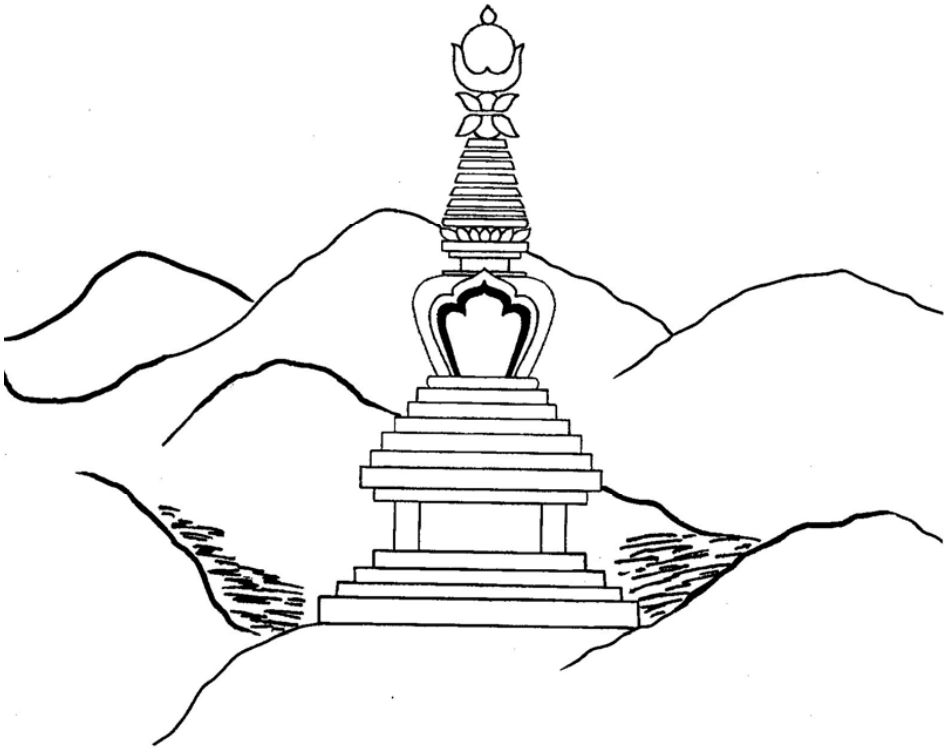
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EDITORIAL

Articles

This issue of the *Bulletin of Tibetology* first brings together articles on three figures well known to scholars of the Eastern Himalayas: Sonam Wangfel Laden La (1876–1936), Lama Ugyen Gyatsho (1851–1915), and Mary Scott (1877–1964). A fourth article presents the very first effort to document the history of the Himalayan art collection held in the museum of the Namgyal Institute of Tibetology. The issue is completed with a fifth article on a proposal for the new orthography of the Tamang language and two book reviews.

The first article by Parjanya Sen reassesses the career of Sonam Wangfel (S.W.) Laden La (1876–1936), a Sikkim-born, English-educated Buddhist from the Darjeeling–Sikkim region who rose to become one of the most important indigenous intermediaries of the British Raj. Focusing on his mission to Tibet in 1923–24, when he was sent to organise a modern police force in Lhasa, Sen examines the complex position of indigenous intermediaries who operated between British imperial interests and Tibetan political realities. The article argues that Laden La's career reveals the tensions and ambiguities inherent in colonial mediation, particularly during the political crisis surrounding the alleged Tsarong conspiracy and disputes over whether he should be regarded as a British or Tibetan subject.

Rather than portraying Laden La simply as a colonial collaborator, Sen highlights the precarious nature of his position within an imperial system marked by surveillance, uncertainty, and competing loyalties. His experience sheds light on how British influence in Tibet depended upon local intermediaries while simultaneously seeking to regulate and control them.

The article also points out domains in which Laden La exercised greater independence. Through his leadership of the Buddhist Association of Darjeeling and his involvement in wider Buddhist networks linking Tibet, Darjeeling, Calcutta, and Sarnath, he helped foster a form of Buddhist transnationalism that extended beyond colonial structures. Sen concludes that although Laden La was shaped by empire, he also used religious and cultural networks to assert a degree of agency,

making him a figure situated between imperial hegemony and local autonomy.

The second article by Tenzing Longsel Barphungpa examines the life and career of Lama Ugyen Gyatsho (1851–1915), a Sikkimese monk, educator, explorer, and colonial intermediary. Focusing on his role as Tibetan teacher at the Bhutia Boarding School in Darjeeling, Barphungpa argues that the school marked an important shift from traditional monastic education to a new form of secular, Western-style learning in the Eastern Himalayas.

The article traces Ugyen Gyatsho's remarkable career as one of the British-trained 'Pundits' who helped survey and explore Tibet. A close collaborator of Sarat Chandra Das, he participated in several expeditions, contributed to geographical knowledge of Tibet, and later held important administrative positions in Darjeeling and Kalimpong while maintaining close ties with Sikkim and its royal family.

The article also notes that he adopted his nephew, Sonam Wangfel Laden La (1876–1936), who would go on to become one of the most influential Sikkimese intermediaries of the colonial period and is the subject of Parjanya Sen's contribution to this volume.

Barphungpa concludes that, despite its colonial objectives, the Bhutia Boarding School played a significant role in the educational transformation of the region. Ugyen Gyatsho emerges as a key figure who successfully navigated loyalties to both the Sikkimese monarchy and the British administration, while helping shape a generation of Himalayan leaders and intermediaries.

The third article by Walter Scott and Anira Phipon Lepcha explores the relationship between Mary Scott (1877–1964), a Scottish missionary, and Chogyal (Maharaja) Tashi Namgyal, arguing that their friendship was crucial to the success of the Scottish Universities Mission in Sikkim between 1923 and 1939. Unlike earlier missionaries, Scott gained the trust of both the Chogyal and the wider population through her sensitivity to local culture, adoption of local dress, extensive travels throughout Sikkim, and long experience in education and public service. Her personal qualities and social background helped her occupy an unusual and influential position within Sikkimese society.

The authors show how this relationship facilitated important social and institutional developments. With the Chogyal's support, Scott founded Gangtok Girls' School in 1923, providing the kingdom's first sustained programme of education for girls. She also contributed to public health initiatives and worked closely with the Lepcha Christian

leader C.T. Pazo, helping to strengthen the organisation of the Christian community and secure legal recognition for Christian marriages.

The article concludes that Scott's lasting achievement was the establishment of a locally rooted Christian presence that respected Sikkim's Buddhist traditions and indigenous cultures. Her careful cultivation of trust with the Chogyal ultimately helped secure approval for Gangtok's first church, inaugurated in 1936. Rather than depicting missionary activity solely as an extension of colonialism, the article presents Scott's work as a collaborative partnership that advanced education, welfare, and religious institution-building while supporting the Chogyal's wider programme of modernisation.

The fourth article by Katia Thomas Rai examines the art collection of the Namgyal Institute of Tibetology, one of the oldest museum collections in the Himalayas and a unique example of a locally developed museological initiative. Through a detailed study of its history, she traces the formation of the collection from the Institute's founding in 1958, highlighting the crucial role played by donations from the Sikkimese royal family, Tibetan refugees, and other benefactors. The article also explores the distinctive character of the museum, whose presentation of objects transcends conventional Western divisions between "art" and "ethnography," while giving prominence to Sikkimese identity and the continuing religious significance of many of the objects on display.

The second part of the article focuses on the challenges of documenting, conserving, and restoring the collection. Drawing on archival sources, oral histories, and recent museological initiatives, Thomas recounts the creation of comprehensive inventories, photographic databases, and conservation programmes undertaken since 2008. Particular attention is given to the ways in which the Institute has developed conservation practices that respect both international museum standards and Buddhist ritual traditions. The article demonstrates how the museum continues to pioneer innovative approaches to the preservation and interpretation of Himalayan cultural heritage despite the considerable challenges posed by Sikkim's climate and limited resources.

The fifth article presents one component of a collaborative linguistic project on Himalayan languages that included both Drenjongke, one of the languages of Sikkim, and Tamang, a language spoken by more than a million people across Nepal and the eastern Himalayas. The authors, Pascal Gerber, Selin Grollmann and George van Driem, present a proposal for a new writing system for the Tamang language. Drawing on recent linguistic fieldwork, the authors discuss how Tamang sounds can

best be represented in writing while remaining practical and accessible for speakers.

The article compares existing ways of writing Tamang and proposes revised orthographies in Tibetan, Devanagari, and Roman scripts. Particular attention is given to balancing linguistic accuracy with cultural preferences and ease of use in education and digital communication. The authors stress that their proposals are not prescriptive but are intended as tools for discussion within the Tamang community, with the broader aim of supporting the preservation and development of the language.

Book Reviews

Alex McKay reviews *Through the India–China Border: Kalimpong in the Himalayas* by Prem Poddar and Lisa Lindkvist Zhang. The book explores Kalimpong's role as a key borderland town linking India, Tibet, and China during the first half of the twentieth century, with particular attention to the Chinese presence in the region. Through themes of trade, migration, espionage, and shifting identities, it offers a nuanced account of the political and social dynamics that shaped this Himalayan frontier in the decades leading up to the 1962 Sino-Indian War.

This issue concludes with Samar Sinha reviews Gerald Roche's *The Politics of Language Oppression in Tibet*, a study that examines how political power, state policies, and social pressures contribute to language loss in Tibet. Moving beyond conventional approaches to language endangerment, Roche focuses on the experiences of speakers of smaller "minoritized" languages within the Tibetan cultural sphere and argues that language loss must be understood as a form of political and social oppression. Sinha regards the book as a pioneering and thought-provoking contribution to the study of language, identity, and power in Tibet and beyond.

Anna Balikci-Denjongpa
Editor, *Bulletin of Tibetology*
Namgyal Institute of Tibetology

NEWS FROM THE NAMGYAL INSTITUTE OF TIBETOLOGY

6–7 NOVEMBER 2025

TWO-DAY CONFERENCE: RIGDZIN SOGDRUP – FOUNDATIONAL TANTRA OF BEYUL DREMAJONG

The Namgyal Institute of Tibetology, in collaboration with the Ecclesiastical Department, Government of Sikkim, organised a two-day State-Level Conference entitled *Rigdzin Sogdrup: Foundational Tantra of Beyul Dremajong* on 6–7 November 2025 in Gangtok. Conceived as an initiative of Dr Passang D. Phempu, Director of the Namgyal Institute of Tibetology, this was the first conference dedicated exclusively to Rigdzin Sogdrup, one of the most important Vajrayana traditions associated with Sikkim's sacred landscape and Buddhist heritage. The practice is closely linked to the teachings and legacy of Lhatsun Namkha Jigme (1597–1652), one of the principal figures in the establishment of Buddhism in Sikkim.

The principal aim of the conference was to bring together monastic practitioners, lineage holders, and scholars to discuss the history, lineage, ritual practices, and contemporary relevance of Rigdzin Sogdrup. Particular emphasis was placed on documenting and preserving the oral teachings, ritual knowledge, liturgical traditions, melodies, torma-making practices, and ceremonial procedures that have been transmitted within monastic communities over generations. The conference also sought to strengthen collaboration between religious institutions and academic bodies and to support the transmission of this unique tradition to future generations.

The conference brought together over 300 representatives from more than thirty-six monasteries across Sikkim, particularly those actively engaged in the practice of Rigdzin Sogdrup. The inaugural session included the release of several publications related to Sikkimese Buddhist history and the Rigdzin Sogdrup tradition, as well as a keynote lecture providing a comprehensive overview of the practice and its place within Sikkim's Buddhist heritage.

Scholarly papers and oral presentations examined the lineage history, ritual structure, melodic traditions, ritual instruments, mandala

arrangements, and the preparation and use of tormas in Rigdzin Sogdrup rituals. Several presentations included audio-visual and live demonstrations, allowing participants to compare ritual traditions maintained by different monasteries. Particular attention was given to variations in torma preparation and ritual performance, highlighting the importance of preserving authenticity while encouraging greater consistency in practice. An oral history session further enabled senior practitioners and lineage holders to share historical knowledge, ritual expertise, and lived experiences that are rarely documented in written sources.

The conference successfully established a forum for dialogue among monasteries and scholars, reaffirming the importance of documenting and transmitting the teachings, ritual knowledge, oral traditions, and specialised practices associated with Rigdzin Sogdrup. It encouraged closer cooperation between academic and monastic institutions, fostered greater scholarly engagement among monks, and highlighted the need for continued research and publication. A commitment was made to publish the conference papers and oral histories in a dedicated volume, ensuring that the knowledge shared during the event is preserved for future generations.

As the first event of its kind, the conference laid an important foundation for future collaborative initiatives, research projects, and efforts aimed at safeguarding one of Sikkim's most significant Buddhist traditions. It demonstrated the strong commitment of the monastic community to preserving the spiritual legacy of Lhatsun Namkha Jigme and provided a framework for its continued study, practice, and transmission.

Following up on this conference, it was decided that a three-day Workshop on the preparation and standardisation of tormas associated with the Rigdzin Sogdrup tradition will be organised for monasteries practising the tradition in the month of September 2026 at Enchey monastery.

A two-day presentation and consolidation programme will be held in November 2026 to review and finalise the outcomes of the training workshop with the participation of practitioner monasteries and other stakeholders. The programme will also feature introductory presentations for the general public on the Preliminary Practices of Rigdzin Sogdrup and the life and contributions of Lhatsun Namkha Jigme.

6–7 MARCH 2026

TWO-DAY WORKSHOP:

The Department of Buddhist and Tibetan Studies at the Namgyal Institute of Tibetology, affiliated with Sikkim University, successfully organised a two-day workshop entitled *Meditation for Everyday Life: Practice and Applications* on 6–7 March 2026. Since the introduction of its M.A. programme in Buddhist and Tibetan Studies in 2019, the Department has emerged as an important centre for advanced Buddhist studies in the Eastern Himalayas, regularly organising conferences, seminars, workshops, and public lectures that promote academic excellence and community engagement.

Led by H.E. Chokyong Palga Rinpoche of the Drukpa lineage, the workshop highlighted the relevance of Buddhist meditation in contemporary life. Through guided meditation sessions, interactive talks, discussions, and practical exercises, participants gained hands-on experience in integrating meditation into their daily routines as a means of promoting mental well-being and personal growth.

Designed to address growing concerns related to stress, anxiety, addiction, and other mental health challenges, particularly among young people, the workshop introduced participants to practical Buddhist meditation techniques for cultivating mindfulness, emotional balance, compassion, and inner well-being. The programme attracted students, scholars, monastics, and members of the public, reflecting the Department's commitment to making Buddhist knowledge and contemplative practices accessible to a wider audience.

19-20 MARCH 2026

TWO-DAY NATIONAL WORKSHOP:

A two-day National Workshop on Sowa Rigpa Therapeutics was successfully conducted by the Faculty of Sowa Rigpa, Namgyal Institute of Tibetology. The programme focused on promoting traditional Sowa Rigpa healing practices and enhancing participants' knowledge of its therapeutic applications.

The academic sessions featured prominent external experts in the traditional healing system, including Professor Rakdo Lobsang Tenzin of the Central Institute of Higher Tibetan Studies (CIHTS), Varanasi, Sarnath, and Dr Dorje Rapten Neshar, Principal of Bangalore Men Tsee Khang College.

8–10 APRIL 2026

EXHIBITION AND INTERNATIONAL SYMPOSIUM

CO-ORGANISED WITH THE FRENCH INSTITUTE IN INDIA

Both an exhibition and symposium were held in memory of the French explorer, scholar and Buddhist practitioner Alexandra David-Neel (1868–1969), who spent over three years in Sikkim between 1912 and 1916. After meeting the 13th Dalai Lama in Kalimpong in 1912, David-Neel travelled to Sikkim and embraced Mahayana Buddhism, where, under the protection of Crown Prince Sidkeong Tulku and the guidance of her Sikkimese teacher, the Lachen Gomchen, she undertook advanced Buddhist studies and meditative retreats in northern Sikkim.

Forced to leave by the British in 1916, she continued her studies and, in 1924, became the first Western woman to enter the forbidden city of Lhasa incognito, aided by the Sikkimese Lama Yongden. Her achievement brought her international fame, which she used to introduce and popularise Buddhism in the West through her influential writings, with many of the books co-authored with Lama Yongden.

David-Neel later described her years in Sikkim as the most important of her life. The exhibition and symposium sought to highlight the vital role played by her Sikkimese teachers and companions, and to document her deep connection with Sikkim and its people.

Exhibition

ALEXANDRA DAVID-NEEL IN SIKKIM (1912–1916):

A JOURNEY INTO BUDDHISM

The exhibition, titled *Alexandra David-Neel in Sikkim (1912–1916): A Journey into Buddhism*, was officially opened at the Institute on 8 April 2026 by the Hon'ble Governor Shri Om Prakash Mathur, together with the French Ambassador to India, H.E. Dr Thierry Mathou. Also present were the Belgian Ambassador H.E. Didier Vandenhasselt, the Swiss Ambassador H.E. Maya Tissafi and HRH Princess Ashi Kesang Wangmo of Bhutan.

The exhibition displays 25 panels with some 80 photographs taken by David-Neel during her stay in Sikkim between 1912 and 1916 and narrates the main events and purposes of her three years spent here. Many of these photographs have never been published or displayed since

David-Neel's public was always more interested in her exploits in Tibet. The importance of these formative years spent in Sikkim and her experiences here have generally been overlooked, or in many instances have even been mislabelled as having taken place in Tibet or on the Tibetan frontier.

Emphasis was placed on the Sikkimese people she befriended and who assisted her in her Buddhist journey: Crown Prince Sidkeong Tulku, her teacher the Lachen Gomchen, scholar-translator Kazi Dawasamdup and other important Lamas of that period. Emphasis was also placed on the life and contributions of her very loyal Sikkimese assistant, Lama Yongden from the village of Mindu (East Sikkim), whom she later officially adopted in France as her son. Photographs and archival material were provided by the Maison Alexandra David-Neel, a museum and archive located in David-Neel's former house in the South of France.

International Symposium

IN HER FOOTSTEPS: GREAT WOMEN IN THE HIMALAYAS

Remembering Alexandra David-Neel

This two-day international symposium, dedicated to Her Majesty Ashi Kesang Choden Wangchuck of Bhutan, was held on 9–10 April 2026 and brought together eight scholars from France and eight South Asian scholars working across the Himalayan region, including Bhutan, Nepal, Sikkim, and Ladakh. Ambassadors and diplomats from the French, Belgian, and Swiss Embassies, the French Consulate in Kolkata, and the French Institute in India participated alongside faculty members and students from local colleges and universities.

Throughout the Himalayas, extraordinary women have made lasting contributions to the region's culture, education, religion, politics, and economic development. Women visitors to the region have at times also played significant roles in these domains. Whether from East or West, these women usually overcame formidable obstacles to become impactful figures as authors, educators, artists, Buddhist practitioners, informal diplomats, explorers, economic innovators, and transmitters of cultural traditions.

Despite their enduring legacies, the stories of these women are too often overlooked in mainstream discourse. This seminar aimed to create a platform for French and Himalayan scholars working across the Himalayan region to share research and reflections on Alexandra David-Neel's legacy and other influential women, or groups of women, in the

region. By doing so, we hoped to honour their achievements, illuminate their contributions, and inspire future generations through the exploration of their lives and legacies.

Both the exhibition and the symposium were held under the auspices of the French Embassy in India. They were co-organised by the Namgyal Institute of Tibetology and the French Institute in India, with the support of the Consulate General of France in Kolkata and the Maison Alexandra David-Neel, Digne-les-Bains, France, together with the financial and organisational support of the CEFIPRA (Indo-French Centre for the Promotion of Advanced Research). The symposium's proceedings will be released in the summer of 2027.

22 MAY 2026:
FOUNDER'S DAY AND THE CHOGYAL PALDEN THONDUP NAMGYAL MEMORIAL LECTURE DELIVERED BY SUNANDA K. DATTA-RAY

The Namgyal Institute of Tibetology observed its Founder's Day on 22 May 2026, commemorating the 103rd birth anniversary of its Founder President, the Thirteenth Chogyal Palden Thondup Namgyal. The event was attended by Gyalsey Palden Gyurmed Namgyal as Chief Guest, along with government officials, scholars, students, and members of the public.

A major highlight of the programme was the revival of the Chogyal Palden Thondup Namgyal Memorial Lecture, delivered by the distinguished journalist and author Sunanda K. Datta-Ray, whose association with Sikkim spans more than six decades. Datta-Ray is best known in Sikkim for his influential book *Smash and Grab: Annexation of Sikkim* (first published in 1984), a work that has stimulated extensive discussion on the events surrounding Sikkim's integration with India and has become an important reference point in debates on the state's modern history. Drawing on his personal knowledge of the Chogyal and his long engagement with Sikkim, Datta-Ray reflected on the kingdom's political transformation, the Chogyal's international outlook, and the importance of preserving historical memory through critical scholarship and public dialogue.

On the occasion, Datta-Ray was presented with the Centennial Medal of Honour in recognition of his contribution to documenting and preserving Sikkim's recent political journey and for his longstanding association with the Institute. The programme also featured an engaging discussion session moderated by journalist Pema Wangchuk, the release

of two Institute publications—*50 Years of Buddhism in Sikkim: History, Culture and Challenges* and *A Guide to Holy Buddhist Sites in Sikkim*—and a book-signing session for *Smash and Grab: Annexation of Sikkim*.

The celebration served as an occasion to honour the legacy of the Chogyal, reflect on Sikkim's recent historical journey, and reaffirm the Institute's commitment to the study and preservation of the cultural heritage of Sikkim and the Himalayan region.

24 SEPTEMBER 2025: ART COMPETITION

A one-day art workshop-cum-painting competition title "Viksit Bharat Ke Rang Kala Ke Sang" was held at NIT Campus, Gangtok, under the aegis of the Ministry of Culture, Government of India. The event was conducted as part of the Seva Parv initiative, in alignment with the vision of Viksit Bharat.

With the theme "Happy Future of India," the event sought to promote art as a powerful medium of self-expression, cultural representation, and civic awareness, while inspiring participants to contribute towards the vision of a developed India. Over 200 participants from schools, colleges, and professional circles showcased their creativity and artistic skills during the competition.

Highlighting the role of art in nation-building, the initiative aimed to spread social awareness, preserve cultural heritage, and encourage progress through creative expression.

A panel of nine professional artists and art educators judged the entries across three categories: School Students, College Students, and Professionals. Winners were felicitated with cash prizes for their outstanding work.

Anna Balikci-Denjongpa
Namgyal Institute of Tibetology

BETWEEN HEGEMONY AND AUTONOMY: REVISITING THE CAREER OF S.W. LADEN LA

PARJANYA SEN
University of Calcutta

Abstract

This article reassesses several key episodes from the long career of Sonam Wangfel Laden La, one of the first Anglicised native Buddhist subjects from the Darjeeling-Sikkim region. In doing so, it highlights the oft-precarious position of the indigenous interlocutor, trained into becoming an agent of the British Raj, and sent into Tibet to do the bidding of the colonial superiors. Drawing upon India Office Records in the British Library and the work of historians like Alex McKay and Laden La's biographers, I analyse the ways through which the British imperial apparatus sought to effectively control and regulate the subjectivities of its interlocutors. The research also discusses how Laden La was able to assert a certain degree of autonomy in non-administrative domains, by laying claim to a new form of Buddhist transnationalism, in the process reclaiming some modicum of native agency.

