's ears cut off. Mipon Rab's fourth son, named Guru Tashi after his grandfather, was chosen to rule when Thekong Tek had no successor. He was succeeded by his first and second sons then his third son's only son, Guru Tenzing. Tenzing's son Phuntsog was Sikkim's first Chogyal (king). Four generations isn't enough

¹ Sakya monastery was founded in 1073. The only surviving ancient building dates from 1268.

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to get from the 13th to the 17th century so grandfather Guru Tashi's Khye Bumsa can't have been helping at Sakya in 1268.

In the century before Phuntsog Namgyal became Sikkim's first Tibetan king, an aristocracy of old school Tibetans displaced by the rising power of the Dalai Lama's Gelug order established itself in Sikkim. Preeminent among these Bhutia immigrants are fourteen original families and another thirty who came later. There are many stories about them. Two boys who were their ancestors went on a pilgrimage and came to a land of cannibals whose wedding tradition was to eat the bride's father or mother unless they provided a surrogate. The boys took shelter with an old woman who told them she was about to be eaten at a marriage feast. She said they would be next unless they got her hand and escaped when her body parts were distributed. They took the hand, fled with it and hid in a tree but were found the next morning. They decided to jump and be killed not captured alive when men began felling the tree. But when they jumped, the one with the woman's hand was flown to safety and the other was transformed into a vulture until he reached a dense forest and escaped.

Phuntsog's consecration is said to have fulfilled a prophecy by Guru Rinpoche that lamas would come to Sikkim from the north, west and south and meet a fourth wise man at Yoksam who would become the country's temporal and spiritual leader. Lhatsun Chembo, a lama famous throughout Tibet, discovered this prophecy and saw it as a command to bring religion to barbarous Sikkim. He crossed the Kang La into Sikkim but could find no way forward. The Lord of Kanchenjunga came to inspire him. He wrote a book about proper worship of the mountain but still could find no path onward. At last, after resting in a beautiful valley he named '*Grove of Joy*', he flew to the 24,000 foot peak of Kabru, stayed there a couple of weeks and then went via Dzongri to Yoksam where he met two more high lamas. He said, "*Here are we three in a new and irreligious country. We must have a king to rule on our behalf.*" Each proposed himself but he reminded them, "*In the prophecy of Guru Rinpoche it is written that four noble brothers shall meet in Sikkim and arrange for its government. We are from the north, west and south. Towards the east, it is written, is a man named Phuntsog, a descendant of brave ancestors in Eastern Tibet. Accordingly, therefore, we should invite him.*" After many adventures they found Phuntsog churning milk near Gangtok, brought him to Yoksam and consecrated him as Chogyal, the '*king who rules with righteousness*'.

Perhaps Phuntsog Namgyal (1642 – 1670) was churning milk when lamas approached but he was already king. What happened in 1642 was unification of Tibet under the Great 5th Dalai Lama and a declaration of allegiance by Sikkim's king to his more powerful neighbor. The Dalai Lama's recognition of Phuntsog as '*ruler of the southern slopes of the Himalayas*' was symbolized by gifts of regalia and Guru Rinpoche's ritual dagger. Tibetan Buddhism of the Gelug order now became Sikkim's state religion, Tibet established his capital at Yoksam with a council of twelve ministers and twelve Lepcha administered local districts. He married a lady from an aristocratic Tibetan family and ruled for 28 years.

Phuntsog was succeeded by his son Tenzin (1670 - 1700) born in 1644. Tenzin moved the capital from Yoksam to Rabdentse during his peaceful reign and married three times. His first wife was a Tibetan by whom he had a daughter. His second wife was a

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Bhutia from Sikkim (some say she was from Bhutan). Their son Chakdor succeeded him. His third wife, a Limbu princess, is said to have originated the name Sikkim. He built her a house she named '*Suheem*', Limbu for '*new house*'. Limbu then began referring to the whole country as Suheem instead of the Tibetan Denzong for '*rice valley*'. Suheem evolved via Sukhim to Sikkim.

