

A Review of
Sikkim, Requiem for a Himalayan Kingdom

This is a book Bhutanese must read for many reasons. It is a gripping historical tragedy told by a master storyteller and researcher. Many of us have heard about India's annexation of Sikkim in the twentieth century but only a few have access to the details of how the tragedy unfolded in the midst of personal and political vicissitudes and the geopolitical competition between China and India for control over the cis-Himalayan areas.

Andrew Duff weaves a riveting narrative using government dossiers, private archives and collections, interviews and informants to tell a harrowing tale of how the small Buddhist kingdom of Sikkim lost its independence to India. His own journey to discover Sikkim started with the photos his grandfather left from the latter's travels to Sikkim in 1922. After making many trips to Sikkim and many years of thorough research, Duff beautifully blends the accounts of personal lives with those of political manoeuvres, of domestic dissent with imperialistic intrigues, and of local circumstances with international situations.

The chief protagonist in this political drama is the beleaguered figure of the last Chogyal or religious king of Sikkim, Thondup Namgyal (1923-82). A man of unrelenting Buddhist integrity and intense love for his country, Chogyal Thondup Namgyal is presented both as the hero and the victim in the story. Faced with the ominous challenges of dissenting citizens and Machiavellian ploys of his opponents, his life was doomed to become one of the most heartbreaking political tragedies of the 20th century. The appearance of his young and buoyant American queen or Gyalmo, Hope Cooke, at the scene did not help to make things better despite earnest efforts. She was even suspected of being a CIA spy planted in Sikkim in order to further American interests in the shifting structures of regional power. Even the romance and love at first sight which fueled their glamorous and exotic union and temporarily brought Sikkim a great deal of global attention, did not last long enough to pull them together through their most difficult times.

The story becomes even more intriguing and dramatic as the author reveals the canny characters of Kazi Lhendup Dorji and his Scottish wife Kazini of Chakung, Elisa-Maria Langford-Rae. The leading Kazi dissident and his foreign spouse spearheaded the political movement against the palace with the hope of establishing a democracy representative of Sikkim's expanding population. It was their ploy and that of India to bring in an increasing number of Nepali immigrants and upset the demographic and political establishment of Sikkim.

The two Sikkimese leaders with western spouses and their bitter exchange, which ensued from the idyllic slopes of Gangtok and Kalimpong, resemble characters and plots straight out of a literary thriller. Interracial marriages were very rare in this part of the world half a century ago and to find two such prominent couples locked horns over the future of a nation is a rare freak of stars. The big sad difference from a thriller, however, is that this

is a story of real lives and of a nation's fate with no happy ending for either of the players. The book ends with the disappointment, which engulfed all four of them after Sikkim was officially turned into the 22nd state of India in 1975.

Their acrimony was heightened by the domineering attitude of Indian political officers and chief executives who worked for their boss in New Delhi. Chogyal Thondup Namgyal's great misfortune, the author sums up, 'has been to find himself dealing with Indira Gandhi, one of India's most ruthless strategic thinkers, at a time when her concerns about her country's security were at their height' (p.326). Sikkim's fate during its final years of independence was largely shaped in the Residency or India House, the base of India's political officer that was more regal than the palace, and in the distant halls of New Delhi. Despite occasional comments and protestations from some governments and contemporary political heavyweights such as Zhou Enlai, Henry Kissinger and Deng Xiaoping, the kingdom of Sikkim, in the final analysis, became a pawn of Cold War rivalry played out in Asia and a victim of geopolitical tensions between India and China. In the end, Duff resigns to the fact that Sikkim never stood a chance given the political realities it faced.

For the Bhutanese readers, the book holds a special significance. Bhutanese must read this book for its literary value, for the author's personal passion to understand a remote country, for the gripping but factual story of political intrigues right next door and for understanding the geopolitical nexus we are perpetually caught in in a highly globalised world. Above all, if history serves to further humanity by helping us avoid past mistakes and emulate past acts of heroism, Bhutanese must read this book for the many lessons we can learn, from archival preservation, demographic changes, immigration challenges to geopolitical dangers and deceptions.

The 380 page book with nice pictures was published by Random House India in 2015, at a time when Bhutan was celebrating the deeds of the 4th Druk Gyalpo. It can certainly help the Bhutanese appreciate how the 4th Druk Gyalpo secured Bhutan's security and sovereignty and ushered it into a new century of peace and prosperity just as Sikkim was helplessly losing its self-rule and cultural integrity. (*This is an extract of a longer review to be published elsewhere*).