INTRODUCTION

> As regards Laden La, he is a British Indian subject of Sikkimese extraction (from Darjeeling) and has been in Lhasa for one year organising a police system at the urgent request of the Tibetan Government. He recently left Lhasa for India but the Tibetan Government have again asked for an extension of his services in connection with the administration of their army.[1]

This estimation of S.W. Laden La came from Frederick Marshman Bailey (1882–1967), who served as British Political Officer for Sikkim, Bhutan and Tibet for several years, from June, 1921 to June, 1926, and again, between December, 1926 to October, 1928.[2] Sonam Wangfel Laden La (1876–1936) was among several Tibetan-speaking Sikkimese from the

[1] Draft of a letter from F. M. Bailey, 28 October, 1924, P.4536/1924, L/P&S/10/1088.

[2] For a list of all the British Political Officers to Sikkim, Bhutan and Tibet and their Gangtok residency, see McKay (2009: 229-230), Balikci-Denjongpa (2008: 171-180).

Darjeeling-Sikkim Himalayan region, who were the earliest beneficiaries of an English education.[3] Born in Bhutia Busty or Ging in Darjeeling,[4] he was also the first local figure from the hills to be appointed as an officer in the Imperial Police Force in Darjeeling.[5] As has been indicated in his biography, compiled by his daughter, Deki Laden La and her husband, Nicholas Rhodes, Sonam Wangfel was one of the earliest examples of an Anglophile Tibetan person groomed and selected from the local Buddhist communities of the Darjeeling-Sikkim Himalayan region,[6] and trained as a 'loyal' interlocutor of the British Raj. The episode, being referred to by Bailey, involved Laden La being sent to Tibet during 1923–1924, for the purpose of establishing and training a police force in Lhasa.[7] This was part of a drive at 'modernisation' of Tibet along European lines, prompted by the interaction of the Thirteenth Dalai Lama, Ngawang Lobsang Thupten Gyatso (1876–1933), with Charles Alfred Bell (1870–1945), British Political Officer for Sikkim, Bhutan and Tibet, from 1908–1918. The Thirteenth Dalai Lama had spent a long period of exile in Darjeeling and Kalimpong, India, from 1910–1912, as a result of the hostilities between China and Tibet, and the Chinese invasion of Tibet in 1910,[8] during which time Bell had acted as diplomatic negotiator between him and Britain, and the two had established cordial and friendly terms with each other.

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3 He was a product of the Bhutia Boarding School, which was established in Darjeeling in 1874, with Sarat Chandra Das as its headmaster, and lama Ugyen Gyatso (1851–1915) of Pemayangtse monastery as its Tibetan teacher. Laden La was the nephew of Ani Chokyi, Ugyen Gyatso's first wife, and the childless couple had adopted him. See Rhodes and Rhodes (2006: 8-9). Some other well-known students of the school were Kazi Dawa Samdup (1868–1922), Lobzang Chöden (1869–1935) and Rinzing Namgyal (1857–1919). It was eventually decided, in 1912, that all Sikkimese landlords would send at least half the number of their sons to the school for an English education. See *The Royal History of Sikkim* (2021: 424-426). My upcoming monograph looks at the biography and career of Sarat Chandra Das, modern Bengal's first Tibetologist, and assesses his role and contribution to knowledge-production on Tibet, during the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries.

4 Rhodes and Rhodes (2006: 9).

5 Rhodes and Rhodes (2006: 3).

6 Another key interlocutor working for the British Raj at the time was David Macdonald (1870–1962). Born as Dorje in Kalimpong to a Lepcha mother and a Scottish father, and raised as a Buddhist who subsequently converted to Christianity, Macdonald was, in 1905, recruited by Charles Alfred Bell to the post of British Trade Agent at Yatung, in the Chumbi valley. He served as Trade Agent at two British outposts in Tibet, Yatung and Gyantse, for a number of years (Bell 1924: 94).

7 Rhodes and Rhodes (2006: 38-39).

8 Bell (1946: 61-130), McKay (2009: 49).

However, an opinion contrary to Bailey's emerges from a letter by Robert Macleod Hodgson (1874–1956), the British diplomat in Moscow, writing to the India Office in Whitehall, London—

> The Chief of Police at Lhassa and principal adviser of the Dalai Lama is a British agent. The Thibetans are highly incited against the English, and the people are begging the Dalai Lama on their knees to drive out the English… The Dalai Lama has at last realized the true position but is powerless to alter it. He has nevertheless refused the English demand for the grant of concessions for the exploitation of the mineral riches of Thibet.[9]

This article revisits an episode from Sonam Wangfel's long and chequered career, one that has not received in-depth critical attention by his biographers, in order to analyse the precarity of the native collaborator subject, precipitously poised at the interstices between Western modernity and autochthonous agency. It underscores how episodes from Laden La's biography offer us a glimpse into the ways through which the British empire sought to subsume and tightly regulate the subjectivities of its interlocutor figures, recruited from the Himalayan borderlands,[10] and how these figures could only lay claim to a selective autonomy through occasional articulations of their agency, in non-administrative domains.

Carole McGranahan uses the term "speculative empire" to refer to spaces and subjects located at the historical, administrative and geographical edges of the British empire in India. Within it, the "subjects of concern" were either "historical (possessing a nation and/ or state)" or "political (possessing an orientation either toward or away from the British empire)." Tibet was, according to McGranahan, part of this "speculative empire," and, albeit lying outside the domain of direct colonial rule, it "required imperial guidance and oversight."[11] The imperial apparatus thus needed to recruit and create a group of 'loyal' and knowable interlocutor figures, from the peripheral Himalayan regions that lay within its direct

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9 Letter from R. M. Hodgson, H. M. Charge of Affairs, Moscow to the Under Secretary of State for India, 21 May, 1924, L/P&S/10/1088.

10 In an upcoming article in *Przegląd Orientalistyczny (Review of Oriental Studies)*, I examine the beginnings of modern English education in the eastern Himalayas in the early-twentieth century, and the grooming of ethnic Tibetans and native Buddhists of Sikkim-Darjeeling, in a bid to produce an ideal interlocutor figure.

11 McGranahan (2017: 72). Although Tibet was never colonised by Britain directly, the "never colonised status," as discussed by Carole McGranahan, cannot be "presumed to signify the lack of past imperial relationship or the absence of postcolonial politics in the present." McGranahan (2017: 68). McGranahan evaluates how Tibet's political status was irrevocably shaped and altered through its relationship with Britain and British imperial policy. See McGranahan (2017: 71).

geographical and administrative ambit, in order to effectively oversee and influence the subjects and spaces that formed part of this "speculative empire." Sonam Wangfel was indeed one of several such subjects. Inhabiting an interstitial location, may he be seen as approximating the "non colonial subject"[12] or a part colonial subject, who begins to both "challenge and complement understandings of empire drawn exclusively from colonialism"?[13] The archival records of correspondence housed in the Asia and Africa Studies (erstwhile India Office) collection in the British Library indicate an imperial apparatus riddled with doubt, uncertainty, fear and anxiety.[14] With regard to this, I also highlight how the native Tibetan interlocutors were deployed as equipment of surveillance by the Raj, and, driven by "information panics"[15] they were often engaged in spying against, and reporting on, each other to their colonial seniors.

The quest to 'modernise' Tibet along European lines was also a bid to assert and leverage British influence and diplomatic control over Tibetan affairs and administration, that played out against the backdrop of the 'great game' between imperial Britain and Russia in the second half of the nineteenth century.[16] This may have been impelled further by a desire for trade monopoly over Tibet's rich mineral resources, as indicated in Hodgson's letter to the India Office, quoted above. As McKay suggests, the British lacked a figure like Agvan Dorzhiev or Sokpo Tsenshab Ngawang Lobsang (1853–1938), a Mongolian monk from Russia, who was a close

[12] McGranahan (2017: 68).

[13] McGranahan, through her study of Ragpa Pangdatshang (1902-1976), an anti-colonial Tibetan nationalist who belonged to a wealthy merchant family of Tibet, was an admirer of both Sun Yat-sen and Subhas Chandra Bose, and launched Tibet's first political party, The Tibetan Improvement Party, along anti-imperial, democratic and modern lines, in Kalimpong, indicates how such subjects troubled the worlds of British political officers "in ways that were both intentional and not, and traces of the resulting discomfort persist in colonial files related to Tibet in India Office Records." McGranahan (2017: 68).

[14] For a discussion of the British empire as "empire of anxiety" see Mark Condos. Condos (2017: 10-13). Condos writes how the British colonial state machinery in India "was intimately tied up with and predicated on a deep-seated, pervasive and permanent sense of insecurity." Condos (2017: 9).

[15] Christopher Bayly, in his seminal study on the British empire in India as primarily an 'empire of information' which made use of several "intelligence communities," has dwelt on the idea of "information panics" that often arose at the margins of imperial authority, where, as Condos assesses, their knowledge and control over local communities and practices was at its weakest. See Bayly (2016: 18, 171-174, 370), Condos (2017: 12).

[16] The 'great game' saw a period of acute rivalry between Britain and Russia for control and influence over Central Asia. Tibet, in many ways, became the bone of contention between imperial Britain and imperial Russia during this period as both sought diplomatic ties with, and trade in-roads into, the 'roof of the world'. See Lamb (1989: 7-8), Goldstein (1989: 7-48), McKay (2009: 10-13).

ally of the Thirteenth Dalai Lama,[17] and it is through Laden La, that they sought to create their own Dorzhiev-like figure.[18]

An interesting counterpoint to these direct attempts by Britain to import European modernity into Tibet may be observed in the initiatives taken by Sidkeong Namgyal Tulku (*sprul sku*) (1879–1914), the tenth *chögyal/ chos rgyal* (*dharma-king*) of Sikkim. Sidkeong Tulku was backed by John Claude White (1853–1918), Bell's predecessor as British Political officer, and recognised by the British India government as heir to Thutob Namgyal (1860–1914), passing over the ninth *chögyal*'s elder son, Tsodrak Namgyal, who, like his father, was not an Anglophile.[19] Sidkeong Tulku had been schooled by Sarat Chandra Das (1849–1917), the Bengali pandit who had been headmaster at the Bhutia Boarding School, before being sent to Oxford to receive "an education in the language of colonial power" which, by this time, was understood as near mandatory "for ruling one of the 'princely' or 'protected' states under the British Empire."[20] McKay reads this as an embrace of European modernity which gave regional monarchs access to the culture of the imperial overlords.[21] Berthe Jansen, however, regards Sidkeong Tulku as an important "Buddhist modernist" who initiated a set of monastic reforms in Sikkim along modernist lines.[22] While a comparative analysis of Sidkeong Tulku's monastic modernisation drives and the Thirteenth Dalai Lama's attempts at introducing European modernity to Tibet (at Charles Bell's behest) would make for an interesting theme, albeit outside the scope of this present study, what is significant for us to note here are the ways in which these benchmarks of European modernity played themselves out at two important geographical and conceptual loci—one a 'princely state' (Sikkim), and the other a part of speculative empire (Tibet). What can, besides, be teased out from this is how Tibetans and Sikkimese people themselves were transnational citizens—sharing borders and religio-cultural affiliation, with access to

[17] A representative in Tibet of imperial Russia, Dorzhiev's proximity to the Thirteenth Dalai Lama became a major cause for apprehension for British imperial interests in Tibet. See McKay (2009: 10-11).

[18] McKay (2009: 125-126).

[19] McKay (2003: 27-28).

[20] McKay (2003: 27).

[21] McKay (2003: 27).

[22] Jansen goes beyond the imperial archive and refers to a Tibetan source written by the tenth *chögyal*, the *bca' yig* (Jansen translates this as "monastic guidelines"). See Jansen (2014: 598). As investigated by Jansen, Sidkeong Tulku sought to reform and modernise both monastic and lay Buddhism in Sikkim, and although, some of these reforms were forced onto his kingdom by the British, the others pertained to his own vision of a future of Buddhism in Sikkim. See Jansen (2014: 598-599).

different kinds of trans-Himalayan Buddhist networks, transactions, exchanges and linkages—prior to their attempted indoctrination into modes of European modernity.

LADEN LA'S EARLIER SOJOURNS TO THE TIBETAN CAPITAL

In June, 1912, during his exile in Darjeeling, the Thirteenth Dalai Lama had asked Bell for an officer to mediate between the Tibetans and the Chinese forces that had overrun Lhasa.[23] The Dalai Lama's request for mediation by a British agent was turned down at the time, as the India Office was keen on maintaining good diplomatic ties with China.[24] However, by the time the telegram from Whitehall, London was received, on 4 July, 1912, the Dalai Lama had already left Darjeeling (on 4 June, 1912), and Charles Hardinge (1858–1944), the then Viceroy of India, on the advice of Charles Bell, had already dispatched Sonam Wangfel, as the British representative, to mediate with the Chinese.[25] What followed was a tug of war between Hardinge and the Home Office, with Hardinge advocating that Laden La be allowed to proceed to Lhasa[26] and the Home Office instructing his recall.[27] Sonam Wangfel was already on his way to Lhasa, yet this mission was seen to have a "political complexion" by the India Office.[28] A letter from the Home Secretary, dated 10 June, 1912, mentions that, at the time, Laden La was not considered as being the right person having "the authority" to negotiate "the terms of surrender" between the Chinese and the Tibetans.[29] Despite Bell's recommendation and Hardinge's backing, Laden La did not make it to Lhasa, but was recalled from Chusul, 31 miles from the Tibetan capital.[30]

Sonam Wangfel next accompanied Charles Bell during his 1920–1921 diplomatic mission to Lhasa, where he began to serve both as the official interpreter to the mission, and as Bell's personal assistant, following the untimely death, in Lhasa, of Bell's former clerk, a Sikkimese by the name

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23 P.2515/1912, IOR L/P&S/11/22, McKay (2009: 53).
24 P.2515/1912, IOR L/P&S/11/22.
25 This was not Laden La's first visit to Tibet. In fact, he had been sent to Chumbi valley in December, 1903, as assistant to Ernest Herbert Cooper Walsh (1865–1952), who was posted as Deputy Commissioner there, as part of the Younghusband expedition (a proxy-invasion) to Tibet. Rhodes and Rhodes (2006: 17-18).
26 P.2515/1912, IOR L/P&S/11/22.
27 P.2235/1912, IOR L/P&S/11/22.
28 P.2235/1912, IOR L/P&S/11/22.
29 P.2235/1912, IOR L/P&S/11/22.
30 P.2347/1912, IOR L/P&S/11/22.

of Achuk Tsering (1877–1920), described by McKay as "one of the (British) cadre's most trusted sources of intelligence".[31] This was Laden La's first time in Lhasa [Fig. 1], after his earlier recall from Chusul, when he had almost reached the Tibetan capital. As part of the mission headed by Bell, Sonam Wangfel made the acquaintance of the Tibetan *bka' shag* / cabinet, headed by Namsang Dasang Dramdul or Tsarong Shapé (1888-1959), the Dalai Lama's aide.[32]

A MODERN POLICE FORCE, A PUNISHMENT IN THE HIMALAYAS AND THE NATIVE INTERLOCUTOR

After Charles Bell's departure from colonial service, and following a brief stint by William Lachlan Campbell (1880–1937) and William Frederick Travers O' Connor (1870–1943), Bailey took over as Political Officer for Sikkim, Bhutan and Tibet in June, 1921.[33] In 1922, Bailey had, in a personal capacity, arranged for the necessary permit to enter Tibet for George Pereira (1865–1923), a military envoy of the British Legation in Peking, where Bailey had made his acquaintance in 1910.[34] Tsarong Shapé, who was then heading the Tibetan army, described by Pereira as a "most enlightened man" albeit without, "any first-hand knowledge of military matters," expressed his desire for "an expert by his side, who should be fairly young and active and hardened to cold", to assist in the organisation of a force, "partly conscription and partly voluntary" and not just drawn

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[31] McKay (2009: 68-69). Emma Martin has reconstructed Achuk Tsering's biography from Bell's personal notebooks and letters. See Martin (2014: 74-75).

[32] Namsang Dramdul or Tsarong Shapé had followed the Thirteenth Dalai Lama and his entourage into exile in India. He once again played a key role in mobilising Tibetan resistance and repelling the Chinese forces towards the end of 1911, ensuring a safe return for the Dalai Lama. See McKay (2009: 47-53). When Bell and his party later visited Tibet in 1920–21, Tsarong was a loyal aide to the Thirteenth Dalai Lama, and served as the head of the Tibetan *bka' shag*.

[33] F. M. Bailey came from a family of civil servants and had served in the British military. He, like many other military personnel sent on diplomatic missions in the Himalayas, grew up with a "profound belief in the British empire." McKay investigates the considerable military influence of the British frontier cadre in the Himalayas, and states that many of the cadre officers came from the Indian Army, were ex-Civil Service officers or had served in first World War. Both Bailey and O'Connor "had been wounded in battle." See McKay (2009: 79-80).

[34] McKay conjectures that Bailey's actual purpose for arranging for Pereira's visit to Tibet was to obtain an estimate of the Tibetan army. See McKay (2009: 107-08).

from Lhasa and its neighbourhoods.[35] Meanwhile, prompted by Bell, the British had already been supplying modern ammunition to Lhasa.[36]



Fig. 1. Sonam Wangfel Laden La (1876–1936), photographed as part of the Lhasa Mission Group, 1921, private collection of Jonathan Bracken[37]

[35] Letter from Pereira to Bailey, 13 December, 1922, IOR Mss Eur F157/ 238.

[36] Through Bell's brokerage, 10 mountain guns, 20 Lewis guns, and 10,000 rifles with ammunition were sold to Lhasa. See Goldstein (1989: 120).

[37] I thank Jonathan Bracken, the great grandson of Charles Alfred Bell, for giving me permission to use this image from his private collection. Jonathan extracted the image of

On 29 October, the *bka' shag* requested Bailey to 'borrow' Laden La for the purpose of training a police force in Lhasa.[38] Sonam Wangfel was deputed to Lhasa in September, 1923, where he established a close alliance with Tsarong.[39] The advice for the attempted 'modernisation' of the Tibetan police force having come from Charles Bell,[40] this force was to emulate the British colonial model, that had already been implemented, both in mainland India as well as in the Himalayan peripheral regions, such as Darjeeling. The specific colonial moorings of this institution have been discussed by scholars such as David Arnold, who sees the police force in India as drawing upon two imperial archetypes—the London Metropolitan Police and the Irish Constabulary—as Indian policing agencies were mostly discarded and discredited, or, even if retained in part, were relegated to a very minor or secondary role.[41] Arnold also postulates how constabularies in British India were provincialised according to the different requirements of respective provinces.[42] Laden La, having already served in the Imperial Police Force in Darjeeling,[43] was deemed the perfect candidate to export the British police model to Tibet. As the prototype of an ideal Anglicised Tibetan, and as someone who had already headed a provincial police force imitating the imperial model in a Himalayan borderland region of empire, Sonam Wangfel could be made to groom and discipline the Tibetans of Lhasa, and also to carry out espionage activities on behalf of his colonial bosses.[44] This attempted mission at schooling and regulating the Tibetans into the disciplinarian norms that emulated colonial prototypes would eventually backfire. Such a model, although it was couched within the rhetoric of universalism and modernity, was mired within troubling hegemonies and fraught polarities of power that attempted to represent Tibet and Tibetans as non-modern and therefore 'backward'

Sonam Wangfel from a group photograph of the Lhasa Mission, and very kindly upscaled the same for reproduction in this article.

38 McKay (2009: 108).

39 McKay (2009: 108), Rhodes and Rhodes (2006: 38).

40 McKay (2009: 108).

41 Arnold (1986: 7).

42 Arnold (1986: 5).

43 Rhodes and Rhodes (2006: 1).

44 Laden La's services as a spy had already been exploited by the Raj, and he had passed the test of 'loyalty' to them. My forthcoming article in *Przegląd Orientalistyczny (Review of Oriental Studies)* looks at this episode where Laden La had accompanied four Tibetan boys to England in 1913, accompanied by a Tibetan plenipotentiary, Dorje Tsegyal or Kusho Lungshar (1880–1938). One of the reasons for Sonam Wangfel being on this trip, as my article explores, was to spy on the activities of Kusho Lungshar for the British.

and 'orthodox,' as opposed to the English officer, who was seen as an embodiment of civilisational progress.[45]

The model police force which Laden La was to train in Tibet was one of the axes along which the European modernity project was hinged. However, a spate of incidents involving Laden La and Tsarong Shapé, would soon bring about an impasse. Melvyn C. Goldstein writes how, at the time, Tibet was already divided into three factions as a result of the attempt at revamping and expanding the Tibetan military. The first, led by Tsarong, the commander-in-chief, and comprising his military personnel, believed in an almost autocratic power vested in the military; the second faction opposed the expansion of the army simply to keep the religiopolitical hierarchy in place, and believed that unchecked military power challenged this orthodox status quo; the third faction, led by the Drönyerchenmo[46] Temba Dargye,[47] held a middle position. Although this faction believed in a need to reorganise the Tibetan army, it was also wary of a potential military supremacy, and used the costs of restructuring the military as the primary reason for not opposing the existing status quo of the Tibetan aristocracy.[48]

When Sonam Wangfel was sent to Tibet to consolidate a police force, the army already resented the police, thinking them to be overpaid, while being entrusted with lesser responsibilities.[49] In May, 1924, a skirmish occurred between the police force and the soldier of the *dapön*/ *mda' dpon* of Salungura. An account of the events was narrated by Tsoko or Sonam Wangdi, earlier the *chipön chenpo*/ *chibs dpon chen po* (master of the horses), and later made a *dapön* (army commander) in 1916,[50] to Norbu Dhondup (1884–1944), another key Tibetan interlocutor of the British Raj, from Kalimpong, one whose character has been described by McKay as fitting the "British ideal of the frontiersman." [51] Norbu Dhondup would

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45 This idea of colonialism as modernity's vanguard, through the travelling out, from Britain to imperial destinations, of industries, technology, information and ideas, have been explored by writers such as Linda Colley. See Colley (2003: 368).

46 Translated in British official records as 'lord chamberlain'.

47 Wherever I have been unable to obtain the dates for a particular Tibetan or English figure from existing archival sources, these have not been mentioned.

48 Goldstein (1989: 89-94).

49 Goldstein (1989: 121).

50 'Sikkim, Bhutan and Tibet: List of Chiefs and Leading Families,' p. 25, IOR L/P&S/20/D216.