Chakdor (1700 – 1716), was only fourteen when he was enthroned. He was challenged by his older sister and escaped to Tibet when Bhutanese forces invaded. They captured Rabdentse and occupied Sikkim for eight years. During that time Chakdor became a distinguished Buddhist scholar and was appointed state astrologer by the 6th Dalai Lama, who also gave him an estate in Tibet that remained in his family for many years. He married a Tibetan lady, returned to Sikkim after the 6th Dalai Lama died in 1706 and with Tibetan support drove Bhutan out. Bhutan invaded again and was defeated but the south-eastern part of Sikkim was lost forever. The conflict between Chakdor and his sister continued until in 1716 she had him bled to death in a hot spring and was in return strangled with a silk scarf. During his decade of actual rule Chakdor established the monastery at Tashiding, commanded that the second of every three sons of Bhutia families become a lama at Pemyantse monastery, supported and adapted religious dances, and developed a Lepcha alphabet.

Gyurmed (1717 – 1733) succeeded his father when he was ten years old. Nepal and Bhutan threatened to invade and there were internal revolts. In 1721 he married the youngest daughter of the head of Tibet's Mindroling monastery. She is said to have been very ugly. Whatever the motive, he retreated to a monastery then became fascinated by Lepcha worship and later went to Tibet as a religious mendicant. His wife abandoned the marriage at that point. When he returned to Sikkim he refused to marry again and died with no heir. A lama who attended him on his death bed said he had named a nun who was carrying his child. The baby was in due course named Phuntsog and consecrated as Sikkim's next Chogyal in 1733.

A Bhutia noble declared Phuntsog (1733 – 1780) illegitimate and proclaimed himself king. He ruled for three years before being overthrown by a Lepcha-Limbu alliance supported by Tibet. Phuntsog was reestablished with a Lepcha Regent but then another threat began to grow. Charismatic Sirijunga was encouraging Limbu pride among his people both in Sikkim and Nepal. In 1741 agents of the court had him killed, the Limbu seceded and the Dalai Lama sent a Tibetan Regent to get control. Bhutan invaded but withdrew when Tibet responded. Five years later Phuntsog took the reins. In 1770 Bhutan invaded again and seized all Sikkim east of the Teesta. The present border was set in the subsequent peace treaty. Newly unified Nepal also invaded in the latter part of Phuntsog's time and the reign of his son Tenzin (1780 – 1793) was dominated by invasions of Limbu-supported Nepali forces. The Chogyal fled to Tibet in 1788 with his Lepcha wife and their son when a huge force from Nepal advanced through Sikkim almost 300 miles into Tibet. It took a massive Chinese army to halt them. China tried to buy off future attacks by ceding to Nepal all Sikkim west of the Teesta. Chogyal Tenzin died in Lhasa before he could return to rule this much reduced territory and was succeeded by his eight year old son Tsugphud.

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It was in Tsugphud's (1793 – 1862) seventy year reign that British India replaced Tibet as Sikkim's protector. After unifying the center of present-day Nepal its rulers continued conquests in every direction. When Sikhs blocked them in the west and China appeased them in the north and east, the only remaining direction was south. British India preempted that. They invaded in 1814, trounced Nepal the following year and restored Sikkim's territory as a buffer. Young Tsugphod's court had his Lepcha relatives in powerful positions traditionally held by Bhutia nobles. They persuaded him in 1826 that his Lepcha chief minister was conspiring against him. When he had the man executed his supporters fled, got Nepali support, and invaded. Tsugphod appealed to the British India Company for help. Captain Lloyd was sent to investigate. On his way he noted Darjeeling's potential as a summer retreat for the Company's Calcutta staff. These hill stations were very important (three quarters of the Calcutta staff died in the summers between 1747 and 1756 alone) and the search for sites went on for years. Cherrapunji looked good but had 458 inches of annual rainfall, a location 30 miles away got only 82 but was too fiercely defended, and so on. After the Lepcha uprising fizzled, newly promoted Major Lloyd was sent back to Sikkim to negotiate for use of Darjeeling.

