



My City
My Heritage

My Gangtok



INTERGLOBE
FOUNDATION



Sahapedia

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Foreword

It is with great pleasure that we present to you this compendium of booklets showcasing some of the lesser-known and overlooked treasures of select cities in our country. Over the past decade, the InterGlobe Foundation (IGF) has been steadfast in its commitment to preserving and restoring India's cultural and built heritage.

Launched in 2019 as a collaboration between the InterGlobe Foundation and Sahapedia, the My City My Heritage project is guided by a shared vision to promote India's vibrant intangible culture through the documentation and celebration of the cultural fabric of its cities. Each city has its own unique story to tell—stories rooted in its monuments, crafts, festivals, and the lived experiences of its people. By documenting these stories, this project not only preserves our cultural fabric but also inspires pride and awareness in local communities and visitors alike.

As custodians of a shared heritage, we at IGF believe that initiatives like this are crucial for exploring a deeper connection between the communities and the spaces they inhabit. We also hope that in each of the project cities, a group of concerned citizens, institutions and government will come together to carry forward this beautiful curation of their city's history. We hope these booklets will entice you to discover these cities and their treasures and share them with others. We welcome more organizations, individuals and researchers to build on the repository created here.

I extend my heartfelt gratitude to the team at Sahapedia, my colleagues at InterGlobe Foundation, as well as the researchers, photographers, and local communities who have contributed to this endeavor.

With best wishes,

Rohini Bhatia

Chairperson
InterGlobe Foundation

Foreword

It gives me great pleasure to introduce this collection of city booklets created under the 'My City My Heritage' initiative, a collaboration between Sahapedia and the InterGlobe Foundation (IGF). These booklets celebrate the rich and layered cultural heritage of Indian cities, bringing to light their stories, unique traditions, and enduring legacies.

At Sahapedia, our journey since 2011 has been defined by a vision—to document and share India's vast and diverse cultural knowledge. Over the past 15 years, Sahapedia has established itself as an open, digital resource dedicated to exploring the histories, arts, and traditions that define our shared heritage. The Sanskrit term 'Saha,' (together with), embodies the spirit of collaboration that fuels our efforts in documenting local contexts and pluralistic traditions, and creating meaningful engagement with India's cultural legacy.

'My City My Heritage,' launched in 2019, has become an extension of this vision. With the generous support of IGF, this project underscores the role of cities as living repositories of history and culture. Beyond research and documentation resulting into City Booklets, the project engages communities, scholars, and enthusiasts in celebrating their cities' unique identities. Initiatives like heritage walks and Anubhutis—Sahapedia's initiative for children with disabilities and marginalized groups—have redefined heritage engagement.

Each booklet reflects research, thoughtful curation, and a commitment to accessible heritage. This endeavor owes its success to the unwavering support of IGF and the contributions of researchers, photographers, local communities, and Sahapedia's team.

It is my hope that these booklets will not only serve as resources for exploration and education but also foster a sense of responsibility for our cultural legacy. I invite you to dive into the stories within and to share in the joy of our collective heritage.

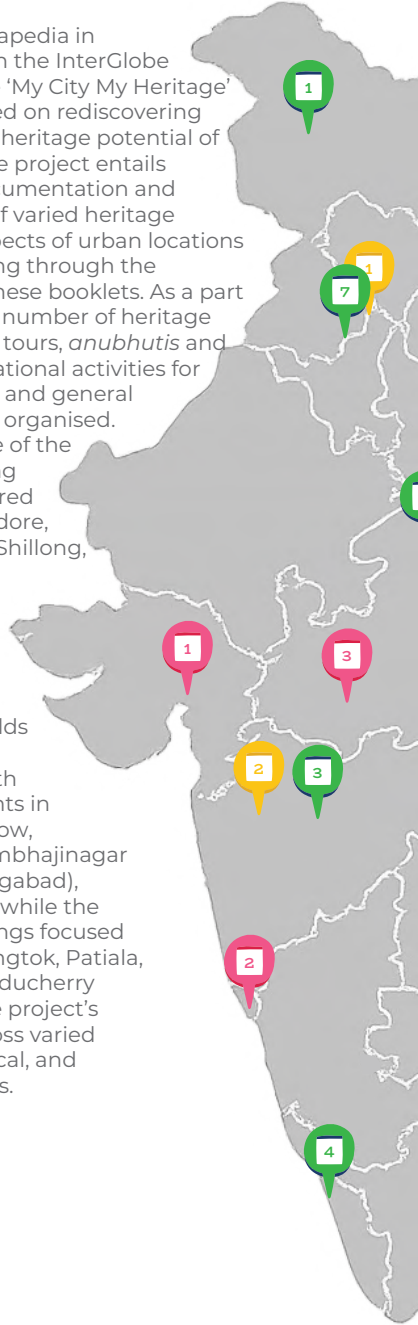
With warm regards,

Sudha Gopalakrishnan

**Executive Director
Sahapedia**

My City My Heritage My Gangtok

Initiated by Sahapedia in partnership with the InterGlobe Foundation, the 'My City My Heritage' project is focused on rediscovering the culture and heritage potential of Indian cities. The project entails exploration, documentation and dissemination of varied heritage and cultural aspects of urban locations in India, including through the publication of these booklets. As a part of the project, a number of heritage walks, museum tours, *anubhutis* and engaging educational activities for school students and general audiences were organised. The initial phase of the project, spanning 2019–2022, covered Ahmedabad, Indore, Prayagraj, Goa, Shillong, Bhubaneswar, Chandigarh, Hyderabad, Kolkata, and Nashik. The ongoing phase (2024–2025) builds on this legacy through in-depth city engagements in Srinagar, Lucknow, Chhatrapati Sambhajnagar (formerly Aurangabad), and Kozhikode, while the current year brings focused attention to Gangtok, Patiala, Gwalior, and Puducherry—extending the project's exploration across varied regional, historical, and cultural contexts.



The 'My City My Heritage' project caters to a wide user group, including but not limited to children with disabilities and from financially and socially marginalised backgrounds, culture enthusiasts, scholars, heritage professionals and tourists. The project aims at creating opportunities, building interest and capacity of young local scholars through collaborative research, documentation and mapping. An equally important and compelling goal is to create fresh avenues for residents, local administration and local businesses



More about the project



to re-engage with their cities' living cultural heritage and renew old as well as create new relationships of participation, community and ownership within these places. This book is a small step in that direction. More detailed versions of all pieces covered in this editorial and more information about each city can be found on our website.

Scan this QR code to visit our portal and get access to our entire encyclopaedia.



Phase I

Ahmedabad, Goa, Indore, Prayagraj, Shillong



Phase II

Chandigarh, Nashik, Hyderabad, Bhubaneswar, Kolkata



Phase III

Srinagar, Lucknow, Chhatrapati Sambhajinagar, Kozhikode, Gangtok, Gwalior, Patiala, Puducherry

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Introductory Note

Gangtok rose to prominence when it became the fourth capital of independent Sikkim in 1894. It is a city shaped as much by trade and movement as by mountains and monsoons. For over 130 years, it has served as the administrative heart of Sikkim, enduring the tides of geopolitics, urbanization, and cultural exchange that have long defined this region. Yet to truly understand Gangtok is to situate it within the larger history of Sikkim — a small Himalayan state of just 7,096 km², the second smallest in India and the twenty-second to join the Indian Union, yet one of the world's richest biodiversity hotspots with an equally vibrant cultural fabric with Khangchendzonga National Park earning the UNESCO World Heritage site in the mixed category.

Sikkim's borders with Tibet, Nepal, and Bhutan have for centuries made it a crossroads of trade, migration, and religious exchange. These trans-Himalayan connections have shaped its landscapes and its people, fostering

layers of belonging that are both rooted and fluid. Situated in eastern Sikkim, Gangtok, now marked by its tourist economy, is a city that emerges from the eastern Himalayan terrain.

This curation invites you to explore Gangtok and Sikkim through multiple lenses: history and human geography, built form and social life, bodily practice and belief, craft and performance, taste and sound.

Between Empire and Nation encapsulates Sikkim's journey as an independent kingdom under the Namgyal dynasty and the changing administration between the British Empire and the Indian nation state till its integration into India. ***The Peoples of Sikkim*** reflects on the diverse communities that animate the region, thinking through identity not as fixed categories but as lived and shared worlds. ***The Lores of Water*** explores natural heritage and its place in culture through folklore. Culinary traditions find expression in ***Grains on the Plate***, reminding readers that foodways are vital sites of heritage.



Tracing Lost Trails reconsiders pathways not merely as infrastructure, but capillaries that connected the silk route along Kalimpong and Lhasa through Sikkim, facilitating economic, spiritual, and social interactions across the Himalayas. The evolving cityscape is explored in **Concrete Contours: The Evolution of the Sikkimese House**, which traces shifts in domestic architecture — materials, layouts, and spatial practices — to understand how homes reflect changing histories and aspirations. Similarly, **Art and Architecture of Monasteries** highlights sacred spaces that embody distinct artistic vocabularies and craft traditions integral to Sikkimese identity. The intangible dimensions of heritage surface more explicitly in **Sang in the Streets**, which traces the practice of incense and sang as everyday acts of devotion woven into the urban fabric.

Indigenous practices and artisanal knowledge that have worked in harmony with ecology through

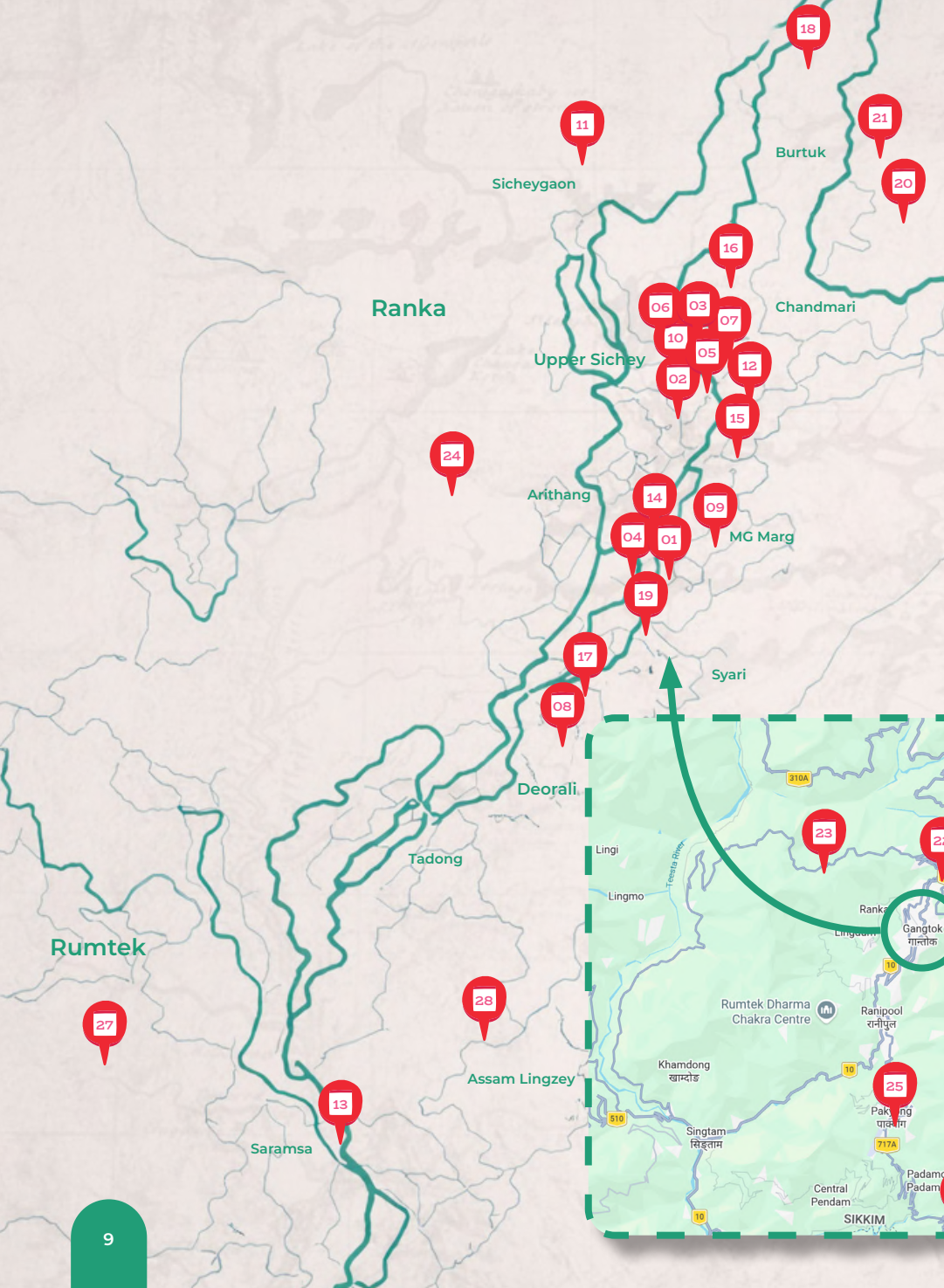
bamboo craft and textiles of the Rongkup community are explored in the **Weaving Patterns of the Hills** and **Crafting Paper from Plants**.

The bustling **Lall Bazaar**, a historic haat in the city, is explored as a living archive of encounters shaped by commerce and conviviality. Contemporary Gangtok continues to evolve within these layered inheritances. Emerging social spaces, including the growing café culture explored in **Café Cultures**, reveal how younger generations reinterpret urban life while remaining connected to place.

The history of exchange and migration has also impacted the craft of metal work as seen through **Inside a Curio Shop**, while **Bending Notes** explores continuity and adaptations to modernity through music. The relationship between nature and culture finds resonance in **Custodians of a Not-So-Hidden Land**, where nature emerges as an ecological and cultural anchor.



Dancing monks. Illustration by Jisha Unnikrishnan.



Ranka

Sicheygaon

Burtuk

Chandmari

Upper Sichey

Arithang

MG Marg

Syari

Deorali

Tadong

Rumtek

Assam Lingzey

Saramsa

Gangtok

Rumtek Dharma Chakra Centre

Ranipool

Khamdong

Singtam

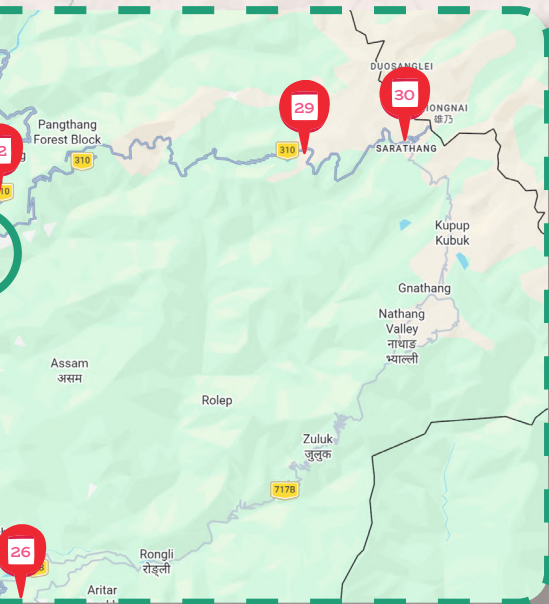
Pakyong

Central Padam

Padam

SIKKIM

Gangtok



Within Gangtok

1. Denzong Cinema
2. Paljor Stadium
3. Directorate of Handloom and Handicraft
4. Lall Bazaar / Khangchendzonga Shopping Complex
5. Rachna Books
6. Travel Cafe
7. Sikkim State Museum and Archives
8. Namgyal Institute of Tibetology
9. Tsuklakhang Palace and Chapel
10. State Central Library
11. Banjhakri Falls Park
12. White Hall
13. Saramsa Garden
14. MG Marg
15. Orchidarium
16. Raj Bhavan
17. Ropeway / Cable Car
18. Bakthang Waterfalls
19. Sikkim Legislative Assembly
20. Hanuman Tok
21. Sikkim Himalaya Zoological Park
22. Tashi View Point

Beyond Gangtok

23. Fambonglho Wildlife Sanctuary
24. Studio Zeyma, Ranka
25. Studio Maato, Pakyong
26. Ramgauri Sangralaya, Rhenock
27. Rumtek Monastery, Rumtek
28. Tribal Research Institute, Assamlingzey
29. Tsongmo Lake
30. Nathu La Pass



Between Empire and Nation

Raman Mohora

Lungtas or prayers flags near Rumtek Monastery. Photo by Abhishek Anil.

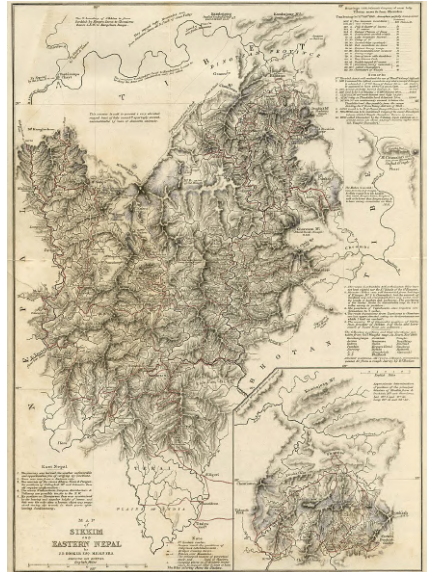
Sikkim today juts out like a small Himalayan knuckle in the Indian landmass, wedged between Tibet to its north and northeast, West Bengal to its south, and flanked by Nepal and Bhutan on its west and east. Sikkim's geopolitical weight is significant, for it possesses the Nathu La and Jelep La mountain passes. These form the most accessible route to the Tibetan plateau and lie close to the Siliguri Corridor that connects India's Northeast to the subcontinent.

Early Settlements and Sacred Landscapes

Human presence in Sikkim is traceable to prehistory. Chipped stone tools and polished Neolithic axes discovered in sites like Odhare and Sajyong indicate early human movement, with linguistic analysis suggesting that the Lepchas were the earliest known inhabitants.

Reconstructing Sikkim's pre-Buddhist past is difficult, as most written records begin with the spread of Tibetan Buddhism. Historians rely on oral traditions and the histories of neighbouring regions to suggest that Sikkim was once constituted of small village-clusters.

According to Mullard's demographic estimations, around 8000-10000 people, comprising Lepchas, Bhutias, Limbus, and other smaller groups, likely comprised the total population in the seventeenth-century. With the onset of Buddhism, Sikkim was designated as a sacred "hidden land" and its past reframed within a sacred Buddhist cosmology.



Map of Sikkim and Eastern Nepal from J.D. Hooker's *Himalayan Journals*. Picture Credits: John Murray/Wikimedia Commons.

The Rise of the Namgyals

This idea of Sikkim as a sacred geographical space forged the intellectual foundation for state formation.

According to Buddhist orthodoxy, the "opening" of the hidden land took place in the mid-seventeenth-century, when three eminent Buddhist monks — Lhatsun Chenpo, Ngadag Sempa, and Kathog Kuntu Zangpo — enthroned Phuntsog Namgyal as the first Chogyal, or ruler, in the 1640s.

Every Chogyal would expend significant effort to consolidate the diverse communities of Sikkim.

In 1663, for instance, the Lho-Mon-Tsong treaty urged unity among the Bhutias (Lho), Lepchas (Mon), and Limbus (Tsong) communities. Over time, this endeavor drew upon Buddhism and gave rise to a Sikkimese Buddhist world.

However, this nascent unity existed in a volatile Himalayan frontier. In the eighteenth-century, Sikkim was threatened by the Nepali Gorkha kingdom on the west and Bhutan on the east. Periodic excursion included the ransacking of Sikkim's then-capital, Rabdentse, and exposed its vulnerability. Within this context of competing regional powers, Sikkim's entanglements with the English East India Company (EIC) took shape.

Under the British Shadow

During the Anglo-Gorkha War of 1815-16, the EIC found an ally against Nepal in Sikkim. After defeating the Gorkhas, the EIC restored Sikkim's lost territories and guaranteed its protection. Sikkim agreed to surrender fugitives from British India and prohibit foreign settlement within its borders without British consent. However, this relationship began to fray over a dispute around Darjeeling. Though Darjeeling had been granted to the EIC by the Chogyal as 'leased land' for the development of a sanitarium, the EIC transformed it into an administrative centre. The rapid development of Darjeeling drew many from Sikkim and weakened the Sikkim tax base.



Narbugong Coronation Throne near Yuksom (Gyalshing), West Sikkim. Picture Credits: Anjan Kumar Kundu/Wikimedia Commons.



Queen Yeshay Dolma, wife of Thutob Namgyal, the 9th Chogyal of Sikkim. Picture Credits: Johnston & Hoffmann/Wikimedia Commons.