51 McKay (2009: 126-127). McKay reconstructs Dhondup's biography mostly from personal interviews with the family members of British military officers serving in the Himalayas, who worked in close association with him. McKay (2009: 222).

relate Tsoko's account, almost verbatim, to F. M. Bailey, to whom he seemed to owe his primary allegiance.[52]

As per this account, amidst the scuffle that broke out, the soldiers of the Salungura *dapön* stabbed a police officer belonging to Laden La's force. When the matter was reported to Sonam Wangfel, he was drinking in the company of Tsarong Shapé and other military officers. Laden La, himself somewhat inebriated, told an intoxicated Tsarong that had such an incident occurred in British India, the field marshal would have the power to shoot or hang the perpetrators. The party soon reached the place where the skirmish had broken out. Tsarong stopped the fighting, and ordered for the two soldiers responsible for the stabbing to be brought before him. One was asked to amputate his own ear and the other to amputate his own leg. The latter reportedly bled to death. Once rumour spread that Tsarong's actions had caused the death of a soldier, the Thirteenth Dalai Lama sent Temba Dargye, the Drönyerchenmo, to inquire about the matter and ask for an explanation from Tsarong. As per Dhondup's report, Laden La organised a meeting with some of the *dapön*s, where an agreement was drawn up to be presented before the Dalai Lama. According to the agreement, Tsarong was to be excused and it would be explained to the supreme leader of Tibet that the army commander needed to be given unrestrained power to punish any perpetrator.[53]

At the time, on special deputation in Tibet was a monk from Bhutan by the name of Padma or Pema Chandra, who had been a teacher of Tibetan at the University of Calcutta in 1922–1923.[54] According to Tsoko, Pema Chandra had insinuated an army coup headed by Tsarong Shapé that would depose the existing Tibetan government.[55] The exact details or sequence of the events are not clearly known, as various versions were narrated by the different interlocutors working for the Raj, including the one which reached the Dalai Lama, and was later related by him to Khenchung, the monk official who was then the Tibetan Trade Agent at Gyantse.[56] In the official British version recounted by Laden La to Bailey, and reported by the latter to the Foreign Secretary to the Government of India, Laden La himself was not a party to any of the events resulting in the death of the soldier or to the

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52 Letter from Norbu Dhondup to F.M. Bailey, 30 August, 1927, IOR Mss Eur F157/240. In fact, the whole file, Mss EUR F157/240, is a record of Norbu Dhondup's (often secret and confidential) handwritten letters to Bailey.

53 Letter from Norbu Dhondup to F.M. Bailey, 30 August, 1927.

54 McKay (2009: 113).

55 IOR Mss Eur F157/240.

56 This version was narrated by Khenchung to F.W. Williamson, the British trade agent at Gyantse and, in turn, reported by Williamson to his colonial administrators. For the various versions of the incident, British and Tibetan, see Goldstein (1989: 121-38).

agreement that was drawn up, but had only been witness to the signing of it (by Tsarong and the other *dapöns*) at his house.[57]

In one particular version of the events, Pema Chandra had even instigated Tsoko to murder the Drönyerchenmo.[58] In the official Tibetan version of the events as narrated by the Dalai Lama to Khenchung, a conspiracy was floated by Laden La and Tsarong Shapé to wrest control of the military power in Lhasa, while reducing the Dalai Lama to only a religious and spiritual figurehead.[59]

The Dalai Lama likely suspected British involvement behind this attempt,[60] although Bailey visited Lhasa in the immediate aftermath of the incidents, from 16 July to 16 August, 1924.[61] McKay has conjectured that Laden La was masterminded by Bailey himself,[62] a reason that he was shielded by the latter.[63] Within the official British version of the events as contained in Bailey's report, the Dalai Lama was heavily influenced by his advisers, some with Russophile leanings, who played up the idea of an English conspiracy.[64]

Sonam Wangfel left Tibet shortly after Bailey, on 9 October, 1924.[65] There were press reports circulating in the media regarding besieging of the British officers, Laden La and David Macdonald, serving as British Trade Agent at Yatung at the time, in Lhasa, although these reports were refuted within official accounts.[66] Some of these media reports hinted at the idea of a British coup, to which an official response (clues to which may be found in Bailey's letter with which I began this article) was formulated

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57 Bailey's report, 28 May, 1927, P.3472, IOR L/P&S/10/1088.

58 Goldstein (1989: 130-31). Pema Chandra came to a particularly gruesome end. When he attempted to flee Tibet after his alleged involvement in the conspiracy came to light, he was pursued and killed, and his head was displayed in Lhasa as a deterrent. See McKay (2009: 113-14).

59 Letter, 27 August, 1926, IOR L/P&S/10/1088; Goldstein (1989: 131-33).

60 Goldstein (1989: 133).

61 Cooper (2003: 91-94), McKay (2009: 109).

62 McKay writes that Bailey "was too good a secret agent to be ignorant of the activities of his own key agent at a crucial time and place." McKay (2009: 109-112).

63 Bailey, in his report, clearly states that Laden La "could have nothing to gain by taking a lead part in such a conspiracy" it is "inconceivable that he should have acted as reported by Khenchung to Dr. Williamson." See Bailey's report, 28 May, 1927.

64 Bailey's report, 28 May, 1927.

65 Telegram from Foreign Secretary to the Government of India, 13 October, 1924, IOR L/P&S/10/1088, McKay (2009: 111).

66 P.4146, IOR L/P&S/10/1088.

highlighting that Laden had left Lhasa in spite of the Tibetan government asking for an extension of his services.[67]

Tsarong had left Lhasa for India in 1924, leaving Thrumba Dzasa (*dza sag*/ high-ranking officer), nephew of the Dalai Lama, as assistant commander-in-chief, and upon his return, he found himself dismissed as the army commander-in-chief and Thrumba Dzasa appointed as the supervisor of the barracks and troops, and the army's powers greatly reduced.[68] Besides Tsarong, all the other *dapöns* who were associated with Laden La and the Tibetan officers who had been trained by the British, were demoted, leading to an eventual degradation of both the police force as well as the Tibetan army.[69]

Historians like Goldstein and McKay have read the incident as an instance of Tibetan opposition to modernity (prompted by rumours of a purported coup), with Western modernity being championed by figures like Tsarong Shapé.[70] Laden La's biographers, however, have repudiated the idea of a coup, as well as Sonam Wangfel's alleged involvement in it, drawing upon the work of other British historians such as Alastair Lamb and Tibetan historians like K. Dhondup.[71] However, the question that is of interest to us here is not whether there was a foiled 'coup.' Indeed, the reading I posit here is not at all a historicist one, pertaining to any historical veracity, or lack thereof, of the set of events that occurred. Instead, what drives our query is the precarity of the interlocutor subject working for the British Raj, precipitously poised at the interstices between Tibetan and Anglicised subjectivity.

A British or a Tibetan subject? The interlocutor's strange predicament

This issue of Sonam Wangfel's subjectivity became an actual bone of contention between the British and the Tibetans. "Whether Laden La is a

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67 See Telegram from Foreign and Political Department, Delhi 28 October, 1924, IOR L/P&S/10/1088.

68 Norbu Dhondup wrote to Bailey describing the Dalai Lama's proximity to the Drönyerchenmo, and the latter relating to him his grievances against Tsarong Shapé. See Norbu Dhondup's letters to F.M. Bailey, 31 July, 1927 and 26 August, 1927, IOR Mss Eur F157/ 240, Goldstein (1989: 136-37).

69 See draft for translation of F.M. Bailey's message to the Thirteenth Dalai Lama, in Norbu Dhondup's letter to Bailey, 1 September, 1927, IOR Mss Eur F157/ 240.

70 McKay has described Tsarong Shapé as an "outstanding secular figure in modern Tibetan history." McKay (2009: 47).

71 Lamb (1989: 161-63), Rhodes and Rhodes (2006: 38).

British or Tibetan subject"[72] was vehemently debated by the British and the Tibetan *bka 'shag* .[73] As indicated by Norbu Dhondup's letters to Bailey, this was occasioned by two feuds over property that broke out between Sonam Wangfel (while he was stationed in Tibet, as in-charge of the police force) and two Tibetan aristocrats—Nyima Pangdatsang,[74] who had close familial links to the Dalai Lama[75] and later, Bagcham Dorje. The cases were referred to the British and Tibetan Trade Agents at Yatung. Although David Macdonald, the then British Trade Agent, wrote a 32-page detailed report in support of Laden La's British subjectivity and sent it to the Government of India, Bailey sent Major Hyslop, associated with the Indian Medical Service, who had travelled with him to Lhasa during July-August, 1924,[76] to intervene, in the aftermath of the above incidents. Hyslop was not favourably disposed towards Laden La,[77] but he nonetheless, "was compelled" to take up the issue of Laden La's subject-status with Lönchen Sholkang,[78] under instructions from Bailey. Lönchen Sholkang readily agreed to Bailey's directives, i.e., of Laden La being construed as a British subject on official deputation in Tibet, on the grounds of Sikkim being a British protectorate. However, Bailey solicited through Hyslop for a written statement from the minister to this effect. The Lönchen delayed for a month, unwilling to provide any written statement, and eventually Norbu Dhondup was asked to intervene and represent the case before the Dalai Lama himself.[79] The Dalai Lama was unconvinced of Laden La's 'British subject' status, and told Dhondup that the matter would be referred to the Tibetan *bka' shag.*[80] Shortly after this, Lönchen Sholkang died and the matter was left undecided. The issue came up again in 1927,[81] after Sonam Wangfel had been appointed as British Trade Agent at Yatung, following

[72] Norbu Dhondup's letter to F.M. Bailey, 29 August, 1925, IOR Mss Eur F157/ 240.

[73] Norbu Dhondup's report to F.M. Bailey, 31August, 1925, IOR Mss Eur F157/ 240.

[74] Norbu Dhondup's report to F.M. Bailey 31 August, 1925, IOR Mss Eur F157/ 240.

[75] Nyima Pangdatshang was the older brother of Ragpa Pangdatshang. For a detailed history of the family, including a rebellion by the younger brother, Tobgye/ Tobgyal Pangdatsang, after the death of the Thirteenth Dalai Lama, in December, 1933, see Goldstein (1989: 177-185), McGranahan (2017: 77).

[76] Cooper (2003: 91).

[77] Hyslop thought that Laden La was not of much use, whether as a Tibetan or a British subject. In a personal exchange with Norbu Dhondup, Hyslop expressed his intense dislike for Laden La and his wish to "see him dead." See Norbu Dhondup's letter, 29 August, 1925, IOR Mss Eur F157/ 240.

[78] In Tibet, the Thirteenth Dalai Lama had formed a tripartite division of power, vested within three ministers or *lönchens*—Shatra, Sholkang and Changkhyim. Goldstein (1989: 12).

[79] See Norbu Dhondup's reports, 28–31 August, 1925, IOR Mss Eur F157/ 240.

[80] Norbu Dhondup's report, 28 August, 1925, IOR Mss Eur F157/ 240.

[81] Norbu Dhondup's letter to Bailey, 2 September, 1927, IOR Mss Eur F157/ 240.

David Macdonald's retirement, in the autumn of 1924. In the meantime, Sonam Wangfel had managed to procure from the *chögyal* of Sikkim the necessary documents as proof of him being Sikkim born. Norbu Dhondup was instructed in a letter from Bailey to once again take up the matter and "ask the Dalai Lama to settle Sonam Wangfel's case." Bailey's letter asserted categorically that Sonam Wangfel was born in Sikkim, had lived there for thirteen years, had landed property in Kalimpong, and paid taxes for it to the British Indian government.[82] The Dalai Lama had reportedly expressed to Dhondup, in a personal audience with him, his displeasure at Laden La's "promotion" and stated that had the latter been a Tibetan subject, his conduct (with regard to the case of Tsarong Shapé) would have been liable to "severe punishment" "in accordance with the custom of Tibetans."[83]

The dispute over Laden La's subjectivity, between the British and the Tibetans, with Bailey actively backing Sonam Wangfel's status as a British subject, is symptomatic of a more complex question with regard to Western modernity, legality and autochthonous agency. Laden La's subjectivity, as defined by Western templates of legality and statehood, was assigned by the British. Unlike Tibetan subjects such as Tsarong Shapé, Sonam Wangfel may only have escaped repercussions, abetted by his British Sikkimese subject status. This contestation over his subjectivity belies a far more precarious position inhabited by the Tibetan interlocutor from the Himalayan borderland region, who remained at the disposal of empire. Caught within this precarity and as someone who had to function within a tightly-regulated apparatus of control and surveillance, Sonam Wangfel emerges as figure located at the interstices between Western modernity and what was perceived as its polar opposite, Tibetan traditionalism. His subjectivity remains interpellated by both his Englishness and his Tibetanness, even as he was made to continuously straddle between these two.

Also, the multiple versions of the purported coup story, that have been recounted by historians (both British and Tibetan) and by Laden La's biographers, and the oft-contradictory claims within available archival records, point towards an imperial apparatus fraught with uncertainty, trepidation and an "information panic," which frequently led political officers like Bailey to deploy multiple native agents reporting on one another. This is instantiated by Norbu Dhondup's correspondence with Bailey, where he is repeatedly made to corroborate incidents from Laden

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82 F.M. Bailey's letter to Norbu Dhondup, 26 September, 1925, IOR Mss Eur F157/ 240.

83 Norbu Dhondup's letter to Bailey, 22 September, 1927, IOR Mss Eur F157/ 240.

La's 1923–1924 stint in Tibet, and also report on Sonam Wangfel's activities from other Tibetan oral sources.[84]

We revisit the imperial archive then, not in the quest of historical 'truth', but rather in search of these interlocutor figures, poised at the very margins of the archive, whose agencies remain ordered and controlled by imperial machinery, the precarity of their positions and subjectivities built into the very process of production of the archive.[85] A caveat needs to be added here though, of the need to go beyond British imperial records, and look at alternative sources that include indigenous and oral histories from the Himalayas.[86] Can Sonam Wangfel be read off entirely as a 'local' subject, stripped of any self-agency whatsoever, or does his career as an interlocutor begin to enunciate a different kind of internationalism, one where his travels, networks and abilities as a mediator and negotiator inflect and become the very linkage through which the imperial machinery becomes operative? The next section of this research investigates how Sonam Wangfel was able to access and activate, from the site of Darjeeling, a different form of Buddhist transnationalism, outside the ambit of his role as an exclusively colonial agent, and outside the purview of colonial regulation and control.

TOWARDS A BUDDHIST TRANSNATIONALISM: RECLAIMING AUTONOMY

In March, 1925, John Noel's silent film *The Epic of Everest*, that documented the unfortunate expedition of mountaineers George Mallory (1886–1924) and Andrew Irvine (1902–1924) to the highest Himalayan

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84 Nicholas B. Dirks discusses how a new rhetorical economy of British colonial rule was founded in the aftermath of the Great Rebellion of 1857, one that was marked by a transition in the estimation of native subjects, based on their proximity and fealty to the Raj. For governance to be effective, the creation of new ethnographic knowledge was necessary; and one of the impetuses governing this ethnological classification of native subjects was the desire to know the ones that were more likely to be loyal to empire. See Dirks (2002: 57), McGranahan (2017: 72).

85 Here, I am drawing upon Ann Laura Stoler's work on the Dutch colonial archive in the Netherland Indies and its discursive construction of racial taxonomies. Stoler looks at imperial archives themselves as "condensed sites of epistemological and political anxiety…," as "both transparencies on which power relations were inscribed and intricate technologies of rule in themselves." See Stoler (2009: 20).

86 McGranahan indicates that writing Tibetan history solely from British imperial records anchors such history to "an imperial default." McGranahan (2017: 71). Felix Driver likewise argues for a need "to open up the archives to a wider range of scholars and practitioners, bringing with them different kinds of expertise and experience." Driver (2024: 58).

peak through Tibet, was screened in England. The film had generated a furore during its screening in Calcutta in 1924, particularly owing to a scene that showed a Tibetan man removing lice from a young Tibetan boy and appearing to eat it.[87] The screening of the film in England was to be accompanied by a troupe of seven Tibetan lamas, supposedly monks, who arrived in England in December, 1924, brought by Noel from the Palkhor Chode monastery in Gyantse, facilitated by John Macdonald, Noel's protégé and son of David Macdonald.[88] *The Sphere*, the British weekly, carried a sensationalist article on 6 December, 1924, with pictures of the seven lamas, whom, they reported, had left the country disguised as bales of fur.[89] The lamas would be made to perform ceremonial chanting, music and dance, before each screening of the film. The brochure of the film advertised the occasion as "the first time in history that *real* Tibetan lamas have come to Europe."[90] The Lamas travelled with Noel and his film to various places, Dundee, Belfast and Hamburg, and at each place, were greeted by more sensationalist coverage in the local dailies.[91]

The previous year, a Parsee entrepreneur by the name of Mr. Bhumgara had wanted to engage Tibetan performers from Darjeeling for staging a Tibetan religious *cham* dance (referred to in British official records as 'devil dance') at the British Empire Exhibition at Wembley during the summer of 1924, in the style of a similar performance that had taken place in Calcutta before the Prince of Wales, during his visit in December, 1921.[92] Mr. Bhumgara's enterprise was opposed by none other than Laden La and the Buddhist Association of Darjeeling/ BAD, of which Sonam Wangfel was president.

An extract of the minutes of a meeting of the BAD held at the Bhutia Busty Monastery on 9 March, 1924, notes how the BAD and Sonam Wangfel objected to the prospect of Bhumgara trying to engage eight lay

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87 Hansen (1996: 729).

88 The lamas were not 'in residence' monks of the monastery, but temporary 'unattached' ones. The whole Macdonald family had been party to John's enterprise (Macdonald's daughter hosted the lamas in Kalimpong), although David Macdonald vehemently denied knowledge of the affair. See Report by F. Williamson, 3 January, 1925, P.762/1925, IOR L/P&S/11/244

89 "Seven Tibetan Lamas Arrive in London," *The Sphere*, 6 December, 1924, The British Newspaper Archive. <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0001861/19241206/007/0006>

90 IOR L/P&S/11/244.

91 "Tibetan Lamas in Dundee," Dundee Evening Telegraph, 1 June, 1925, The British Newspaper Archive. <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0000563/19250601/116/0009>.

92 P.1198/1924 and P.2060/1924, IOR L/P&S/11/244.

Buddhists from the Himalayan region for performing at the British Empire Exhibition. The objection was raised on the grounds that laymen were religiously proscribed from performing a dance meant to be performed only by monks.[93] Bhumgara retorted by stating that his enterprise was merely attempting to supplement the income of the local Buddhists of Darjeeling, who worked as "hill-chair men" and often posed as dancers to earn extra money.[94] Intervening in the matter, Bailey gave his word, through a written letter to Laden La, dated 31 March, 1924, that no such dance would be performed at Wembley that would "deprecate" the religious significance of the lama dance.[95] The dancers were given permission by the Home Office to go to England to perform under an undertaking from Bhumgara that a) the dances should not be "devil dance" and b) that they should be non-religious.[96] Bhumgara never kept his word and it was reported to Bailey that the performers used religious masks and props, and wore cheap imitations of religious robes, in what appeared as an "undesirable parody" of the Tibetan religious dance.[97] A series of letters between Bailey and the Home Office show Bailey's discomfort, after the Wembley fiasco, with Bhumgara once again being permitted to take the Tibetan dancers to England to perform for the 1925 screening of John Noel's film.[98] In analysing these two episodes, Peter H. Hansen has pointed out the complex interplays of Orientalist racist representation of Tibetans and Himalayan diplomacy in the beginning of the twentieth century.[99]

Bhumgara, as evidenced by a letter, dated 25 February, 1925, was planning to take a further troupe of Tibetan dancers from Darjeeling to Wembley for the next British Empire Exhibition of 1925, and was awaiting the necessary permits from the Foreign and Political Department.[100] Bailey indicated in his letter, dated 20 March, 1925, to the Foreign Office, his disinclination towards these dancers being granted the necessary travel permit. As advised by Laden La, Bailey also proposed an alternative—that the dancers, their dances and props be first inspected by the BAD and an undertaking taken from Bhumgara "not to use any paraphernalia and not to

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93 The BAD noted that the dance that was being taken to Wembley was not a "proper lama dance but a laymen's Singhi dance." P.2050/1924, IOR L/P&S/11/244.

94 P.1198/1924, IOR L/P&S/11/244.

95 P.2050/1924, IOR L/P&S/11/244.

96 P.3345/1924, IOR L/P&S/11/244.

97 Letter from F.M. Bailey, 20 October, 1924, P.4538/1924, IOR L/P&S/11/244.

98 IOR L/P&S/11/244.

99 Hansen notes that these racist representations led to Tibetans defining "subject positions for themselves in ways that transformed not only Anglo-Tibetan diplomacy but also internal politics in Tibet." See Hansen (1996: 716).

100 P.1051/1925, IOR L/P&S/11/244.

have any dances performed that have not been approved by the Association."[101] Unlike the case of Noel's lamas, these dancers were residents of Darjeeling and construed as British Buddhist subjects, and came under the religious jurisdiction of the BAD. An agreement was accordingly drawn up on 4 April, 1925 between Sonam Wangfel, as president of the BAD, and Mr. C.C. Banerjee, Bhumgara's agent, that aimed at regulating all such future performances, the kind of dance performed, and the props and accoutrements of the performers. The agreement stipulated that a prior list of the dances and the exact props to be used was to be submitted and approved by the BAD. No programme, besides those in the list, pre-approved by the BAD, would be allowed. Besides these provisions, it was mandated that all the religious equipment that had been used during the 1924 Exhibition be deposited with a representative of the India Office till the return of the troupe's members to India. In case of non-compliance with any of these regulations, Bhumgara would be subject to a maximum penalty of rupees ten thousand. It was also suggested that Bhumgara be asked to pay another additional security deposit of rupees ten thousand, prior to the permits being issued by the Foreign Office.[102] This last clause of furnishing a hefty deposit was seen as particularly preposterous and it was ultimately decided to withhold permission for travel altogether, and completely ban the engagement of Tibetan dancers for all future exhibitions, much to the relief of Laden La.[103]

Here, we witness Sonam Wangfel exercising a certain amount of autonomy, particularly over the domain of religious affairs, and with regard to representation of Tibet and Tibetans in the West. Through the BAD, he was not only able to inaugurate a Buddhist transnationalism from the site of Darjeeling, but also leverage the Association to the position of a crucial stakeholder of native Buddhists from this Himalayan borderland region, lying outside the administrative jurisdiction of the Tibetan *bka 'shag*.

The BAD thus became the mouthpiece of this new Buddhist transnationalism, that was defined both by its relation to Tibet as well as by its distinction from it. While Sonam Wangfel had no 'jurisdiction' over Noel's lamas who were brought from Gyantse through John Macdonald's machinations, through the BAD, he was able to exercise his authority and influence over Bhumgara's lamas. Using his proximity to Bailey, Laden La was able to ensure that the local Tibetan Buddhists from Darjeeling would not risk being reduced to generic anthropological specimens exhibited before the West, by strictly regulating the enunciations of any such

[101] P.1290/1925, IOR L/P&S/11/244.
[102] P.1443/1925, IOR L/P&S/11/244.
[103] P.1443/1925, IOR L/P&S/11/244.

representation through his Association. In this way, he was able to not only exert a certain degree of autonomy outside of his role as an agent within the British imperial apparatus, but also manipulate the very working of this apparatus, making it acquiescent to the interest of local Tibetan Buddhist subjects from Darjeeling, in the process loosening its hegemonic grip over these subjects.