Major is a low rank (3rd of 10). A higher official would have taken over if Lloyd failed which is presumably why he accepted Tsugphud's offer of use of Darjeeling in return for restoring territory that Lloyd knew was given to the Raja of Jalpaiguri. More surprisingly, Lloyd rewrote the offer to include not just Darjeeling but an area 30 miles long and 10 miles wide, a twelfth of the entire kingdom. He had by this time been told to stop negotiating because a mutually satisfactory agreement was impossible but forgiveness comes easier than permission. He waited six months before sending the signed deed to Calcutta. It is unambiguous under Western law but was probably not understood that way by the Chogyal: *'The Governor-General having expressed his desire for the possession of Darjeeling, on account of its cool climate, for the purpose of enabling the servants of his government, suffering from sickness, to avail themselves of its advantages, I, the Sikkimputtee Rajah, out of friendship to the said Governor-General, hereby present Darjeeling to the East India Company, that is, all the land South of the Great Ranjot River, east of the Balasur, Kahail and Little Ranjit Rivers, and West of Rungno and Mahanadi Rivers.'* An annual payment was to be made. The Chogyal presumably interpreted that as rent. It is hard to believe he would have transferred ownership of a twelfth of his territory simply *'out of friendship'*.

Dr. Campbell, appointed in 1839 as Darjeeling's first Superintendent, did not reciprocate the Chogyal's *'friendship'*. When serfs who fled from Sikkim to Darjeeling were forcibly taken back he accused Sikkim of kidnapping naturalized British citizens. Instead of making payments he collected taxes then expressed surprise when the Chogyal asked for what he was promised. The Chogyal's son-in-law popularly known as the Mad Dewan who became Chief Minister in 1847 was more aggressive. In 1848 botanist Dr. Hooker sought to explore Sikkim with Campbell and was refused. The next year they entered covertly via Nepal, mapped north Sikkim and went on to Tibet. Tibet executed the border guard who allowed them to pass and Sikkim imprisoned them for a month when they re-entered. Britain sent a punitive force the following year and in the next decade despite armed resistance occupied southern Sikkim from Darjeeling to the Indian border. In 1860 after the British government nationalized the Company, Campbell was told to invade and finish getting Sikkim under control. He was easily halted by a force with

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matchlocks and arrows but more troops under army leadership were successful the next year. Sidkeong Namgyal, acting for his father, was then forced to sign a treaty affirming Sikkim's independence so as not to provoke Tibet and China but binding the Chogyal to *'refer to the arbitration of the British Government any disputes or questions that may arise between his subjects and those of Nepal, or any other neighboring State, and to abide by the decision of the British Government'*. The treaty formally annexed Sikkim's southern half, entitled Britain to build roads across Sikkim and banished the Mad Dewan, his family and descendants. The only benefit to Sikkim was that Britain doubled the annual payment they started making in 1850.

Darjeeling was by this time important to Britain because it is a prime location for tea. The shrub is indigenous to India and China. Britain had some success with tea grown from seed gathered in Assam but China tea was far superior. In 1851 Robert Fortune smuggled tea seeds from China and broke their monopoly. Darjeeling tea became immensely profitable and, as we saw, the Company took all southern Sikkim to get it safely to India. They later realized Sikkim has the best route between India and Tibet and hoped to use it to trade their lower quality tea for Tibetan wool. They also imagined Tibet had huge gold reserves to buy Indian goods. The Company would likely have annexed northern Sikkim to secure that route if the 1857 Indian Mutiny had not resulted in the transfer of responsibility for India to the British government. That only postponed the inevitable, however. Britain's Viceroy in India were less enthused about trade with Tibet but increasingly concerned about invasion via Sikkim. Frustrated by Britain's machinations, Chogyal Tsugphod grew increasingly aligned to Tibet and devoted himself to religion after the Mad Dewan became Chief Minister in 1847. He spent several months in Tibet every year and the first two of his five wives were sisters of the Panchen Lama.. His oldest surviving son Sidkeong was by his second wife. Sidkeong's successor Thutob came from his fifth marriage, to Maharani Menchi. He also had a son by a maidservant and a daughter who married the Mad Dewan. His son by the maidservant married his widow Maharani Menchi.