In response, the British officials, with some Bhutia-Lepcha landlords and the first Pradhan Thekedars, encouraged Nepali settlement in Sikkim.



Three *chorten* remnants at Rabdentse Ruins. Picture Credits: Dhilan Chandramowli/Wikimedia Commons.

By the 1890s, the Nepali population outnumbered the Lepchas and Bhutias, a demographic change that altered Sikkim's socio-political landscape in the years to come.

Sikkim then detained two British subjects, Dr. Archibald Campbell and Sir Joseph Dalton Hooker, which provided the British with ground to seize Sikkimese territory and later pursue the Sikkim Expedition to Tumlong, its capital. This resulted in the signing of the Treaty of Tumlong (1861) which transformed Sikkim into a British Protectorate and placed the British in control.

In 1890, the British Residency was set up in Gangtok with a political officer to administer local affairs and expand influence into Tibet. In 1904-05, British army officer Francis Younghusband undertook an expedition to Lhasa, Tibet via Sikkim, underscoring its strategic importance. In 1911, the 13th Dalai Lama sought refuge in Sikkim while fleeing unrest in Tibet, under British protection. In both cases, Sikkim functioned as a British-controlled corridor that enabled movement for British purposes. Having secured paramountcy in the region, the British restored limited internal authority to the Chogyal in 1918. Until 1947, Sikkim experienced a period of cautious stability under the Chogyal, in alliance with the British.



Rabdentse Ruins, Geyzing. Photo by Paramanu Sarkar. Picture Credits: Paramanu Sarkar/Wikimedia Commons.

Between Autonomy and Integration

Following India's independence, Sikkim found itself in an ambiguous position, with Crown Prince Palden Thondup Namgyal, then advisor to his father, acting as Sikkim's representative in dealings with the new Indian government. Although Sikkim was a member of the Chamber of Princes, its cultural and religious affinities lay little with India. The Indian Cabinet itself was divided on how to handle Sikkim's status. While Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel favoured pre-empting potential Chinese advances through the Himalayan kingdoms, Jawaharlal Nehru preferred to allow these kingdoms to retain their autonomy.

Within Sikkim, the tide was split. Two political parties formed, with the lines divided between monarchy and popular representation, as well as minority protection and majoritarian representation.

The Sikkim State Congress (SSC) formed in 1947, supported by the Nepali population, and demanded the abolition of landlordism, the introduction of representative government, and accession to India.

In response, palace loyalists of the Bhutia-Lepcha elite formed the Sikkim National Party in 1948. The following year, the Indo-Sikkim

Treaty of 1950 tilted the balance of Sikkim's autonomy. Political unrest in Sikkim, due to demands for a representative government, led the Chogyal to seek Indian protection. In turn, Delhi gained control over defence, foreign affairs, and communications, and the right to intervene in internal matters in cases of emergency in Sikkim.

Internally, the Namgyal monarchy sought to manage Sikkim's complex social composition and introduced a "politics of parity," to grant equal legislative representation to the Bhutia-Lepcha minority and the Nepali majority. The system was criticised as a denial of democracy. Simultaneously, following the Chinese takeover of Tibet, the

Sino-Indian war, and clashes at Cho La and Nathu La passes, India became increasingly wary of Sikkim's autonomy. This was exacerbated by Chogyal Palden Thondup Namgyal's efforts to articulate a Sikkimese identity, his insistence on renegotiating the Indo-Sikkim treaty, and his calls for the membership of Sikkim in the United Nations. In 1963, the Crown Prince married an American socialite, Hope Cooke, which brought Sikkim increased international attention. These growing international connections were viewed with caution by India.

Within Sikkim, political outfits alleged that, the Chogyal's vision of a "Tibeto-Burman" national identity alienated the majority Nepali population.



12th Chogyal Palden Thondup Namgyal meeting Jawaharlal Nehru at the Prime Minister's house, New Delhi. Picture Credits: Internet Archive.



Tashi Namgyal, the 11th Chogyal of Sikkim. Picture Credits: Ernst Schäfer/Wikimedia Commons.

By the early 1970s, discontent took the form of demands for greater democracy. When the Sikkim National Congress (SNC) alleged large-scale rigging in the 1973 general elections, mass demonstrations followed, paralysing Gangtok. At the Chogyal's request, Indian troops intervened to restore stability, which resulted in the signing of the Tripartite Agreement (1973) by the Sikkimese parties, India, and the Chogyal. The monarch was reduced to a constitutional figurehead, replaced by a "responsible government" supervised by a Chief Executive appointed by the Indian government. In the elections that followed in 1974, the pro-India SNC won 31 of 32 seats, and the assembly passed a resolution calling for integration with India.

The new council passed the Government of Sikkim Act in 1974 furthering relations with India, including a demand to participate in its political institutions. The Indian parliament amended its constitution, making Sikkim its first and only 'Associate State' and providing it representation in the Indian Parliament.

The Chogyal objected and appealed to India for a "free and fair" referendum. This issued the beginning of more violence within Sikkim until April 9th 1975, when Indian troops surrounded the palace

and left the Chogyal under house-arrest. The next day, Sikkim's council voted to abolish the monarchy and seek a full Indian statement. A referendum, scheduled under the supervision of the Indian state four days later, announced a 97 per cent vote in favour of joining the Indian Union — and the Indian Parliament swiftly passed the Thirty-Eighth Constitutional Amendment Act to allow it. On May 16th 1975, Sikkim became India's twenty-second state, bringing an end to three centuries of Namgyal rule. Sikkim thus moved from British protection to India without any intervening period of full sovereignty. This postcolonial transition between 'Empire' and

'nation' seems the consequence of larger contexts, neither wholly coerced nor entirely free, but shaped both by local struggles for equality and the strategic imperatives of new nation-states.



12th Chogyal Palden Thondup Namgyal and Hope Cooke at Schiphol Airport, North Holland, 1966.
Picture Credits: Ron Kroon/Wikimedia Commons.



The Peoples of Sikkim

Pema Wangchuk Dorjee

Women captured shopping at Lall Bazaar. Photo by Abhishek Anil.

Sikkim, *Mayel Lyang* to the indigenous Lepchas since pre-history, and *Beyul Demajong* to the Bhutias who consolidated the land into a kingdom in the mid-seventeenth-century, carries the meanings of “paradise” and “hidden” in these original names. For the people who gave these names, paradise equated to being pleasant and welcoming. *Beyul*, the hidden land, was qualified as *Demajong*, literally the valley of rice, and translated more evocatively as the Bountiful Hidden Land. Both these attributes suggest openness and inclusivity. In the story of how the kingdom came to be called ‘Sikkim’ too there is a story of diversity. When Thungwamukma, the Limbu princess married to Sikkim’s second Namgyal king, Tensung Namgyal, arrived at the Rabdentse palace, she exclaimed, “Su-khim,” variously translated as “new palace” or “beautiful new home.” The invocation stuck, and the land became Sikkim.

Sikkim is a land which sources its identity and name from how different communities looked at it. In doing so, it becomes a place which accommodates diversity.

Sikkim’s population of 7,00,000 people represents a constellation of communities. The Government of Sikkim almanac, with an array of community-specific holidays marked, announces just how many communities have been settled here long enough for their special holidays to be marked institutionally.

Historically, Sikkim’s location has always been a veritable crossroad of migrations, trade, invasions, and in more recent centuries, political intrigue and colonial adventures and expansionism. All of these events peopled its ethnic landscape. The strongest claim to indigeneity belongs to the Lepchas and Limbus (also called Tsongs in Sikkim), the only two communities whose origin stories and myths are located within Sikkim’s current geography. That said, there were no major geographical obstacles, save what must have at one time been malarial forests to the south, which would have kept people out. Hence it can be safely presumed that people from other communities too may have moved through, settled, and got assimilated in Sikkim.



Gathering at Tashiding monastery in Sikkim during the 14th Dalai Lama’s visit. Picture Credits: Homai Vyarawalla/Wikimedia Commons.

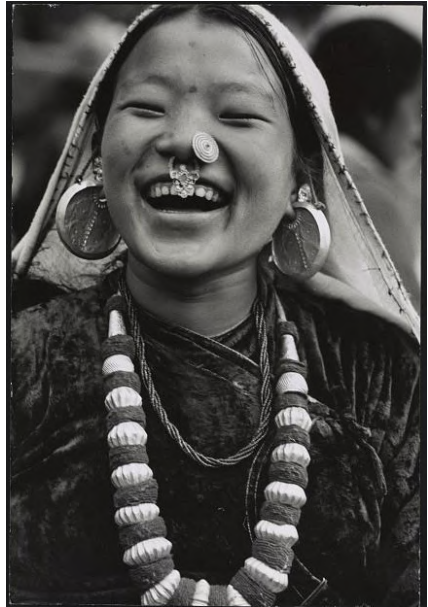
In the seventeenth-century, major turmoil in Tibet effected a turning point in Sikkim’s history, with the arrival of Tibetan Buddhism, as a part of which the Namgyal dynasty was established. The Bhutias of Tibetan origin had already settled down in

parts of East Sikkim and the founding of the Namgyal dynasty elevated them to prominence. This led to Sikkim's cultural, religious, and political landscape carrying a strong Bhutia-Buddhist imprint.

Interestingly, even though Sikkim weathered phases of occupation, alienation, and subjugation, the relationship between its different communities remains more accommodating. Take, for instance, the traditional ways of life of the people here: the Limbus and the wider Nepali constellation were engaged in agriculture and animal husbandry, the Lepchas were hunter-gatherers, and the Bhutias pastoralists. In the Sikkimese landscape, this meant the Nepalis preferred the valleys and the open slopes, the Lepchas the thickly forested mid-hills, and the Bhutias gravitated to pastures along the higher slopes. Of course, these vocations are no longer applicable, and nor were they watertight silos in the past, but they serve to represent the individuality and interdependence of the Sikkimese.

Sikkim practices complex and practical arrangements to allow for the state's ethnic plurality to flourish even in the contemporary sociopolitical context.

In 1961, Sikkim promulgated the Sikkim Subjects Regulation, which placed the Lepchas, Bhutias, and Tsongs on equal footing and automatically recognised them as Sikkim Subjects if residing in Sikkim.



Nepali (unknown ethnicity) woman. Picture Credits: Alice Kandell/Library of Congress.

In fact, even undomiciled members of the three communities could apply for subjecthood if they had not acquired citizenship elsewhere and had descended from a Sikkimese subject, including those from territories no longer part of the kingdom. In the very first amendment to the rule, ethnicity was completely disassociated from subjecthood and the rules rephrased such that only belonging and residence had to be established. This recognised that Sikkim had grown into a multiethnic population, with every community considered to be deserving of recognition, identity, and representation. And that is how things have been ever since, forging a Sikkim which is a living social mosaic.

Linguistic diversity is also prominent in Sikkim. In 1642, the people primarily spoke Lepcha and Limbu when the Namgyal dynasty was established. Then Tibetan became the court language and the Bhutias spoke Dejongke. Eventually, in 1975, when Sikkim merged with India, Nepali became the lingua franca, an adoption recognizing the population group that powered Sikkim into the twentieth-century. Here, it is crucial to note that communities now seen as Nepali were traditionally recorded as separate communities, having lived in Sikkim long before the establishment of Nepal or Sikkim. In the first census of 1891, 14 communities (including 'slaves') were recorded, 11 of which are now clubbed together as "Nepalis."

The formative years of the kingdom had seen disenchantments triggered by language imposition, so it is to the government's credit that it did not attempt language domination when modern education was introduced here. Schools were all English-medium. The significance of this consideration is that, today, the official languages of Sikkim are English, Nepali, Sikkimese (Bhutia), and Lepcha. Additional official languages include Gurung, Limbu, Magar, Mukhia, Newari, Rai, Sherpa, and Tamang. Even though the state continues to have English-medium schools, students now have the option of taking their mother tongues as a third language.

While no state language was accorded primacy when it came to education, each was accorded recognition when

it came to cultural expression.

This nuanced balance is part of the terms of Sikkim's merger into the Union of India.

Article 371F of the Constitution of India, which outlines "special provisions with respect to the State of Sikkim," allows for Sikkim to continue with its Old Laws, including those in conflict with the Constitution.



Bhutia women. Picture Credits: Pandey/Wikimedia Commons.



Lepcha women in Dumdyam. Picture Credits: Alice Kandell/Library of Congress.



Young boys and monks play football in a ground near Rumtek Monastery. Photo by Abhishek Anil.

For instance, Sikkim, despite being a part of a secular India, has a seat reserved in its legislative assembly for a Buddhist monk. Called the Sangha seat, this is also the only legislative constituency in the country decided by an electoral college (made up of monks from a select clutch of Sikkimese monasteries). These Sangha MLAs have served as Ministers and Deputy Speakers in the past, with the present incumbent holding important portfolios in the Cabinet. Similarly, while the rest of India has seats reserved only for Scheduled Tribes (ST) and Scheduled Castes (SC), Sikkim has two SC reserved seats and 12 seats reserved for Bhutia-Lepcha candidates. These moves reassure members of the two communities that democracy will not sideline their interests and rights.

Another unique system allowed to continue is the Dzumsa system practiced in parts of North Sikkim. Kept out of the purview of the Panchayati Raj Act, they were recognized as a traditional village council. The Dzumsas of Lachen and Lachung villages continue to govern land, resources, rituals, and dispute resolution, blending customary law with community consensus. This is one of the only surviving indigenous self-governance institutions, old enough to still include including only male household heads in the decision-making process.

Where this process of adjustments and privileges could be considered a paranoid reaction to fears of being submerged by India, a more positive approach would be to view Sikkim's integration as a hybrid model —

democratic yet protective — that has delivered relative political stability. Sikkim offers a compelling model of how diversity can be institutionally recognized without descending into nationalism or sub-nationalism. The experience of Sikkim underscores the importance of sensitivity, inclusivity, and respect for indigenous knowledge and practices — socially, legally, and politically.



Pipon, the village head/ Dzumsa leader in Lachung.
Picture Credits: Alice Kandell/Library of Congress.



The Lore of Water

Shraddha Shree Rai

Teesta in Sikkim. Picture Credits: Indrajit Das/Wikimedia Commons.

Sikkim is blessed with a wide variety of flora, fauna, and geographical features, prominent among them its many water bodies. Rivers such as Teesta and Rangeet and lakes such as the Tsomgo, Khecheopalri, and Gurudongmar are not merely components of ecology in Sikkim, but also containers of spiritual belief and cultural practices. Several folktales, myths, and local tales abound around them. These water bodies — understood to be sacred and pure — hold cultural, mythological, and religious significance.

Teesta-and-Rangeet

River Teesta, one of the largest rivers in Sikkim, provides subsistence with water for irrigation, agriculture, hydroelectricity, and fishing. It is also a significant source of myth and reverence.

A popular Lepcha story tells the tale of Rongnyu (Teesta's original name) and Rungyuit (popularly spelt Rangeet).

As per the Lepchas, these two river spirits were created by Itbu-moo, the mother goddess of the Lepchas.

These rivers were considered living beings with sacred ancestors and also lovers. One day, the two rivers decided to race down the hills, promising to wait for the other by the midlands of Punzok (present-day Peshok). Each of them chose a guide. Rongnyu asked Parilbu, a serpent, who guided her with care.

But Rangeet asked Tutfo, a bird who was distracted by the nectar of the flowers — as a result of which Rongnyu reached Peshok early. Upon seeing Rongnyu already there, Rangeet exclaimed with great surprise, “*Ha Thee Sa-Tha*” (*When did you arrive?*), giving Rongnyu the name Teesta. Rangeet's pride, crushed that he lost the race, led him to wind backwards in great anger and cause floods. People prayed and fled in terror to the highest hill of Mount Tendong, where the creator descended in the form of *kohomfo* (partridge), accepted the people's offerings of *chi lok faat* (fermented millet), and sent an earthquake to drown the flood waters. Teesta consoled and wooed Rangeet till he softened and they promised to flow together as one: Rangeet on top of Teesta, giving the confluence of the rivers a blue-green colour at the top and a greyish-white below.

Even today, many festivals and ceremonies of the Lepchas — marriages in particular — focus on recalling the love story of Teesta and Rangeet, reminding the couple that the union of marriage may also face challenges and to inspire them to overcome these obstacles and flow as one like Teesta and Rangeet. The water of the Teesta is also considered sacred by the Lepchas and sprinkled on the couple during their marriage ceremony. The myths related to these rivers and their love stories have also been developed into dance traditions, which are performed particularly during the festival of *Tendong Lho Rum Faat*.



Gurudongmar Lake, North Sikkim. Picture Credits: Madhumita Das/Wikimedia Commons.

Gurudongmar Lake

The Gurudongmar Lake is one of the highest sacred lakes in the world, situated at an elevation of 17,800 feet in Mangan District, North Sikkim.

The lake was named after Guru Rinpoche, who was believed to have visited it in the eighth-century. According to popular belief, on his journey back to Tibet from Sikkim, Guru Rinpoche witnessed that the locals were unable to use the frozen water of the lake. His touch unfroze a particular portion of the water — which would stay forever unfrozen, even in extreme winter. Considered a blessing of fertility from Guru Rinpoche, this cemented the lake as a divine protector of traders and herders.

As per a tale from Sikhism, Guru Nanak is also said to have visited the lake in the fifteenth-century. As such, the lake is considered holy and venerated by Buddhists, Hindus, and Sikhs.

Khecheopalri Lake

Originally named the *Kha-Chot-Palri*, or the heaven of Padmasambhava, lake Khecheopalri is located in the village of Khecheopalri, West Sikkim. One of the holiest of Sikkim's 150 lakes, the lake is revered by Hindus, Buddhists, and Lepchas alike.

According to Buddhists, the lake is a dwelling place for the Goddess Tara Jestum Dolma, the mother of Lord Buddha. The shape of the lake,

resembling a heel, is considered to be the imprint of her foot. It is thus seen as a part of the sacred landscape of the *Demazong*, the Buddhist pilgrimage circuit.

Lake Khecheopalri also has another famous origin story, according to which there were once two lakes located in the north-western Himalayas. The younger lake, known as Labding Pokhari, moved to Yuksam, but as the people of Yuksam did not respect the Labding Pokhari and started polluting it, the goddesses decided to shift the younger lake to Chhojo. When the lake could not fit there, it moved to its new home — Khecheopalri.

The Lepchas, who revere the lake as well, have their own story, according to which a Lepcha girl named Nenjo Asha Lham was given a precious gem by goddesses. This gem, lost by her mother, is believed by locals to be

inside the lake. Since that gem was blessed, the water of the lake is still considered pure and holy, possessing healing properties to cure many diseases.

Till date, due to this belief, the locals residing around the lake do not allow the water to be used for any other purposes other than rituals, rites, and ceremonies.

Besides these stories, the lake is also quite popular all over Sikkim as the ‘Wish-fulfilling Lake.’

Khecheopalri lake is also surrounded by religious structures, such as the holy caves of Dupukney and Chubukney, which are worshipped as holy sites where Guru Rinponche and *lamas* (monks) meditated. Cave Dupukney is also believed to be the place where Lord Shiva meditated,



Khecheopalri Lake, West Sikkim. Picture Credits: Amitabha Gupta/Wikimedia Commons.



Old *chortens* on the premises of Khecheopairi Monastery. Picture Credits: Amitabha Gupta/Wikimedia Commons.

making the area sacred to Hindus as well. Locals offer prayers at the site during Hindu festivals such as *Shiv Ratri* (an annual festival celebrating Shiva) and *Nag Panchami* (a day for the worship of the *nagas* or snakes).