The Rhodes describe Laden La as a "devout Buddhist" who spent "much of his time" "supporting local religious institutions, as well as a number of local social causes."[104] Following his retirement in July, 1931, Sonam Wangfel attended a convention of Buddhists from across the world at Sarnath in November, 1931. At Sarnath, Sonam Wangfel was made the representative of the Mahabodhi Society for Tibet.[105] He also arranged for a performance of a lama dance at the Mulagandhakuti vihāra[106] in Sarnath, the same year.[107]

In the 1920s, Laden La also actively supervised the construction of the Darjeeling branch of the Bengal Buddhist Association vihāra. During this period, Sonam Wangfel became acquainted with Kripasaran Barua (1865–1926), who had come from Chittagong and established the Bauddha Dharmankur Sabhā or Bengal Buddhist Association in 1892, in the Bowbazar area of north Calcutta.[108] In 1919, Kripasaran, following a bout of ill health, was visiting Darjeeling, after a trip to Bhutan, along with his friend and longtime associate, Asutosh Mukherjee (1864–1924), the vice-chancellor of the University of Calcutta. Barua and Mukherjee enlisted the help of Sonam Wangfel to procure a grant of thee *bighā* and five *kāthās* of land for the construction of the Darjeeling branch of the Bengal Buddhist Association vihāra from the maharājā of Burdwan, Bijay Chand Mahatab

[104] Rhodes and Rhodes (2006: 4).

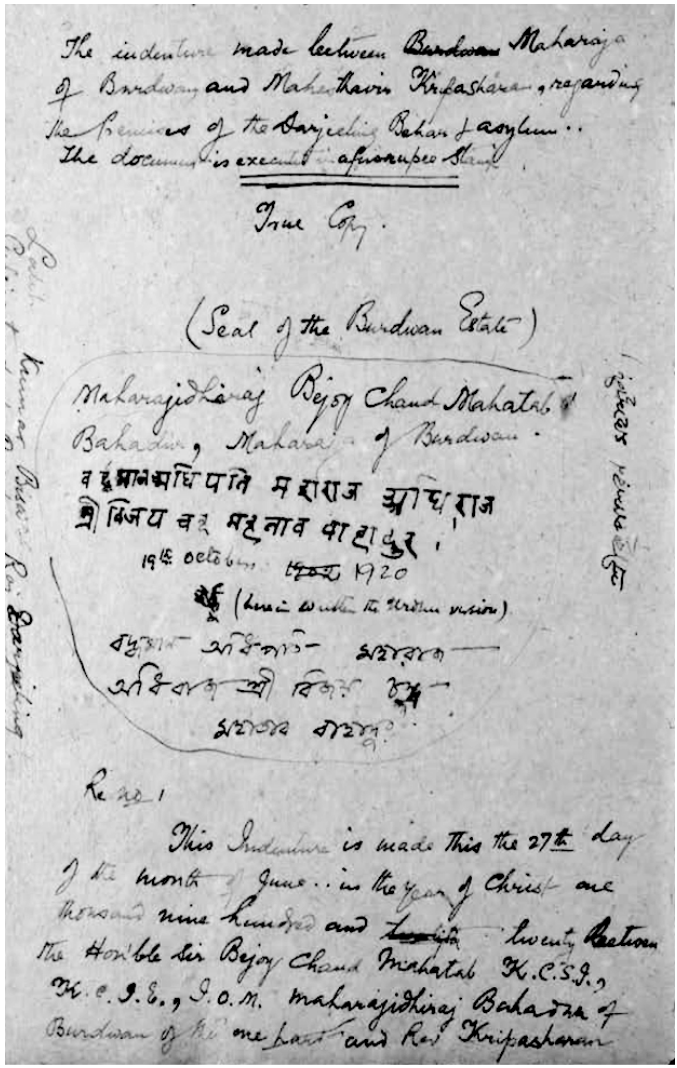
[105] Rhodes and Rhodes (2006: 63).

[106] During the 1920s, Anagarika Dharmapala, and the Mahabodhi Society founded by him in Calcutta in 1892, were actively engaged in the politics of repatriation of Buddhist sacred relics. A lot of the neo-Buddhist vihāras were built by Mahabodhi Society at sites associated with the Buddha's biography for the specific purpose of housing these relics. The Mulagandhakuti Mahavihāra at Sarnath came up as one such site. See Mukherjee (2014).

[107] Rhodes and Rhodes (2006: 63).

[108] Born in Chittagong, Kripasaran Barua became one of the central figures, besides Anagarika Dharmapala, in ushering a 'revival' of Buddhism in late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century Calcutta. Besides bringing about a pedagogical revival of Bengal's historical links to Pala-era Buddhism, Kripasaran, during his very lifetime, was engaged in newer kinds of Buddhist proselytism, through the establishment of different centres of Buddhist learning, schools and as many as seven vihāras in various parts of north and northeast India. For a detailed exploration of Kripasaran Barua's career and the history of the Bengal Buddhist Association, see Sen (2022: 76-92).

[Fig. 2]. This was acquired on June 27, 1920[109] and Laden La (along with one of Kripasaran's disciples, Anandaswamy) supervised the construction of this new vihāra, and oversaw its day-to-day management, once it was established.[110]


The indenture made between Burdwan Maharaja of Burdwan and Maha Thairo Kripasharan, regarding the premises of the Darjeeling Bahan Asylum.. The document is executed in a foreign Stamp.

True Copy.

(Seal of the Burdwan Estate)

Maharajadhiraj Bijoy Chand Mahatab Bahadur, Maharaja of Burdwan.

বর্দ্ধমানাধিপতি মহারাজ অধিরাজ শ্রী বিজয় চন্দ মহতাব বাহাদুর।

19th October 1920

(Seal with Urdu version)

বহুমান অধিকারী — মহারাজ — অধিরাজ শ্রী বিজয় চন্দ — মহতাব বাহাদুর।

Re 20/-

This Indenture is made this the 27th day of the month of June.. in the year of Christ one thousand nine hundred and twenty between the Honble Sir Bijoy Chand Mahatab K.C.S.I., K.C.I.E., I.O.M. maharajadhiraj Bahadur of Burdwan of the one part and Rai Kripasharan

Fig. 2. Deed of grant by Bijay Chand Mahatab, the maharājā of Burdwan, to Kripasaran, negotiated by Laden La, for the construction of the Darjeeling branch of the Bengal Buddhist Association vihāra

[109] Brahmachari (1965: 13).
[110] Mss 231/64.

In many ways, the travel of the Bengal Buddhist Association from Calcutta to Darjeeling was facilitated by a figure like Sonam Wangfel Laden La, in turn, linking the Himalayan hill town with new strands of Buddhist revival in the colonial capital.[111] The coming together, through newer networks of living Buddhism, of the two spatial locations of Darjeeling and Calcutta, via the travels of the Darjeeling branch of the Dharmankur vihāra in 1920, underscores the importance of Darjeeling as a site of transnational Buddhist linkage in the early-twentieth century. In many ways, Sonam Wangfel was one of the figures around whom such a form of Buddhist transnationalism was hinged. He, together with the BAD, enabled the forging of Darjeeling as an international Buddhist 'contact-zone,'[112] through newer transnational networks and cross currents, between Tibet and the neo-Buddhist organisations of Sri Lanka, Calcutta and Chittagong. Although partly facilitated by the British imperial networks, these interlinkages were nevertheless premised upon the abilities of native mediators such as Laden La, who, through this role, was also able to carve out and reinvent his agency and autonomy, independent of his role as an agent of empire.

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[111] My upcoming monograph, on Sarat Chandra Das, evaluates how knowledge-production on Tibet from Darjeeling, during the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, also informed and inflected the production of newer imaginaries and historiographies of the Bengal region from Calcutta, in effect, linking the peripheral Himalayan site with key centres of colonial knowledge-production, located in the colonial capital. This was facilitated by Das, and aided by several of Das's Himalayan collaborators, from the Sikkim and Darjeeling region, one of whom was S.W. Laden La.

[112] Harris (2016: 37-38), Martin (2016: 87), Viehbeck (2017: 13-19).

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‘PUNDIT’ LAMA UGYEN GYATSHO AND THE BHUTIA BOARDING SCHOOL, DARJEELING: PEDAGOGICAL REFORMS IN 19TH CENTURY SIKKIM

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INTRODUCTION

Formal education in the hills of Sikkim had traditionally been the preserve of Buddhist monasteries. Usually, the senior monks would train the novice monks in various rituals and practices. There were also monks who ventured beyond Sikkim to Tibet to receive formal education in the great monastic institutions of Tibet, such as Mindroling (Tib. sMin grol gling), and Tsurphu (Tib. mTshur phu).

The Sangchen Pemayangtse Monastery in West Sikkim, for instance, sent groups of young monks to Mindroling monastery during the reign of the Second Chogyal of Sikkim, Tensung Namgyal (1644–1699). Subsequently, during the reign of the Third Chogyal, Chagdor Namgyal (1686–1717), a monastic school (Tib. *shad grwa*) came up at Pemayangtse monastery.[1]

Thus, there was a tradition of very early “institutional” approach to education long before the British arrived. This carried on into the 20th century when the Enchey Lama School, Gangtok and the Pemayangtse Monastic School, were established in 1909 and 1958, respectively.

This was followed, around the middle of the 19th century, by the advent of Christian missionaries to Darjeeling.[2] Darjeeling’s senior administrator, L.S.S. O’Malley, wrote in 1907 in the *Bengal District Gazetteers: Darjeeling*: “No article on the progress of education in the district of Darjeeling would be complete or accurate which did not accord the first place of honour to these Christian missionaries who have been pioneers in this as in much other good work”.[3] Whether these missions were a tool of

1 *The Royal History of Sikkim*, (2021: 132). For a history of the monastic education system in Sikkim see, Bhutia (2026).
2 Darjeeling had been acquired by the British from Sikkim in 1835.
3 O’Malley (1907: 170).

imperial control, or a project of genuine enlightenment, has been much discussed in the past.

Prominent politician, historian and lawmaker, Thomas Babington Macaulay famously wrote in 1835, that "a single shelf of a good English library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia".[4] Colonial administrators held the view that European knowledge was inherently superior in science, social thought and philosophy, compared to the traditional metaphysics of Eastern knowledge systems. Thus, they could claim intellectual superiority that made colonial rule seem morally necessary.

On the other hand, despite the imperialist motives, an argument can be made that this very education system laid the foundations of the modern universities and administrative systems that have propelled countries like India into a formidable position on the world stage in the 21st century.

The pioneering attempt at bringing formal English education to the hills was made by Revd. William Start, an independent missionary, who brought more than twenty German missionaries to Darjeeling around 1842. He and his friend Karl Gottlieb Niebel started a school for Lepcha children in Tukvar, near Darjeeling. This school functioned for some time and parts of the Bible were translated into the Lepcha language.[5] Around the same time, another British introduction was being seeded, plucked and proliferated in the hills of Darjeeling, with the first forays into tea cultivation.

However, it was not until the efforts of another missionary, Revd. William Macfarlane, a Scottish Church missionary, that a proper system of education was established. He trained teachers, and moved the Government to help establish schools. He was described as being "faithful in that which is least". Subsequently many schools came up. The first of these schools based on European models was the Loreto Convent (1846, Roman Catholic), which was followed by St. Paul's School (1864, Church of England), both in Darjeeling. Over time, these institutions run on Western lines grew and scores of boys and girls from Nepal, Sikkim, Bhutan, Tibet, Burma and throughout India benefited.

Macfarlane in 1872–73, A. Turnbull and W.S. Sutherland in the 1880s were refused permission to reside in Sikkim by the Eighth and Ninth Chogyals of Sikkim, Sidkyong Namgyal and Thutob Namgyal

4 Macaulay (1835: 109).
5 Plaisier (2005: 10).

respectively.[6] Thus, the Christian missionaries made very little inroads into Sikkim.

BHUTIA BOARDING SCHOOL OF DARJEELING [7]

Then, in April 1874, the Bhutia Boarding School of Darjeeling was opened on the orders of Sir George Campbell, the Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal, following his meeting with the Chogyal Sidkyong Namgyal at Darjeeling the previous year. Chagzöd Karpo, (real name Tenzin Namgyal), son of the Seventh Chogyal Tsugphud Namgyal and the most efficient and influential individual in Sikkim, gave his whole hearted support to the proposal and opined that it would be ideal to send the boys of the noble families in Sikkim. Even the Pemayangtse monks, the premier monastic institution in Sikkim, wholly supported the idea, particularly the subject of surveying.[8]

The school was established by the Deputy Commissioner of Darjeeling, Mr. J. W. Edgar, created from the old Middle English School (Estd. 20th September 1856). Later, in 1892, it was raised to the status of a High School. Edgar wrote that the Bhutia Boarding School was being opened for the purpose of "teaching of English, Thibetan and hill-surveying".[9]

The purpose of the school was to provide a good education to young Bhutia and Lepcha boys, along with children of immigrants from the plains working in Darjeeling as Government servants, etc. In this school, Bhutia boys could receive a broad education. The syllabus covered both traditional Tibetan language and religion, with subjects such as mathematics and English language which would prepare the children for life in British India. They were educated for free and trained as explorers, interpreters and surveyors.[10]

The British hoped that some of the students would learn sufficient surveying skills for them to be able to complete a map of Tibet, and to help improve the relationship with their northern neighbour. Sir Alfred Croft, Director of Public Instruction in India, wrote that the objective was "to train

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6 Lepcha (2016: 28).

7 This article builds on the textbox "The Sikkimese Students of Darjeeling's Bhutia Boarding School" in *The Royal History of Sikkim: A Chronicle of the House of Namgyal* (2021: 424-26). Taking this as a template, the focus of this article is on a teacher, Lama Ugyen Gyatsho. Students of the school, such as Kazi Dawasamdup, Lobzang Chhoden and Rinzing Namgyal, will be the subject of an upcoming article.

8 Edgar (2005: 23).

9 Ibid.

10 O'Malley (1907: 177).

up interpreters, geographers and explorers, who may be useful if at any future time Tibet is opened to the British".[11]

The aim was to send the best students from the Bhutia Boarding School, off to Dehradun where the Survey of India had its headquarter. There they would be trained more intensively in techniques of surveying and exploring.[12]

A Bengali, Sarat Chandra Das, was hired as the first headmaster. Das was a scholar and an engineer who, as a British spy, visited Tibet surreptitiously in 1879 and 1881, posing as a Buddhist scholar. His daring missions, of four months and fourteen months respectively, brought back a treasure trove of intelligence about the hidden land beyond the snows, a land forbidden for centuries to all outsiders.

In his, *Autobiography: Narratives of the Incidents of My Early Life*, Das narrates the circumstances of the establishment of the school in the spring of 1874. The twenty-five year old Das on being appointed as Headmaster of the proposed school was told by Edgar that the school was meant to impart modern English education to the *Gyalsey* or Crown Prince of Sikkim, Thutob Namgyal, and to the sons of the chiefs and *Kazis*. Edgar had hired a Sikkimese monk of the Pemyangtse monastery, Lama Ugyen Gyatsho, as the Tibetan language teacher.[13]

Das wrote to Chogyal Sidkyong Namgyal to send his younger half-brother and also to the leading Kazis to enrol their sons at the school. Some local Bhutia boys from Darjeeling and surrounding areas were also added.

Thus, by August of 1874, the school had fourteen boys, of ages apparently between 10 and 15. Six of them were monks. One (not a monk) was already married! Another was the son of Cheebu Lama, Sikkimese Prime Minister (*Drönyer*) and largest landowner in Darjeeling. This boy, who would go on to be known as Rechuk Dewan, was being educated at Pemayangtse and his release from the monastery was obtained by Edgar.[14]

All the boys progress quickly, learning to read English and making rapid progress in mathematics within a few months. Three or four of them, writes ICS officer Sir William J. Herschel, "… wrote very good or thoroughly excellent hand, with a rapidity and grace (due to chalk and a board) which would have been satisfactory in a finished clerk. They would all write Tibetan in the formal and fluent hand."[15]

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11 Waller (2004: 193).
12 Waller (2004: 194).
13 Das (1969: 13).
14 Ibid.: 14.
15 Ibid.

Apart from the languages and arithmetic, the students were also taught carpentry and had in fact built the benches they sat on and the map-stands in the class themselves. Other activities they were engaged in included gardening and gymnastics. Das gave lessons on surveying to the boys from higher classes.[16]

The *Gyalsey*, Thutob Namgyal, was unable to enrol as he had to succeed to the throne on the death of his older half-brother, the Eight Chogyal of Sikkim Sidkyong Namgyal. Das writes that "Five fine looking youngmen (sons of Kabi, Karmi, Laso, Yangthang, Ringyon Kazis) took their admission in the school".[17]

The school was visited the following year by Lord Northbrook, the Viceroy of India. The annual grant for the school stood at Rs. 1,000.[18]



Staff and students of the Bhutia Boarding School, Darjeeling, 1888,
with Sarat Chandra Das standing in the back, third from left.
Ugyen Gyatsho is seated in the back row, fifth from right

16 Ibid.: 17.
17 Ibid.: 15.
18 Ibid.: 25.

Lama Ugyen Gyatsho along with Kazi Dawasamdup, Lobzang Chhoden and Rinzing Namgyal were some of the Sikkimese associated with the Bhutia Boarding School, Darjeeling, who would go on to have outstanding careers. While Kazi Dawasamdup became Sikkim's foremost man of letters, the other three, cultivated strong ties between British India and Sikkim, the definitive relationship for Sikkim in the period between the mid-19th century up to India's independence from the British yoke in 1947. They all lived through a momentous phase of Sikkimese history. A brief biography of Lama Ugyen Gyatsho is presented here.

LAMA UGYEN GYATSHO (1851–1915): SIKKIMESE 'PUNDIT'

Lama Ugyen Gyatsho was born at Yangang, South Sikkim, in 1851. He belonged to the Gensapa clan. His ancestors served at the time of the First and Second Chogyals, Phuntshog Namgyal and Tensung Namgyal respectively, for which services they were granted lands at Lingdam and Yangang in south Sikkim. These lands have been described by Deputy Commissioner of Darjeeling, J. Ware Edgar, writing in 1873, as "a fine forest of oak and chestnut".[19]

At the age of ten he joined the Pemayangtse monastery as a monk, where he studied Tibetan language and Buddhism for twelve years.

In 1872, he travelled to Tibet to bring back a set of Tengyur scriptures for the Pemayangtse monastery.[20] The next year, Lama Ugyen Gyatsho accompanied the Eighth Chogyal Sidkyong Namgyal to Darjeeling on a very historic visit to meet the Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal, Sir George Campbell in 1873 and, in the same year, assisted Deputy Commissioner of Darjeeling, Mr. J. W. Edgar, on a tour of Sikkim.

A year later, in 1874, Lama Ugyen Gyatsho was appointed Tibetan teacher at the newly established Bhutia Boarding School in Darjeeling.

He was later trained in surveying. He was to become one of the remarkable British-trained Indian spies, explorers and cartographers, the 'Pundits', who played a significant role in the mapping and exploration of Central Asia and the Himalayas during the "Great Game"[21] in the second

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19 Edgar (2005: 68).

20 *Lists of Leading Officials, Nobles and Personages in Bhutan, Sikkim and Tibet*. (1908: 5).

21 The Great Game was a power struggle between Britain and Russia for influence in Central Asia. In the case of Tibet, this can be seen as not a duel, but a three way fight for dominance as this was a region very much within the Chinese ambit of influence.

half of the 19th century. The pundits were immortalised in Rudyard Kipling's "Kim".[22]

In the year 1802, the Great Trigonometrical Survey was undertaken by the British in the Indian sub-continent. The goal was to map the whole of Central Asia, including the mighty Himalayas with scientific precision. By this time almost the whole of India had already been mapped. There were few big empty spaces on the map of the world. One such space was Tibet.

Mapping Tibet was difficult, both in terms of the geographic and climatic hurdles, but also because the Tibetans were hostile to outsiders. In came the Pundits, men such as Man Singh, Nain Singh Rawat, Sarat Chandra Das and Lama Ugyen Gyatsho. Prayer wheel and sextant in hand, these intrepid travellers, surveyors and spies helped the British make inroads into Tibet and gather information.

In 1878, the Pemayangtse monastery sent tributes to Lhasa and to the Tashilhunpo monastery in Shigatse. These tributes were to be delivered by Lama Ugyen Gyatsho. In this pretext, he also managed to arrange for an invitation from the Tashilhunpo monastery for Sarat Chandra Das to enrol as a student in the monastery. The monastery also made all the necessary arrangements, such as telling them about the different routes and informing the Dzongpöns (district chiefs) to help the travellers.[23]

Thus, in June of 1879, Das and Lama Ugyen Gyatsho left Darjeeling. Lama Ugyen Gyatsho was then "serving under the director of public instruction for Bengal, by whom he was lent to the Survey Department for the expedition referred to".[24]

They took with them one pocket sextant, one prismatic compass, two hypsometers, one thermometer, one field glass and one hundred and fifty rupees in cash. From Dzongri in West Sikkim, they skirted the boundary of Nepal and eventually crossed over into Tibet via the Chatangla Pass. This was a perilous journey. They went without food for three days, Lama Ugyen Gyatsho contracted bilious fever along the way and they had to bivouac in fox dens or on bare ground under open skies.

The two swiftly became foxhole friends, literally. Extracts from this journey penned by Sarat Chandra Das "How I Crossed the Jon-Tsang La Pass" can be found in Douglas Freshfield's *Round Kangchenjunga*.[25]

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22 In the novel, the character Hurree Chunder Mookerjee was modelled on Sarat Chandra Das.

23 Freshfield (1903: 309).

24 *The Geographical Journal* Vol. 4 (1894: 61-62).

25 Freshfield (1903: 310-324).

They remained in Tibet for six months, returning to Darjeeling with a large collection of Tibetan and Sanskrit texts. They returned through the Donkiala Pass into northern Sikkim. Sarat Chandra Das spent the whole of 1880 in Darjeeling poring over the information he had obtained.

In 1878, he collaborated with the Deputy Commissioner of Darjeeling, ethnologist and linguist, Major Thomas H. Lewin, to write an early textbook on Tibetan language, "A Manual of Tibetan". L.A. Waddell, who was then considered one of the foremost authorities on Tibet and Tibetan Buddhism and who later became Professor of Tibetan at University College, London, acknowledges the help of "Ur-gyän Gya-ts'ô, head of the Yang-gang monastery of Sikhim and a noted explorer of Tibet" in the preface of his book, *Buddhism and Lamaism of Tibet*.[26]

In 1879, the Deputy Commissioner of Darjeeling, Major Thomas Herbert Lewin's textbook on Tibetan language was published, written in collaboration with Ugyen Gyatsho. He acknowledges the latter in the preface to the book, 'a learned Lama from the monastery of Pemiongchi, with whom I have studied'.[27]

In November 1881, Sarat Chandra and Ugyen Gyatsho returned to Tibet, where they explored the Yarlung Valley and Lhasa. They also visited Jang Lachi, Sakya Jang and Lake Chomo Telthung, before returning to India in January 1883. It was after this mission that Sarat Chandra Das began initial works on his Tibetan-English dictionary. In both the missions, Ugyen Gyatsho acted as Das's secretary and surveyor. He had the language skills and was personally known in Tibet.[28]

In 1883, Ugyen Gyatsho, aged thirty-two, returned to Tibet for six months on independent exploration work making a complete survey of Yamdrok Lake, with his wife Choki.[29] From here he crossed the mountains and reached the Upper Manas River or Lobratsangpo and the Tigu Tso. These regions remained *terra incognita* to the outside world until then. At Shakhang Dzong he was placed under arrest, but managed to secure his release and ultimately made it to Lhasa.