Sidkeong Namgyal (1862 – 1874) was 44 when he became Chogyal. He had been identified as an incarnation and originally lived as a celibate lama but there was no other acceptable candidate. He had been Sikkim's effective ruler since the Mad Dewan was banished. He resolved disputes with the rulers of Tibet and Bhutan as an equal but Britain treated him like the subservient rulers of India's native states and referred to him as Maharaja. In Sidkeong's State Visit to Bengal in his final year, the Governor denied his request to reorganize Sikkim's army and have it trained by Britain. Sidkeong married but had no children. Sikkim's Tibetan faction and his still influential uncle the Mad Dewan considered Sidkeong's only surviving brother, Thutob, an unworthy successor because he had a harelip. They believed that to be a sign of weak intelligence and favored Thinley, the child of Tsugphod's widow Maharani Menchi and his son by his maidservant. Britain thought Thutob would help them deal with Tibet while Thinley would make it more difficult so they engineered 14 year old Thutob's succession.

There was a massive influx of Nepalis in the first half of Thutob's reign (1874 – 1914). A powerful landowner defied a prohibition Tsugphod put in place when tea plantations were introduced. He established a settlement of Nepalis to work his land. When young Thutob's administration did not respond, other landowners and British tea farmers

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defied the ban. Lamas from Pemyantse began ejecting the settlers. The conflict escalated. Thutob appealed for help to the British Governor of Bengal. He endorsed the ban but Thutob's delegates nullified the declaration by adding next to the seal, *'according to the Governor's desire I promise to abide by the Policy of allowing the Gurkhalese to settle in uninhabited and waste lands of Sikkim'*. Landowners continued settling Nepali workers with support from British officers in Darjeeling. Thutob then went to Tibet for help and fell under the Mad Dewan's influence. Britain cancelled an expedition to investigate in 1886 when they learned Tibet would respond with force. Then Tibet invaded Sikkim and occupied an area Thutob said was part of Tibet. Tibetan forces penetrated further. In 1888 a British force drove them out, appointed a political officer to rule Sikkim and exiled Thutob to India. He was allowed to return in 1896. Sikkim's fate was now determined by Britain's fear of a Russian invasion of India and frustration over Tibet's refusal to communicate. They sent an expedition through Sikkim to compel Tibet into a treaty. John Buchan's 1924 account expresses their attitude; *'In 1903 the position of Britain was like that of a big boy at school who is tormented by an impertinent youngster. He bears it for some time, but at last is compelled to administer chastisement'*. Most of the treaty expedition leader Younghusband made with Tibet was repudiated after protests by China. Some of Thutob's power was restored for his support of the expedition but his title remained Maharaja.

Thutob's eldest son, Tsodak, was his expected successor. Thutob was directed in 1899 to bring him back from Tibet where he was being educated but he would not come. Britain then recognized his younger brother, Sidkeong Tulku, as heir apparent and began giving him a Western education. Sidkeong Tulku (1914) was an incarnation of his uncle Sidkeong and like him had to get dispensation to succeed his father. He was intelligent, well educated, progressive and well trained. He served in a British mission to Tibet, studied for two years at Oxford and became Minister of Forests, Monasteries and Schools when he returned to Sikkim in 1908. He was the effective ruler for the last few years of his father's reign and abolished imprisonment for non-payment of debts in 1913. He planned to abolish the landlord system and curtail the aristocracy's privileges when he succeeded his father but died within a few months of his consecration. He was almost certainly assassinated. He had married the younger sister of his father's third wife but they had no children so he was succeeded by his younger half-brother.