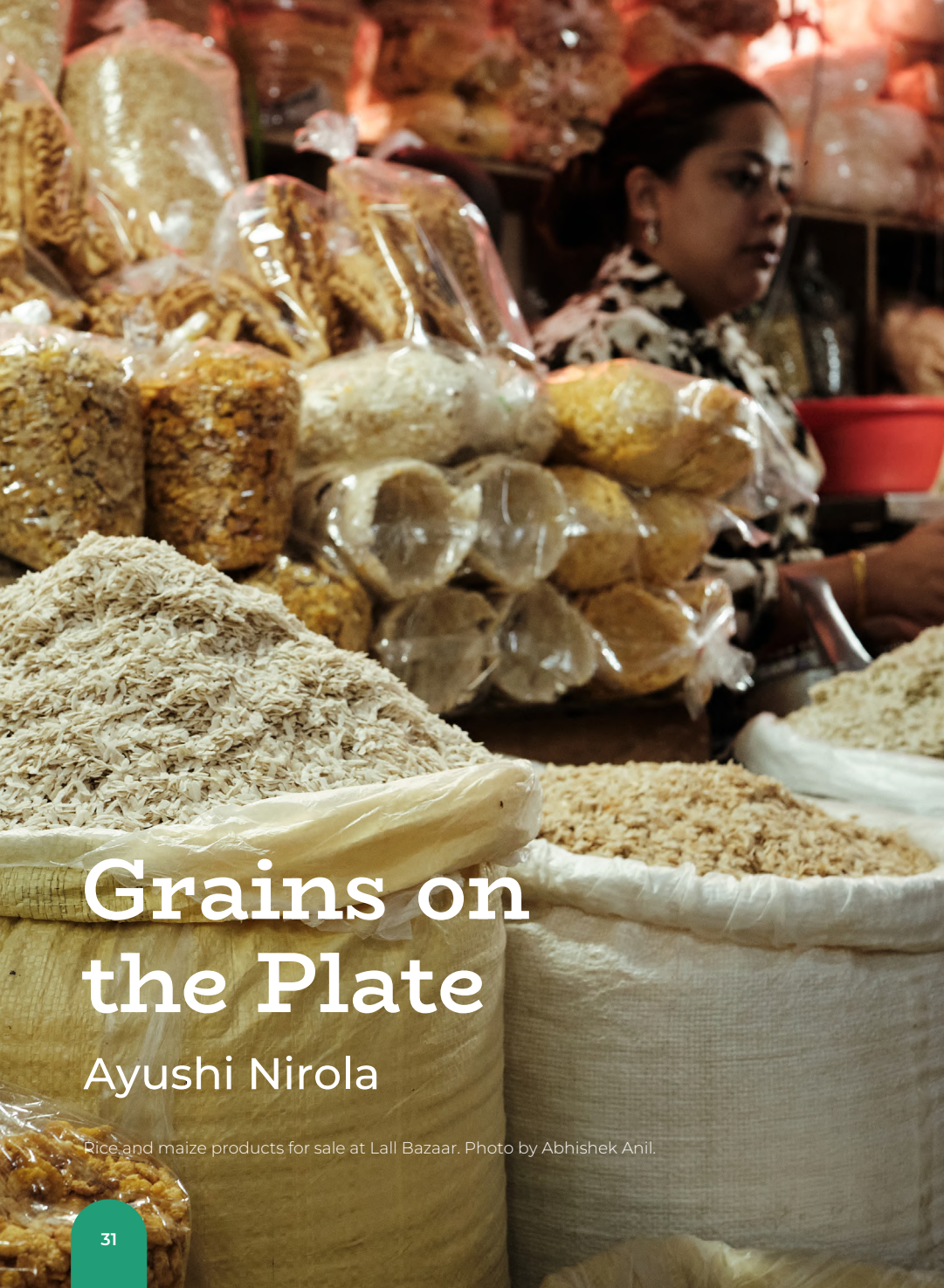
Two other main festivals are associated with Khecheopalri lake. One is *Chho Tsho*, a festival performed to offer thanks to god for food. During this festival, the local people of the village collect money from each household to celebrate and perform rituals at the lake, after which they enjoy a feast together. The other festival is *Bhumchu*, where the lake goddess is worshipped by the locals to maintain peace and harmony. Organised around February or March, this festival features the *lamas* and the locals worshipping the goddesses for three days with offerings to colourful idols of god and lamps made of butter. Other than these, there are also frequent community rituals centred around the lake, which are performed mainly during full moon and new moon days. Festivals like these are popular not only among the local communities but also devotees coming to seek blessings and wish-fulfilment.

Conclusion

These myths and folktales of rivers and lakes in Sikkim often personify natural forces as living elements with their own emotions and relations. They are also marked as sacred, encouraging rituals to develop around them. Such myths become part of the different tribes' identities, and also teach environmental ethics. Rivers and lakes in Sikkim are not only water bodies providing lifelines to various people of different communities — their myths are mediums through which the gap between divergent groups are slowly overlapping to encourage environmentalism.



Noble Orchid. Illustration by Jisha Unnikrishnan.



Grains on the Plate

Ayushi Nirola

Rice and maize products for sale at Lall Bazaar. Photo by Abhishek Anil.

In Sikkim, which has undergone significant urban and climatic transformation, the region's foods serve as an archive of memory. Sikkim's kitchen is centered around rice, meat, and millet.

Millet crops like buckwheat, barley, maize, wheat, and rice were grown by the indigenous people. Rice fields, however, flourished with Nepalese immigration during the British colonial period and the Namgyal dynasty. Nepalese farmers brought in terrace farming and irrigated fields, yielding high production and incorporating rice as a staple.

The Magic of Millets

Millet is intertwined with the heart of communities in Sikkim, as reflected in their stories around it. Take the Lepcha tale of *laso mung pano* (the king of demons), in which millet is a remnant of Itbu Deboo or Itbu-moo, the creator.

Elders tell another tale of a time when an ancestor gave their body to the earth, and from their heart sprang millet, the grain destined to endure cold winds and unforgiving slopes.

In another version, *sumong pho* (blood pheasant) won over a sky-spirit and reinstated crops by bringing millets to a land that was devastated by floods in the valleys of Sikkim. Therefore among the Lepchas, millet becomes more than nourishment; it becomes a memory.



Sikkim, dry season, rice terraces. Picture Credits: Alice Kandell/Library of Congress.

Millet is consumed in many forms, ranging from *khuri* (*khuri-khu*) or *dhindo* to fermented beverages. *Khuri* is a traditional Lepcha crepe filled with wild green-leafy vegetables, wild herbs like *kanchel bee* (*gagleto*), or other wild herbs and *chhurpi* (yak-cheese). *Dhindo* is a staple made out of millet steamed with water, eaten in place of rice.

Fermented alcoholic beverages made out of millet are revered among various communities like the Rai, Limbu, Bhutia, Lepcha, Tamang, and Gurung, with the millet husked, grinded, washed, boiled, dried and stored with a traditional yeast called *marcha*.

Among the Limbus, such alcoholic beverages are crucial parts of festivals like *Chasok Tonmang* (harvest festival), wedding ceremony, death ceremony, and child birth. Some fermented millet beverages can also be drunk as *chiya* (tea) on an everyday basis. Similarly among the Rais, they are also used during festivals and rituals. The community has a special flask made up of

traditional gourds to store them. Among the Lepchas, the beverage *chi* is used during ancestral worship, marriages, birth ceremonies, and other rituals, also as offering to god. When one visits monasteries, fermented millet seeds are bought and offered along with other religious offerings.

Bhutia households call the drink *chaang* or *tongba* and serve it in bamboo containers. Another variety is *changkol*, prepared by boiling the fermented millet and adding pieces of omelette with nuts and sugar. Similar fermented alcohols are made out of corn, yam, wheat, and barley. The corn variation, prepared using a special pot, is a distilled and concentrated form referred to as *raksi*. Socially, the culture of fermented alcohol faces casteism. In dominant Nepali social discourse, indigenous communities have often been associated with practices such as the consumption of fermented alcohol and labelled as *matwalis* (alcohol drinkers), a categorisation that has historically reinforced social hierarchies.

What's on the Plate?

Everyday eating in Sikkim usually begins with the familiar *daal-bhaat-sabji-maasu thali* (lentil-rice-vegetable-meat plate) that serves as both late-morning meals and evening dinners. An alternate way of looking at the same plate is as a culmination of *bhaat-kodo-tongba* (rice-soybean-fermented alcoholic beverages), depending on the altitude and availability. Across Sikkim, the plate changes subtly from house-to-house, season-to-season.



Marcha for sale in market.
Photo by Abhishek Anil.



Khuri-Khu. Picture Credits: Pema Yangden Lepcha/
Wikimedia Commons.

However, millets continue to appear as beverages or snacks such as *khuri* with vegetables.



A thali with rice, lentil, vegetables and meat. Photo by Abhishek Anil.

Meats and Leafs

Local vegetables and leafy elements on the plate include *sisnu* (stinging nettle), *ningro* (fiddlehead fern), and mountain squashes.

Flour is sprinkled over *sisnu* to do away with the thorns, after which the leaves are separated and cooked into a dish that lowers blood sugar. Minced beef is also added to *sisnu* and mountain squash in Bhutia households. The Rai, Limbu, or Lepcha community emphasize chutneys of wild herbs like *chimping* (hogweed), which has a slightly bitter undertone with a tingling sensation. Green leafy vegetables, and seeds of hogweed (a cure for dysentery, with anti-inflammatory properties), are paired with pork.



Chimping. Photo by Abhishek Anil.

Other kinds of meat are also eaten. In Bhutia kitchens, there are two prominent beef soups. One is a clear broth, left after the bone and meat are slow-cooked, which is eaten with rice or between bites. Another contains beef bones and beef fat. Beef is also sun-dried and fried into smoky textured pieces called *sikam*, which is also used to make beef soup.

Ponguzum, favoured by the Lepcha, is a dish of grilled fish with rice and vegetables cooked in hollow bamboo tubes. The Rai can pair rice with pork or chicken, which can appear as a special dish called *wachipa* that has a bitter undertone and enters as a special form of protein in everyday cuisine. Country chicken is used for this, with the innermost feather of the fowl being a key ingredient.

Nepali households lean toward mutton or chicken curries, *aludum* (potato curry), *sinki*, and an array of preserved foods.



Fire smoking mutton.
Photo by Ayushi Nirola.

Fermented Foods

Fermented foods appear in varied forms across the plate. *Gundruk* is a famous fermented cuisine: the *rayo ko saag* (brassica rapa subspecies) is washed, cut, and dried under the sun. The pieces are placed in a tight bag within a dug-pit, pre-heated with fire, for one month. Eaten as a soup or salad, *gundruk* is an appetizer high on iron and calcium. It is believed to have originated in Nepal during times of war, when leaves hidden under the dug pit resulted in the fermented version. The same technique may have travelled as Nepali people migrated. *Sinki* or fermented radish follows the same process.

Kinema (fermented soybean), fried or soupy, is also very common in the region. The process of fermentation is passed down via generations. The process of fermentation is passed down through generations, and *kinema* remains a common sight in local markets. *Kinema* has a pungent aroma with a fulfilling taste.

Bamboo shoot is another fermented product in Sikkim, which goes commonly by the term *tama* in Nepali or *mesu* in Limbu. The shoots can also be pickled.

Maku, a comforting *chhurpi* melted in ghee, is widely-consumed. *Chhurpi* is a fermented product of milk. After it turns to curd and is stirred to make ghee, the remaining liquid (*mohi*) is boiled and left to cool. From this, the *chhurpi* solids are separated. The days of fermenting differ across

communities: Bhutia households wait 3-5 days, while in other Nepali communities, *chhurpi* is consumed right after separation. *Ningro* and *chhurpi* are also combined in a popular dish that combines forest produce with fermented ingredients.

Sides and Snacks

The *achaar* palette consists of *timbur* (sichaun pepper) *chutney*, or *rukh tamatar* (tamarillo) *chutney*. A mixture of pumpkin seeds, chilli, salt (*dulo achaar*) stored in a bottle is a common sight at the dining table. Street-food includes potato curry eaten with flattened rice, *alu-chewra*, famously sold by Bihari-Sikkim residents as a street-food. Boiled potatoes are also consumed as *sadeko alu* or marinated potato.

Even within the same region, the rice plate differs. Some *thalis* are brothy, some prioritize fermented food and meat, and some have a variety of *chutneys* and spices. In this way, the *daal-bhaat* combination emerges not as a fixed recipe, but a flexible one through which seasonality and taste are negotiated in daily food practices.

While many dishes have transcended kitchen borders and boundaries, their meanings do not always transfer easily. Mutton, for example, is avoided by some Rai groups. Many upper-caste Nepali households, especially in rural areas, discriminate against *kinema* for its smell and taste. Brahmanical ideas of pollution decide arbitrarily which foods are less pure. Fermented food, like curd, that has a different smell is consumed easily. This reflects how caste-based

prejudices subtly surface in food practices in Sikkim.

Other popular dishes now strongly associated with Sikkim, such as *thukpa*, *gyathuk*, *thenthuk*, and *momo*, reflect long histories of Tibetan and Himalayan food exchange.

While many of these are traditionally wheat-based, local adaptations today include millet versions such as *kodo ko momo* and seasonal fillings like *iskus*, showing how even widely travelled foods are absorbed into Sikkim's grain ecology and seasonal food practices.



Sidra for sale in a market. Photo by Abhishek Anil.



Pounding of rice. Picture Credits: Alice Kandell/Library of Congress.

Home-made sausages called *guema*, stuffed with beef pieces, beef blood, and intestines, are another delicacy among the Bhutias. *Karyong* is a type of pork sausage common among the Lepchas, the pork mixed with fresh herbs and accompanied by grain-based sides like rice or millet. Small dried fish called *sidra* is consumed in the form of chutney as a side. Across these dishes, rice or millet are bedrocks on the plate.

The Festival Specials

Grains also surface prominently during celebrations and festivals. The use of wheat in sweets can mark a ritualistic pause and a divergence from the consumption of millets or rice. *Khapse* (*ka*: mouth, *se*: snack) is a traditional cookie made out of wheat flour, sugar, edible oil (ghee), and oil. The dough of the flour is cut into palm-sized squares and folded over to half its size, then cut into sections to form several pleats before deep-frying.

Consumed during Loosong (Bhutia Harvest Festival) and Losar (Tibetan New Year), *kyabzay* is believed to be a sweet that brings about peace and celebration.

Rice too is used for desserts. *Selroti* is a round-rice flour sweet. The word *selroti* might have originated from the Nepali word *saila* (young) or from the local variety of rice called *seli*. The rice is soaked and ground into a flour using a traditional grinder called *jhato* or *ohkli*. The flour is mixed with ghee, sugar, and cardamom; the



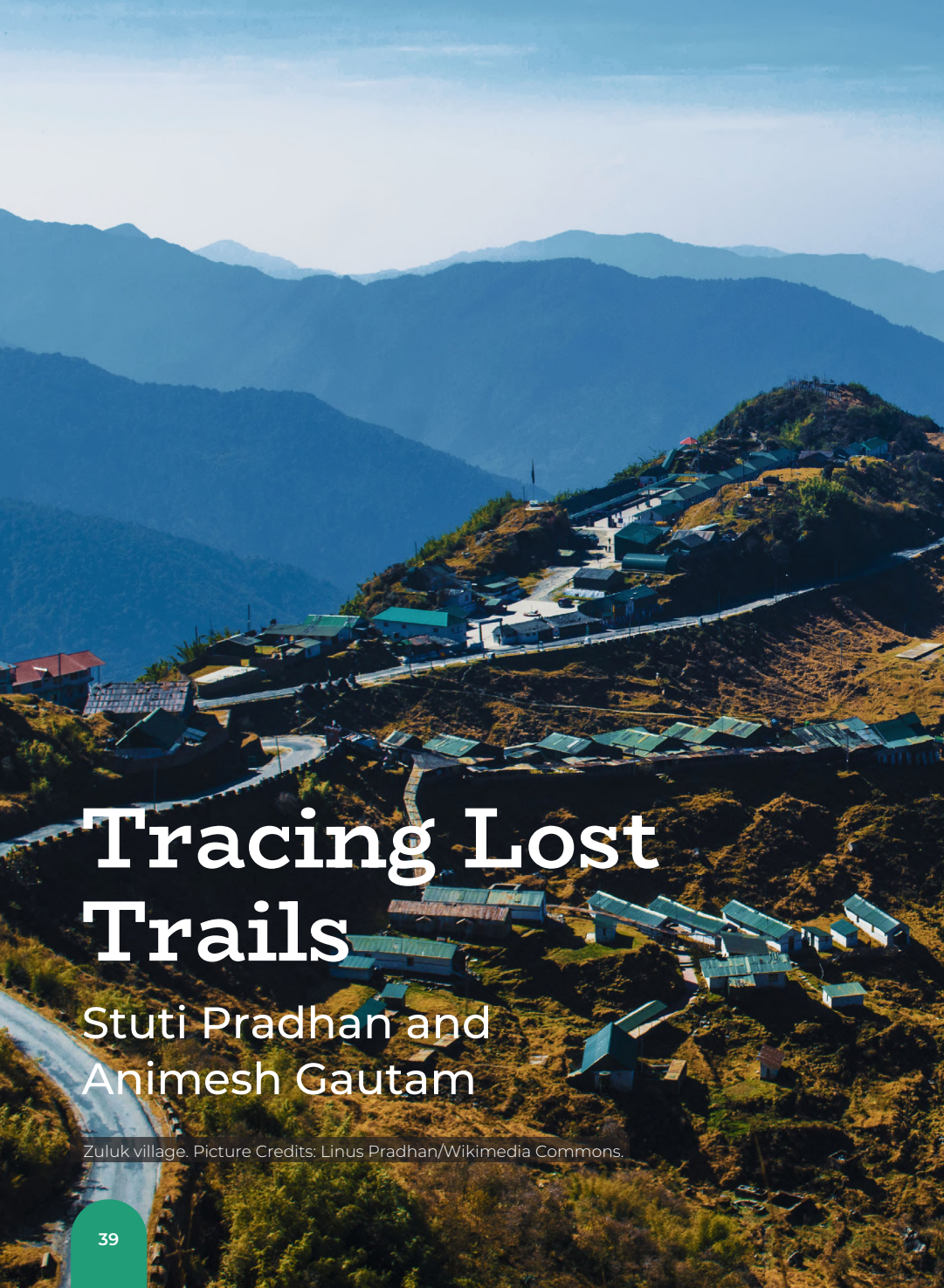
A *jhato*, traditional stone grinder.
Photo by Ayushi Nirola.

paste is rested overnight, then fried using a pointed stick called *suuro*. It is tradition to gift a basket of *selroti* to the bride's parents by the groom during Nepali marriage. It is often paired with *aludum* or cooked mutton intestines (*kharchi marchi*).

In Sikkim, both *khapse* and *selroti* are given to neighbours during Dashain (Dussehra) or Losar by Nepali and Tibetan communities, turning food into a shared gesture of celebration, memory, and belonging.

Black Cardamom. Illustration by Jisha Unnikrishnan





Tracing Lost Trails

Stuti Pradhan and
Animesh Gautam

Zuluk village. Picture Credits: Linus Pradhan/Wikimedia Commons.

We often hear our grandparents say '*hami tah jungle ko baato hirdai ka-ka pugthyo*': 'we used to walk through forests to reach places.' In contemporary times, these 'old' forest trails, pivotal in mapping 'local' routes, have been replaced by meandering concrete roads that cut across mountain curves. Visually, these trails couched within the physical landscape of our tiny Himalayan state carry impressions of beauty, despite recurring landslides. Socio-culturally, these roads tell us stories of a bygone past and a dynamic present — stories that cement the roads of Sikkim as heritage. We bring together these stories from Eastern and Western Sikkim, unravelling how different kinds of engagements with such roads have facilitated varying trans-Himalayan cultural, spiritual, and economic exchanges.

Forgotten Roads of the East

The old forest trails facilitated, for centuries, trans-Himalayan trade amongst diverse Himalayan communities, even before the "opening-up" of the trade route to Tibet by the British via Sikkim.

The advent of British military expeditions in the late 1800s, especially that of British officer Francis Younghusband in 1903-04, channelled a spur of traders (Indian and European) towards Tibet, all following the Nathu La and Jelep La road in East Sikkim.

Along the route, smaller Sikkimese village roads — such as those of Rhenock, Aritar, Rongli, and Phadamchen — were transformed to provide halting stations, rest houses, and camping grounds for the traders and their mules. The construction of these roads demanded the labour of Himalayan men and women, even as these tiny villages witnessed how the forest trails that connected them to other villages turned into cart roads for trans-Himalayan trade. Simultaneously, their land was used to construct *dak bungalows* (rest houses) for the Indian, European, and American traders to rest and refuel while on the arduous journey from Kalimpong to Lhasa. Though the easily accessible trade route to Tibet via Sikkim raised significant revenue for the Sikkim government from transit duties, the labourers of Sikkim and Darjeeling hills who carried those traded goods were often low-paid and mistreated. The dark past of the often romanticised Old Silk Road is one of forced labour and exploitation.

However, in reimagining the stories of these roads by emphasizing vernacular narratives, we write a different script of heritage. Heritage lies in how a local is able to pinpoint Sikkim's first police outpost in Aritar without it being distinctly identified and barricaded with state-sanctioned hoardings. Or how the locals have honoured the unidentified traders who lost their lives along the trade route. Heritage lies in acknowledging that while the trope of the Old Silk Road draws in revenue through tourism today, the merchandise that dominated the trade was, in fact, wool! An elderly resident, Shri Sunder Pradhan of Rhenock, Sikkim's first

halting station along the Jelep La road, recalls that the Jelep La road was popularly also called the Wool Road.

Now 102 years old, Sunder aja (grandfather) tells me (Stuti) about how he would place orders for health-related books from Mathura and Gujarat through one of Sikkim's oldest post offices in Rhenock.