Thus, as Col. H.C.B. Tanner, Deputy Superintendent, Survey of India reports in 14th of October 1884:

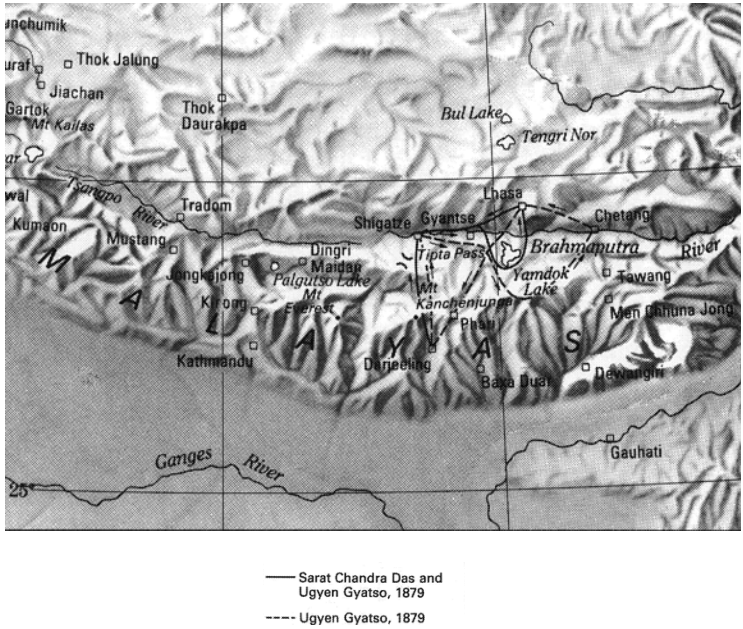
"Excellent Lama Ugyen Gyatcho has done a most extensive exploration of the country between Sikkim and Lhasa. His work will now be published, and will certainly reflect the greatest credit on him. He was engaged on his

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26 Waddell (1993: xii).
27 Lewin (1879: vii).
28 *The Geographical Journal* Vol. 4 (1894: 62).
29 O'Malley (1907: 197-213), Rhodes (2006: 9).

last exploration from the 9th June 1883, till 16th December 1883, and from the latter date till the end of October, in the Great Trigonometrical Office, Darjeeling, in working up his observations and plotting his traverses".[30]

These adventurous missions and the survey reports went a long way in building a complete map of these hitherto unmapped regions and served as the only reliable information available to the British about Tibet. Colonel Tanner, in 1887, reported about the accuracy of Ugyen Gyatsho's work and was of the opinion that "his work bore comparison with that of the best explorations in Tibet".[31]



Sarat Chandra Das and Lama Ugyen Gyatsho's journey, Waller (2004: 198)

The dynamics between Sarat Chandra and Ugyen Gyatsho during their adventures was thus observed by a colleague from the Survey of India: "the Lama was the harassed and hard-working surveyor: the Babu the light-hearted observer".[32] Sarat Chandra Das, when he was Deputy Inspector of Schools, Darjeeling, described Ugyen Gyatsho as, "A very honest and useful servant of Government".

30 *Rai Bahadur Lobzang Chhoden and Rai Bahadur Lama Ugyen Gyatcho: Service Records.*
31 *The Geographical Journal* Vol. 4 (1894: 62).
32 Holdich (1906: 250).

He was Chief Tibetan Interpreter during the Sikkim Expedition of 1888, a British military expedition to expel Tibetan forces from the Kingdom of Sikkim. He was described as "a very good Interpretor and a most intelligent man", by J.G. Ritchie, Deputy Commissioner, and he received a silver campaign medal.[33]

He assisted Sarat Chandra Das in bringing out his now well-known Tibetan-English dictionary. He was instrumental in the exploration of Tibet, and prepared the itinerary for another wonderful cartographer and explorer from Sikkim, Kinthup.[34]

The Geographical Journal notes: "Subsequently Lama Ugyen Gyatsho rendered some material help in the preparation of the manuscript narrative of a journey from Darjiling to Gyala Sindong, Tsari, and along the lower Sanpo, by another Tibetan, Kinthup, who had been sold into slavery, and kept a prisoner for nearly six years while conducting that exploration, and who has since received a gratuity of Rs. 3000 from Government. The Lama also assisted in drawing up an account of the Pama Koichen country, from the original manuscript of a Mongolian lama named Sarap Gyatsho."[35]

Macaulay describes him as, "Ugyen Gyatso… is the great man here (Yangang) - he owns the living, in fact, of the monastery".[36] Lama Ugyen Gyatsho quickly became a man of repute in Darjeeling.

He retired from his teaching position in 1893,[37] and was conferred the title of Rai Bahādur and granted Rs. 1,000, in October 1893, by the Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal, Antony Patrick MacDonnell, at The Shrubbery, summer residence of the Lieutenant-Governor, in recognition of his services to the empire.[38] He was also presented with a medal by the British Government for his services in exploration on the North East Frontier.[39]

He went on to hold many important offices in the Darjeeling district such as Sub-Inspector of Schools, Superintendent of Police, and was also a Deputy Magistrate and Deputy Collector, besides serving as manager of Kalimpong Khashmahals (communal forests) or Government Estate from

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33 Rhodes (2006: 12).

34 *Rai Bahadur Lobzang Chhoden and Rai Bahadur Lama Ugyen Gyatcho: Service Records.* For more information on the fantastic adventures of Kinthup, see Wangchuk and Zulca (2007: 150-154).

35 *The Geographical Journal* Vol. 4 (1894: 62).

36 Macaulay (1885: 3).

37 Rhodes (2006: 12).

38 *The Geographical Journal* Vol. 4 (1894: 61-62).

39 *Rai Bahadur Lobzang Chhoden and Rai Bahadur Lama Ugyen Gyatcho: Service Records*.

June 1895 till his retirement in 1910. Kalimpong was then the centre of the Government subdivision of Daling.[40]

In his capacity as Deputy Magistrate and Deputy Collector in the Darjeeling district, he was briefed in November of 1900 to settle some villages in the Ging area of Darjeeling,[41] which had been brought under tea cultivation by the Darjeeling Tea Company between 1860–1864.[42] Interestingly, in a display of great fortitude and foresight, Chogyal Thutob Namgyal made it clear that no trees were to be cut during the settling of villages.[43]

For his exemplary services Lama Ugyen Gyatsho was conferred the title of Dewan by the Chogyal in December 1901. In 1906, he was given judicial powers in the first class.[44] He was also known as Yangang Drönyer.[45]

He is credited with rebuilding the monastery at Ging, Darjeeling, and at his own expense, donating a large statue in the main prayer hall. This monastery is a branch of Pemayangtse monastery in Sikkim. It was first constructed c. 1728 in a different part of Darjeeling, Rishihat, before being moved to a location near St Andrews Church and eventually removed to Ging in 1879.[46]

He is also credited with securing for Pemayangtse monastery, bronze figures of Guru Rinpoche and his consorts. The murals in the Yangang monastery are also attributed to his patronage.[47]

Lama Ugyen Gyatsho divided his time between his home in Darjeeling, Yangang Villa at Bhutia Busti; Kalimpong, where he carried out his duty as manager of Kalimpong Khashmahals; and his ancestral home in Yangang, South Sikkim.[48] Stricken by rheumatism and heart disease in November 1909, Lama Ugyen Gyatsho was forced to retire the following year, on 15th of April 1910. He was under treatment at the Lowis Jubilee Sanitarium, Darjeeling.

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40 Graham (1905: 49-50).

41 SPA DA/AD/001/017, Council meeting of 29 November 1900.

42 O'Malley (1907: 74).

43 SPA DA/AD/001/017, Council meeting of 29 November 1900.

44 SPA DA/AD/001/046-047, Council meeting of 18 July 1906.
Judicial powers in the first class meant the power to try ordinary civil and criminal cases and fine up to Rs.100/- or imprison for one month in the Gangtok jail.

45 *The Royal History of Sikkim* (2021: 129).

46 Ibid.: 181-82.

47 *Rai Bahadur Lobzang Chhoden and Rai Bahadur Lama Ugyen Gyatcho: Service Records*.

48 Rhodes (2006: 12).

The Lama and his first wife Choki had no children and adopted one of Choki's brother's son, S.W. Laden La (1876–1936).[49] The Lama's second wife was Tokhang Changchub Dolma. He also had a common wife with his brother, Jorden Kazi, and in his will executed on the 2nd of Aril 1911, the Lama mentions one son, Bongthoop Kazi (another son had died) from this common wife. In the will the entire property is bequeathed to Bongthoop Kazi.[50]

However, this is in contradiction to other accounts and chronicles, such as D. Dahdul's *Sikkim – The Hidden Land of Rice*, where the Lama is supposed to have had no male issue. At any rate, after his death on the 22nd of May 1915,[51] the Yangang Estate was resumed by the Sikkim Durbar, and later leased to Rai Bahadur Sonam Topden of the Libing family.

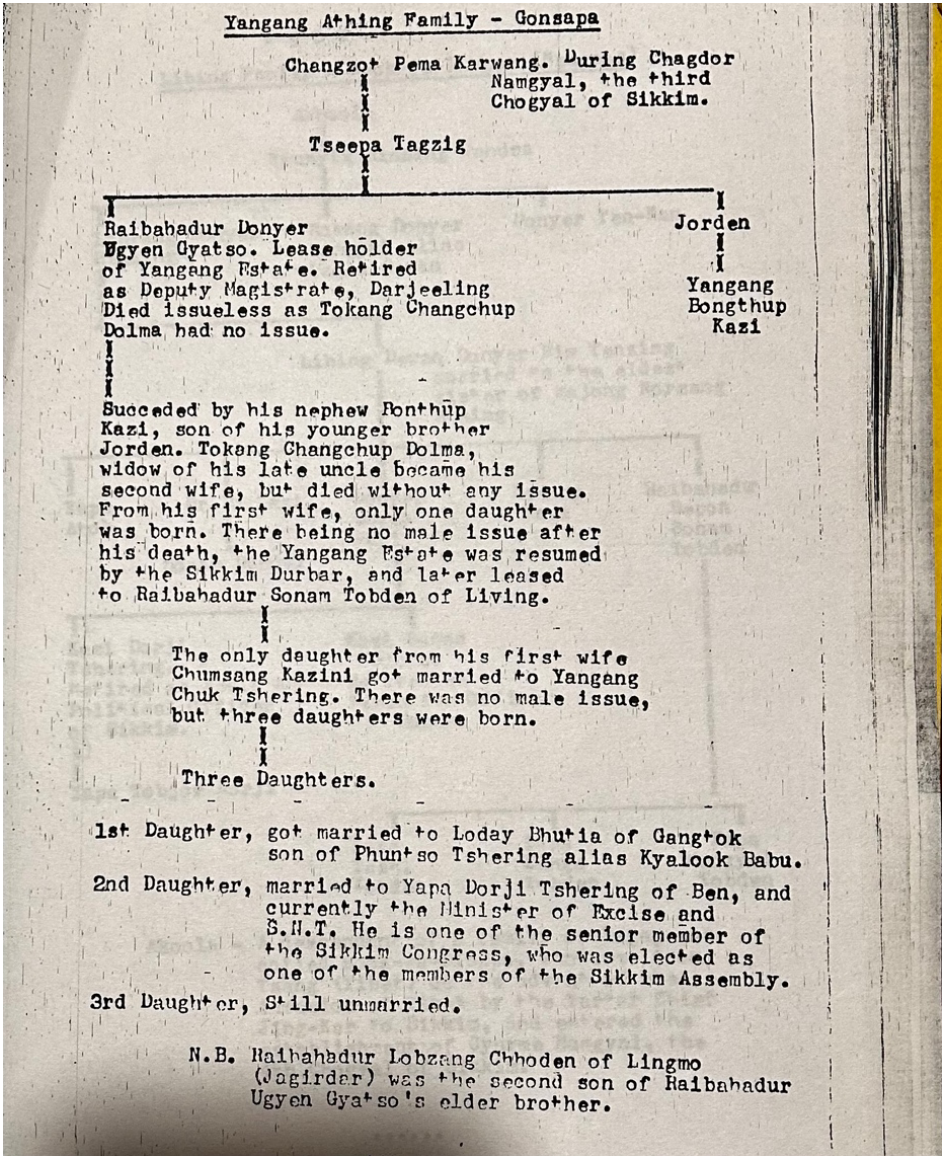
Lama Ugyen Gyatsho firmly believed that the establishment of good relations between the British and the Tibetans was in the interests of both parties, and consequently for Sikkim. Thus, under his influence, his relatives, Lobzang Chhoden of Lingmo and Rinzing Namgyal of Malling, were among the first Sikkimese boys to receive a European education at the Bhutia Boarding School, and go on to have careers within the British administration, while at the same time serving in the highest offices of the Sikkimese court.

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49 For more on this interesting figure read, Rhodes 2006 and the first article in this issue by Parjanya Sen.

50 *Rai Bahadur Lobzang Chhoden and Rai Bahadur Lama Ugyen Gyatcho: Service Records.*

51 Rhodes (2006: 32).



Yangang Athing Family - Gonsapa

Changzot Pema Karwang. During Chagdor Namgyal, the third Chogyal of Sikkim.

Tseepa Tagzig

Raibahadur Donyer Ugyen Gyatso. Lease holder of Yangang Estate. Retired as Deputy Magistrate, Darjeeling Died issueless as Tokang Changchup Dolma had no issue.

Succeded by his nephew Ponthup Kazi, son of his younger brother Jorden. Tokang Changchup Dolma, widow of his late uncle became his second wife, but died without any issue. From his first wife, only one daughter was born. There being no male issue after his death, the Yangang Estate was resumed by the Sikkim Durbar, and later leased to Raibahadur Sonam Tobden of Living.

Jorden

Yangang Bongthup Kazi

The only daughter from his first wife Chumsang Kazini got married to Yangang Chuk Tshering. There was no male issue, but three daughters were born.

Three Daughters.

1st Daughter, got married to Loday Bhutia of Gangtok son of Phuntso Tshering alias Kyalook Babu.

2nd Daughter, married to Yapa Dorji Tshering of Ben, and currently the Minister of Excise and S.N.T. He is one of the senior member of the Sikkim Congress, who was elected as one of the members of the Sikkim Assembly.

3rd Daughter, Still unmarried.

N.B. Raibahadur Lobzang Chhoden of Lingmo (Jagirdar) was the second son of Raibahadur Ugyen Gyatso's elder brother.

The Yangang family genealogy tree[52]

[52] Dahdul (1979)

CONCLUSION

The British Empire and British colonialism have come under considerable scrutiny in recent decades. As the young nations that emerged from the Empire have come of age, many hitherto unexplored, unexamined and uncomfortable facets of British rule are being examined more closely. This article examines one of the more positive aspects of the colonial experience in India. Students who received an education in the fine schools established and run by the Europeans, went on to have influential careers, not only in Sikkim, but also in Bhutan, Nepal and other parts of India.

However, even this educational legacy remains contested, since the end goal of educating colonial subjects was subjugation and pillaging of the same colonies. European colonial powers invoked the idea of "civilizing missions" to justify their imperial expansion between the 15th and 20th centuries. They used it in order to rule over non-European peoples and consume, in rapacious mouthfuls, the resources of Asia, Africa and other parts of the world in order to fuel their own economic development and industrialization. The Enlightenment French philosopher Marquis de Condorcet called it a "holy duty" for Europeans to help non-Europeans civilize themselves.[53] European intellectual context that viewed non-European societies as "backward", would persist well into the 20th century. It found expression in Rudyard Kipling's poem, *The White Man's Burden*, wherein he waxes lyrical about the European peoples' moral responsibility to "civilize" the "new-caught, sullen people, / Half devil and half child", as he puts it.[54]

The Bhutia Boarding School in Darjeeling was established under the pretext of giving the sons of leading Sikkimese families a formal western-style education, but was really a training centre for surveyors who could help the British open up Tibet to trade. Nevertheless, the school played an important role with regard to education in these hills, as well as in shaping Sikkim's tumultuous relationship with the British Empire. It represented a significant pedagogical departure in Sikkim from traditional monastic rote learning to secular surveying.

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53 Condercet (1795: 238).

54 Kipling (1903).

The school probably functioned till 1891 when it was merged with another school, the Darjeeling Zilla School to form the still extant Darjeeling High School.[55]

Even less is known about the Bhutia Boarding School in Gangtok. This school was probably established in 1906, and within a few years, there were 46 boys in this school by 1908, of whom 10 were day-scholars.

It was set on a marvelous spot with a big wide lawn facing Gangtok town. It was once, briefly, occupied by a garrison of two companies, under the charge of the Political Officer. Kazi Dawasamdup was the first headmaster of this school where he also taught English. Among Kazi Dawasamdup's students were the future Chogyal Tashi Namgyal,[56] Aphur Yongden[57] and S. Mahinda Thero.[58]



Bhutia Boarding School, Gangtok, circa 1913

55 Among the alumnus of the Darjeeling Zilla School was the diplomat and interpreter Rai Bahadur Norbu Dhondup OBE, CBE (1904–1947).

56 Khangsarpa, Gompa Namgyal, p. 6.

57 Aphur Yongden (1899–1955) was the travel companion, co-author and adopted son of the French explorer and writer Alexandra David-Neel.

58 S. Mahinda Thero (1901–1951) was a poet and an author who participated in Sri Lankan independence movement. Born Pempa Thondup, though more commonly known in Sikkim as Sarki Tshering, S. Mahindra Thero was Kazi Dawasamdup's younger half-brother. For a biography of S. Mahindra Thero, see Wangchuk (2008).

Boys from the Bhutia Boarding School were nominated by the Political Officer for scholarships to the Darjeeling High School. After graduating some of the boys went on for further education to Indian institutions such as the Medical School at Patna.

The school had a playground, and the Civil Hospital Assistant at Gangtok visited the school weekly for medical check-ups. The Maharaja took a keen interest in the school.[59] The boys were taught Tibetan, English, Hindi, History, Geography and Mathematics. Lepcha was later added as a second language.

The Bhutia Boarding School was converted into a High School later and called the Sir Tashi Namgyal High School, affiliated to Calcutta University. Retired Army Major Mr. C. E. Dudley, a veteran of the First World War, was the first headmaster of the high school. This high school then became the Tashi Namgyal Academy in 1959, still one of Sikkim's premier educational institutes.[60]

There was also a Nepali Boarding School. This school had 61 boys on its roll by 1908, including four students (day-scholars) who were the sons of the then deceased Taksari Chandrabir Pradhan of Rhenock.[61] The following year, one of the boys was sent by the Durbar to Patna for medical training.[62] The subjects taught here included, English, Hindi, History, Geography, Mathematics and Drawing.[63]

In a Council Meeting in 1912–13, it was decided that all landlords should send at least half the number of their sons of school-going age for English education. A school for daughters of the Kazis was opened the same year in Gangtok. There were five students, and the curriculum included Tibetan, Hindi and knitting. The school received a grant-in-aid from the Sikkim Durbar.[64] The following year, a hostel was also constructed at a cost of Rs. 1,000.[65]

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59 *Administrative Report of the Sikkim State for 1908–09*. Calcutta: Government of India Press. 1909.

60 https://www.tashinamgyalacademy.com

61 Taksari Chandrabir was a powerful Newar merchant-landlord.

62 *Administrative Report of the Sikkim State for 1909–10*. Calcutta: Government of India Press. 1910.

63 Ibid.

64 *Administrative Report of the Sikkim State for 1912–13*. Calcutta: Government of India Press. 1913.

65 *Administrative Report of the Sikkim State for 1913–14*. Calcutta: Government of India Press. 1914.

In addition to these were thirteen day schools and eight night schools established and maintained by the Church of Scotland Mission. There was even a school in Lachung, North Sikkim.[66]

Lama Ugyen Gyatsho led a rich life and influenced many people, and was pivotal in Sikkimese relations with the British Empire. When the Sikkimese royal family was held under house-arrest at Ging monastery, Darjeeling in 1892, Lama Ugyen Gyatsho was one of the few people allowed to meet them. Ugyen Gyatsho was responsible for their wellbeing, including buying their rations.[67]

The next year, the royal family was moved and detained at Kurseong for two years by the British. Ugyen Gyatsho again, was sent twice a month to give the Chogyal his allowance.[68] Even after the relationship between Sikkim and the British improved, Lama Ugyen Gyatsho was detailed by the British to look after the royal family. Apart from supplying rations and following their orders, he "presented Their Highnesses with clothing also, and each year he never failed in presenting them with the customary summer and winter offerings, always with a willing attitude. While they were living in Kurseong he also instructed Their Highnesses in the methods of astrology and numerology".[69]

Thus, Lama Ugyen Gyatsho was able to honour both his loyalty to his king and his duty to his British paymasters. A less adroit man in his place may have made matters worse for Sikkim, especially given the character of Claude White.

The grim aftermath of Sarat Chandra Das and Lama Ugyen Gyatsho's missions to Tibet also has to be understood in the light of the colonial enterprise. The British were interested in prying open Tibet like an oyster. They sent spies such as Sarat Chandra Das and Lama Ugyen Gyatsho. The latter developed a network of Tibetan peoples without whose help and collaboration, the British would not have been any the wiser about their northern neighbours.

Later, when the Tibetan government found out that their own people had betrayed the country's isolationist policy and helped outsiders, these people were charged with sedition and severely punished. They were thrown into prisons. Some were executed, including the respected abbot of Drongtse monastery, Lama Sengchen Dorjechan, who was executed by

66 Ibid.
67 *The Royal History of Sikkim* (2021: 399).
68 Ibid.: 408.
69 Ibid.: 428.

being drowned in the Tsangpo River on July 1887.[70] The governor of Gyantse, the Phala Dahpon, and his wife, were thrown into prisons for life. Their properties were confiscated and their retainers were mutilated and left to die.[71]

The suffering was eventually extended to the whole of Tibet, when, as a result of the survey and information gathered by the pundits, the 1903–04 military expedition led by Francis Younghusband, entered Tibet, looted, humiliated and killed thousands.



Lama Ugyen Gyatsho with his nephew Lobzang Chhoden to his right, and Mazong Lön Norzang to his left. Standing behind is Kazi Dawasamdup

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MARY SCOTT AND THE MAHARAJA OF SIKKIM

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Mary Scott (1877–1964)

INTRODUCTION

Mary Scott, who worked as a missionary in the Eastern Himalayas from 1905 to 1953, had a strong working relationship with Maharajah Tashi Namgyal, throughout her years leading the Scottish Universities Mission (SUM) in Sikkim (192–39). But what gave her the impetus to leave the relative security of the thriving Kalimpong community which she had served for 18 years, in favour of Sikkim, where the Mission was known to be challenging?