Tashi Namgyal (1914 – 1963) was twenty when he became Maharaja. He was also well educated and progressive. His first major reform was establishment in 1916 of an independent judiciary to oversee those functions of the landlords. When full authority was restored to him by Britain in 1918 he accelerated reforms, prohibiting public gambling in 1921 and unpaid labor in 1924. He continued reforms throughout the first 35 years of his reign and led his country out of its medieval past. His massive land reforms were completed when he ended forced labor in 1945, eliminated the landlords' courts and registration of deeds in 1948 and peasants began to pay taxes directly to the state. The last third of his reign was very different, however. He never recovered from losing his older son in WW2 and retired more and more to a life of prayer. When India became independent in 1947, Sikkim became an Indian protectorate and was caught up in India's struggle to become a nation. Two fifths of India's land was ruled by princes and Britain had included Sikkim in that category in a 1935 Government of India Act. India's future was controversial. Should it develop into a single nation, separate ones,

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become a loose federation, or what? Britain said when they withdrew, *'the rights of the states which flow from their relationship to the crown will no longer exist and all the rights surrendered by the states to the paramount power will return to the states.'* Did that mean Sikkim and the principalities could become independent? Sikkim's participation in the debate was led by Tashi's son Palden Thondup. His reign did not begin until 1963, but he was de facto ruler from the late '40s. The introduction of democracy in India fueled pressure for the same in Sikkim. Riots broke out that had to be quelled by Indian troops. The Chogyal retained internal autonomy but an Indian civil servant was appointed head of the administration. A general election was held in 1953. The Bhutia-Lepcha and Nepalese communities battled for control and Sikkim grew increasingly unstable then in 1962 Indian and Chinese forces clashed on Sikkim's northern border. India was growing ever more concerned about events in Sikkim.

Palden Thondup Namgyal (1963 – 1975) was Tashi's second son. Born in 1923 and recognized as an incarnate lama, he began training but became heir apparent when his older brother was killed. He represented Sikkim in a 1946 Provisional Government of India study where Sikkim was neither recognized as a nation nor merged into India like the hill states west of Nepal. Nehru said, *'Sikkim is an Indian state but different from others ... something between a state in India and an independent state'*. Palden's first wife was the daughter of a Tibetan noble. In 1963 he married an American, Hope Cooke, pronounced himself Chogyal not Maharaja when he was consecrated and pushed for Sikkimese independence. It was a lost cause. Unlike Nepal and Bhutan, Sikkim has relatively easy access from Tibet that makes India vulnerable to invasion. Nehru's hopes for an alliance with China ended in the 1962 border dispute and the 1965 Indo-Pakistan war raised fears of a China-Pakistan alliance. In June 1966 Hope Cooke published an article arguing that Sikkim's Chogyal probably only meant to grant Britain usage rights at Darjeeling. The implication was that India should return it to Sikkim. India grew ever more concerned. The Chogyal's ambitions were growing, his ability to rule was shrinking and China continued to claim Sikkim's cultural affinity with Tibet demonstrated that it was Chinese territory. Massive riots broke out in 1973 when the Nepalese community demanded *'one man, one vote'*. The Chogyal had to get India to restore order. Anti-monarchist agitation continued to grow until in 1975 Sikkim became India's 22nd state.

1.4 British East India

Tibet, Nepal, India and Britain all had major impacts on Sikkim. In later chapters we'll see what led to Tibetans establishing Sikkim's aristocracy in the mid-1500s and why Nepalis came as workers from the mid-1800s. Here, I'll touch on the British East India Company. We'll return to it in more detail in a chapter about India. The Company was established with a royal charter in 1600 to develop Britain's trade in the East Indies and break Dutch control of the spice trade. There were frequent battles between Dutch and British ships. In 1615 the Company negotiated what looked like a better opportunity, trade with India. The emperor who ruled most of India and Afghanistan granted the Company exclusive trading rights and by 1647 it had 23 bases in India. In the 1670s Britain's king granted it the right to acquire territory, mint money, command troops, make war and peace, and exercise civil and criminal jurisdiction over acquired areas. It immediately raised an army of British officers and Indian troops. By 1720, 15% of all British imports were from India, chiefly cotton, silk, indigo and saltpeter as well as tea