Renowned for a variety of orchids and an abundance of cardamom, smaller villages in Sikkim were able to utilize trade routes to connect to cosmopolitan centres through institutions like the post office.

Just recently, when I told my father that I was writing about the Jelep La trade route, he excitedly told me how the old wooden house in Rhenock Bazar, now a shoe shop, used to function as a bank during the early 1900s. It is these memories that retain the essence of the vernacular heritage of the place in which we live.

Museums, like Ram Gauri Sangralaya in Rhenock, uphold and preserve our past. However, it is the personal experiences and memories of the people who still use the forest trails that allows us to move beyond nostalgia for an ancient trade route — and incorporate complex networks of trans-Himalayan forested trails in Western Sikkim into our cultural heritage.



Alice Kandell with a villager and a horse, Sikkim. Picture Credits: Library of Congress.

The Ecological Systems of the West

To illustrate a set of trans-Himalayan forest trails, I (Mesh) reflect on my personal experience during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown, when I spent a few months living with my sister in our paternal village of Omchung, near Gyalshing town, tracing unmapped paths woven into everyday life. Resembling much of the Eastern Himalayan landscape, the paved roads in the area carved through and dissected the slopes, while forest and unpaved walking trails formed a widespread system of capillaries.

I spent most afternoons following these trails and *ghorey saraks* (unpaved horse/mule trails) that

connected our house in 4th mile to other households, villages, and even towns scattered across the hill slope. Along the way, I noticed that everybody knew each other and everybody engaged in all kinds of exchanges with one another, as was historically facilitated by the widespread networks of forest trails. One village elder from Rethang, Dhan Maya Limbu, remembered locally as Bijuwani *boju* (grandmother), relied on these trails for years to sell her vegetables at Gyalshing haat (local market) for her livelihood.

From Omchung 4th mile, the trails climb through streams, landslides, beautiful waterfalls, breath-taking *deoralis* (hilltops), grazing fields, *siru bari* (cogon grass groves),



Aritar Dak Bungalow in Rhenock. Photo by Abhishek Anil.

devithans (spirit-dwelling places), and water springs, all in turn giving shape to local ecologies. As the vegetation starts to resemble *lek* side (higher-altitude temperate vegetation), I knew I was approaching Rethang village, 3 km from Gyalshing town — the point from which the trails connect people onwards to sacred pilgrimage sites of Western Sikkim.

These trails are a crucial part of wider spiritual geographies connecting the historic Buddhist pilgrimage sites of Pemayangtse monastery, Dubdi monastery, Norbu Gang chorten, Rabdentse ruins, Khechuperi lake, and Tashiding monastery, falling within the sacred *Beyul Demajong* landscape as recognized by the Bhutias (Lhos).

Another layer that unfolds in the contemporary landscape of

Western Sikkim is a range of nationally protected areas such as the local reserve forests, Barsey Rhododendron Sanctuary, and the UNESCO World Heritage Khangchendzoenga Biosphere Reserve. The emergence of nature conservation, particularly through ecotourism, has given these trails the novel purpose of becoming trekking, hiking, and heritage trails.

The sacred site and village of Khecheopalri Lake, popularly known as the wish-fulfilling lake, is one important epicenter. Local youths in the village like Latop and Bhaichung Bhutia, who run independent ecotourism businesses, rely on forest trails and paved roads to operate their (everyday) ecotourism activities. Given growing environmental and cultural concerns from ecotourism activities, they are also selective about what local sites and routes are



Ganesh Pradhan showing us old files and records from his private museum collection in Ram Gauri Sangralaya. Photo by Abhishek Anil.



Remnants of Sikkim's first police outpost in Aritar. Photo by Praveen Chettri.

suitable for such activities — even in this, roads and routes are an important aspect of heritage-(re)making.

Far from simply being recollections of the past, local stories emerging out of the historic Silk Route corridor offer perspectives from the communities living in the former halting station. Everyday acts of remembering and living become ways to (re)articulate their alternative narratives of place, belonging, and heritage. So it is that these trails of Sikkim become part of the heritage of the land: they continue to be (re)made or repurposed in times of growing environmental concerns, retaining importance as integral parts of local ecologies.



Rhododendron flower. Illustration by Jisha Unnikrishnan.



Concrete Contours: The Evolution of the Sikkimese House

Pema C Bhutia

A stone house in Rinchonpong, Sikkim. Picture Credits: Lokendra Nath Roychoudhury/Wikimedia Commons.

From a bird's eye view, the city of Gangtok reveals itself in layers today — buildings stacked side-by-side along the contours of the land, each following the practical template of the ubiquitous five-and-a-half-storey Reinforced Cement Concrete (RCC) building. This is the architectural language that has captured the common imagination, a vernacular born not of romantic notions of Himalayan architecture but of pragmatic necessity and rapid transformation.

The Architecture of the People

Before examining how Gangtok arrived at its current character, it is essential to look at the roots of vernacular architecture. As Paul Oliver, one of the leading scholars on the subject, defines it, vernacular architecture is “the architecture of the people, and by the people.”

In the context of Sikkim, this vernacular was historically shaped by what the land and local ecology provided. Material choices varied dramatically depending on location and altitude. Stone and rammed earth were used in the high-altitude villages of North Sikkim, like Lachen. In higher altitudes inhabited by herding communities, or *dokpas*, stone was the primary building material as it provided thermal mass and protection against harsh weather. Local timber and bamboo were the standard in the forested mid-elevations, while wooden shingles provided roofing where suitable trees grew.



Exterior of a house in Lachung, Sikkim. Picture Credits: Alice Kandell/Library of Congress.

Traditional houses were modest in scale, with spatial arrangements reflecting economic realities and social priorities. In most households, a single room served multiple functions: the kitchen, bedroom, dining area, and general living space.

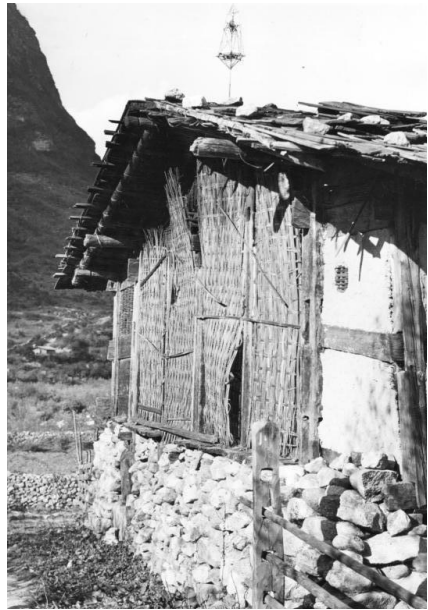
The kitchen, centered around the *chula* (hearth), was invariably the most vibrant space in the home, providing warmth and becoming the gathering point for family life.

In Bhutia households, when a family could afford to build an additional room, it would typically be the *chesum* (shrine room), reflecting the central role of Buddhist practice in daily life. Only later, as economic conditions improved, would separate bedrooms be added. Nepali houses followed similar patterns, with the kitchen and its *chula* forming the heart of domestic life. Toilets were universally located outdoors, separate from the main dwelling.



A hearth in Sikkim. Picture Credits: Alice Kandell/Library of Congress.

The relationship between building and ground was carefully considered. Many houses, particularly in areas prone to moisture and on steeper slopes, were raised on stone plinths or wooden stilts. This elevation protected timber from rot, deterred pests, and created ventilation beneath the living floor. The main living spaces remained on the upper floor where they stayed drier. Roofs were steeply pitched to shed heavy monsoon rains and snow, with large roof overhangs protecting the walls. Building was fundamentally a communal activity. When a family needed to construct a house, people from the village would come together to help. The process became a form of collective knowledge-making, with techniques adapted and refined through generations of practice.



A house in Lachung. Picture Credits: Ernst Krause/Wikimedia Commons.

The Ikra Vernacular

One building technique that became particularly widespread across Sikkim, transcending community boundaries, was *ikra* construction. This was a common vernacular solution that made practical sense across the region. The technique involved creating wall infills between timber posts and beams using woven bamboo.

Split bamboo strips were woven in a lattice pattern between the structural timber frame, creating a

flexible yet stable wall surface that could then be plastered with a mixture of mud, cow dung, and sometimes lime.

The advantages of *ikra* were multiple. It was lightweight, which reduced the load on foundations in hilly terrain. Most significantly, the flexibility of the bamboo-and-timber assembly performed well during earthquakes. It remained the dominant building technique for residential structures until the arrival of new materials in the mid-twentieth-century.



An *ikra* structure in Rhenock town. Photo by Abhishek Anil.

The Chogyal's Vision

During the late 1960s and early 1970s, as Sikkim's political future hung in the balance, Chogyal (king) Palden Thondup Namgyal, sought to establish a distinct Sikkimese identity through art, culture, and architecture. Architecturally, his ambitious project was to create buildings that would embody a distinctly 'Sikkimese' aesthetic.

The opportunity to realise this vision arose with the construction of Sikkim House in New Delhi's diplomatic enclave, which Swiss architect Robert Weise was hired to design by the Chogyal.

Weise, who had never set foot in Sikkim, drew upon his travels and work in Tibet and

Nepal to conceive what he imagined as Sikkimese architecture.

He borrowed heavily from Tibetan Buddhist monasteries: sloping roofs, ornate timber work, and religious iconography. The Chogyal approved the concept enthusiastically, and Sikkim House was constructed according to Weise's sketch. This moment proved pivotal in establishing a template: the 'Sikkim Style' became synonymous with Tibetan Buddhist aesthetic elements. Weise would go on to design several other significant buildings in Sikkim, including the Palace Secretariat, helping to establish a building language for public buildings — with which all further government projects had to comply.



Sloping roofs of Enchey with ornate woodwork windows. Photo by Abhishek Anil



RCC structures at MG Marg, Gangtok. Photo by Abhishek Anil.

The Introduction of RCC

However, the story of Weise and the Chogyal's architectural vision represents only an elite, state-sponsored attempt at defining Sikkimese identity through built form. Meanwhile, a different architectural transformation was taking place, one driven not by aesthetic considerations but practical necessity and material innovation. Access to building materials and construction technologies has always been stratified by wealth. But the story of RCC in Gangtok is fundamentally a story of how an elite material became democratised.

The introduction of reinforced cement concrete to Gangtok can be traced to colonial influences in neighbouring hill stations. Initially, RCC was an elite material: not

everyone could afford it or possessed the technical knowledge to work with it. Significantly, the first RCC buildings in Gangtok, built in the main bazaar area around MG Marg, belonged to the wealthier families. The Elephant Mansion in Deorali, Tenzing and Tenzing in Pani House (both belonging to the royal family), the Bakers Cafe building date to this era.

RCC was also part of the Chogyal's drive to renovate monasteries: the timber floors, which succumbed to the damp and caused illness, were replaced with concrete slabs.

The monasteries in Gangtok thus became hybrids — practical problem-solving exercises that incorporated modern materials, while maintaining traditional upper-storey elements.

RCC as the Common Vernacular

After the merger with India in 1975, Sikkim witnessed an influx of development projects and increased construction activity. One of Weise's apprentices, Narendra Pradhan, became one of the few practicing architects in the region and designed buildings like the Sikkim Police Headquarters near MG Marg, the Forest Office in Deorali, and the Secretariat Building. However, Pradhan's work and that of the few other architects in Sikkim represented only a small fraction of the building activity in Gangtok. The vast majority of construction — residential buildings, commercial structures, small institutions — was proceeding without architectural input. In the late 1980s, the municipal body of Gangtok began distributing building sites extensively and there was a significant shift in building styles: more residential RCC buildings began to appear. The concretisation of the city, which had begun with elite structures in the 1950s, slowly gained traction among the broader population.

The construction of concrete buildings emerged in a utilitarian manner, shaped by engineers who studied RCC construction techniques for the architectural advantages of the material.

A standard template emerged: five-and-a-half-storey RCC buildings with columns and beams measuring approximately 1x1 feet, typically arranged in a

grid of about 14-15 feet centre-to-centre. Cantilevers were used for staircases or verandahs.

Hoods extended from floor slabs and ran across the building perimeter, eliminating the need for *chajjas* (projecting eaves) above windows, assisting with maintenance work and laying plumbing lines. This efficient design would become the dominant building template in Gangtok. As RCC construction became common, the material became more readily available as suppliers established themselves in the region. Most importantly, people recognised the practical advantages. Unlike *ikra* and timber structures, which could reach a maximum of three-storeys, RCC allowed buildings to go higher. This made economic sense as land prices rose and plots began to be distributed in standard sizes; the ability to build vertically proved cost-efficient and valuable. RCC buildings were also sturdy, being resistant to fire, moisture, and earthquakes.

The rising popularity of RCC meant that local contractors and masons learned the techniques. More often than not, the house owner in consultation with the head *mistri* (head mason) would decide the layout and design of the house, purely based on experience and rule of thumb. This vernacular knowledge, passed between builders, accumulated through trial and error, represents a contemporary form of traditional building practice. What had once been an elite, foreign, sophisticated material became



An old house made of mud, wood, and *ikra* style at Yalli village. Photo by Martin Sada.

accessible to ordinary people. contemporary form of traditional building practice. What had once been an elite, foreign, sophisticated material became accessible to ordinary people.

Slowly, Gangtok transformed into the dense concrete agglomeration it is today, with smaller towns in Sikkim following suit. The old houses with timber and *ikra* structures have largely disappeared or survive only in pockets, remnants of a pre-RCC era.

Building Heritage as Change

Gangtok now has numerous practicing architects, who are innovating adaptations of vernacular traditions that respond to contemporary contexts.

***Ikra* construction is being used as wall infill instead of brick walls in private residences.**

Motifs from cultural traditions are being incorporated into new buildings, suggesting that older typologies can find new applications within contemporary constructions.

The question of how to move forward architecturally. Rather than privileging one over another, perhaps the task is to recognise that Gangtok's architectural heritage encompasses all of the varied stories and styles: the monastery renovations with hybrid materials, the matchbox RCC buildings, the elite experiments in defining cultural identity, and contemporary attempts at reinterpreting vernacular traditions. The task is to build with intention and care, understanding that what we create today will be tomorrow's heritage, regardless of whether it conforms to today's notions of tradition.

Note: Supplemented by conversations with local architects Kailash Pradhan and Upendra Gurung.



The Art & Architecture of Monasteries

Yashasvi Sharma

Enchey Gompa in Gangtok. Photo by Abhishek Anil.

A monastery, or *gompa*, is a large residential institution that houses a community of monks or nuns. In Sikkim, there are a total of 111 Buddhist monasteries, which preserve centuries of Buddhist tradition and display unique Himalayan artistry that is both symbolic and functional. They act as living museums: every visual element is not just decorative, but embodies religious symbolism, cultural identity, and aesthetic mastery.

The most important monasteries in Sikkim are Dubdi, Pemayangtse, Sangachoeling, and Tashiding, which are located in West Sikkim. The other important ones are Phensang in North Sikkim, Rumtek and Enchey in East Sikkim, and Ralang in South Sikkim. These are significant centers of spirituality, learning, and community.

The Build of a Monastery

The monasteries of Sikkim are inspired by Tibetan monasteries, but have been adapted to the region. They are usually built on a hilltop, secluded from towns.

The old monasteries, such as Dubdi Monastery, are usually two-storeyed and thatched-roofed. The walls are made of stone laid in traditional mud-mortar. The main front facade of the *gompa* usually faces east, with a courtyard at the front where events take place.

A *yabring* (covered seating structure) for the high *lamas* (monks) flanks the courtyard. The supporting structure of the building is corbelled, consisting of wooden pillars, main beams, and cross beams decorated with motifs.

The ground floor is the *dukhang* (the prayer hall), which houses the altar of gods and where the rituals and prayers take place. The staircase in the entrance of old monasteries leads to the *rapshay*, or first floor, that opens into a daily ritual room where the *Kangyur* and *Tengyur* texts (ancient Tibetan Buddhist texts) are kept. The *sangdopalri* (open attic space) represents the space for god. In many monasteries, separate chambers are built on the first floor



Carved wooden window with floral motifs, Tsuklakhang. Photo by Abhishek Anil.

for performing tantric rites. Such rooms are easily identifiable by the demon head motifs painted on the entry doors of such chambers.

The building's defined roof form is usually stepped into three layers. The sloping and tiered roofs with upturned eaves, which withstand excessive rainfall, are a unique feature of Sikkim Buddhist monasteries. The wooden windows, doors, and pillars are intricately carved, coloured vibrantly, and heavily ornamented.

Specially trained artisans and workers perform the construction work, while trained monks and artisans undertake intricate decorative work in the monasteries.

Inside a Monastery

The monastery has an enormous door, ornamented with brass, that opens into a large prayer hall, with a double-row of pillars separating it into a nave and two aisles.

The interior and exterior walls are decorated with paintings of Vajrayana Buddhist pantheons of deities called Bodhisattvas. The interior is coloured richly, the walls covered with life-size frescoes of deities, saints, and wrathful deities or *dharmapalas*, and the beams painted red, embossed with lotus rosettes and other emblems. The *chesum* (altar) seats the three main deities worshipped in Sikkim: the Shakya Muni Buddha in the center, Guru Padmashambhava (also known as Guru Rimpoche, who introduced Vajrayana Buddhism to Sikkim in the eighth-century CE) to the left, and Chenrezig, or Avalokiteshvara, a revered figure in Mahayana Buddhism sits to the right.

The monastery also houses a significant number of *thangka* (cloth paintings) paintings, sculptures, *torma* (butter sculptures), intricate wooden carvings, religious objects, and musical instruments (*mandals*), which are part of the daily rituals and rites of the monasteries.



The exterior wall of the Tuskklhang altar.
Photo by Abhishek Anil.

Paintings

Sikkim adopted the Tibetan style of art. The early monastic paintings were imported from neighbouring countries such as Tibet, Bhutan, and Nepal, while the locals who painted were very few.

In 1957, the Palden Thondup Cottage Industry opened and became instrumental in introducing Tibetan monastic arts to a large number of local artists.

Under the guidance of a foremost Tibetan painter, Rinzing Lharipa (or Bermoik Lharipa), many local artists learnt this style and were later appointed as art teachers in Palden Thondup. Today, known as the Directorate of Handlooms and Handicrafts, it is a centre for preserving and promoting the traditional arts of Sikkim.

Murals

Large life-size murals in monasteries often have a narrative flow. Frequently, they feature the *dharmapalas* (protector deities), depicted in fearsome poses symbolizing the fight against ignorance. A wall painting depicting the wheel of life, a concise and elaborate symbol that effectively explains the most complex aspects of Buddhist philosophy, is a common display at the entrance to the prayer hall of the monastery.

Thangkas

A *thangka* is a Tibetan Buddhist scroll painting on cotton or silk, usually depicting a Buddhist deity or scene. They are mostly hand-painted, with some being embroidered or appliqued. All *thangkas* are mounted in brocades of red (the colour of lamas), yellow (the colour of Buddha), and blue (symbolizing eternity). The colour of the deity is also important as it identifies the deity. In general, the *thangka* serves as an image for worship, becoming the focal point for the Buddhist's faith during meditation or worship and offerings.

Training in *thangka* painting at the Directorate of Handlooms and Handicrafts takes four years, requiring artists to learn specific iconographic rules and grids.

The process of the craft is long and painstaking, with a detailed *thangka* taking months to complete.

These detailed guidelines have helped artisans maintain and preserve the religious identity of these *thangkas*. Hence, the characterization of the murals, which form an essential part of the monastery interiors, remains the same.

The natural pigments previously procured from Bhutan and Tibet for *thangkas* are now rare and expensive and so have been replaced by modern plastic paints.



A mural at Enchey Gumpa depicting the Wheel of Life. Photo by Abhishek Anil.



Thangka painting at the Directorate of Handicrafts and Handloom (DHH). Photo by Abhishek Anil.

Simultaneously, historical canvases made from yak-skin, known for durability, have been replaced by cotton canvases.

But *thangka* painting continues to thrive: one of the distinguished *thangka* painters from Sikkim today is Khandu Wangchuk Bhutia, whose expertise earned him the Padma Shri Award in 2022.

Wood Carvings

Wood carving is an old traditional craft traditionally patronized by Buddhist monasteries and households. The windows and doors of the monastery are wooden, ornately carved and hand-painted and decorated. Bright colours, floral motifs and curvilinear patterns are used for the wooden pillars, windows,

doors, and beams of the monasteries. Monasteries are also adorned with wooden *chesums* decorated with flowers and dragons, *choktse* (traditional tables), eight lucky signs of Buddhism, offering bowls and manuscript cases.