In Kalimpong and Darjeeling the Eastern Himalayan Mission had a close working relationship with the Government of Bengal, effectively providing 'outsourced' education and health services to these districts. Yet in Sikkim, while the SUM had introduced Western medicine and education in the 1880s, its role by 1923 was altogether less clear.

In April 1923 Mary left a strong, well-staffed missionary community in Kalimpong to become the only British missionary in the kingdom, running 12 'parishes' across a state with very few roads, making it inherently difficult to engage and cohere the church communities. Since 1889, the role of resident missionary in Sikkim had been carried out by men tough enough to endure the physical and mental demands of touring by pony and on foot. Added to this, the Sikkim state was now providing educational and modern medical care, with government employment offering greater social status than employment with the Mission.[1]

We will explore how Mary negotiated these inherent challenges by building a strong relationship with the Maharaja and his family; a relationship that came to represent a friendship, and one which gave Mary licence to make changes that came to have a lasting impact on Sikkim society and its religious life.



With the Maharani and children of a Mission Junior School, possibly Vok
(from the archives of the late Rev. C.T. Pazo)

[1] Alex Mckay. 'The Indigenisation of Western Medicine in Sikkim', *Bulletin of Tibetology* 2004, Volume 40, pp. 25-47.

SITUATION UP TO 1923

The SUM had first been allowed a resident missionary in Sikkim when Britain established its protectorate there in 1889. Up to that point, despite repeated requests by Reverend William Sutherland, the Maharaja had not signalled his approval.[2] Native missionary workers were instead trained at the SUM Institute in Kalimpong, led by Sutherland, before their deployment to Sikkim. Scottish missionaries were allowed in as visitors only.

However, when J.C. White, the first British Political Officer, arrived in 1889, he swiftly approved residence for a European missionary in Sikkim. By then SUM provision of medical dispensaries and schools—the origins of public services in Sikkim—had expanded significantly, so a central headquarters within the kingdom made logical sense. Yet the conditions were constrained: the missionary could not live in the capital and was prohibited from evangelising except within the churches.[3] A mission house was established at Chidam by John Macara, the first resident missionary.

Despite these restrictions, in May 1894 Sutherland and Macara made the risky move of entering Tibet at Rinchingong from Bhutan to evangelise. They were quickly apprehended by a Chinese guard, narrowly escaping death at the hands of angry locals. Their action also incensed White, who at the time was negotiating carefully with the Tibetan authorities to open a trading post at Yatung. The Government of Bengal held in question the missionaries' permission to be in Sikkim, noting '*…when they are once there, it is difficult, if not impossible, to control their future movements*'.[4]

In the years ahead it was no secret that the Eastern Himalayan Mission continued to have designs on Tibet. In March 1903, when Mary Scott wrote from Mertoun House in the Scottish Borders, to Sutherland in Edinburgh requesting the loan of any books on the Eastern Himalayas, the reply from John McMurtrie openly stated: '*I'll send you two books on Tibet, which our Kalimpong Christians are seeking to enter'*.[5] Such ambition must have given White and successive Political Officers a continued cause for suspicion.

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2 Cindy L. Perry, *Nepali Around the World: Emphasising Nepali Christians of the Himalayas*, Ekta Books, Kathmandu, 1997, p.102.

3 Cindy Perry, op. cit. p. 88.

4 Memorandum dated 4 June 1894, from H.J.S. Cotton, Chief Secretary to the Government of Bengal Political Department.

5 Letter dated 13 March 1903, from John McMurtrie, Convenor of the Church of Scotland Foreign Mission Committee, to the Hon. Mary Scott.

Added to that, when White introduced a system for taxation, the Durbar could start opening state-run schools and medical outlets across the kingdom, watering down the Mission's value to the state. In November 1920, Tashi Namgyal established an Education Department, which included oversight of the SUM schools.[6]

In 1922, while the Scottish mission had 12 churches operating across southern, eastern, and western Sikkim, yet it still lacked a formal place of Christian worship in Gangtok. The matter had been 'live' since 1907, when a substantial sum of money had been raised by the Scottish universities to fund some form of memorial to the late Edward Taylor (1866–1906), who had died from blackwater fever while serving in the Duars. A petition for land for a church was first raised with the Maharaja in 1909. He had delegated the decision to his Durbar. Yet while the petition was not flatly dismissed, neither was permission fully granted.[7]

The Mission put the Maharaja in a difficult position. As 'Protector of the faith' he was compelled to prevent an untrammelled surge in Christianity, yet he knew that to the south, in Kalimpong and Darjeeling, the Eastern Himalayan Mission was helping to shape a modern, civilised, diverse society that offered people modern medicine and excellent schools, including education and industrial training for girls and women.

MCKEAN'S EXPERIENCE

At the outset of his tenure in Sikkim, William ('W.G.') McKean had sought to move the Scottish Universities Mission from Chidam to Gangtok. In September 1901 he wrote to White about his request, proposing that he would open a Chinese-led carpentry school in Gangtok for local boys, followed by training in other trades. He also offered to make available the Mission bungalow at Chidam to accommodate one of the Government's proposed District Hospitals.[8] White rejected McKean's request.

McKean had arrived the previous year, sent by Edinburgh University Missionary Association. In Scotland he had been serving as an ordained

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6 Dick B. Dewan, *Education in Sikkim: An Historical Retrospect*, Tender Buds' Academy, Pedong, 2012, p. 215.

7 Proceedings of the Government of India Foreign Department, August 1911 – 'Proposal to erect a Christian Church at Gangtok'.

8 Letter dated 13 September 1901, from W.G. McKean to J.C. White regarding the possibility of moving the Scottish Universities Mission to Gangtok, and the establishment of a carpentry and metalwork school.

kirk minister,[9] and appears to have had no previous experience of India or the Eastern Himalayas. So, it seems reasonable to suspect that he may have lacked deeper affinity for local customs and political sensitivities, and that his primary aim was evangelism and bringing local people into the Christian fold—including Tibetans entering Sikkim on the trade route along the Chumbi Valley. In 1909, while on furlough, McKean provided St Andrews University Missionary Association with '*a very clear description of the strategic importance of Sikkim from its geographical position. He described the various races of people, their customs and religious habits, and pointed to some of the difficulties that the missionary had to face*'.[10]

For McKean, the difficulties had become apparent soon after arriving in Sikkim. In August 1903 he reported to the Church of Scotland in Edinburgh that, despite the sharp growth of the kingdom's population due to an influx of people from Nepal, '*…our position in Sikkim after quarter of a century is little short of ridiculous*', with reference to the low number of Christians. He reported that the Scandinavian Mission was preparing '*to occupy a portion of Sikkim*', whereas in his mind the work should be undertaken by one missionary organisation only.[11]

There were further setbacks ahead, as McKean battled to consolidate the SUM, beginning with the stalled request for a church in Gangtok which ran from 1907 to 1912. Difficulties with management of schools followed. In March 1914, the Scottish Universities Mission sub-council, with McKean in the chair at Allan Manse, Kalimpong, noted a new standing order that the sanction of 'Sikkim State' was now required before opening a school. The Durbar had just refused the reopening of Namthang school, and Turuk school had to be closed because the landlord had refused permission for the teacher to continue teaching. The committee noted that '*This may be traced to the same influence as led to the closing of the first school.*'[12]

Later, in 1917, letters from McKean show him desperately seeking to purchase wool, to fulfil orders for carpets from the new weaving school, because the Durbar had imposed monopolistic control of the purchase of wool on Tibetan traders in Sikkim.

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9 Article reporting on W.G. McKean 'pleading the cause of foreign missions', *The Berwick Journal*, 7 June 1900.

10 Extract from the St Andrews Missionary Association minute book – '*Reverend William McKean on Work in the Universities Mission Field*', St Mary's College, 19 January 1909.

11 Letter dated 2 August 1903, from W.G. McKean to John McMurtrie, Convenor of the Church of Scotland Foreign Mission Committee.

12 Minutes of the Scottish Universities Mission Sub-Council, 10 March 1914.

McKean left Sikkim in 1920, for a new role in Kurseong. Yet in early 1923, when the Christians in Gangtok were lobbying again for a proper church, he felt compelled to advise the Foreign Mission Council: '*A church building of any size in Gangtok has never been necessary… Now, the small communities of European and Indian Christians have very much decreased, to about half a dozen and thirty respectively, and there is no community left for whom the expenditure of so considerable a sum would be justified.*'[13]

With the post having lain empty for three years, it was in this unpromising situation that Mary Scott submitted her offer to fill the post—temporarily, until a suitable man could be found.

MARY'S WORK BEFORE 1923

There were stark contrasts between Mary and her predecessors in Sikkim, the most fundamental being her gender, helping to seal her reputation with the Maharaja as remarkable. Further she had been home-schooled, and was neither ordained nor formally qualified. Despite these shortcomings, Albert Craig writes of her arrival in Sikkim, '*She was welcomed by the State authorities, for by this time she was a well-known and highly respected personality*'.[14]

Mary had attended Deaconess House in Edinburgh for two years from 1895.[15] This new institution prepared young women for work in either the 'Home Missions' in Scotland or the Foreign Missions. The curriculum included 'House-to-house visitation', 'Clinical instruction in the art of sick nursing', and 'Systemic bible instruction'.[16] It was also intended as preparation for the 'Zenana missions', the system for getting female missionaries into Indian households to provide medical care and education to those women and girls held in purdah.

Her belief in the principles of Zenana became apparent in her voluntary work for the Zenana Association of St Boswells, in the Scottish Borders, of which Mary became secretary in 1903. This work primarily helped to finance Women's Guild projects overseas, and it was at this time that she

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[13] Letter dated 5 February 1923 from Rev. W.G. McKean to William MacLachlan, Secretary of the Foreign Mission Committee.

[14] Albert Craig, *A Scot in Sikkim* (1984), The Board of World Mission and Unity; section entitled 'Sikkim – the Challenge.

[15] Albert Craig, *A Scot in Sikkim* (1984), The Board of World Mission and Unity; section entitled 'Childhood and Preparation'.

[16] *The Church of Scotland Yearbook*, 1896, pp. 24-27.

became acquainted with the work Dr and Katharine Graham. From the moment of her arrival in Kalimpong with the Grahams in February 1905, she was involved with teaching women in handicrafts at the Industrial Training School. In September 1905, she started a morning class in reading and the bible at the Training School, which proved popular.[17] From 1908 Dr Graham appointed her to run 'Home Industries House', providing accommodation in Kalimpong for women and girls attending the school from further afield.

Hereafter, Mary devoted much of her time up to 1923 to teaching, superintending and managing the Training School and the Girls School. Both were growing at speed, and Mary also began visiting hill villages around the district, to promote these opportunities for self-development. Albert Craig quotes her as saying "*All the odd jobs came to me. When other people were ill or away, I had to fill in*", but also that '*She became very fond of travelling in the district around Kalimpong where she was often sent to bring girls for training in school or in hospital*'.[18]

Mary's work among the women of the region grew in profile. James Nicoll Oglivie, a Foreign Mission Council official visiting in 1922, observed, '*No one comes closer to the life of the villagers than she. The women and the girls of the hills rejoice to see her coming. She is their proved and trusted friend*'.[19]

Alongside this, Mary became known for establishing medical camps around the district at times of epidemic and pandemic, her most recognised achievements being during the Spanish Flu pandemic of 1918–19. For this, she was decorated with the Kaisar i-Hind medal in the 1920 New Year Honours list.

Evidence suggests that Mary was known to the ruling classes in Sikkim long before she volunteered for the Mission. As early as February 1909, she had visited Gangtok with Katherine Graham and her daughters, where they visited the new Lace School and were presented with a hearth rug from the Maharani.[20] Later, on an excursion to Sikkim in early 1916, Mary's travelling companion Dr Constance Cousins writes of being welcomed into the home of the Kazi at Temi by dint of '*Miss Scott's aristocratic parentage*', such that '*they feel they can treat her as an equal*'.[21]

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17 Minutes of the Kalimpong Mission Council, 10 February 1906.

18 Albert Craig, *A Scot in Sikkim* (1984); section entitled 'Kalimpong: 1905–1923'.

19 J. N. Ogilvie, *An Indian Pilgrimage*, William Blackwood and Sons, 1922, p.120.

20 Letter dated 15 February 1909, from Katharine Graham to Dr J.A. Graham.

21 Letter dated 8 January 1916, from Constance Cousins in Namchi to 'My Dear Family'.

MARY'S FAMILY BACKGROUND

We believe that Mary's family background informed the Maharaja's decision to grant her residence in Gangtok. In June 1939, when working on residence arrangements for Mary's successor, Gavin Fairweather, the Eastern Himalayan Mission Council was reminded by the Durbar that '*Miss Scott was temporarily permitted in 1923 to stay in Gangtok on certain terms and conditions, and mainly in consideration of her friendship with His Highness the Maharaja and purely personal grounds*'.[22]

There were arguable similarities in social class between the families of Mary and the Maharaja. The Namgyals had ruled Sikkim for 11 generations, a dynasty dating back to the mid-17th century. Likewise, Mary's father Walter was descended from the Earls of Marchmont and Lords Polwarth, lineages dating back to the 1690s, with family members often involved in politics, public life, the church and good causes. Mary's maternal great grandfather, the 8th Lord Aberdeen, had served as Prime Minister of the United Kingdom from 1852 to 1855. This contrasted starkly with her middle-class, ordained or professionally qualified male predecessors.

By good fortune the Hepburne Scott family also appears to have been known personally to Florence Bailey, mother of Frederick Bailey, Political Officer in Sikkim from 1921–28, by dint of Edinburgh society circles.[23] We assume that as close adviser to the Maharaja, this connection enabled Bailey to provide further reassurance of Mary's reliability when consulted.

RESIDENCE IN GANGTOK

We deduce that Mary, who in 1915 had chosen to move from the Mission Compound in Kalimpong to live among local people in the bazaar, knew the inherent challenges with Temi. She had visited the mission house on a visit in 1916 to Sikkim with Constance Cousins, who had herself reported to her parents, '*We did not enjoy the Temi part of our holiday quite as much as the rest… The manse is in such a lonely position, no bazaar within seven miles, and though it is open country in a sense, it has these cold damp*

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[22] Minutes of the Eastern Himalayan Mission Council, 16th June 1939, regarding '*an intimation from the Sikkim Durbar*' on residential arrangements for Mr and Mrs Gavin Fairservice in Sikkim.

[23] Letter from Frederick Bailey to his mother, dated 27th March 1923.

forests above it. I can't think how they [the McKeans] *stand it. There are five Christians only*'.[24]

Consequently, when Mary made her proposal in December 1922, the Scottish Universities sub-council noted, '*The Council… welcome an offer from Miss Scott to work for a year at least provided suitable arrangements can be made*'.[25]

While Mary's permit to reside in Gangtok was eventually issued by Frederick Bailey, we understand that she had already discussed these arrangements with the Maharaja. By contrast, McKean's failed application for residence in Gangtok in 1901 had been made to the Political Officer. Bailey reported to his mother in a letter dated 27th March 1923, '*I think Mary Scott is going to live in Gangtok for her mission work. They are looking for a house for her*'. We conclude from this that Bailey was not consulted initially over Mary's residence.

For the next 18 years Mary was subject to the same terms and conditions issued to her by Bailey in early March 1923.[26] This included applying to the Political Officer for a residence permit every six months, for His Highness to consider. Her residence could therefore never be taken for granted, and it is assumed that her movements and actions were monitored.

Mary's reputation in Sikkim

More than just living in Gangtok, Mary saw that a central location in the capital for the Mission House would be vital for impact. Soon after arriving on 5 April 1923, she moved from the house to which she was first allocated, to another—Mazong Kothi[27]—carefully chosen for its proximity to the main road, the Royal Palace, the bazaar, and the European community.[28] This contrasted starkly with McKean, who had felt compelled to impose a colonial-style bungalow and outbuildings on the landscape at Temi.

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[24] Letter as per footnote 21.

[25] Minutes of the Scottish Universities Mission Sub-Council, 26 December 1922.

[26] Sikkim Agency Office permit to reside in Gangtok, signed by F.M. Bailey on 3 March 1923.

[27] John A. Ardussi, Anna Balikci Denjongpa and Per K. Sørensen, *The Royal History of Sikkim: A Chronicle of the House of Namgyal*, Serindia Publications, Chicago, 2021, p.373.

[28] Letter dated 15 January 1924, from Mary Scott to Mr McLachlan, secretary of the Foreign Mission Council.

In her new house, Mary held a Christmas party in 1923 for over 150 people, demonstrating her capacity to bring people together from all parts of Gangtok society. The Maharaja and Maharani were invited, and attended bringing rugs, cups, and a gramophone to 'help the party', along with local people and resident Europeans. There was a Christmas tree, Christmas carols were sung and '…*The gospel message rang out clear & plain, even if it was very brief*'. Preparation and service of the food was carried out so as to avoid caste prejudice among other guests.[29]



With visitors at Mazong Kothi, where Gangtok Girls School had reached bursting point in the early 1930s

Throughout her time in Sikkim—in Gangtok, when touring in the district, and later when back in Kalimpong—Mary took to wearing local dress. This signalled her affinity for local culture, and her desire to work as an integral part of society, rather than to impose alien church values. This contrasted with her predecessors in the role, and her colleagues in Kalimpong. For all their sensitivity and care for the native communities, the missionaries typically wore Church of Scotland ecclesiastical dress as they went about their work, while living in the demarcated Mission Compound.

[29] Letter as per footnote 28, dated 15 January 1924.

There was similar methodology in Mary's approach to engaging people as she toured the district. While her predecessors had engaged Christian families through church activity, she sought '*...to visit each Christian family in their own home, and thus get to know them better than by merely meeting them at services*'.[30] She undertook her first tour in June 1923, just two months after arriving in the Kingdom. On this occasion she spent just a night in each 'parish'; thereafter she would spend up to a week at each, seeking to understand what the local people required. Despite the physical demands of touring, she continued this practice, despite her cardiac problems, until leaving Sikkim.



At Vok, wearing her standard garb for district touring, a Lepcha *dumvun*
(from the archives of the late Rev. C.T. Pazo)

[30] Letter as per footnote 28, dated 15 January 1924.

In time, Mary further demonstrated her value to the Maharaja by using her experience in providing medical relief to his kingdom. During a bout of Kala Azar in 1936, for example, when she was instrumental in setting-up a medical camp at Namchi for the Civil Surgeon, Dr Hendricks, she informed His Highness: '*Nothing gives me greater satisfaction than to be able to help the poor in trouble, and I hope to be able to do this either in the district or at K.A.* [Kala Azar] *centres from time to time, and as I go about my own work throughout the year.*'[31]

FRIENDSHIP WITH THE MAHARAJA

For these and other reasons, the Maharaja's trust in Mary deepened as he recognised her value to his own agenda to develop Sikkim and enhance its relations with the wider region. In 1925 he invited her to accompany him and the Maharani on a regional tour of the Eastern Himalayas.[32]

Correspondence between the Mission House and Royal Palace, that might otherwise have documented their unfolding relations, seems hard to come by, but various sources offer colourful glimpses into their friendship through the 1920s. A letter from Lt Col Bailey to his mother tells of lunch at the Royal Palace with the Maharaja, the Maharani, and 'Miss Scott' on Tuesday 6th November 1923. In early July 1927, while at Humbie House in Scotland, she writes to congratulate the Maharaja on the birth of his third daughter, also describing in detail how she had travelled to Richmond, North Yorkshire, to watch the total solar eclipse of 29 June; the Maharaja's reply includes '*We hope you will be back in Gangtok* [in December] *and we will have the pleasure of enjoying your company in the snow*'. In 1928, back in Gangtok, when the Maharaja had sent 'a plate of fish' down to Mazong Kothi, Mary thanks him by letter ('*They will make a nice variety in my diet*'), enclosing a Scottish novel set in the 17th century, partly at Inverary in the West of Scotland, and explaining she had stayed there while on furlough. In September 1930 Mary returns 18 handkerchiefs to His Highness on which her pupils have embroidered his initials, inviting him to afternoon tea at Mazong Kothi with his two sons, to meet her friends Mr and Mrs Francon Williams, who are visiting from the Duars.[33] Between

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[31] Letter 15 September 1936, from Mary Scott to the Maharaja, written from 'Kala Azar Camp'.

[32] Letter dated 4 May 1925, from Mr McLachlan, secretary of the Foreign Mission Council, to Mary Scott, regarding '*your tour as the guest of their Highnesses*'.

[33] Drawn from a series of letters, dated in the 1920s, between Tashi Namgyal and Mary Scott, British Library Endangered Archives Programme (EAP 880, Sikkim Palace Archives).

these events she sometimes acted as hostess for the Maharaja at the Palace,[34] and even provided instruction in Scottish reeling (country dancing) at Palace functions.[35]

Bailey's letters to his mother also indicate that Mary was a frequent visitor to The Residence, for meals, overnight stays, and when ill. He relates how on Christmas Day 1927, Mary secured a radio from the Maharaja and tried to tune into a church service in Calcutta.

Such details suggest that Mary had a natural affinity for life at the Palace. Combined with her close association with the Political Officers, this created a firm bedrock of trust with the Maharaja. In turn this increased her latitude as a missionary, beginning with education for girls.

Education for girls

In contrast to Kalimpong and Darjeeling districts, where girls' schools had been running for over 30 years, Sikkim had no such schools. An attempt by the Maharaja in 1912 to create a school for his daughters and those of his Kazis had failed due to a lack of skilled teachers.[36] So from the moment of her arrival in April 1923, Mary, with 18 years' experience of education in Kalimpong, could only have offered them hope. Female education was integral to a progressive state.

Mary started Gangtok Girls School in late 1923 with one teacher and two girls, Himadri Mala Thapa and Pabitra Mala Thapa, rising to 45 by 1926. Writing to supporters of the Mission in June 1926, she stated that this was a response to many requests when she arrived in Gangtok, from people seeking a teacher for their girls.[37] However, given her experience, it is hard to believe that she had not seen the opportunity before approaching the Maharaja on the matter of her residence—her pupils in Kalimpong had included girls sent from Sikkim across the border to be educated. However, in the same letter, she explained that, for now, she was keeping the school small and aimed at the daughters of '*leaders and land-owners in the state*'.

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[34] Albert Craig, *A Scot in Sikkim*, The Board of World Mission and Unity, 1984.

[35] Detail related orally on 31 May 2025 by James Hepburne Scott (1947-2025), Mary's great great nephew.

[36] Anira Phipon Lepcha, 'Women's Education and Mary Scott in Sikkim', *Adroitic Research Journal*, Volume 4, July-September 2017.

[37] Letter dated 21 June 1926, from Mary Scott to 'Friends', namely financial sponsors of the Scottish Universities Mission, requesting an additional £100 per annum for Gangtok Girls School.