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forwarded from China. Rivalry between Britain and France led in 1754 to war in Europe, India and America that ended France's role in India. The Company's 1757 victory at Plassey was a military triumph but the high cost of its army was a major drain on its profits. The by now enormous demand for China tea was an even greater problem because China controlled both its price and how they were paid. They would take only cash. The Company solved that by selling Bengal opium in China, then the supply problem by growing China tea in Darjeeling. By the late 1850s profits were so great that the Company was taken over by the government and India became *'the jewel in the crown of the British Empire'*. Sikkim's geography now became important strategically. The route through Sikkim seemed both a threat and an opportunity. Russia could invade India that way; Britain could transport opium to China. China tried to cut off the sea route in 1840. Macauley, who found the land route in 1884, was excited, too, by other trade potential. Tibetans were known to be prodigious tea drinkers and *"The finest borax, rhubarb and musk in the world are the exclusive products of Tibet and its frontiers. Much of the first and second is taken to Russia by the Mongolian merchants and by the Chinese merchants to Peking, and thence by European merchants to Europe and America."* He acknowledged, however, that China would likely oppose any trading agreement because, *"there are two Indian products which the Chinese look upon with dislike – opium and tea [and] however much we may resent the present policy, and however unreasonable and humiliating we may consider it, we cannot challenge it as an infringement of right. We ourselves allowed the power of China to become finally supreme in Tibet in 1792."* Tibet ignored British overtures and China refused Macauley's proposed mission. Over a century later India still grapples with the same fear and greed provoked by the land route and the same conflicts inside Sikkim over Nepali immigrants.

1.5 People

Sikkim's population was approximately 200,000 in 1971 near the end of its independence. Thirty years later it was approaching 550,000 fueled by immigration of workers from Nepal and West Bengal, especially men. The male/female ratio in 2001 was 875 to 1,000. About 89% of the population is rural.

1.5.1 Lepchas

Sikkim's original inhabitants, the Lepchas, are of Mongolian descent. Their name may be derived from *'lap'* meaning a sacred place. Some attribute it to mispronunciation of the Nepali word, *'lapcha'*, meaning *'nonsense-talkers'*. Others say Nepalis named them for a species of submissive fish. They refer to themselves as Rongpas, a Tibetan word meaning ravine dwellers. Many of the few remaining Lepchas live on a reservation in North Sikkim that was established early in the twentieth century.

The Lepcha creation legend is that God Rum formed everything in the universe including a holy mountain Kingtsoom Zaongboo Choo *'the bright auspicious forehead peak'* which we call Kanchenjunga. Rum made two balls of snow from the top of the mountain. With the one in his right hand he made a man, Phadong Thing, meaning *'most powerful'* and with the other a woman, Najyonguyu, meaning *'ever fortunate'*. They became the parents of all Lepchas. Because their union was incestuous their first seven children became demons who harassed their twenty younger, peaceful siblings. They prayed for

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help and Rum sent them a rescuer, Tamsang Thing. He battled for many days with the king of the demons, Lasso-Moong-Ponu, who took the shape of a tiger and other fierce creatures. In the end Tamsang Thing killed him and returned to the mountains where he remains in case he's needed again. The Lepcha new year features an effigy of the devil king and a mock battle that ends with the effigy being burned to celebrate the victory of good over evil. Rum is also said to have created seven divine couples who live in a snow covered valley beyond Kanchenjunga. Every morning they are reborn as children who grow up during the day and become old in the evening. Lepchas pray to them for good harvests. When the Lepchas were more devout the divine couples used to visit but they only send birds nowadays when it is time to sow or harvest.