These are made from locally sourced wood such as *raani chaap* (macalia exelsa), *okner* (walnut), and *tooni* (toona celiata). The design process starts with sketching on paper, the design being transferred by stencil onto smoothed wood. Different tools are used to carve the wood free-hand, which is then smoothed, layered with primer, painted, and coated by a protected varnish. The Directorate of the Handicraft and Handloom Institute provides a training course for traditional wood carving.



Carved and painted wooden windows at Enchey Gompa, Gangtok. Photo by Abhishek Anil.



Carving of a wooden panel at DHH. Photo by Abhishek Anil.

Conclusion

The traditional methods of building monasteries in Sikkim have undergone significant transformations. Historically, sustainable materials such as wood, stone, and traditional plaster were used to construct monasteries. However, with the rise of contemporary technologies, these have been replaced in almost all monasteries by concrete, steel, and other materials.

Some of the environmental challenges in Sikkim include prolonged monsoons, landslides and earthquakes, which cause damage to art and architectural heritage. Many old monasteries, built with traditional methods and materials, have been damaged or destroyed by fires and earthquakes and then rebuilt with concrete. One of the only monasteries that has retained its original stone structure is the Rinchenpong monastery in West Sikkim.

The historical artworks within these monasteries have also been affected. Some of the old paintings, once central to the spiritual and cultural experience of these religious sites, have required repainting and original artistic details have been lost to time.

Restoration and conservation efforts are crucial to retain remnants of these old traditional styles of art and architecture. In 2011 and 2012, the Tibet Heritage Fund restored the wall paintings of Tsuklakhang Royal Palace monastery in Gangtok.

The archive section of the Culture Department safeguards historically important institutions and monuments, working with the Archaeological Survey of India, the Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage and the National Research Laboratory for Conservation. The work of these organizations in documenting and restoring the art and architecture of monasteries is essential for safeguarding the rich and unique cultural heritage of Sikkim.



Mural of Jhambala, a deity of wealth and fortune, at Enchey Gompa. Photo by Abhishek Anil.



Sang in the Streets

Abhibyanjana R Thatal

Incense bundled together ready to be packaged.
Photo by Abhishek Anil.

Each evening, as one walks the quieter streets and footpaths of Gangtok, an earthy smoke mingles with pungent kitchen flavours. Rising from the household *chesum* (shrine), this is burning *sang* or incense. This impalpable experience, of smelling *sang* as one walks through Gangtok, is the manifestation of centuries of living ritual.

In Sikkimese society, particularly in Buddhist families, incense-burning rituals are part of everyday life. Incense is burned ritually at the *gompas* (monasteries) in the *sangbum* (ritual vessel for burning incense) or at home in smaller metallic or clay containers. All over Gangtok's markets, incense is sold in different forms: organic incense sticks, bundled leaves and branches of the pine and juniper, or powdered versions.

If you ask a shopkeeper, the dried pine and juniper branches and leaves are almost always sourced from Lachung and Lachen valley, where the trees are found in abundance.

The incense sticks, meanwhile, generally come from monastery-based production units in Sikkim or from neighbouring places such as Kalimpong, Bhutan, or Darjeeling. Alongside are also sold incense burners made of metal, wood, or clay, for those seeking to burn the incense in private quarters.

Every evening, I recall my grandfather religiously taking some coal from the burning *chula* (earthen fireplace) to



A *sangbum* made of stone at Enchey Gompa in Gangtok. Photo by Abhishek Anil.

light up the leaves of the *sang* and offer it at the altar of the house. All household altars usually include a container activated with charcoal, in which incense sticks or leaves are placed, allowing the scent to disperse gradually throughout the space. Often, *lamas* (monks) in monasteries and people in domestic households accompany these smoke-offering rituals with the recitation of mantras for meditation, as well as for the invocation of protective deities, buddhas, and forces associated with the natural environment.

The History of Sang

***Sang* (*bsang*: Tibetan origin), though used colloquially to describe dried juniper and**

pine tree leaves, is also the term for the ritual around incense that is linked with Buddhism in Sikkim.

But its practice can be traced to native Bon religious/spiritual Tibetan practices of offering fragrant leaves for purification and appeasement to gods, prior to the spread of Buddhism. Solomon George FitzHerbert, scholar of Tibetan studies, notes that in Buddhism, the rite of *sang* is also understood as following the Indic tradition of burning incense as a fragrant offering to the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas.

Though incense is a part of the religious and ritualistic lives of people all over the Indian subcontinent and the world, it holds a special weight in Sikkim. In Sikkimese and Tibetan Buddhist contexts, this practice is rooted in the idea of purification and appeasement to higher or spiritual beings that reside side-by-side with humans. The smoke from the *sang*, though formless, acts almost as a bridge transcending different realms.

Sang is tied very closely to how Sikkim is conceptualised or imagined through the Buddhist lens. Believed to be one of the most sacred places on Earth, Sikkim is regarded as a land inhabited by *lamas*, guardian deities, *dakini* and *daka* (sacred beings that inhabit natural landscapes), and peaceful and wrathful deities.

Kalzang Dorjee Bhutia, a research scholar, comprehensively explains that the *Riwo Sangcho*, the smoke-offering ritual that is detailed in the text of the same name, is rooted in

the belief of restoring harmony and balance by facilitating connection between dimensions.

This is emphasized through the legend of the Lhatsun Namkhai Jikme, a revered Tibetan Buddhist teacher who employed the *terma* (hidden treasure or teaching) of *Riwo Sangcho*, or Mountain Smoke Offering, to “open the hidden land” of Sikkim by calming the angry deities. He is credited to have disseminated this ritual around 1646, with Kyapje Dudjon Rinpoche adding verses, openings, and prayers in later centuries to the text *Riwo Sangcho*, which offers guidance on how to conduct this ritual smoke offering. Bhutia notes that 108 ingredients are prepared for this offering. In the contemporary context, these rituals are performed at disaster sites such as landslides or at times of crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as on significant dates of the Tibetan Lunar Calendar.

Yet rituals such as *Riwo Sancho* are elaborate and take resources to perform, as well as requiring community effort and extensive ecological knowledge to collect ingredients. When we visited an incense factory in Tashiding, Mr Sangay, who has been running the factory for eight years, showed me a pack of stick incense and told me that this is the special *Riwo Sangcho* incense that has been blessed by *lamas*. This repackaging of the centuries-old ritual into incense sticks is suggestive of the ways in which these older practices persist through re-interpretation and adaptation.



A shop in Lall Bazaar selling incense, sang, and incense burners. Photo by Abhishek Anil.



Dried Juniper and Pine tree leaves, colloquially called sang for sale in Lall Bazaar. Photo by Abhishek Anil.

The Inside of an Incense Factory

When we arrived at the incense factory in Tashiding, located in the small Gyalshing district of West Sikkim, Sangay expressed a confused delight and amusement as to why we had travelled nearly four hours to visit his “factory.” He explains that the term often creates expectations of something large and industrial, but his production unit occupies the terrace of a rented house a short distance from his village of Gyangap. Here, he lives with his family downstairs and runs the factory. According to him, this venture has provided a stable livelihood, supporting himself and four employees, more sustainable and fulfilling than his previous work as a contractor taking government projects. He credits his brother, who is a *lama*, for the idea to start the factory.

The production process in his factory involves a combination of manual labour and machine work. Though the process was once entirely manual, there is now equipment dedicated to grinding, mixing, and shaping the incense that is used along with human intervention.

The ingredients in the *Riwo Sangcho* incense are selected for their aromatic and ritual properties.

In a brochure that Sangay hands me are listed saffron, white and black cardamom, clove, cinnamon, nutmeg, *gokul* (Commiphora wightii), *jatamasi* (a honeysuckle native to Himalayas), *chirauta* (Swertia chirata), *agarwood*, (resinous wood of Aqualilaria trees), *titepathi* (mugworth), *saldhoop* (made of Sal tree or Shorea robusta), white and red sandalwood, Himalayan pine



Rolling the incense into stick-like shape inside the Denzong Neynag Pe incense factory. Photo by Abhishek Anil.



A man rolling and cutting the incense sticks into shape in the incense factory. Photo by Abhishek Anil.

leaves, rhododendron, the root of the *malagiri* (or *archya*) tree, and *shuppa*, a fine powder sourced from Bhutan. Pine-wood dust, which is essential to this incense, is sourced from regions in Lachen, Lachung, and higher-altitudes, where these trees grow in abundance. It takes time and seasonal planning to source and collect these ingredients. They are then dried, minced, and ground, before being mixed with wood resin, honey, jaggery, and sugar.

The final product of the incense is branded as *Denzong* (another name for Sikkim) *Neynag* (holy place) *Pe* (incense), which is also marketed as “Sikkim Organic Incense.”

Sangay proudly shares testimonies of people who found the incense grounding and meditative.

Sang is a souvenir for tourists visiting Sikkim, but for those living outside, it is a reminder of home. Used as a tool of meditation or simply for the more utilitarian purpose of airing out odor or creating an earthy fragrance in our homes, the use of *sang* and incense has shifted from strictly ritualistic practice and integrated seamlessly into everyday lives in households and other spaces. Rooted in ritual and reinterpreted as an ecological and cultural place-making practice that extends beyond its religious uses, the aroma of *sang* shapes how Sikkim is experienced and remembered.



Crafting Paper from Plants

Lavomit Lepcha

Paper Making. Picture Credits: Alice Kandell/Library of Congress.

Long before industrial paper reached the Himalayas, mountain communities were making durable writing material from the bark of a forest shrub. *Edgeworthia gardneri* — known as argeli, lokta, or kuntu — grew quietly on shaded slopes, its strong fibres eventually forming the basis of a paper tradition that linked ecology, spirituality, and trade across the Eastern Himalayas.

This evergreen shrub thrives in moist temperate forests at altitudes ranging from 1500 to 2700 meters. It grows on shaded slopes and riverbanks, contributing to slope stability and biodiversity. Native to Sikkim, Nepal, Bhutan, and their surrounding regions, argeli bears clusters of fragrant yellow flowers, but is best known for its strong, fibrous bark. Its durable fibres, resistant to insects and decay, form the foundation of a long-standing tradition of handmade paper.

Before argeli was widely used in paper-making, it played an essential role in the daily lives of the Lepchas of Sikkim, who understood its value through generations of close observation and practice. This essay traces the plant's journey from a utilitarian household material to a culturally significant and economically valuable resource across the Himalayas.

Argeli for the Lepchas

Known as Rongkup or “children of the snowy peaks,” the Lepchas developed a sophisticated understanding of forest plants through daily usage.

The argeli, known as kuntu in the Lepcha language, was used by them to make rope for fastening baskets, weaving harnesses, and securing household items.

As its bark regenerates after harvesting, the plant serves as a renewable resource. Traditional harvesting practices, such as stripping bark from mature branches without uprooting the shrub, helped ensure long-term regeneration and prevent soil erosion. The Lepchas' sustainable use of argeli demonstrates a system in which ecological understanding evolved alongside cultural practices.

Monastic Demand

The arrival and spread of Buddhism in Sikkim during the seventeenth-century marked a major shift in the cultural importance of argeli. As monasteries such as the Pemayangtse, Tashiding, and Enchey Monastery gained prominence, the demand for durable writing materials increased. Sacred texts, mantras, and ritual manuscripts required paper that could withstand humidity, insects, and the passage of time. The bark of *Edgeworthia gardneri* proved ideal for this purpose.

Over time, paper-making techniques spread through the Himalayan monastic networks, drawing on long-established traditions from neighbouring regions.

Specialised workshops were established under the patronage of monasteries and royal courts to produce high-quality paper for religious and administrative purposes.

Himalayan communities adapted local materials to meet the needs of Buddhist institutions, transforming an ecological resource into a cultural and religious necessity. As Buddhist institutions adopted the plant for paper-making and its cultural role expanded, sustainable use still continued to be a priority.

Trade and Colonial Documentation

By the eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries, handmade argeli paper had become a valued commodity in trans-Himalayan trade. Bark harvested from forests in Sikkim and Nepal was transported to artisanal papermakers, who produced sheets that were traded with Tibet in exchange for wool, salt, and other essential goods.

Even as colonial influence expanded across the region, handmade Himalayan paper continued to hold importance. Industrial paper lacked the strength, durability, and longevity required for monastic manuscripts, so many monasteries continued to rely on traditional paper. Villages in South and West Sikkim sustained household-based paper-making, preserving the craft and supporting local livelihoods. This continuity illustrates the capacity of traditional

systems to adapt to external pressures while retaining their ecological foundation.

Today's Eco-Friendly Paper

In the late-twentieth-century, global interest in eco-friendly products led to a renewed appreciation of handmade Himalayan paper. Nepal and Bhutan developed thriving industries based on argeli and related species, producing journals, stationery, and art papers for export.

Sikkim also initiated efforts to revive and promote the craft through government support and community-based projects.

Enterprises such as the Borong-Polok, a paper unit, unite traditional craft knowledge with modern economic opportunities.

This revival highlights key ideas in sustainability theory, which emphasises the integration of cultural heritage, ecological stewardship, and economic well-being. Argeli paper production requires minimal energy, produces biodegradable waste, and allows for bark harvesting without killing the plant. It therefore represents a model of environmentally-responsible industry rooted in indigenous knowledge.

Challenges

Despite its long history, argeli faces modern challenges. Deforestation, habitat loss, and overharvesting pose significant threats to natural populations in certain areas. Climate change also poses risks by altering the moisture and temperature conditions necessary for the plant's growth. Further, younger generations are increasingly moving to urban areas, leading to a decline in traditional craft knowledge.

Addressing these challenges requires integrated conservation strategies, including community-led resource management, eco-certification of handmade paper, and educational initiatives that emphasise traditional ecological knowledge. With careful

stewardship and modern support, argeli can continue to serve as a cultural and ecological resource for future generations.

The story of *Edgeworthia gardneri*, from Lepcha rope to monastic scripture, from trade-commodity to eco-friendly craft, encapsulates the resilience and creativity of Himalayan societies. The argeli's tale emphasises that indigenous communities have long understood the importance of balancing use with conservation. The Lepchas' intimate knowledge of the plant reminds us that ecological wisdom lies in the everyday practices of communities that have lived closely with their environment for generations. In a time of global environmental uncertainty, such traditions offer valuable lessons in sustainable living.

Handmade paper-making. Illustration by Jisha Unnikrishnan.





Weaving Patterns of the Hills

Rongnyoo Lepcha

Weaving of a *Thyaktuk* at the Directorate of Handlooms and Handicraft in Gangtok. Photo by Abhishek Anil.

The diverse handloom and handicraft practices of Sikkim and its neighbouring regions have evolved as a form of ecological adaptation, migration, cultural exchange, and patronisation.

One of the most well-known is traditional woolen-carpet weaving, common in Bhutia households among the women and today taught as vocational courses in the more public space of the Directorate of Handicrafts and Handloom in Gangtok. The traditional carpet weaving practice involves weaving woolen yarn balls into colourful patterns marked with a stencil drawings that include the traditional motifs of dragons, phoenixes, floral patterns; presently, this art has seen a number of deviations from these orthodox motifs to include the interpretations and taste of the artisans.

Another significant weaving tradition associated with the Gurung community is the *rari*, a black-and-white chequered boxed pattern made of goat wool, which is coarse and rough to touch: this is used as a blanket in the colder altitudes, where goats go grazing.

Hay, an agricultural by-product, is also used to weave seats and mats by people in the region. Practices of *rari* weaving with hay have not yet been patronised by the government, and as a result, are rarer today in urban centers. Of this multitude of practices, this essay focuses on the



Newer designs and spin-offs of traditional motifs using clouds, floral, and bamboo patterns at DHH. Photo by Abhishek Anil.

craft and handlooms that emphasize the ecological adaptation of the Rong community of the Eastern Himalayas — for whom, too, weaving is an integral part of life.

Dumpra, the Garment-Blanket

I, Rongyoo, personally have a deep connection to weaving. My childhood was spent around looms, watching my *nyokung* (grandfather's second sister) beat colourful threads tight. Out emerged designs, while she told me and my sibling stories about shape-shifting *jhyamphi mung* (yeti). This scene was familiar to every household in the village, which produced *dumpra* for their family.

***Dumpra*, also called *thokro-dum*, is the attire of Rong men, serving as garment by day and blanket by night.**

The women weave this cloth out of rough, thick fibers of *kuzu* (nettle) that can endure the cold climate of the hills. Today, *dumpra* is produced by government-funded cottage industries in Sikkim.

A collection of different weaving patterns are used for the *dumpra*:

1. **Aa-shyer**: multicoloured stripes in groups of eight or ten, from which the *dumpra* derives its name.
2. **Po-chyak** (*po*: bamboo, *chyak*: the node or eye): this design is inspired by the bamboo-knot pattern, with thick and thin lines (the number decided by the weaver) laid horizontally.
3. **Sumok and subok**: a triangle-shaped design that symbolizes the headwear of the Rong, *sumok thyaktuk*.
4. **Tsulot-tyet**: inspired by the arrow tips, it forms a sharp “V” laid sideways. This design may have gained importance due to the central role of the bow-and-arrow for the Rongs, a hunting-and-gathering community.
5. **Tungbrik**: this design is inspired by stylized insects.
6. **Tungblyok**: this design is inspired by a spider that makes an ‘X’ in its web.
7. **Aa-thyap-alyot**: the ends of the fabric on both sides of the *dumpra* are left with threads hanging loose for a certain length as an adornment.

Bamboo as Kin and Resource

The Rongs share a close relationship with bamboo. Bamboo, fast-growing and versatile, is understood as a natural resource that *Varto Amu* (Mother Nature) provides. Its usage is synonymous with rituals for the Rongs, as an acknowledgement of their dependence on this plant.

Till today, Rong people often say: “till bamboo exists, so will the Rongs.” From birth to death, bamboo is intricately woven with Rong society and culture. Light and flexible, it can be molded into any shape — and the Rongs are expert in crafting elaborate designs with bamboo.

Various species serve to make baskets, weapons and tools for hunting or traps, attire and objects of adornment, and even musical instruments. Another important plant used simultaneously with the bamboo is the *ru* (cane, *calamus acanthospathus giff*), employed together to weave artefacts such as baskets and utensils.

But one of the most resourceful uses of bamboo and *ru* for the Rongs is hat-making. These hats, exclusive to Rongs, are traditionally known as *thyaktuk* (*thyak*, from *athyak*, head; *tyuk*, to wear). They have five layers, with each layer crafted using available indigenous materials like bamboo, cane, *tuklop* leaves (especially *ka-fyer-lop*, the leaf of *Canna indica*. L), and mica sheets. The material makes these hats strong, durable, and sustainable.

The oral history of the *thyaktuk* has nonviolent origins. The god of music and dance, *Narok Rum* (*rum* meaning god/deity), was so pleased with the Rongs that he bestowed on them a *thyaktuk* adorned with brightly coloured feathers. This gift then became part of the Rong identity.

Crafting a Thyaktuk

The knowledge of weaving *thyaktuks* is passed down from generation to generation, though it can be acquired by an individual willing to train under a master. The time and skill that the process requires limits the production to a small number of weavers.

To make these hats, the best time to harvest bamboo for their *pali* (sleekness) is between April to June, after which bamboos harden.

The bamboo is shaven to strands as thin as human hair, dyed with natural pigments of yellow and red, and finally dried. One by one, these strands are woven into a *thyaktuk*.

The innermost layer is casually and loosely woven to construct the base. After this, a layer of *tuklop*, the dried leaves of the ka-fyer plant, is laid as a water-repellent. Some *thyaktuks* also use *kafer-lop* or *pago-rip* (*Oroxylum indicum*) for this inner padding.

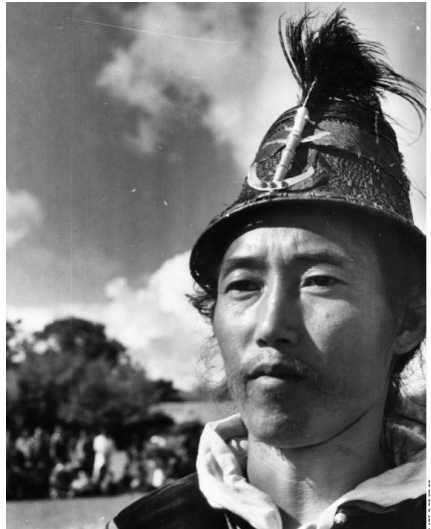
Finally, the outermost layer is woven. Very intricate and decorative, it consists of several parts:



Shaving of the bamboo into thin strands.
Photo by Abhishek Anil.



A man in *dumpra* and woman in *dumdyam*, Lepcha traditional attire. Picture Credits: Alice Kandell/ Library of Congress.



A man wearing *thyaktuk*. Picture Credits: Ernst Schafer/Wikimedia Commons.