It is evident that Mary soon recognised that the fast-growing school was strengthening her goodwill with the Maharaja and his Durbar. On seeing in 1926 an advert in *Life and Work* magazine for an ordained medical missionary for Sikkim, she wrote to the Foreign Mission Council: '*There is a possibility that I hardly like to assume it as a probability, that I might be allowed to stay on in Gangtok & continue the work even if you send a man to Temi; because they value the girls school I have opened here*'.[38]



Leaving Mazong Kothi, most likely for an official engagement at The Residency or Royal Palace

[38] Letter dated 3 May 1926, from Mary Scott to William MacLachlan, Secretary of the Foreign Mission Committee.

The school fulfilled a need in Sikkim, but there remained another need for the growing Christian community: the establishment of a church in Gangtok, as a headquarters for the Presbyterian Church in Sikkim. The Maharaja was rightly insistent that the church should be for local people, which Mary recognised needed strong local leadership.

C.T. Pazo

While still in Kalimpong Mary had met Chhotuk Tsering ('C.T.') Pazo, born in 1898 in Namthang, South Sikkim, to non-Christian Lepcha parents. Pazo was sent to the Mission junior school in Namthang, South Sikkim, where he soon embraced Christianity and was baptised in 1909. He was the first student in the region to matriculate in Tibetan, which he then taught at the SUMI from 1920. Recognising his talent, Mary had encouraged him to study Divinity and pursue ordination. He came to Gangtok in 1927, when Mary appointed him to run the Girls School while she was on furlough. By this time he was married to Chyokit Lepcha, with a son, Passang Obed, born in 1924, to be joined by a daughter, Mary Asmit, in 1929.[39] Pazo was ordained in Kalimpong in February 1928, becoming pastor of Sikkim church.[40] He led Sunday services in Mazong Kothi, and became responsible for administration and visitation across all congregations in the state.

As Pazo progressed to becoming superintendent of the Sikkim mission in 1948, the Maharaja's trust in him, and in the Mission, was evidenced in his involvement in Sikkim public life, including as a member of various educational and government boards, and latterly on the Sikkim State Council from 1959–69 and 1972–73. His eldest grandson, Arthur, today recalls there came a point when the Maharaja held weekly audiences with Pazo to discuss religious matters.[41] Cindy Perry asserts his affinity for

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[39] Interview on 28 November 2025 with Arthur Pemba Pazo, eldest son of Passang Obed, on Pazo family history. After the death of his wife in the mid-1930s, C.T. Pazo married again and had two more children, Alfred Rubzee (b.1937) and Helen Rose (b.1938). From Pazo's four children were born eleven grandchildren. The eldest, Passang, a distinguished career forester, become an elder of the Church of North India in Gangtok. In the present day, Arthur, the eldest son of Passang, is a volunteer in charge of the Sunday English Service at the church co-founded by his grandfather.

[40] Brief biographical pamphlet of the life Chhotuk Tsering Pazo published by Sikkim Church on his retirement, Darjeeling: JJP Press, 1976.

[41] Arthur Pazo interview.

Tibetan language and culture was an important factor in this, as well as his native roots in Sikkim.[42] To Mary, Pazo had appeared to have perfect credentials for the role.

In the early 1930s, however, the focus for Pazo and Mary was to consolidate Christianity in Sikkim with construction of a first church for the capital. With a strong Lepcha leader and a network of catechists and elders across the state district, that expectation was now looking more realistic.

CHRISTIAN MARRIAGES

Prior to addressing this matter, however, there was another fundamental issue for the Christian community, one of legislation. It had come to Mary's attention that the Indian Christian Marriages Act of 1872, providing legal status to church marriages, was not valid in Sikkim. Consequently, the marital status of Sikkim residents who had Christian marriages outside the state, along with those married in Sikkim locally by non-ordained catechists, had no legal recognition.

In early 1930, Mary and Pazo petitioned Christians across the community, and put a request to His Highness that he '*legalise all such marriages between Christians performed in the past*', to be formally registered by the Durbar, and that '*such marriages as shall in like manner be performed in future*'.[43] The petition was signed by 31 Christians from across the district, and followed later in the year by a petition organised by the Finnish Mission signed by 19 people in north Sikkim.[44] On 17 November Mary discussed with the Political Officer the practicalities of transferring marriage details for registration with the Durbar, with the Maharaja approving the Act for incorporation on 22 November. It was formally decreed on 28 January 1931.

While it seems this transaction progressed easily, we see it as highly significant for church–government dynamics. It gave the Durbar a fundamental stake in church business, in addition to oversight of the

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42 Cindy L. Perry, *Nepali Around the World*, Ekta Books, 1997, p.101.

43 Petition dated 10 May 1930, submitted by Mary Scott to the Maharaja.

44 Petition dated 2 September 1930, submitted by Ellin Kronquist of the Free Church of Finland Mission to the Maharaja, via Mary Scott. Kronquist was a member of the Scandinavian Alliance Mission, which since 1894 had been operating in North Sikkim, particularly at Lachen and Lachung.

Mission schools. It also led to Pazo's deeper involvement in government activity, further helping to prepare the ground for a church in Gangtok.

A CHURCH IN GANGTOK

Mary had envisioned such a building from the moment of her arrival,[45] despite the failure of earlier bids, and the statement from McKean that a church was not needed in Gangtok. Not until 1933, however, did Mary and Pazo finally start to petition for a church. We see this as a deliberate tactic on Mary's part, to minimise the risk of another stalled attempt.

In August 1933 another petition was circulated among the Christians of Gangtok. Mary submitted it to the Maharaja in September, advising: '*The matter mentioned in this petition and by myself to your Highness does not relate to a big European church, but to a very simple place of worship as already granted to the Indian Christians here through the mission*'.[46]

On 4 May 1934, the Judicial Secretary wrote to Babu Baksingh Karthak and other 'Gangtok members of the Sikkim Kirk Session of United Church of Northern India' to inform them that the Maharaja was content for the sale of land for a church to go ahead, on the provision '*that the Church should be under the exclusive control and management of the local Christian residents, and the Mission has no concern whatsoever with its management*'.[47]

Mary knew that this did not yet constitute full approval. We believe that while on furlough in 1934, she engaged a firm of architects in Edinburgh to draw up designs for a Tibetan-style building, contrasting with the Victorian-Gothic mission churches of Darjeeling, Kurseong, and Kalimpong. There was also the matter of ownership of the Gangtok church buildings. While the Maharaja wanted the Gangtok church managed by local Christians, the church of Sikkim was to be part of the United Church of North India (UNCI). Dr A R Normand of the Foreign Mission Committee advised Mary that UNCI was soon to be registered in British India as a property ownership corporation. He laid out three options that

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45 Letter dated 15 January 1924 from Mary Scott to Mr McLachlan, secretary of the Foreign Mission Council, reflecting on the possibility that God might '*some day turn the hearts of the Rulers of Sikkim to grant us a sale for a church as a permanent mission station in Sikkim*'.

46 Letter dated September 1930, from Mary Scott to the Maharaja of Sikkim, enclosing a petition signed by members of the Gangtok Christian community, British Library Endangered Archives Programme (EAP 880, Sikkim Palace Archives).

47 Papers concerning the grant of a site for the construction of a church in Gangtok, ibid.

might meet the conditions of the Maharaja for local control, and those of the Church of Scotland, as main financial donor, for certainty of future use as a church.[48]

With the Maharaja's subsequent approval on these matters, the sale of land went ahead. On 4 April 1935, the secretary of the Gangtok Christians wrote to the Judicial Secretary '*...We humbly beg to pray that you will very kindly convey our humble thanks to His Highness for his generous act of kindness shown upon our small community*'.[49]

The church was inaugurated on Friday 30th October 1936. The Maharaja did not attend the ceremony, but instead he sent Rai Bahadur FC Jali, his State Chief Engineer, as a representative of the Durbar.[50]

A FINAL WORD

Over 16 years, Mary Scott had sustained a unique position in Sikkim. Through her friendship with the Maharaja and his family, she brought modern education for girls, and the keystone of today's Evangelical Presbyterian Church of Sikkim. That her residence in Gangtok was a privilege of that friendship was emphasised by the Durbar's insistence in 1939 that her successor, Gavin Fairweather, must reside back in the Mission House at Temi.

We believe that Mary and Pazo helped to strengthen Christianity in Sikkim in a way that was sensitive to the Maharaja's loyalties to the Buddhist faith and indigenous cultures, and which actively supported his agenda. In turn their work enabled the Durbar to integrate church proceedings into government; in 1938, the Durbar decreed that baptisms had to be registered with local Thekadars or Kazis, who would secure permission from the Durbar, and that all Christian marriages had to be reported to the Maharaja's General Secretary.[51]

Further, we believe that the Namgyal family genuinely valued Mary's friendship, and her uniquely courageous personality, and came to respect

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[48] Letter dated 22 December 1934, from Dr A.R. Normand, Secretary of the Foreign Mission Council, to Mary Scott at Humbie House, East Lothian, regarding options for registered ownership of Gangtok church.

[49] Letter dated 4 April 1935, from Sherak Dorji Karthak, secretary of the Gangtok Members of Sikkim Kirk Session, to the Judicial Secretary to the Maharaja of Sikkim.

[50] *Platinum Jubilee: Gangtok Church – Evangelical Presbyterian Church of Sikkim*, 1936–2011.

[51] Evangelical Presbyterian Church of Sikkim Millennium Celebration Souvenir publication (2000), p. 20.

her work, beyond her period of service in Sikkim. We see, for example, in scenes of the opening of the Kalimpong Institution for the Blind in the early 1940s, that the Maharani attended as guest of honour, as Mary entered into this next and final chapter of her long service in the Eastern Himalaya.[52]

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Palden Ongchu Pazo, Gangtok
Panu Ongri Pazo, Gangtok
Tar Tshering Lepcha, Gangtok
Sonam Dhondup Tshering, Gangtok
National Library of Scotland, Edinburgh
SOAS, London
The British Library, London
University of St Andrews, Fife

[52] Mary left the Sikkim mission in January 1939 on the advice of her physician that her cardiac weakness was now incompatible with the high altitude of Gangtok. She retired to Kalimpong, but by 1940 had started to establish the Kalimpong Institution for the Blind (today the 'Salvation Army Mary Scott Home and School for the Blind') at 9th Mile. She led this establishment until finally leaving India in 1953, spending her final years in Scotland.

DOCUMENTING THE NAMGYAL INSTITUTE OF TIBETOLOGY'S MUSEUM COLLECTION

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The Museum, Namgyal Institute of Tibetology

INTRODUCTION

Since its establishment in 1958 by King Tashi Namgyal (1893–1963), the primary mission of the Namgyal Institute of Tibetology has been the collection and preservation of Buddhist texts from the various Tibetan traditions. While the Institute initially focused on developing its library holdings, a number of works of art were donated during the first years following its foundation. Over time, a true collection was gradually

assembled through further donations and acquisitions. Today, it comprises approximately 480 objects, predominantly Buddhist in nature (sculptures, ritual objects, painted and embroidered thangkas, manuscripts, and masks), but also includes non-religious items such as jewellery, musical instruments, and coins.

This example of a museum initiative that is entirely local in origin and has been developed since the 1960s is unique in the Himalayan region. Although the museum may appear modest at first glance, it reflects a heritage vision that differs from the model generally employed in the West for the preservation and presentation of Himalayan collections. It therefore seems important to highlight at the outset the three principal characteristics that distinguish the Institute's museum from other collections of Himalayan art: its multidisciplinary approach, its promotion of Sikkimese identity, and the place accorded to the sacred.

The Institute's collection is presented through a multidisciplinary approach that combines art history and ethnography, as well as sacred and secular art. The exhibition follows a thematic arrangement, grouping objects according to their iconography or their nature, since the lack of information regarding provenance and dating makes a chronological or stylistic presentation difficult. These curatorial choices differ from the conventional presentation of Himalayan art in Western museums.

Tibetan objects, which arrived mainly during the twentieth century and in large numbers following the Chinese invasion and the Cultural Revolution, were generally divided into two categories. Objects considered beautiful and sacred according to Western criteria were placed in art museums and became the subject of iconographic and stylistic studies, while so-called 'ethnographic' objects, deemed less 'aesthetic' to Western eyes, were housed in ethnographic museums and remain, even today, less thoroughly documented. The example of the Institute's museum demonstrates that, in a Himalayan context, such categories do not exist and that works of art and ethnographic objects can be displayed together without categorical distinction.

It is also important to emphasize that the documentation and study of Himalayan art should be approached through the same multidisciplinary perspective. The contemporary statues from Drakar Tashiding (NIT.S.2008.100–103) displayed in the museum provide a clear example. A conventional stylistic analysis might lead to a dismissive assessment of their simple aesthetic qualities and is insufficient for understanding these sculptures. Only historical and ethnographic research reveals the

significance of the figures represented and the sacred character of the wood from which they were carved.

The museum's exhibition design firmly anchors the collection within its local environment, and a number of objects are directly connected to Sikkimese regional identity.[1] The wooden display cases, columns, and beams of the museum hall are decorated with traditional Sikkimese motifs, including flowers, offering bowls, and dragons. This museographic design allows visitors to feel welcomed as if they were entering a beautiful Sikkimese home, where traditional furniture is adorned with the same motifs and colours.

Within the Institute's collection are a number of objects directly related to Sikkim, most often through their iconography, but sometimes through their material and/or place of manufacture. Among the most noteworthy are: a series of five thangkas painted by the Sikkimese artist Rinzing Lhadripa Lama (1912–1977) recounting the history of Sikkim (NIT.T.2014.348-352);[2] four wooden sculptures created by Sangay Tenzin, a monk from Drakar Tashiding in West Sikkim, representing the first Chogyal of Sikkim and the three Tibetan masters[3] who, according to historical tradition, performed his coronation in 1642 (NIT.S.2008.100–103); two masks depicting Dzönga (NIT.M.2008.177) and Mahākāla-Yapdü (NIT.M.2008.178), the protective deities of Sikkim who appear during the Pang Lhabsol dances; and a local coin (NIT.NUM.2015.377), a unique object within the collection and a rarity, with only about thirty examples surviving worldwide.[4] All of these objects display iconographic features closely connected to the history and religious beliefs of the region.

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1 Mullard, 2011 and Hiltz, 2003.

2 These paintings are reproduced in Ardussi, Balikci Denjongpa and Sørensen, 2021, pp. 582–587.

3 These are Chogyal Phuntshog Namgyal (1604–1670) and, as for the masters: Ngadag Phuntshog Rigzin, also known as Ngadag Sempa Chenpo (1592–1656), Kathog Kuntu Zangpo or Kathog Rigzin Chenpo (exact dates unknown) and Lhatsun Namkha Jigme or Lhatsun Chenpo (1597–1654). Four contemporary metal sculptures of the same figures (NIT.S.2008.96 to 99) were donated to the institute in 2007.

4 Bhattacharyya (1984) lists 32 such coins, most of which are in private hands, including the one held by the Institute. Around ten of them appear in the sale catalogues at Spink (London): *The Nicholas Rhodes Collection of Coins of North-East India (Part I)* of 24 September 2013 and the same collection *(Part II)* of 27 September 2016. These coins are similar to those minted in Nepal during the same period; the only distinguishing feature is the inscription 'Sikkim'. There was no local currency in Sikkim prior to the arrival of Nepalese merchants known as 'Pradhans' in the late 19th century. These brothers purchased land and the right to extract copper from it in order to mint coins for trade with Nepal and

The Institute was therefore a pioneer in its commitment to promoting Sikkimese identity and paved the way for other private and community museums in the region that have been established more recently.

This collection also reflects a museological approach that differs from the prevailing Western model regarding the place of the sacred within the museum. First, for many visitors, religious sentiment takes precedence over aesthetic contemplation in this 'temple-museum.' Visitors are required to leave their shoes on the porch, as they would when entering a monastery, and many begin their visit by prostrating themselves before the central statue of Mañjuśrī (NIT.S.2008.117) before touring the museum. The former director, Mr Sinha, already referred to this religious sentiment in relation to the first donations made in the 1960s, which were motivated by the fact that the Institute was regarded as a 'sacred place of preservation' (see quote).[5]

Similarly, each morning museum staff place offerings of water bowls before the same statue of Mañjuśrī, and during our interview with the late Director Mr Tashi Densapa (d. 2021), he proudly mentioned on two occasions that the collection had received the Dalai Lama's blessing during his visit in 2010. This blessing is regarded as a protective act contributing to the preservation of the collection.

Finally, it is above all in the restoration criteria adopted by the Institute that the museum most fully respects the sacred nature of the religious objects in its collection. Since 2018, any conservation treatment deemed necessary for the preservation of an object has been carried out in accordance with Buddhist ritual practice, as if the object were being preserved in a monastery. The Institute's team works alongside Sikkimese monks to ensure that objects desacralized through preventive conservation measures regain their consecrated status before being returned to display. The restoration of the large statue of Mañjuśrī (NIT.S.2008.117) in 2018–2019 was the first major conservation project undertaken on an object from the Institute's collection and provided an opportunity to establish these restoration principles.[6]

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the Darjeeling region. The coins were minted only between 1883 and 1885, as neither the British nor the Nepalese authorised their circulation within their respective jurisdictions.

5 Sinha Nirmal C., 1984, p. 33: 'A few donors were frankly poor refugees from Central and Eastern Tibet and refused any payment; they firmly asserted that they were not sellers of images and that they donated these for safe custody in a place which was to them a sacred repository of scriptures and icons; the donors, rich and poor alike, would not call this Institute a library or museum as we do.'

6 Thomas, 2025.



The museum's central statue of Mañjuśrī

Having established the significance and distinctive characteristics of the Institute's art collection, this article now turns to the challenges involved in its preservation. The documentation of both the history of the collection's formation and the objects themselves is a long-term undertaking to which the Institute's staff and I have been devoted for several years. Although this research remains ongoing, it seemed important to present here the stages of the work that have already been completed.

I shall first present the information currently available regarding the history of the Institute's collection. I shall then discuss the museological documentation project initiated in 2008, which led to the creation of a photographic database and, in 2019, a comprehensive database containing information on all the objects in the collection, as well as the implementation of regular conservation and restoration campaigns thereafter.

1. *Documenting the history of the formation of the institute's art collection*

Let us first recall that, although the Institute was originally conceived primarily as a Tibetan library rather than a museum, the latter is nevertheless mentioned in the founding charter of 28 October 1958. The display of Buddhist religious objects was, in fact, a natural complement to the Institute's library holdings. In the early years, however, everything remained to be done, and the priority was to build up the collection of Tibetan texts before a collection of works of art could be envisaged.

Documenting the history of the Namgyal Institute of Tibetology's art collection is not an easy task. When I began this research in 2018, only two sources dealing with the subject were available, a clear indication of the secondary importance accorded to the collection, despite the fact that sources relating to the Institute's library are far more numerous.

The first is an article published in the *Bulletin of Tibetology* in 1984 by Nirmal C. Sinha entitled 'Ten Priceless Images.' Sinha was the director of the Institute at the time of publication, but he had also served as its first director from 1958 to 1971. His article therefore constitutes a first-hand account of the early years of the collection's formation and is an invaluable source. The second source is a chapter simply entitled 'Museum' in the volume published in 2008 to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the Institute, written by Tenzin C. Tashi and published by Tashi Densapa, who was serving as director at the time.

A reading of these two sources provides an initial understanding of the collection. Beginning in 2018, I also conducted interviews with several members of the Institute who were then in office: Director Mr Tashi Densapa (who passed away in 2021), Deputy Director Ms Kelsang Choden, Research Coordinator Dr Anna Balikci-Denjongpa, and Museum Assistant Ms Pema Kesang, in order to obtain further information on the history of the Institute's art collection.

The following account is based on information drawn from these written and oral sources. The earliest donors mentioned are presented in chronological order.

When the Institute's first director, Nirmal C. Sinha, wrote about its early years, he emphasized the importance of donations during the initial formation of the art collection:

> Our principal programme was for the collection and procurement of Tibetan literary sources in manuscripts and woodblock prints. Yet within three years our collection of icons and scrolls had numbered nearly a hundred. All these were old (some very old) and authentic, that is, they came from temples, monasteries, and ancient households. Far more interesting was the fact that about fifty items were free and unsolicited gifts.[7]

We then learn that the very first work of art to enter the collection was donated by the king himself. Chogyal Tashi Namgyal took a bronze (gilt-copper) statue of Guru Rinpoche (Padmasambhava, NIT.S.2008.116) from the Tsuklakhang, the royal temple located within the palace compound, and had it placed on the Institute's main altar approximately two weeks before its inauguration.[8] The article further specifies that the statue dates from the 1930s, was produced by artists from Tsang in Tibet, and had been installed in the Tsuklakhang in 1935.

Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru was also responsible for several important donations. He first presented the Institute with the relics of two disciples of the Buddhist emperor Aśoka (c. 304–232 BCE), named Madhyama and Kāśyapa Gotra (NIT.R.2008.254 A–E). The relics of these Buddhist monks were discovered by the archaeologist Sir Alexander Cunningham (1814–1893) in the region of Sānchī in 1861 and deposited in London, either in the India Office Library (according to the 2008 publication) or in the Victoria and Albert Museum (according to the 1984 article).[9] In 1958, they were returned to India and, since these two monks had preached in the Himalayan region, Nehru agreed that they should be placed under the care of the Institute in Gangtok.

The relics arrived on 17 November 1959, and Princess Pema Tsedeun Yabshi-Pheunkhang Lhacham (1924–2008) and her husband Sey Kusho

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7 Sinha Nirmal C., 1984, p. 33.

8 Sinha Nirmal C., 1984, p. 37.

9 The discovery comprised, in total, the relics of ten arhats, found beneath a stūpa, whose names were inscribed on four soapstone coffins, and among which were also the relics of Śāriputra and Maudgalyāyana (preserved at Sānchī). Sinha Nirmal C., 1984, p. 46.

Gompo Tsering Yabshi-Pheunkhang (1918–1973) donated a silver stūpa to house them (NIT.R.2008.235). However, as the 2008 publication notes:

> Yet intriguingly, today the relics of the Asokan missionaries lie in a wooden casket presented by Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru. In the absence of an authoritative explanation for this, one may therefore conjecture that a portion of the relics of the Asokan monks was enshrined in the chorten and the rest kept in Nehru's casket, ostensibly to serve as a more tangible display.[10]

In accordance with the wish expressed by the king and the Institute's director to associate a statue of the Buddha with these relics, Nehru also donated two sandstone sculptures depicting the Buddha teaching and the bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara standing (NIT.S.2008.129 A–B). These works were installed in the so-called 'Ajanta Room' on the uppermost floor of the Institute and therefore lie outside the museum's exhibition spaces. The sculptures were transferred from the Sarnath Museum in May 1960, and Sinha proposed a date in the mid-ninth century for both works.[11]

Kazi Yarpa Tempo Namgyal Barphungpa (dates unknown),[12] a member of the noble Khendzong family, donated to the Institute two gilted copper statues of Korlo Demchog (Cakrasaṃvara or Saṃvara) (NIT.S.2008.115) and a gilded brass statue of Namgyalma (Sarvajaya or Uṣṇīṣavijayā) (NIT.S.2008.114). He had received these images from the monks of Kundeling Monastery[13] in Tibet and, on the advice of Gyelsey Palden Thondup Namgyal, entrusted them to the Institute in early 1960. Some of the attributes of the Korlo Demchog statue were damaged or lost during its hurried transport to Sikkim. Sinha proposed a date in the late nineteenth century for these two works.[14]

Princess Pema Choki Yapshi-Yuthok Lhacham (1925–1969) donated the large statue of Mañjuśrī, the bodhisattva of wisdom (NIT.S.2008.117; see Section II.3), which stands on the main altar in the museum hall. The donation was made in the name of her father-in-law, Kalon Yuthok, governor of Chamdo (in Kham, eastern Tibet). Sinha notes that the statue

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10 Tenzin C. Tashi, 2008, p. 69.