Lepcha history was recorded long after the events and although there is a Lepcha script most of their early books are in Tibetan. The Lepcha script was developed in the early 1700s soon after the influx of Tibetans by Sikkim's third Chogyal so he could educate the Lepchas and convert them to Buddha's teachings. When dependable Lepcha history begins, they were clearing new forest land every few years, primarily for millet and maize, and growing some dry-land rice for celebrations. According to one Lepcha text, they had a king, Pohartak Panu, who sent an army to Takshashila in NW India to help Emperor Chandra Gupta fight Alexander the Great. Takshashila had the world's first university and attracted students from Greece, Arabia and China 700 years before the birth of Christ. The majority opinion is that Turve Panu was Lepcha's first king in the first half of the 1400s. He is said to have had a considerable army and to have established by marriage a lasting alliance with Limbus from Nepal who controlled southwest Sikkim. It is said that after the last king in his line died, the Lepchas elected a leader and thereafter ceased to be warlike.

British anthropologist Geoffrey Gorer spent several months studying the Lepchas in the mid 1930s. Like others in war-torn Europe he wanted to understand the origins of human aggressiveness. Why are Lepchas peaceful, he wondered, when so many of their neighbors are the reverse? His research is fascinating although his history can be misleading. He wrote, *'When the tribes of Tibet, and later of Nepal, amalgamated into single states with expansionist policies, the Lepchas found themselves confronted with warlike enemies against whom they were practically defenseless ... to save themselves they abandoned their cultivation and took to a nomadic life in the forests.'* Tibet was in fact unified and expansionist a thousand years earlier. The Tibetans who came and established a government in Sikkim in the 1600s were wealthy refugees. Nepal was not unified and did not invade Sikkim until the late 1700s, more than a century later. Some Lepchas did leave their land when the Tibetans arrived. Some joined the court and administration. Many stayed where they were and began growing cardamom when it was introduced from Nepal in the 1870s. That put them at the mercy of Mahawari money lenders from India who were granted a State monopoly on cardamom trading in return for collecting the sales tax. Rulers throughout the Himalaya collected taxes that way. The British East India Company took over operation of such systems throughout India. Many Lepchas were forced to take goods instead of cash for their crop and then had to borrow at very high interest rates to pay taxes.

The peaceful Lepcha culture resulted from an environment where subsistence was not too demanding and achieving more was almost impossible. The steep hills of Sikkim

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support only scattered smallholdings and very small villages. Living close to others was impractical and being a serf unthinkable. Gorer writes, *'The Lepchas so dislike being ordered about that even on construction jobs which could be more efficiently performed with a director of operations they insist on working independently and ignore anybody who tries to give orders.'* A similar culture develops in all such environments although Gorer considered the Lepchas an extreme case. He wrote that while it may or may not be true that no Lepcha was ever born to lead, certainly none was ever born to follow.

The major art of the Lepchas is stories where fabulous elaborations are woven into a fabric of real events. Gorer has one about a king of Sikkim whose sister was a devil. She sat on a high throne with her vulva stretching to the ground and made every man and his horse copulate with her. One day she heard of a man whose penis was so enormous he coiled it eight times round his waist. She bore him twin sons. The elder had only one eye in the center of his forehead. The queen later had the king killed at the hot springs by severing his arteries. The king held the artery ends together just long enough to order his minister to exact revenge. The minister stuffed a scarf down the queen's throat and suffocated her. At that instant the king let go his arteries and expired. The minister then drowned the doctors. The story takes a week to tell and also explains how the king's son lives as a farmer, is recognized as king, has adventures when Gurkhas invade then flees to Tibet. The three foot labia, twenty foot penis and tourniquet are Lepcha embellishments. Features like the death of the king and queen originate in events like those involving Chogyal Chakdor and his sister in 1716. The man who farms sounds like Sikkim's first Chogyal. Other Lepcha legends are reminiscent of biblical stories. There was, for example, a great flood where only the peaks of two mountains remained above water. They were Tehdong and Motnom, a brother and sister. Motnom feared her brother was about to be submerged, bent forward to see, slipped below the surface and all the people on her were drowned. Those on Tehdong kept praying until God heard them and sent a pigeon which they greeted with a pitcher of chang. That made it thirsty and it drank all the floodwater. There's also a tower of Babel. Village leaders decided to make a tower of clay pots to the sky. The two men at the top at last called to those below to send a hook so they could snag the sky. The people thought they were saying they had reached the sky and no longer needed the tower, so they tore it down.