1. **Sundyong song:** the topmost layer is divided into eight sections, using a ru mold, to resemble a spider web
2. **Aa-mik** (eye): the hexagonal-shaped spaces on the second layer of the hat represents the eyes of bees. Loosely woven, it sits on the interior, moulded into the same shape as the outer layer, with the *tuk-lop* layered in-between.
3. **Sumok-tsum:** the third layer, where more intricate designs are woven. Horizontal and vertical strips of ru and bamboo are interwoven in diamond-shaped designs symbolizing auspiciousness. There are three styles of sumok-tsum: the plain one, amot or female, the adorned one, abu or male, and a smaller one, *akup* or child.
4. **Aa-fyet** (the end or bottom): the bottom part of the *sumok*, where thicker strips of bamboo are woven with smaller strips of ru into an exoskeleton holding the headwear together.

The final part of the *sumok* is a small strap made of ru to hold the hat under the chin, but this is optional to the wearer's preference.

The *sumok* is usually also adorned with feathers. Though porcupine quills are often used, colourful, extravagant feathers are preferred. The most desired feather is the tail of the Nambong Ong Pano Foo (Racket Tailed Drongo), believed to be the king of birds by Rongs. Recently, a sun-and-moon symbol has been incorporated after contact with Buddhism; this is now used to hold the feathers in the front of all *thyaktuks*.

Rong hats have also been a material of interest for those outside the community.

The famous British Museum houses a *sumok* collected in 1960 by Dr J. D Hooker when he came to Darjeeling and Sikkim for his botanical studies.

Styles of Thyaktuk

One popular style of *thyaktuk* is the *sumok* (war) *thyaktuk* or war-hat. Once worn by Lepcha guards during Chogyal rule, today it is worn during special occasions. The meticulous craftsmanship it requires makes it invaluable, ranging from the price of fifteen-forty thousand.

This has led to the creation of affordable *thyaktuks* for laypeople. One such hat is the *pabri*: cylindrical, smaller in size with a rounded top and feathers in the front, the *pabri* has a similar weaving pattern to the *sumok* but less elaborate designs. *Na-rek* (from Narok Rum) *thyaktuk* is another version, worn during cultural performances and dances. Loosely-woven and slightly conical, it is held by a thin strip under the chin so it stays in place while performing.

Thyaktuk and Dumpra in Culture

Culturally, the *thyaktuk* is often worn with traditional Rong attire, such as the *thokro-dum* or *dumpra* for men. Particularly worn during festivals and

collective celebrations, the hat is a symbol of pride and identity, reminding the younger generation of their roots.

Currently, more Rongs are reviving the use of the *thyaktuk*; it has acquired an essential part in Rong ceremonies, cultural programs, and exhibitions showcasing indigenous traditions. Efforts to preserve and promote Rong crafts have drawn attention to the hat as an example of sustainable, eco-friendly craftsmanship.

Like the Rong traditional attire of *dumpra*, the hat is more than a traditional accessory; it is a meaningful cultural artifact of the Rong community that embodies their history, creativity, and harmonious relationship with nature.



Bamboo grove in Rumtek. Photo by Abhishek Anil.



Woolen carpet weaving at DHH. Photo by Abhishek Anil.



Lal Bazaar

Aakriti Thatal

Pickled *dal* for sale in Lal Bazaar. Photo by Abhishek Anil.

From the outside, Lall Bazaar looms as a striking landmark in Gangtok, its facade decked in red tiles immediately catching the eye. Contrary to popular belief, however, the “Lall” derives not from the Hindi word for red, but refers to the name of a *dewan* (minister) of the Chogyal. Today, Lall Bazaar is an expansive area, including the Khangchen-dzonga Shopping Complex (the largest shopping complex in the locality), the Denzong Cinema Hall (one of the oldest cinema halls in Sikkim), the *Thado* Line (Nepali for “Erect Path,” the stairway that links Lall Bazaar and MG Marg), and parts of the supermarket complex.

The Making of the Market

Sikkim’s marketplaces are inseparable from the story of an older, trans-Himalayan traffic. Documentations of the Central Asian Silk Route are amassing, but a lesser-known trail, known as the Southwest Silk Road, or the Sikkim Silk Route, passed through the mountains of Sikkim and Tibet, serving important trade functions between India and Tibet. Due to the arduous nature of this route, traders often halted in small villages and set up shop to sell some of their trade goods. On the stretch between Changthang in Tibet and Kalimpong, these points included Gangtok and Rhenock in Sikkim. Researchers trace the history of *haat* (temporary market, often regularly held) bazaars in Sikkim to this long-forgotten trading tale. It is thought that these *haat* bazaars are what eventually grew in popularity and became local markets.



A busy *Tharo* Line market in Gangtok. Photo by Abhishek Anil.



A market in Gangtok in 1969. Picture Credits: Alice Kandell/Library of Congress.

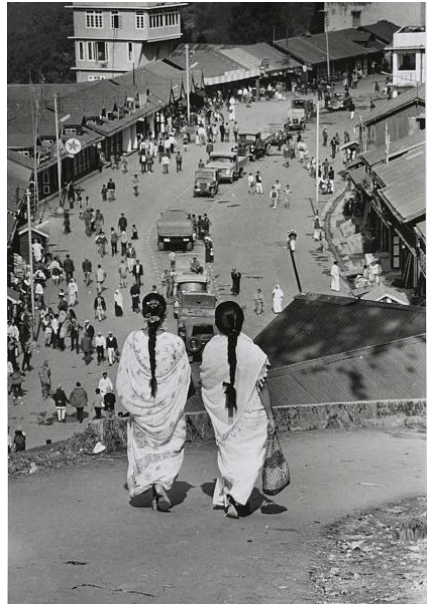
A Brief History

Amidst this backdrop is the story of Gangtok. Located at a geopolitically significant point, it acted as a hub for trade and exchange with rural hinterlands, neighbouring cities like Siliguri and Darjeeling, as well as bordering countries like Tibet and China.

During the nineteenth century, a North Indian businessman, Jethraj Bhojmal, arrived at Gangtok as a cashier for the British forces, which handled trade in the region due to the Treaty of Tumlong.

His new office functioned as a pay office, the state bank, the state treasury, the public exchequer, and even a departmental store. When Claude White arrived in Gangtok as its political officer in 1887, his team further set up various shops and offices, including the post and telegraph offices, a rest house, a hospital and dispensary in the area.

This inaugural shopping district shifted to what is now the Old Market area in 1925. That same year, Tashi Namgyal, the Chogyal of Sikkim, granted permission to ten individuals to open businesses and allotted them sites in present-day MG Marg — the beginning of its market culture. A weekly market started at the beginning of the 20th century, and though there was no defined site for it at that time, it is now confined within the Lall Market area. By 1951, many new shops bedecked the two sides of MG Marg. Subjected to the



Market in Gangtok, at what is now MG Marg. Picture Credits: Alice Kandell/Library of Congress.

closure of trade between India and China during the first Indo-China war, the stores shifted to cater to a more regional, local customer base. Weekly markets and haat bazaars began to burgeon for the needs of the locals. These are now primarily situated in the Lall Bazaar area.

It was in 1956 that Lall Bazaar — named after John S. Lall, the first *dewan* to the Chogyal — was properly built.

It began as a modest, open-air street bazaar, located just below the southern section of MG Marg. The outer rows were occupied by multi-storeyed buildings with shops on the ground floors and residential quarters above.

Lall Bazaar Today

What began as a humble shopping square has now evolved into a bustling complex. Today, Lall Bazaar stands five-storeys tall, the ground floor dedicated to parking and a local taxi stand. On the first floor is the lively *sabji bazaar* (vegetable market). The second and third floors have shops that sell everything one might ask for, from clothes to household supplies and tools to traditional attire and jewellery.

Among Lall Bazaar's many attractions is its range of products and prices. The spot is a shopping hub for the vast majority of the working-class population, extending its reach beyond Gangtok. A wide demographic, consisting of school and college students, the younger members of the workforce, and

even people from well-off families, frequents the Lall Bazaar. Lall Bazaar is also sustained by a mix of communities across Sikkim. Women from self-help groups run the majority of the *sabji bazaar* shops that sell organic produce like *raya ko saag* (Himalayan mustard greens), spinach, watercress, fenugreek, *iskus* (chayote), and seasonal fruits; cheeses like the local *chhurpi*, tofu, and paneer, dried fish namely *sidra* and *sukuti*, and festive foods like *kyabzay*, *zeyro*, *siraula*, *chewra*, and *selroti* that are used in households during festivals. The Marwari mercantile population sells a wide range of items, including spices, clothes, pots and pans, upholstery, and food. Older Tibetan women sell Tibetan food like *phalay*, *gyathuk*, *phambi*, *laphing*, pine-leaves incense called *sang*, and clothes sourced mainly from Bangkok, Siliguri, Delhi,



Shop in Lall Bazaar selling *khapse*, *zeyro* and festive snacks with grains and pulses. Photo by Abhishek Anil.

and China. Sections of the Nepali population also sell traditional handcrafted jewellery and accessories in small curio shops, some of which date back to the time of the Chogyal. For tourists, Lall Bazaar offers access to a variety of stores that sell traditional attire and Sikkimese, Tibetan, and Nepali crafts, such as bamboo handicrafts, carpets, clothes, jewellery, utensils, etcetera, without breaking the bank. There are an array of clothing shops that together capture the diversity of Gangtok's fabric, ranging from traditional attire to fast fashion. There are also quick and inexpensive snacking points that serve as spaces of congregation.

The Lall Bazaar terrace also serves as a public space in the ever-urbanising city of Gangtok, presenting a solution for the death of open and public spaces.

Here, we once found skateboarders and rappers practising and performing. Additionally, this terrace has also provided space for trade fairs and expos in the past. With the building of a skate park in Gangtok, the Lall Bazaar terrace now opens the way to new shops. Lall Bazaar is a burgeoning and sensorally rich market that continues to grow and stand out. Thus it is that though locals and tourists alike remark on the lack of space to comfortably set foot in Lall Bazaar, they still find themselves there.

Everyday Life of the Bazaar

Markets play a significant role in the production of cultures amongst the citizens of any town. Lall Bazaar too is not simply a site of buying and selling, but a living archive of everyday trade routes and rituals that bring people together, shaped by generations of vendors, customers, migrants, and traders.

Lall Bazaar is an exuberant display of solidarity and community. During the *aitabaarey haat* (Sunday market), when local sellers lay out their products in rows in the open spaces between the market area, individual shopkeepers often look after their neighbouring shop's produce. The whole haat operates as a family, with community as the foundation of their success.

Equally, out of all the markets in Gangtok, it is Lall Bazaar where one finds people of all demographics, from Nepalis to Bhutias, Lepchas, and Marwadis.

A shopkeeper there recently expressed something striking: "Our products are not only for one group or another. We celebrate the shared heritage of all communities and castes in this region." Her use of "our heritage" stands out in a landscape where harmonious heterogeneity is rarely acknowledged.

Today, multibillion-dollar chains like Reliance threaten the Lall Bazaar economy. With subsidised prices,



Handicrafts for sale in Lall Bazaar. Photo by Abhishek Anil.

customers often prefer these markets for weekly or monthly purchases. Yet markets like Lall Bazaar, especially the haat, offer what markets cannot: organic, seasonal produce. rooted in ecological and cultural traditions, foods tied to ancestral practices. Lall Bazaar plays an expansive role in Gangtok, from sustaining livelihoods to preserving knowledge and nurturing customs across generations.

Note: Parts of this article were originally published in the anthology 'From Saigon to Shillong: Marketplaces as Crossroads of Culture,' edited by Dr Etawanda Saiborne, Freddie M. Majaw, and Dr Amanda C. Tongper and published by Northeast India AV Archive, St. Anthony's College, Shillong.



Café Cultures

Aakriti Thatal and
Abhibyanjana R Thatal

Inside Café Fiction of Rachna Books. Photo by Abhishek Anil.

Gangtok has been transitioning to an urban center since it was an independent kingdom. Initially a military cantonment for the British Armed Forces, Gangtok transformed with the construction of the British residence, Raj Bhawan. The growth of the merchant class, bazaars, and increasing self-employment through craftsmanship slowly led to urbanization. The Public Works Department emerged in the late-nineteenth-century, and by the twentieth-century, the place slowly grew to have urban qualities. After the merger with India, Gangtok has slowly matured into its present urban character, which is still under constant change due to multiple urban development projects.

Third Spaces in the City

Urban Gangtok sits on a hilly terrain marked by winding roads, concrete buildings, large parking lots, sprawling green construction sheet cover, countless hotels, restaurants and marketplaces. What is markedly missing are accessible, open public spaces for recreation or congregation.

A public life is often lived inside third spaces, which have emerged not as a leisurely space for the elite but a necessary site for people to come together.

A case of these small in-between places is that of the café. Two cafés have emerged as important cultural hubs in urban



Café Fiction shop front, Development Area Gangtok. Photo by Abhishek Anil.

Gangtok: Rachna Books and The Travel Café. Rachna is accompanied by its sister companies, Café Fiction, a café on the first floor of the establishment, and a bed-and-breakfast on the floor above the bookshop. The Travel Café is a company under Tag Along Backpackers. These are among the two most community-engaged spaces in Gangtok, where people pursue pauses as well as activity. They cater to a growing population interested in the arts, hosting live music, open mic poetry nights, book-readings and signings, and workshops. Informal cultural labour unfolds here through these scenes.

Both cafés are located in the Development Area of Gangtok, a 15-minute walk from MG Marg, the heart of town. They also sit in the presence of two major cultural institutions, the Manan Bhawan and the Nepali Sahitya Akademi.



Inside Rachna Books. Photo by Abhishek Anil.

Rachna's Coffee-Workspace Congregation

Marking the entry to the Development area, Rachna Bookstore has been one of Gangtok's most prominent cultural landmarks since 1976.

This space serves multiple functions: a bookstore and a congregation site for events or workshops on the first floor, as a café and a workspace on the ground floor, and as bed-and-breakfast upstairs for those visiting Gangtok. Rachna describes itself as “essentially a bookshop, quintessentially Gangtok.”

While originally established by his father, Rajiv S Shresta, Raman Shresta, the current owner, reiterates that it was his mother and grandmother who were the real

storytellers in his family — and attributes the legacy of storytelling in Rachna to them.

Popularly known as the Bookman, Raman Shresta proudly calls himself a bookseller. Today, the present-day store runs with the addition of Café Fiction, started by his spouse, Sarvada. In Gangtok, Rachna has provided the space for many literary discourses, workshops, book releases, musical programs, poetry and storytelling sessions. Café Fiction also offers an environment for young locals and tourists to work.

In 2019, Rachna entered publishing under its own banner, Rachna Books, to centre narratives from Sikkim and the Darjeeling-Kalimpong hills of the Eastern Himalayan region.

Rachna has been part of book fairs across the country, as well as literary festivals such as the Jaipur Literature Festival and the International Booksellers conference.

Raman also curated the Sikkim Literature Festival with the Culture Department of Sikkim. Rachna was also awarded the Bookstore of the Year in 2015 in the Publishing Next Industry Award. They have also hosted two writers' residencies in collaboration with Villa Swagatam, a cross-residency program by the French Institute and the French Embassy in India.

The Case of Travel Café

In the same locality is the Travel Café run by Manisha Sharma, Bhavana

Sharma, and Saran Rai. Started in 2018 as part of Tagalong Backpackers, the hostel right above where travellers stay, the café is a space where travellers and locals could meet and interact with each other. They have been hosting Tagalong Sessions, an annual musical event bringing together musicians from within Sikkim and recently Nepal to their small cafés.

Through tag sessions, conversations, and random encounters, Travel Café is a space where stories are shared, allowing people to find a place to tell the stories of Gangtok and Sikkim in their own words and subverting the narratives in tourist brochures and other media.



Inside Travel Café. Photo by Abhishek Anil.

Cafés as Urbanisation

Through the cultural production in these cafés, encompassing art, literature, poetry, music, workshops, and exhibitions, the people gathered find new space for community and belonging. The images of Gangtok shared here are predominantly of the urban middle-class of Gangtok. These cafés have welcomed students, writers, filmmakers, travellers, tourists, researchers, artists, musicians, and major sections of the middle-class population in Gangtok.

These spaces have acted as a private-public space, both in terms of ownership and characteristics, and provided people with much-needed space away from home and work. The infrastructure allows for a space to congregate publicly, albeit closed, while also sitting alone. Patrons often remark that they feel at home in these cafés, somehow finding the space more private.

Simultaneously, these spaces allow for interaction between both locals and travellers. The Travel Café has aimed to provide good food and a comfortable space for this purpose. Similarly, the nation-wide known independent bookshop Rachna has attracted lots of tourists, researchers, artists, and travellers.

Leisurely consumption and rest are other reasons why Gangtokians find these cafés attractive. The primary reason, however, is the culture that they produce and support. Rachna has been the vanguard for conversation and the exchange of knowledge for over 40 years.

The integration of these café into an already existing ethos, be it reading or travelling, has also helped these spaces engage with the youth. As Raman mentions, it may be due to the lack of public space where the young can gather that they seek reprieve in the cafés.

Submerged deeply in the denseness of social life, these cafés offer not just space for people, but also a realisation of these individuals' and society's urban aspirations. Gangtok is still a young city, and access to these kinds of spaces is a relatively new concept. Although curated based on the preferences and allowances of certain sections of society, influenced by factors such as class and access to English, cafés keep alive the tradition of being a place for congregation and public discourse. And while cafés are not neutral spaces, they are places of resistance and doing culture.

Must-Visit Cafés in Gangtok

- **Taste of Tibet (1999):** One of the most iconic restaurants in Gangtok known for their food.
- **Sikkim Coffee (2021):** Part of a chain of cafés making himalayan cuisine and their own coffee production.
- **Tattoo Café (2023):** This café doubles as a tattoo parlour.
- **Craft Theory Collective (2024):** A space curated for art from artists of the region and brewed artisanal coffee.



A performance by Ankit Shrestha at Travel Café. Photo by Abhishek Anil.



A performance at Travel Café. Photo by Abhishek Anil.



Bending Notes

Abhibyanjana R Thatal

Damaha at the Sikkim State Archive, Culture Department of Government of Sikkim. Photo by Abhishek Anil.

The myriad folk musical cultures of Gangtok are diverse and varied, shaped by the ethnicity, language, and history of various communities. These traditions are often closely linked with ritualistic life and culture, with the very identity of some communities defined by their musical practices.

Musical Communities

The Gandharba communities of Nepal, Sikkim, and the surrounding hills are traditionally travelling musicians who sing to earn a living. Their songs function as carriers of news and social commentary. Other forms of songs include *ghatana geet* (“event-song”), based on current events and happenings across the regions, and *laure sandesh* or *laure geet* (soldier’s songs), songs that convey messages from soldiers serving in the army. These songs are reflective of a history of migration and military service among these Nepali-speaking communities.

Gandharba musical traditions also include *dafe ra muralichari geet*, which tell stories of the two Himalayan birds, and *karkha*, a genre celebrating the kings and warriors of Nepal.

Two instruments are central to their music: the *sarangi* carries the melody and the *arbaja* provides a rhythmic base.

The Damai, a caste-based community, are also musicians by professions as well as tailors. They

perform the *naumati baja* or *panche baja*, an ensemble of percussion and wind instruments considered auspicious in Nepali Hindu rituals. The term “Damai” is derived from *damaha*, the large kettledrum that anchors the ensemble. Although the Damai have historically faced severe social discrimination, their music ironically occupies a central place in ritual life, their presence indicating the higher social status of a family during marriage ceremonies. The ensemble serves multiple functions marking auspicious moments, such as the departure of a bride. The *panche baja* is performed during weddings, sacred thread ceremonies, festivals, and processions. While much of its repertoire includes secular entertainment music, the contexts in which it is performed are always sacred or semi-sacred.



A man playing *sarangi*. Picture Credits: flowcomm/ Wikimedia Commons.

These musical traditions have adapted to influences from radio broadcasts and film music. The inclusion of the *panche baja* in the military has led to the introduction of new rhythms known as *paltan naya bakya* (new army tunes), which have now become common processional music.

Myths and Legends

Sikkim has a fair share of musical myths associated with different communities as well. The Limbus have a legend of the *chyabrun* (or *ke*) drum which is considered

The drum is believed to have been made from the skin of Keysami, the tiger son of Khappura, who was killed by her human son Namsami in order to protect himself and his mother.

Used in ceremonies conducted by shamans such as Phedangmas, Yeba, and Yema as well as during death rituals, the sound of the drum, combined with dance movements (*Ke Lang*), is believed to confuse evil spirits and keep them at bay. Certain instruments like the *dampfu* (associated with the Tamang community) trace their origins to the beginning of the universe. When Peng Dorjee hunted a goral, his wife Senje Ruisang lamented seeing her husband kill an innocent animal. Filled with guilt, Peng Dorjee made a drum out of its skin and played it — upon hearing it, a *danphe* Himalayan Monal) bird began dancing in joy and so the instrument was named *dampfu*.