The man who synthesized Lepcha beliefs with Tibetan Buddhism was Lhatsun Chembo *'the great reverend god'*. He was born in SE Tibet where many of Guru Rinpoche's texts were discovered and he found more in Sikkim including one that foretold his own mission. As we saw earlier he met two other lamas at Yoksam and they pronounced Phuntsog ruler of Sikkim in 1642. Lhatsun Chembo is said to have been a favorite of the young 5th Dalai Lama and enabled him to impress the Chinese emperor when they met in Beijing in 1653. The Dalai Lama had a vision that a sage would visit him and alerted his attendants but word did not reach the guards. When Lhatsun Chembo arrived and blew his human thighbone trumpet the guards tied him up. He attracted attention by making the Potala shake. When he was brought before the Dalai Lama he struck him with his fist, vomited and said: *"You are going to China. On the way great danger besets you but my fist rid you of that. You will be in great peril there. Consult this paper and you will be relieved. My vomiting means you will be given great power and riches."* The Dalai Lama was baffled when the emperor asked him the *'essence of the rainbow color'* until he remembered the paper Lhatsun Chembo gave him and found an answer there

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that so pleased the emperor that he gave the Dalai Lama great riches. Lhatsun Chombo spent most of the rest of his later life choosing sites for monasteries in Sikkim and is said to have died when quite old searching for a rare leopard skin that ascetics prize as a prayer mat.

1.5.2 Limbus

Limbu territory straddles the border between Sikkim and Nepal. Like other Himalayan folk their allegiance is first to their family then their tribe. The central government and its culture come a long way third. Unlike Lepchas who accommodated to Bhutia culture the Limbu resisted. Most of them seceded to Nepal and retained substantial independence when it was unified. Those who stayed became known as Tsangs. The approximate place of origin of the Limbu is apparent from their Tibeto-Burman language. A Limbu creation myth is that their supreme god, Sham Mung, created the first woman from bamboo ashes and fowl's droppings. She married the wind and had a son, he met two women of unknown origin one of whom bore a son and the other a daughter, they married and their children were the first Limbus. A myth with more connection to recorded history is that the Limbu are descended from ten brothers and their priests who left home at Varanasi 300 miles southeast of where the Limbu now live. Five brothers went directly to the mountains, the others went via Lhasa and all ten settled west of Kanchenjunga where they had many children with local women of unexplained origin and became a nation.

1.5.3 Bhutias

The languages of the Bhutia of Sikkim, Bhutan and northern Nepal are all variants of standard Tibetan. A few traders and yak herders no doubt crossed the Himalayan passes and settled from early times but there seems to have been no large scale exit from Tibet until the Gelug reformation in the early 1600s. Those refugee nobles and high lamas reestablished their privileged life in Bhutan and Sikkim. The landowners dispossessed by the Chogyal in the first half of the 20th century were predominantly Bhutias.

1.5.4 Nepali Settlers

Organized immigration to Sikkim began in 1867 when Chogyal Sidkeong leased land to Newari brothers from Kathmandu who brought Nepalis to work it under the Indian zamindari system that was introduced in Nepal when it was unified. The zamindar landlord collected taxes for the central government and exacted as much as possible in addition for himself. Nepalis introduced terrace cultivation to Sikkim which greatly increased yields and cardamom that became an important cash crop. They also worked in copper mines on land leased by Newari traders. Settlement further increased when Claude White became Sikkim's effective ruler in 1889. He wrote, *'The country was sparsely populated and in order to bring more land under cultivation, it was necessary to encourage migration, and this was done by giving land on favorable terms to Nepalese, who, as soon as they knew it was to be had, came freely in.'* The USA was giving settlers homesteads on Indian land at that time and China is doing it now for Han settlers in Tibet. At the end of the 19th century Sikkim's population comprised 20,000

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Nepalese, about 6,000 Lepchas and 5,000 Bhutias. A century later almost 80% of Sikkim's 540,000 population was of Nepali origin.