Dampfu at the Ramgauri Sangralaya, Rhenock.
Photo by Abhishek Anil.

Hybridizing Form

Traditionally, music in Sikkim is not an isolated performance but embedded in ritualistic practices (such as Limbu Shamans), agriculture and labour songs (*Damokae Sanglo*, *Baramasey*), harvest songs (*Zo-Mal-Lok*), love songs (*Pamlo Sanglo*, *Juwari*) and songs in communal gatherings (*Rodi* of the Limbu community, *Chutka*) and festivals songs (*Deusi - Bhaili*, *Denjong Chaa-Lu*). Yet music has recently evolved as an entity that demands its own stage, with a steady fusion of musical elements from Western classical scales to Hindustani interacting with folk rhythms in the region.

Tamang Selo, for instance, is a popular folk style inflected by the influence of digital media and westernised musical practice. This folk-musical and -dance form, attributed to the Tamang community, is usually performed in Nepali recreationally or during festivals and weddings. Creolisation has led to blended music in blues and jazz bands such as Cadenza Collective (Blues Selo) and folk-rock bands like Gauley Bhai (Aunty Ko Tato Bagaicha, Aunt's warm garden), in which you can hear rhythmic Tamang Selo influences. In Kalimpong, multi-genre artist Saila blends Nepali and English rap lyricism with hip-hop, rock, and Hindustani classical elements.

In Sikkim specifically, we see fusion in the music of Sofiyum, a Lepcha band with rock elements, and Zeron, a singer-songwriter singing in English and Lepcha, blending modern popular tunes with Lepcha folk music.

Sikkim's Alternative Musics

Music in Sikkim is embraced widely: whether in taxis or salons and shops, songs range from old to new Bollywood and Hindi-language popular music, Billboard topcharts, western pop icons like Rihanna, Justin Bieber, or Ed Sheeran to regional Nepali music.

Before rock and metal rose to prominence in the rest of India, these

genres found a strong foothold in the Northeast of India for fifty years. Rock, in its many forms, has an engaged fanbase in Sikkim, creating a space where folk-musical elements readily intersect with global genres. This meeting may not necessarily point to a rupture from tradition, but towards an ongoing evolution. The role of churches is also significant in popularising Western instruments such as the guitar, drums, bass, and keyboards in the lives of people. One might interpret this onset of fusion and the adoption of Western popular music styles as a transgression of ethnic or caste-based identities in favour of migrating toward more translocal identities. In Sikkim, contemporary musical forms now carry different kinds of stories, often shaped by migration and issues of identity and informed by the emotional landscape of personal lives.



Men playing *chyabrun* drum. Picture Credits: Hari Gurung/Wikimedia Commons.



Lasomungkup performing at Travel Cafe Gangtok. Photo by Abhishek Anil.

In Sikkim, Nepali rock music is the most popular, as evidenced by Nepalese headliners like 1974 CE, Sabin Rai, and Albatross headlining concerts in and around the region. *Resham Firiri*, a Nepali rock song, has been performed ubiquitously across the region and international gatherings such as Ethno-Music India. Sikkim has also been home to bands such as Tribal Rain, who fused math-rock elements with softer-rock sensibilities to create a unique experimental blend of Nepali music, earning international recognition. Gangtok and other towns like Namchi have been home to a burgeoning underground scene featuring metal, grindcore, noisecore, and other niche genres.

Although Sikkim has only a small number of live venues for music, with its oldest venue, Café Live and Loud, having shut down (and impacting the prevalence of metal music, which is still thriving in the state), spaces such as Gangtok Groove and Travel Café serve as sites to experience contemporary forms of musical performances.

The extremely underground scene creates alternative niche spaces for expressions of existentialism and nihilistic questions, brought forward by masculine identities finding voices and ways of expression.



Flute artist, Ashish, performs in Travel Cafe. Photo by Abhishek Anil.

While it may be easy to attribute this shift solely to media influence, such explanations overlook the agency of people in actively choosing, adapting, and reshaping musical forms. In the case of Sikkim, we see the emergence of hybrid forms of music as a marker of ethnic identities negotiating with modernity. There are also expressions that seek to form a sense of a larger Nepali/Himalayan identity, as seen in artists such as Tribal Rain, Zeron, Sufium, Saila, Cadenza Collective, Gauley Bhai, and Bipul Chettri. Folk-musical cultures do not disappear, but co-exist and overlap with modern forms: the sonic landscape of Sikkim today reflects these complexities, shaped by traditional practices and personal agency.



Inside a Curio Shop

Abhibyanjana R Thatal

Dhaal or shield adorned with repoussé dragons and geometric borders with turquoise and coral inlays. Photo by Abhishek Anil.

In the “New Market” area adjacent to MG Marg in Gangtok are a set of small curio shops that also function as souvenir stores, an integral part of the tourist economy. Among them is a special curio-silverware shop, which houses artifacts exclusively handmade by artisans of the shop. Though it fronts as a curio-shop, its history in metalwork in Sikkim is much longer.

The Babu Kazi Sakya Store

In Sikkim, metal-work — brass work, Buddhist statues in monasteries, silver and copper work — was primarily popularized after the influx of artisans from Nepal. The craftsmen produced ritual objects, sculptures, and jewelry for monasteries and royal patrons. Their contributions have hugely influenced Himalayan and Buddhist art forms.

Metal-casting from Nepal has influenced not only art, but also the Tibetan Buddhist cosmic landscape.

Stories that read like legends, of the Nepali princess Brikhuti bringing brass and metal work to Tibet, are popularly told.

The curio-and-silverware store in New Market, Gangtok, is the product of such a Nepali lineage. Currently, it is owned by Dhananjay Sakya, the descendant of a family of craftsmen working in metal for over nine-generations. His grandfather, Gyan Ratna Sakya, endearingly remembered as Sanu Bhai Sakya due to his short stature, was patronized



The Babu Kazi Sakya shop front at New Market area in Gangtok. Photo by Abhishek Anil.

by the Chogyal of Sikkim. He worked for the royal court and places such as the Palace Gompa (Tsuklakhang), Namgyal Institute of Tibetology, and Chorten Gompa. From there, he opened a small goldsmith shop and worked with diverse materials like brass, copper, and bronze. He also received Sikkimese subjecthood, after which his family too was granted Sikkimese citizenship.

Almost a decade after Sanu Bhai Sakya, his son, Babu Kazi Sakya formally established a curio shop in Gangtok in 1946 — and it continues to be named after him.

Dhananjay, the owner, is the youngest of four siblings and the third-generation working in jewelry and metalwork in Sikkim. His eldest brother works on larger monastery projects and has been associated with designing the Buddha sculpture of the Buddha park in Ravangla, an iconic Sikkimese image popular on tourism websites. Dhananjay moved back to Gangtok eight years ago, after the passing of his father, having spent almost 25 years in Russia working as an engineer. Though he grew up surrounded by a legacy of skill, devotion, and artistic lineage,



Variations of *karuwa*, an artefact for containing water and other liquids. Photo by Abhishek Anil.

engineering emerged as a more desirable and aspirational path for his generation. He explains his return to India and to metalwork as a reconciliation with his own sense of self and inherited tradition.

Today, the shop is a single-floor complex with a small opening. Upasana Sakya sits by the counter with a welcoming smile. Inside is a display of silver trinkets, silver jewelry, wooden masks of Mahakaal, Mount Khangchendzonga, Green Tara, brass items and antiques from the collections of fore-fathers, intricate metal work and ornaments — all parts of the cultural imagination of Sikkim.

Further lies a pathway to another open room, which displays the countless accolades and national prizes



Brass sculptures of Guru Padmasambhava and other buddhist sculptures displayed inside Babu Kazi Sakya shop. Photo by Abhishek Anil.

of Babu Kazi Sakya alongside statues of Buddha, brass work, and rare swords.

Even further is a small chamber, where there may be someone sitting and polishing a ring or a cup.

With the turn of the century, as patronage shifts from strictly religious to market-driven productions, there has been an increase in the production of sculptures for the market and the introduction of jewelry which may or may not be for ritual practice. However, the Babu Kazi Sakya curio-shop today is not only meant for tourists to carry a souvenir back home, but also for the locals to honour their customs and festivals. Dhananjay showed me a list of eighteen sub-tribes and communities

in Sikkim and the kind of ornaments they wear: each community with its own type of jewelry, featuring filigree style edging or wire work, hand-linked chain tassels, repousse or stamping. At present, besides such silver jewelry, the shop also makes statuettes, plaques, and medallions for state functions.

Inside the Craft

When Dhananjay restarted the shop and rehired artisans, he shifted the production unit and living quarters from Rumtek to Gangtok to ensure that transportation did not damage the products.

The production unit is about a 15-minute walk from the shop which is at the centre of the town. Dhananjay's home is a four-and-a-half-storey building, whose ground floor serves as the living quarters of the artisans and the semi-basement as the production unit that houses machines for silver sheets and strings.

In the basement are four artisans, each working on something with their own meditative focus. The room barely gets sunlight, as is the case with lower-floors of buildings in the concrete jungle of Gangtok and is lit instead with LED light bulbs. They are all sitting down with their legs crossed. They explain that it is important to be seated on the ground for metal work, as it requires not only precision, but also strength and force that are difficult to apply when seated on a workbench. However, the posture causes them all leg pain; upstairs, Dhananjay shows us a massager he bought for the

artisans to come in and use to relieve themselves. Downstairs, they also have a large speaker to play music while they work.

All of the artisans are from Nepal. This production unit, albeit a small one, borrows from their techniques and skills.

Some of the methods used are hollow/lost-wax casting (*thajya* in Newari), hammered work or repousse (also called *thajya*), embossing and engraving.

While precious metal-casting is predominantly associated with the Newars, who are elite, a large section of artisans invited from Nepal are also people from historically subjugated castes, like the Kaami known to be occupational blacksmiths, making knives of different kinds, and working



Hammering of a silver string into a ring-like shape at the production unit. Image Credit: Abhishek Anil.

with leather. Ramesh Sunwar is one such artisan, referred to as the captain of the unit by Dhananjay. He moved from the Nuwakot region of Nepal about seven years ago with his wife and a child. He has been here the longest among the four artisans in the unit. As I watch, another artisan, Raju, skillfully hammers a silver bowl with a wooden stick and works free-hand to carve floral patterns and designs on the silverware. Prakash is simultaneously melting the silver with a torch blower. As I ask where else he has been, he recalls his time working at a monastery in Ladakh. When asked what place he prefers, he remarks, “*Kalakar ko desh hudaina*”: an artist has no country.

The story of Babu Kazi Sakya shows us an interconnected history of art and craft in this region, a reminder of the intertwined and almost indistinguishable stylistic evolution of Newari and Tibetan art forms in Buddhist iconography.

A long history of migration and cultural exchange, as well as the transmission of specialized skills, played a vital role in shaping Sikkimese Buddhist visual culture, where such inherited crafts are not merely decorative but foundational to its artistic and spiritual expression.



Dhananjay Sakya next to the image of his father Babu Kazi Sakya and a wall displaying Babu Kazi Sakya's accolades. Photo by Abhishek Anil.



Hammer engraving on silver bowl. Photo by Abhishek Anil.



Ramesh Sunwar a.k.a the captain of the *karigars* (artisans) in the unit. Photo by Abhishek Anil.



Custodians of a Not-So-Hidden Land

Sharbendu De

Khangchendzonga range as seen from Gangtok.
Photo by Abhishek Anil.

A long time ago, *Itbu-moo*, Mother Creator, created *Kongchen Kongchlo*, i.e. Mount Khangchendzonga, the world's third-highest mountain peak. To complement this glorious creation, she created lakes and rivers.

But something seemed amiss, so she created Fudongthing, the first man, and his companion-sister, Nazong Nyu, who would become the guardian deities of the Lepchas. This folklore, "Children of the Snowy Peaks," is the Lepcha story of genesis, making Mount Khangchendzonga deeply revered and the most sacred peak of the Lepchas. Since Lepchas believe themselves to have originated from Mount Khangchendzonga (*Itbu-moo's* first creation), they even regard the mountain as a sibling, their elder brother. Another iteration of the tale believes they were created from its snow.

The sacred mountain is part of the imagination and myths of several indigenous communities across the valley. The sacred meanings of these stories have been integrated with Buddhist beliefs and constitute the basis for Sikkimese identity. Many indigenous rituals celebrate and uphold a reverence of nature as a continuous reminder of human kinship with the natural elements. This includes agriculture. For example, the Lepchas believe that the time for preparing the rice fields is guided by birds sent by invisible spirits. They also consider themselves related to elements of nature: both rice and millet are family. *Zo nyo kung* is the grandmother of rice, the new seed of millet is the daughter-in-law, the new seed of rice the son-in-law, and their grain regarded as children. This also extends to other natural elements. Halfdan Siiger, during his field work in Tingvong village in Dzongu in the late 1940s, notes a story about a family that believes all humans originate from a



View of Kanchenjunga from Hodgson's Bungalow, 1854. Picture Credits: Illustration by W. Taylor from J.D. Hooker's Himalayan Journals/Wikimedia Commons.



Statue of Lepcha Chief Te-Kung-Tek at Kabi Lungchok. Picture Credits: Walter Callens/Wikimedia Commons.

rock kam li; others in the village believed that only the locals originated from the rock.

Lepchas also have deities for grains, land, vegetables, animals, and in particular, *mung* (angry deity). A *bongthing* or *mun* (Lepcha shamans) makes sacrificial offerings to appease them and obtain blessings from *mung*. Distinct *mungs* offer specific blessings for each animal or farm-field: for example, *Sha-So-Ra-K-Rok* is the creator and protector of minor domestic animals. Many prayers exist as songs.

Mount Khangchendzonga is also believed to contain sacred 'hidden lands' by Buddhists and Lepchas.

Buddhists call such hidden lands *Beyul* and Lepchas *Mayel Lyang* (meaning 'the land of hidden paradise' and 'land blessed by God' in the Lepcha language).

Another story goes, according to the Lama Gongdu *terma* (hidden teachings), that in the eighth-century, Guru Rinpoche concealed a great number of major and minor *terma* texts and religious objects across Sikkim, hence granting it the title of 'Land of *terma*.' Buddhist teachings prophesise that certain Buddhist masters would come and discover these concealed 'treasures.' In another telling by Dorje Dechen Lingpa, it is believed that Sikkim was a wild and dangerous land uninhabited by humans until the visit of Guru Rinpoche, who blessed the terrain and converted the harmful spirits of the region into protectors of dharma.

Spirituality as Ecological Welfare

These beliefs in the sacredness of nature, along with cosmologies of hidden valleys and spiritual landscapes, instill a deep respect for the myriad elements of the natural world. This encourages multispecies cohabitation and kinship. Any interference with such sacred spaces is therefore met with strong opposition, often resulting in the conservation of nature. This reverent orientation toward the natural world has shaped many political, economic, and ecological moments in Sikkim.

In 2025, when a climbing expedition took place on Mount Khangchendzonga, both the Bhutia and the Lepcha community believed the expedition had polluted the sacred landscape and upset its guardian deities.

Purification rituals were organized and forgiveness was sought, requesting ongoing divine protection and seeking future blessings. This complex context explains why the surrounding area of the Khangchendzonga National Park (KNP), which covers 25 per cent of Sikkim, is inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage list in 2016 as a 'mixed heritage site,' recognising both its natural and cultural values.

In the early 2000s, the Sikkim government proposed a series of 27 hydro-power dams over the river Teesta and its tributaries, with several located inside Dzongu, a sacred Lepcha reserve in North Sikkim (in the buffer and transition zones of the Khangchendzonga Biosphere Reserve). The entire Lepcha community rose to protest under the banner of the Affected Citizens of Teesta (ACT) in 2007, taking to the streets of Gangtok with a 915-day nonviolent, relay hunger strike. Three youths — Dawa Lepcha from Lingdong, Tenzing Lepcha from Hee Gyathang in lower Dzongu, and Gyatso Lepcha from Passingdong — emerged as iconic figures from this protest movement. Lepcha youths all paused to reflect on their ancestral heritage and a generation was reinvigorated to emerge as

custodians of their sacred lands. Prava Rai, the founder of Sikkim Project, writes that the event restored an understanding of Dzongu as a place of pilgrimage. As crucially, this turned out to be a watershed moment in modern Lepcha history, galvanising them for a common cause — their reverence for nature, their kin.

The sustained resistance of the Lepchas, alongside Buddhist communities, led to the scrapping of four dams which had been proposed within the National Park and on its peripheries. This remains one of the world's most inspiring and successful anti-dam protests till date. Gyatso and Tseten Lepcha, key members of ACT, write, 'We are striving to keep the river flowing free as after death our souls will travel all the way up the Rongyoong to their final resting place in the mountain'.

Rongyoong/Rongnyu, the river, originates in the Khanchendzonga range and flows through the Dzongu before it meets the Teesta.

Their arguments are not solely spiritual or premised on mythical beliefs, but also firmly rooted in ecological understandings, awareness of the region being seismically sensitive, Rights of Nature (RoN), and the preservation of Dzongu, the only reserved land for the Lepchas.

Sikkim till date remains a largely peaceful state, where most natives cohabit with nature. It was the first



to ban plastics as well as the use of pesticides in farming. However, though it is largely celebrated as India's 100 per cent organic farming state, the locals living in Gangtok have to depend on the vegetables and fruits transported from the plains, most grown using pesticides. Though free from litter and overtaking or honking vehicles, Gangtok has mushroomed exponentially into a concrete jungle, jostling for space and sunlight. An undisrupted view of the

mountains, if any, has become a selling-point for tourists. Slowly, the conception of land is now turning into property, an ailment most Sikkimese had long resisted with great aplomb. The fabric of human-nature relationships is gradually witnessing a strain.

The people of Sikkim have long shared a deep relationship and identification with nature, which has bolstered and encouraged thoughtful ecological decisions in



the face of capitalism and greed. At this time, it is necessary that the Sikkimese people continue resisting succumbing to these temporal temptations and remain in pursuit of a balance that enables multispecies cohabitation.

Khangchendzonga range. Photo by Abhishek Anil.

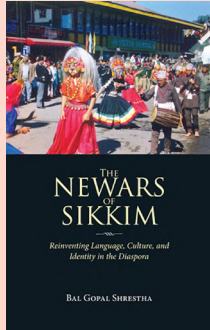
City Reads

Books that capture the region's historical and cultural heritage.

The Newars of Sikkim: Reinventing Language, Culture, and Identity in the Diaspora (2015)

Bal Gopal Shrestha,
published by
Vajra Books

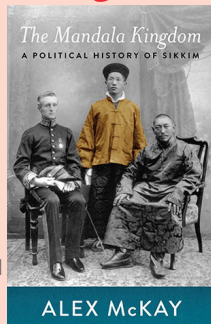
The book is both an ethnographic account and an analysis of the identity formation and negotiation of the Newars of Sikkim through ritual activities and the performance of identity through festivals.



The Mandala Kingdom (2021)

Alex McKay,
published by
Rachna Books

The book presents a political history of Sikkim from the colonial period till 1947 and is dubbed an essential read for scholars and anyone curious about Sikkim and its history.

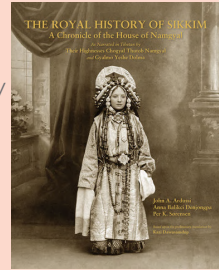


The Royal History of Sikkim: A Chronicle of

the House of Namgyal (2021)

Serindia Publications

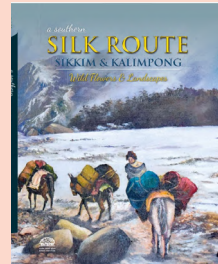
Originally written in Tibetan in the nineteenth-century by Chogyal Thutob Namgyal and his Tibetan Queen-consort Yeshe Dolma, this book translated to English by Kazi Dawasamdub, revised and supplemented by John A. Ardussi, Anna Balikci Denjongpa, and Per K. Sørensen, talks about the history of Sikkim through the perspective of the royal family.



A Southern Silk Route - Sikkim and Kalimpong: Wild Flowers and Landscapes (2024)

Rajib Gogoi, J.H. Franklin Benjamin, Norbu Sherpa, Geetamani Chettri, Srijana Mangar, Bishal Chettri, Ashiho Asosii Mao, published by Botanical Survey of India

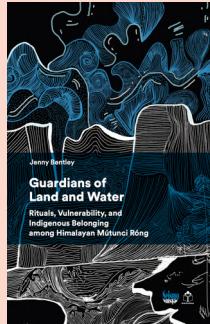
A comprehensive look into the silk route between Kalimpong to Sikkim that chronicles the botanical, cultural, social and political dimension of the historical trade route of the region.



Guardians of Land & Water (2025)

Jenny Bently, published by
Rachna Books & Siesmo Press

A book based on over a decade long ethnographic work of the author with the Mutanchi Rongkup or the Lepcha community's ontological world, understanding of the self and the world, ritual practice and performances.



City in Films

Films that tell stories of Sikkim and its people.

Sikkim (1971)

Possibly one of the earliest film documentaries of the state. Sikkim is a 1971 documentary film by Satyajit Ray, commissioned by the Chogyal Palden Thondup Namgyal, on the sovereignty of Sikkim. The film was banned in India till 2010.



Raalang Road (2017)

Written and directed by Karma Takapa, the film is set in a small town in Rabong, Sikkim, where four people are coincidentally brought together after a mysterious robbery. The film explores cultural immigration and the complex social realities of Sikkim.



Pahuna: Little Visitors (2018)

Directed by Pakhi Tyrewala, the film shows the journey of two stranded Nepali children along with their baby brother who migrated to Sikkim during the Maoist uprising in Nepal.



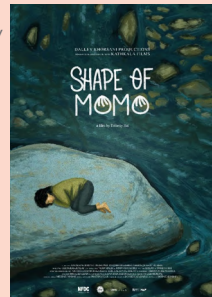
Tara: The Lost Star (2024)

Set in the backdrop of Gnathang-Memenchu village, the film directed by Samten Bhutia is a visual treat and a social drama capturing the story of Tara, a young girl, set out to find a place for herself in the world.



Shape of Momo (2025)

Directed by Tribeny Rai, the film follows the story of Bishnu who leaves her job in Delhi and goes back to her village in Sikkim. As she navigates the deeply patriarchal environment at home, she struggles with family demands, social expectations, and questions about her own identity.



Museums & Memories

Institutions that house precious relics and remnants of the region's past and the living cultures. Please note that entry fees may be applicable for some sites.

Namgyal Institute of Tibetology



Established in 1958, the NIT is a research institute houses a museum, research center and two libraries with an expansive collection of Sikkimese and Tibetan artefacts, largest collection of Tibetan books outside Tibet, literature on Sikkim and the Mahayana Buddhist cosmology.

Location: Deorali, Gangtok

Days: Monday - Saturday

Timings: 10 am - 4 pm

Ramgauri Sangralaya



This is a private museum hosting ethnographic collection of artefact, a botanical garden, and extensive stamp and driftwood collection. This museum also has collections of old Sikkimese governmental documents.

Location: Rhenock, Sikkim

Days: Monday - Saturday

Timings: 10 am - 4 pm

Sikkim State Museum and Archives



Part of the Culture Department of the Government of Sikkim, this archive cum museum is located at a heritage building in Sikkim with two floors dedicated to artefacts and an archive of documents and photographs about Sikkimese history and culture.

Location: Near Zero Point, Bhanu Path

Days: Monday - Saturday

Timings: 10:30 am - 4:30 pm

Directorate of Handloom and Handicraft (DHH), Craft Gallery



Formerly known as Handloom and Handicrafts Centre of Sikkim, the institute was established in 1957 as a training center for a variety of handicrafts and handloom in Sikkim by then Chogyal Palden Thondup Namgyal. It provides vocational training in crafts like mask making, thangka painting, carpet weaving, thara weaving, wood-work and bamboo crafts. Its craft gallery displays the various craft work from past to present.

Location: Zero Point, National Highway Gangtok

Days: Monday - Saturday

Timings: 10:30 am - 4:30 pm

High Court of Sikkim Museum



Housed in the former Chief Justice's bungalow built in 1910, and inaugurated as a museum in 2017, the institute has five galleries each dedicated to judicial documentation, photodocumentation of 'Sikkim/ Sixteen laws', Sikkimese history and archeological findings in Sikkim.

Location: Forest Colony, Baluwakhani, Gangtok

Days: Wednesday - Monday

Timings: 10:00 am - 5:00 pm

Heritage Sites

Notable archeological landmarks and heritage sites in Sikkim.

Dubdi Monastery



Located in Geyzing and from the Nyingma sect of Buddhism, this monastery was established in 1701 to commemorate the Buddhist Namgyal kingdom in Sikkim. It is one of the oldest monasteries in Sikkim.

Location: Dubdi Monastery, near Yuksom, Gyalshing District, Sikkim

Days: Monday - Saturday

Timings: 6 am - 5 pm

Norbugang Chorten



Located in Yuksom, the Norbugang Chorten which is also the assumed coronation site, commonly referred to as Norbugang connotation throne is where the story of the crowning of the first Chogyal of Sikkim, Phuntsog Namgyal by three lamas headed by Lhatsun Chenpo took place marking the beginning of the Namgyal dynasty in Sikkim.

Location: Norbugang Chorten, Yuksom,
Gyalshing District, Sikkim
Timings: 9 am - 5 pm, all days

Rabdentse Palace Ruins



Located in Rabdentse, the second capital of Sikkim, the palace established by second Chogyal Tensung Namgyal was home to the monarchs from 1670 to 1814. Cited as a monument of national importance by Archeological Survey of India, the palace was destroyed during the Gorkha invasion.

Location: Rabdentse Ruins, Pelling-Pemayangtse Road, Gyalshing district, Sikkim

Timings: 10 am - 5 pm, all days

Tholung Monastery

A World Heritage property under UNESCO, the Tholung monastery located in upper Dzongu was originally built in 1789. The present structure was re-built in 1980. Pilgrims need to trek while camping for a couple of days to reach the monastery which houses the region's ancient manuscripts, artefacts and precious collections of the kingdom shifted here during the Gurkha invasion in the 1800s.

Location: Upper Dzongu, Mangan District, Sikkim

Note: Requires an on foot hike of 20 km from Lingzey to the monastery



Khangchendzonga National Park



Part of the Khangchendzonga Biosphere Reserve, the national park is inscribed the UNESCO world heritage sites in mixed category. Named after Mount Khangchendzonga, the park covers an area of about 689 sq miles from Mangan district to Gyaltsing district with a rich flora and fauna reserve.

Location: Khangchendzonga National Park, Mangan district to Gyalshing district, Sikkim


Timings: 10 am - 4 pm, all days

STORIES TRAILS





From Enchey to Rumtek

 50km apx

 Enchey Gompa

Photos by Abhishek Anil and Wikimedia Commons.
Illustration by Jisha Unnikrishnan.





Deltin Denzong

Himalayan Zoological Park

Indian Oil Petrol Pump

Park Stadium

Lal Bazaar

Black Cat Museum

Gangtok Road

Upper Tadong

Mayfair Spa Resort & Casino

Rawate Rumtek

Naitam

SH 2

- 01. Enchey Gompa
- 02. Directorate of Handloom and Handicraft (DHH)
- 03. Sikkim State Museum and Archives
- 04. White Hall & Ridge Park
- 05. Tsuklakhang Royal Chapel and Monastery
- 06. Namgyal Institute of Tibetology (NIT)
- 07. Rumtek Monastery

Gangtok, earlier being the capital of an independent kingdom and now of present-day Sikkim, holds a rich history shaped by the region's political past and its religious and spiritual dimensions. This trail invites you to explore the city as an expansive geographical vessel of a Buddhist kingdom and its craft culture, encouraging you to interact with the city and its people.

Starting from the Enchey Gompa, the historical pilgrimage site outlining the spiritual contours of the beliefs and practices of the people in Sikkim, the trail moves downwards to the main town of Gangtok from the state archive and crafts training center to old monuments and palaces and museums and finally ends at the Rumtek Monastery at the outskirts of Gangtok. In the town center, the trail covers important historical and cultural sites in present-day Gangtok that shape the imaginations of the region's culture and the past.

This trail covers a large hilly terrain with cultural, historical, and spiritual centers as the guiding framework to understanding Gangtok.

1 Enchey Gompa

The Enchey Gompa, a prominent monastery of the Nyingma order of Mahayana Buddhism, is popular not only among Buddhists but also Hindus. There is a common belief that any



prayer or wishes of the followers of this monastery are fulfilled. First established in 1840 and rebuilt into its present architectural form with ornate woodwork in 1909, the monastery made Gangtok a popular pilgrimage site. Legend goes that the monastery was a hermitage of Lama Druptob Karpo, a monk with flying power. The *Detor cham*, a masked dance, is performed on the 18th and 19th day of the 12th Lunar month of the Tibetan calendar, as is the dance of *Singhe cham*.

2 Directorate of Handloom and Handicraft (DHH)



Founded by the then Chogyal Palden Thondup Namgyal in 1957, the directorate of handloom and handicraft was originally called Palden Thondup Cottage Industries

Institute (PT Institute). The center today provides vocational courses on various Sikkimese crafts such as carpet weaving, *thangka* painting, mask making, bamboo crafts and more. The institute is open to all who are curious about craft processes and also has an art gallery which displays state and national award-bearing craft products. The institute also has a sales emporium for people to take back souvenirs.

3 Sikkim State Museum and Archives



Located near the Zero point, the Sikkim State Museum and Archives was established in 1990 and is under the Culture Department of the Government of Sikkim. The two-storeyed stone building, featuring beautiful wood and stone-work

houses, records holdings of 15 Secretariat Departments of the Durbar Period as well as artefacts of various communities of Sikkim.

4 White Hall & Ridge Park

The White Memorial Hall was built in a typical British architectural design in 1931 to honour John C White, a British political officer in Sikkim who built the (present-day) Raj Bhavan. This two storied building is located near Ridge Park, a promenade near the Tusklakhang monastery which once hosted an open market for goods brought in from the Sino-India-Tibet trade route. Today, Ridge Park also houses an orchidarium.



5 Tsuklakhang Royal Chapel and Monastery

Tusklakhang monastery was the former royal residence and chapel of the Namgyal dynasty, currently managed by the Tusklakhang Trust. It was built in 1898 by Chogyal Thutob Namgyal. The site is both politically and culturally significant, with the annual Pang Lhabso! celebrations of Gangtok taking place in its compound.



The space also houses sacred art, artefacts, and ceremonial objects. The palace features architectural design that is now synonymous with a Sikkimese style, featuring intricate woodwork and vibrant paintings.

6 Namgyal Institute of Tibetology



Located in Deorali, this is one of the most important museums and research institutes on Buddhism in Sikkim. The Namgyal Institute of Tibetology (NIT) was inaugurated in 1958 by then Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru. The institute houses two libraries and a museum, which hosts a rich collection of manuscripts, ancient Buddhist texts, statues from Sikkim and Tibet, *thangkals*, ritual objects, and over 30,000 volumes of books in Tibetan, Sanskrit, and English. The institute also has a Bulletin of Tibetology that

publishes research work in the field of Buddhism and histories of Sikkim.

7 Rumtek Monastery

Also known as the Dharma Chakra Centre, this monastery is one of the most significant monasteries in the Himalayan region. Originally built in the mid-eighteenth-century under the guidance of Changchub Dorje, 12th Karmapa Lama, and later



reconstructed in 1959 under the guidance of Rangjung Rigpe Dorje, the monastery serves as the seat of the Karma Kagyu lineage of Tibetan Buddhism in exile. The monastery complex showcases traditional Tibetan architectural design, murals, sacred relics brought from Tsurphu Monastery, the Karmapa's seat in Tibet, and elaborate *thangkas*.

Please Note:

- This trail can be done independently and can typically be covered in one or two days, depending on the preferred pace of the individual(s). The trail can be covered partly on foot, by car, and by cable car. Shared cabs are available from each location.

On foot: From DHH to Tsuklakhang Palace.

By car: Enchey Gompa to Gangtok; Rumtek to Gangtok.

Cable car: After completing the walking trail up to Tsuklakhang, take the road to Namnang and then the cable car to Deorali to reach NIT.

- Entry fees may be applicable at some places, such as the Craft Gallery and the NIT Museum.
- While the order of the trail may be adjusted for convenience, following this sequence is recommended.



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Village Hopping From the Last to the First Capital

 278km apx

 Gangtok

Photos by Martin Sada, Abhishek Anil, Sristi Sharma and Wikimedia Commons.

Illustration by Jisha Unnikrishnan.





01. Gangtok
02. Temi Tea Garden
03. Yangang
04. Ravangla
05. Borong
06. Tashiding
07. Yuksom
08. Khecheopalri Lake
09. Bermiok



Beginning in Gangtok, the present and last capital of the former Himalayan kingdom, and moving gradually toward Yuksom, the first capital established in 1642, this village hopping trail traces the political, spiritual, and cultural evolution of Sikkim.

As you travel, the shift is not only geographical but historical. Urban streets give way to tea slopes, forest villages, sacred lakes, monasteries, and agrarian settlements. Each place reveals a different layer of Sikkim, shaped by the beliefs and cosmologies of the people who inhabited this region and practices that these villages have endured over time.

This trail is designed as open and flexible rather than a fixed tour. It is built around locally run homestays and small community spaces that allow travellers to engage directly with people, food, architecture, landscape, and histories—inviting you to move slowly, stay longer where you feel connected, and experience Sikkim not as a series of sights, but as a living, layered mountain culture.

1 Gangtok

Gangtok, the capital of Sikkim, was the last seat of the Chogyal monarchy before the kingdom merged with India in 1975. Once a small settlement along Indo-Tibetan trade routes, it grew into the political and cultural centre of the state. The Tsuklakhang Royal Chapel connects visitors to Sikkim's royal



legacy, while the Namgyal Institute of Tibetology offers insight into Tibetan Buddhist scholarship. Travellers can explore Lall Bazaar and Enchey Compa to observe spiritual spaces and local produce, visit handicraft and handloom centres, walk the monastery circuit, and experience the town's evolving café culture. A stay of two nights allows visitors to understand how Sikkim transitioned from a sacred kingdom to a modern Himalayan state.

Stay Suggestions: Tag Along Hostels

2 Temi Tea Garden

Established in 1969, Temi Tea Garden is the only tea estate in Sikkim, reflecting a shift from subsistence farming to organised, organic tea cultivation that now contributes to Sikkim's global identity. Temi offers a visual and experiential contrast to Gangtok's urban setting, with expansive green hills, colonial-era bungalows, and a



working tea economy. Visitors can walk through tea gardens, understand the process of plucking and processing, interact with estate workers, and enjoy panoramic views of the surrounding mountains. A one-night stay in or around the estate allows travellers to observe how landscape, labour, and livelihood shape this region before continuing deeper into rural Sikkim.

Stay Suggestions: Temi Kothi Homestay

3 Yangang



Yangang is a quiet settlement in South Sikkim: open landscapes and paddy fields, against views of the sacred Bhaleydhunga peak, reflect everyday agrarian life shaped by farming, forest access, and small monastic communities. Travellers can walk through paddy fields and cardamom plantations, visit nearby monasteries, explore forest trails and waterfalls, and spend time understanding seasonal farming cycles. Conversations with local families reveal how migration, education, and sustainability are reshaping village life today.

A stay of one to two nights allows visitors to experience home-cooked meals, quiet evenings, and the slower

rhythm that defines South Sikkim before continuing towards Ravangla.

Stay Suggestions: Dhuni Homestay

4 Ravangla

Ravangla sits at a higher elevation in South Sikkim and serves as an important cultural and spiritual centre. It is best known for the Buddha Park, built to commemorate the 2550th birth anniversary of the Buddha, and for its proximity to Ralang Monastery, a key centre of the Kagyu sect of Tibetan Buddhism. Monasteries overlook valleys, prayer flags line forest paths, and mountain views shape daily life. Visitors can explore Buddha Park, visit monasteries, take short forest walks, and watch the sunrise over Khangchendzonga.

Stay Suggestions: Selep Homestay



5 Borong

Borong is a small and peaceful village in South Sikkim, known for its wide views of Mount Khangchendzonga and natural hot springs. Less commercial than nearby towns, Borong opens up into terraced fields, forest trails, and distant snow peaks.



The hot springs near Borong are believed to have healing properties and attract visitors seeking therapeutic baths, especially during cooler months. The village also serves as a base for short forest walks, birdwatching, and gentle exploration of surrounding hamlets.

A stay of one night in a local homestay is ideal to experience sunrise views of Khangchendzonga before moving toward Tashiding.

Stay Suggestions: Himalayan View Homestay

6 Tashiding

Tashiding is one of the most sacred Buddhist sites in Sikkim, perched on a hill between the Rathong and Rangeet rivers. It is home to the revered Tashiding Monastery, established in the seventeenth-century and closely associated with the Bhumchu festival, an annual ritual where a sacred vase of water is opened to predict the fortunes of the coming year.



Historically, Tashiding played an important role for the Sikkimese kingdom, and remains a critical pilgrimage site. The hilltop is lined with prayer flags and chortens, including the Thongwa Rangdol stupa, believed to cleanse one's sins upon sight.

Travelers can visit the monastery, learn about the Bhumchu ceremony, walk through the quiet forested paths around the hill, buy local organic incense, and observe the meeting of rivers below. A stay of one night in a simple homestay nearby is recommended before continuing toward Yuksom, the first capital of Sikkim.

Stay Suggestions: Rabney Residency or Sanu Homestay

7 Yuksom

Yuksom was the first capital of Sikkim, where the first Chogyal was crowned in 1642 at the Norbugang Coronation Throne, marking the formal establishment of the Yuksom as the first capital of Sikkim, where the first Chogyal was crowned in 1642 at the Norbugang Coronation Throne, marking the formal establishment of the Sikkimese kingdom under the guidance of three revered lamas. Yuksom remains a symbolic starting point of Sikkim's political and spiritual history.

Also home to Dubdi Monastery, considered the oldest monastery in Sikkim, Yuksom is the gateway to the Khangchendzonga National Park and several important trekking routes.

Travelers can visit the coronation site, walk to Dubdi Monastery, explore traditional village homes, and learn about the origins of the Chogyal dynasty. A stay of two nights is recommended in Yuksom, which allows visitors to reflect on the beginnings of the kingdom after tracing its later developments through Gangtok and Tashiding.

Stay Suggestions: Yak homestay, Limboo Homestay



8 Khecheopalri Lake

Khecheopalri Lake is one of the most sacred natural sites in Sikkim, revered by both Buddhists and Hindus. According to local belief, the lake fulfills wishes; it is said that even leaves that fall on its surface are swiftly carried away by birds to keep the water pure. Nearby monasteries and small villages continue to maintain the ritual and ecological sanctity of the site.

Travelers can spend time by the lake, walk through surrounding



forest paths, interact with local families, and learn about the belief systems that connect Buddhist and indigenous traditions. A stay of one night in a nearby homestay allows for early morning and evening visits when the lake is at its most peaceful.

Stay Suggestions: Khecheopalri Sanctuary Homestay

9 Bermiok

Bermiok is a quiet agrarian village in West Sikkim, historically associated with the Subba (Limbu) community. The Subbas were among the early settlers in these mid-hill landscapes and played an important role in shaping local agricultural systems, customary governance, and clan-based social structures. During the monarchical period, Subbas often functioned as village heads and intermediaries within the Chogyal administration.

The landscape reflects this history of settlement and cultivation with terraced fields, cardamom plantations, millet farming, and forest-edge homes adapted to mountain ecology. Cultural life remains rooted in oral traditions,



seasonal agricultural rhythms, and harvest festivals such as Chasok Tangnam, which honours land and ancestral spirits.

Travelers can walk through farmlands and village trails, learn about traditional agricultural practices, and enjoy expansive views of the Khangchendzonga range on clear days. Bermiok offers a grounding conclusion to the trail, shifting focus from royal capitals and monasteries to indigenous agrarian roots and lived community history.

Stay Suggestions: Daara Pari Homestay

Please Note:

- This is a self-guided itinerary, best completed over 12 to 16 days, with one or two nights in each place.
- Ensure that stays are booked well in advance.
- Shared cabs are available from each location. Connect with homestay or hostel hosts to help arrange them.
- Approach the journey with an open mind, set realistic expectations about the stay, food, and destination, respect local culture and traditions, and take time to immerse in everyday local life and experiences.
- Speak to hosts and follow their recommendations to make the most of each place.
- If any issues arise, feedback should be shared directly with hosts in a kind and considerate manner so they can improve. Avoid leaving negative reviews online without first speaking to them.
- Support local communities by buying handmade products and local produce from villages.
- Travel responsibly: carry a reusable water bottle, minimize plastic use, and dispose of waste properly without littering.
- Follow all local rules and guidelines, if any.



Tag Along

A Sikkim-based travel initiative focused on community-driven, responsible tourism. Through curated local experiences and pioneering ventures such as the Nathu La cycling route, it works closely with communities to promote meaningful engagement with the region's culture and landscape.

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