11 Sinha Nirmal C., 1984, p. 38.

12 We have been unable to ascertain his exact dates of birth and death. According to information provided by Dr Anna Balikci-Denjongpa, he died before his wife and son, who themselves passed away about fifteen years ago.

13 Kundeling Monastery is situated in Lhasa, not far from the Potala Palace, and was destroyed during the Cultural Revolution.

14 Sinha Nirmal C., 1984, pp. 39–40.

had been commissioned in Chamdo for the old 'Yuthok House' in Lhasa, where the Tenth Dalai Lama, Tsultrim Gyatso (1816–1837), was born.[15]

The address delivered by the President at the General Council meeting of 7 December 1961, quoted in the 2008 publication, reveals that the arrival of this large statue led to a reorganization of the statues previously donated by Nehru, discussed above:

> Princess Pema Choki has offered, on behalf of Yuthok House, to install a very large image of Manjushri on the ground-floor altar, where until last week we kept the two ancient stone images brought here in May 1960 by His Excellency Professor Kabir as gifts from the Government of India. These two images are now in the upper hall, the walls of which will be painted in the Ajanta style by Indian artists commissioned by the Government of India.

Padmashri Lachman Singh Jangpangi donated a copper statue of the four-armed Avalokiteśvara (NIT.S.2008.107). The sources indicate that he worked for more than twenty-five years as a trade agent in Gartok and subsequently for five years in Yatung. The latter, located in the Chumbi Valley, became a British trade mart in 1893, a status confirmed in 1904, the year in which the British also secured trade agencies at Gartok (in western Tibet) and Gyantse (between Lhasa and Shigatse). Sinha states that the donor received the statue in 1956 from monks associated with Tholing Monastery, located in the Ngari region of western Tibet. The image is said to have been brought from India to western Tibet before 1800.[16]

Princess Pema Tsedeun Yabshi-Pheunkhang Lhacham donated to the Institute a sculpture of Tārā,[17] a manuscript of the *Epic of Gesar* (NIT.MS.2014.273), dated to 1550 and written in cursive Tibetan (*umed*), originating from Kham, as well as a copy of an ancient Lepcha text deposited in the British Museum in 1896 (NIT.MS.2014.270).

The name of John Pierce, a British merchant residing in Calcutta,[18] also appears in the sources. He owned a collection of thangkas (portable religious paintings) and sculptures, which were donated to the Institute by his mother following his death in 1961.

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[15] Sinha Nirmal C., 1984, p. 40.

[16] Sinha Nirmal C., 1984, pp. 40–41.

[17] Sinha Nirmal C., 1984, p. 41. The author mentions only one statue of Tārā donated by the princess, but according to the collection's records, 12 statues could match this description. We are unable to determine which one the author is referring to.

[18] Despite my research, I have no evidence to confirm this information, nor any further details about this man.

After discussing these first clearly identified donors, matters become more complicated when attempting to establish the identity of subsequent donors or to document the Institute's purchases of works of art.

The 2008 publication states, without providing any names, that the remaining donors consisted of Sikkimese families, Tibetan refugees, and foreigners, while some objects were acquired locally.[19] It mentions in particular a 'poor Tibetan refugee'who sold several statues to the Institute (without identifying them individually) and donated a metal sculpture of Tārā. Another statue of the same deity, this time made of clay, was donated by a 'monk,' although no further information is provided regarding his identity. This illustrates the difficulties encountered in documenting the list of donors associated with the collection.

The author of the same article notes that the sums paid for acquisitions were far below the actual value of the objects, as the Institute had only limited financial resources for its operation and even fewer for building an art collection. Sellers were therefore not necessarily motivated by profit, but rather by the desire to place religious objects in an institution that would ensure their proper preservation. As N. C. Sinha observed:

> A few donors were frankly poor refugees from Central and Eastern Tibet and refused any payment; they firmly asserted that they were not sellers of images and that they donated these for safe custody in a place which was to them a sacred repository of scriptures and icons; the donors, rich and poor alike, would not call this Institute a library or museum as we do.[20]

In the same 1984 article, N. C. Sinha describes the circumstances surrounding a particular acquisition, which likewise demonstrates that financial gain was not necessarily the sellers' primary motivation:

> In the summer of 1961, a Tibetan refugee brought us a rare and exquisite bronze statue, the image of Prajna-Paramita, consort of Manjusri. He wanted me to quote a fair price. I consulted our Lamas for their opinion and to check our funds and budget allocations. I told the Tibetan that we could offer only up to Rs. 1,200, whilst this image (3") would easily sell for Rs. 2,500 in Calcutta, and we had no intention of cheating him. The Tibetan refugee said, 'I know that your scholar friends, whether Indian or American, might pay as much as Rs. 5,000. But I want my household icon, which is over 300 years old, to be in safe hands. Take this image for Rs. 1,100, which I need for my journey to Dorjedan (Bodhgaya) and my

[19] Tenzin C. Tashi, 2008, p. 69.
[20] Sinha Nirmal C., 1984, p. 33.

> puja there." We were only too happy to "buy" the image. Experts would now value it at Rs. 10,000.[21]

Moreover, another factor affecting the Institute's ability to acquire works of art must also be taken into consideration: the particular historical context of its early years. The influx of Tibetan refugees arriving in India with works of art, together with the offers they received from Western institutions and art dealers, also helps explain the difficulties encountered by the Institute in building its art collection. N. C. Sinha clearly bears witness to this imbalance in available resources:

> I refer to these events to draw the attention of today's readers to the network of Western foundations throughout Tibetan refugee settlements such as Misamari and Mussoorie in 1959–62. These foundations would offer fantastic—I should say fabulous—prices for Tibetan icons and art objects, and this Institute was unable to compete. Our laws banning the export of antiquities and art treasures were not designed to deal with such contingencies.[22]

He gives the example of a set of eighteen embroidered thangkas depicting the lineage of the Panchen Lamas. Three separate sets had been produced in 1933: one remained at Tashilhunpo Monastery, the residence of the Panchen Lama in Tibet, while the other two were blessed and presented to devotees.

> These two sets were brought in 1960–62 to the Misamari-Buxa camps.[23] An American foundation paid more than Rs. 8,000/- for one set, and we acquired the other for less than Rs. 2,000/- as requested by the party concerned.[24]

The idea of establishing a permanent museum with a collection comprising more than just a few objects was truly formalized in 1964, but funding was lacking. In a speech delivered before the Institute's General Council on 14 September 1970, Chogyal Palden Thondup Namgyal declared:

> I would recommend that all unspent funds be transferred to a separate capital account with effect from 1 October, which is our Foundation Day, and I am sure that the capital savings from October 1970 to October 1972 will be put to good use in building up our museum. Whilst the many tourists appreciate on-the-spot explanations of our icons and art objects,

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21 Sinha Nirmal C., 1984, pp. 34–35.
22 Sinha Nirmal C., 1984, p. 35.
23 Misamari is in the state of Assam; Buxa is in West Bengal.
24 Sinha Nirmal C., 1984, p. 35.

> both visitors and our staff have to endure considerable inconvenience when viewing our collections in a systematic manner due to the lack of proper display conditions. Even research scholars have found our methods of preservation and display unsuitable for their purposes. I feel that our museum would effectively counter the temporary decline in interest in our field by making our treasures more attractive to prospective scholars from India and other Asian countries.[25]

Thanks to this clear commitment and the financial support that accompanied it, the history of the Institute's art collection could truly begin.

In 'Note IV' of the *Bulletin of Tibetology* for 1973, which reports on the Institute's activities, Director A. M. D'Rozario wrote that the Institute 'has initiated a project for the establishment of a museum.'[26] In the 'Note' published in the 1975 issue of the *Bulletin of Tibetology*, he stated that the museum project was nearing completion. [27]

Later, in an article published in the *Bulletin of Tibetology* in 1981, Director T. S. Gyaltshen briefly described the museum's collection:

> The Museum Section contains a representative collection of precious icons, ritual objects, traditional art objects, rare thangkas, and ancient manuscripts in Sanskrit, Tibetan, Chinese and Lepcha. The casket containing the relics of the two Asokan missionaries, Kashyapa and Madhyamagotra, displayed in the showcase, is one of several priceless antique objects. Five sandalwood images, which are examples of indigenous art, and some new objects of traditional art were acquired and added to the collection during 1980–81.[28]

Furthermore, in the article on the Institute's publications published in the *Bulletin of Tibetology* (1982, no. 1), it is noted that a brochure entitled *A Guide to the Sikkim Research Institute of Tibetology & Other Buddhist Studies* had been printed for distribution to 'tourists and visitors. Hindi and Nepali versions were also printed for distribution. A Lepcha translation is now in preparation'.[29]

This indicates that the Institute was already attracting tourists, whose visits were no doubt centred on the museum, then the only area open to the general public. Unfortunately, we have not been able to locate a copy of

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25 Tenzin C. Tashi, 2008, p. 71.
26 D'Rozario A.M., 1973.
27 D'Rozario A.M., 1975.
28 Gyaltshen T.S., 1981.
29 Banerjee A.C., 1982/No. 1, p. IV.

this brochure. It would have been interesting to determine whether the art collection was mentioned and, if so, how it was presented.

Until 1987, the general library occupied what is now the museum's main hall. Photographs[30] of ceremonies held during this period clearly show bookshelves lining the walls, while only a few display cases contained works of art. The display case serving as the central altar, housing the large statue of Mañjuśrī, was already in place.

During our interview with Director Mr Tashi Densapa, he informed us that the position of 'Museum Assistant' had been created as early as the 1960s, but remained effectively vacant for many years due to a lack of personnel. According to Deputy Director Ms Kelsang Choden, however, the creation of a space truly dedicated to a museum dates rather to the early 1990s. At that time, she herself held the position of Museum Assistant and told us that a theft had occurred in 1993 (a Tibetan *pecha*-format manuscript and two *phurba*, according to her account).

She also indicated that admission tickets for visitors were introduced in 1994 and that, in 1997, under the direction of Mr Tashi Tobden, the museum space was reorganized in order to improve the presentation of the art collection. For example, the square display cases were replaced with triangular ones to improve visibility of the objects on display and labels painted on triangular wooden panels were placed next to the objects to provide visitors with some information. These were replaced in 2010 by laminated paper labels prepared by the Research Coordinator, Dr Anna Balikci-Denjongpa, and her assistant Tsering Penchung (based on research undertaken with her previous assistant, Kalsang Bhutia, in 2005), in preparation for the visit of the Dalai Lama.

The 2008 publication also notes that conservation practices had improved and that: 'the institute has already researched, photographed, and documented the extensive collection for posterity. All the displayed items have proper accompanying documentation.'[31]

This statement most likely refers to a document entitled *Listing and Documentation of Artifacts*,[32] dating from 2003, in which 206 objects from the collection are described in a very summary manner, as well as to the work initiated in 2008 by Ms Pema Kesang when she assumed the position

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[30] Some photographs are published in Tenzin C. Tashi, 2008 and Banerjee A.C. (ed), 1982, BoT No. 4. Others, which have not been published, were kindly shown to me by the deputy director, Ms Kelsang Choden, during our interview.

[31] Tenzin C. Tashi, 2008, p. 72.

[32] This document was commissioned by the then director, Tashi Densapa, and produced by PAN Architecture, a Gangtok firm headed by Naveen Pradhan.

of Museum Assistant that same year. Both of these developments are discussed in greater detail in the second part of this article.

Ms Pema Kesang received training at the National Museum in Delhi in museological principles and conservation techniques. It was with her that I collaborated between 2018 and 2020 on the documentation of the collection. Prior to her appointment at the Institute, responsibility for the museum rested first with Dr Rigzin Ngondub Dokhampa, a monk by training (from Tashiding Monastery) and author of a doctoral thesis on symbolism in Buddhism, and subsequently, from 2004 onward, with Mr Thupten Tenzing. Both served as research staff. Ms Pema Kesang left the Institute in the spring of 2020, and since then responsibility for the collection has been assumed by Ms Samten Choden Bhutia. She has been assisted by Mr Rikzin Chopel Lepcha (Research Assistant) since September 2023.

To conclude this attempt to reconstruct the history of the Namgyal Institute of Tibetology's art collection, I would like to recall the view expressed by the late Director Mr Tashi Densapa when I interviewed him in 2018 about the prospects for expanding the collection in the future. He stressed above all the importance of preserving, restoring, and exhibiting the existing collection as effectively as possible. The Institute's financial resources do not permit the acquisition of new objects in the context of the current art market. Works of Himalayan art have become far too expensive, and the Institute can therefore only envisage enlarging its collection through potential donations.

Indeed, documenting the existing collection already constitutes a significant research undertaking. Although the art collection was not a priority for the Institute during its early years, and although it was assembled largely through donations rather than through a deliberate acquisition policy, it now occupies a central place within the institution. The museum serves as the Institute's principal showcase for the general public. Visitor numbers continue to increase, making it all the more important to document this unique art collection, unparalleled in Sikkim, as thoroughly as possible.

2. *Documenting the collection: a museographic study*

The museographic documentation of the Institute's art collection is a long-term undertaking that remains ongoing and has already passed through several important stages. The appointment of Ms Pema Kesang in 2008, the first museum professional to be placed in charge of the collection,

marked the beginning of documentation carried out according to international conservation standards. In 2018–2019, my collaboration with the Institute's staff led to the creation of a photographic archive and a database covering the entire collection. Since then, conservation and restoration campaigns have been conducted on a regular basis, while research on both the history of the collection and the individual objects has continued. These different stages are presented below in chronological order.

As noted above, a document entitled *Listing and Documentation of Artifacts*, dating from 2003, provides evidence of an initial effort to document the collection. It presents 206 objects—less than half of the collection—in a very summary manner. For each object, the document includes a small frontal photograph, accompanied by an identification, acquisition date, material, dimensions, and inventory number. However, the acquisition date and inventory number are frequently missing. This document naturally complements the inventory register (maintained in manuscript form, according to customary practice), which was kept up to date as the collection was assembled and contains the minimum information required to identify the objects.

Upon her arrival at the Institute in 2008, Ms Pema Kesang undertook a professional programme of museum documentation by creating one volume of the *General Accession Register* and seven volumes of the *Classified Accession Register*.[33] One particularly important aspect of the *General Accession Register* is that inventory numbers were systematically assigned to all objects, which had not been the case previously. Ms Pema Kesang adopted the following system: 08.01, 08.02, 08.03, and so forth. The first two digits ('08') refer to the year 2008, when she carried out this work; thereafter, she used the year of acquisition (09 for 2009, 10 for 2010, etc.). All objects that entered the Institute's collection before 2008 were therefore assigned inventory numbers beginning with '08'. The following digits correspond to the sequence of objects in her list, based on their arrangement in the display cases in 2008, a configuration that is no longer current.

The seven volumes of the *Classified Accession Register* are organized by object type: 'thangka,' 'images metal,' 'images non-metal,' 'others metal,' 'others non-metal,' 'miscellaneous,' and 'manuscripts.' Each

[33] These documents exist only in printed form, as the digital files were lost following a technical IT issue in 2015. Digital files are available for subsequent volumes of these registers from that date onwards.

object record contains a sufficient number of categories[34] to allow for the subsequent development of detailed documentation and is accompanied by one or two small photographs for rapid identification of the object (although their quality is insufficient, for example, to establish a condition report).

Although the level of information then available on the objects remained fairly limited—particularly regarding their history, dating, and provenance—Ms Pema Kesang's work provided an essential documentary foundation for the study of the collection.

In 2018, when my collaboration with the Institute began, we identified two major priorities for advancing the documentation of the collection. First, it was necessary to transform the volumes of the *Classified Accession Register* into a searchable database that would allow rapid retrieval of information by keyword, category, and other criteria. Such a tool was essential for analysing the information already available on the collection and identifying gaps requiring further research. Second, it was crucial to create a complete high-resolution photographic archive of all objects in the collection in order to ensure their accurate identification and to assess their condition.

The development of these museological tools was made possible through the support of the then Director, Mr Tashi Densapa, and the Research Coordinator, Dr Anna Balikci-Denjongpa, as well as through the work of the Institute's staff, particularly Ms Pema Kesang, Museum Assistant and curator of the collection; Mr Phurba Tsering Bhutia, Research Assistant and photographer; Mr Karma Sherap Bhutia, Archivist; and Ms Samten Choden Bhutia, then Research Officer, who assumed responsibility for the museum following Ms Pema Kesang's departure in 2020.

The principal stages of this museological project, which continued until 2019, were, first, the establishment of a more comprehensive and coherent inventory numbering system;[35] second, the cleaning of the objects and the

[34] Serial number, accession number, old accession number, title of object (English, Tibetan, Sanskrit), material, dimensions (length, width, depth, diameter, weight), provenance, period, detailed description, place of production (country, state, district, village, date of manufacture), maker (artist, craftsman), manufacturing technique, style, usage, inscription/legend, unique feature, mode of acquisition (date, place, method, source, value in rupees), location (display, reserve), condition, publication details, photograph details, remarks, entered (date), verified (date).

[35] The aim was to clarify the identification of the object by adding 'NIT' for 'Namgyal Institute of Tibetology' and a letter to immediately identify the nature of the object: 'S' for 'sculpture', 'T' for 'thangka', 'R' for 'ritual/religious objects', 'M' for 'mask', 'MS'

photographic documentation of the entire collection (with a minimum of six views for each object); and finally, the organization of these photographs[36] and the entry of information from the registers in order to create a documentary database.

This final stage was a lengthy and demanding process that took several months to complete, but it subsequently made it possible to analyse the collection and establish its general characteristics. Eighty-three per cent of the collection consists of religious objects. With only a few exceptions, the sculptures represent divine figures; to these may be added the ritual objects, thangkas, manuscripts (all of which are religious in nature), and masks used in religious ceremonies.

The list of donors could be established with precision, but it applies to only 27 per cent of the objects in the collection. Considerable research therefore remains to be undertaken in order to determine the exact provenance of the remaining objects. Analysis of the acquisition dates shows that the Institute received the greatest number of donations during its early years, primarily from Sikkimese donors. Thereafter, acquisitions continued at a steady pace until 2015–2016, when the collection began to expand through purchases. This development coincided with the opening of an ethnographic annex devoted to the Lepcha population and the installation of new display cases in the museum gallery.

Whether an object entered the collection through purchase or donation is recorded for only 170 objects, making it difficult to determine which mode of acquisition predominated. Nevertheless, the documented purchases, given the modest sums involved, provide clear evidence that the Tibetan refugees who sold objects to the Institute during the 1960s were motivated above all by a desire to place their sacred objects in safekeeping. An extract from the address delivered by the President of the Institute at the General Council Meeting of 10 October 1960 confirms this interpretation:

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for ‘manuscript’, ‘SEC’ for ‘secular’, ‘NUM’ for ‘numismatic’, ‘JEW’ for ‘jewellery’, ‘LEP’ for ‘Lepcha object’, ‘CAM’ for ‘camera’, ‘MUS’ for ‘musical instrument’. The year code has been updated: ‘08’ becomes ‘2008’. The year of acquisition (post-2008) of the object and its nature can now be identified simply by reading the inventory number.

[36] The files in the photo database are named using the object’s inventory number, to which we have added letters to distinguish the views: ‘A’ for the front view of the object, ‘B’ for the rear view, ‘C’ and ‘D’ for the side views, ‘E’ for the view of the base and the underside, and finally ‘F’ for the top view.

> This is because the owners have parted with these not so much for cash as for their respectful preservation. Our collection is both a museum and a sacred repository with lamps burning round the clock.[37]

The places of origin and dates recorded in the registers remain limited and should be regarded as preliminary hypotheses requiring confirmation through the more detailed documentation work that is still ongoing.

The years following the creation and analysis of the database were marked by an interruption of the work due to the COVID-19 pandemic, followed by its gradual resumption in the wake of changes in both personnel and leadership at the Institute. During the pandemic, I was able to begin the in-depth documentation of a selection of objects remotely. However, once activities resumed, it became clear that the new team responsible for the collection—Ms Samten Choden Bhutia and Mr Rikzin Chopel Lepcha—needed to prioritize conservation and preventive conservation campaigns.

The climate of Sikkim presents a major challenge for the preservation of the collection. Extremely high levels of humidity during the monsoon season (80–90 per cent from May to September) encourage the proliferation of insects and the corrosion of metals. As early as 2018–2019, during the cleaning and photographic documentation of the collection, emergency conservation work proved necessary on both the display cases along the rear wall and the large central statue of Mañjuśrī (NIT.S.2008.117).

Carried out in collaboration with local monks, the conservation treatment of the Mañjuśrī statue incorporated a Buddhist reconsecration ritual following the completion of the material conservation work. This established a precedent at the Institute in the care of the collection by combining the physical conservation of objects with respect for the intangible religious practices associated with Buddhism. [38] Subsequent preventive conservation campaigns have followed the same standards, and this approach distinguishes the Institute from many international museums.

In 2021, Ms Samten Choden Bhutia undertook a revision of the museum's display and intervened on the materials used in the display cases in order to reduce insect infestations. The new arrangement of the objects also allowed for a more effective presentation of the Sikkimese works, which were grouped together within the same display cases. Taking her new responsibilities as curator of the museum very seriously, she

[37] Tenzin C. Tashi, 2008, p. 69.
[38] Thomas, 2025.

completed several certified training programmes in preventive conservation techniques offered by the Tata Trust between 2023 and early 2025. Through this training, she was able to develop specialist knowledge of the various materials represented within the collection.

Our collaboration resumed actively in the spring of 2023 with the study of archival materials relating to the history of the collection and the conduct of interviews (recorded and, in some cases, filmed) with retired former members of the Institute as well as artists who had donated objects during the 1980s. Some of these individuals have sadly since passed away, underscoring the importance of adapting collection documentation methods by incorporating these invaluable oral sources while there is still time, in order to compensate for the limited written documentation available.

In the autumn of 2023 and the spring of 2024, Ms Samten Choden Bhutia, assisted by Mr Rikzing Chopel Lepcha, established a collaboration with Dr Ayesha Fuentes, Conservation Researcher at the University of Cambridge Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology. Drawing on her expertise in conservation, she was able to guide them in the cleaning of metal sculptures, the control of insect infestations, the treatment of metal corrosion, and the restoration of certain damaged thangka brocades. Their valuable exchanges also focused on the development of preventive conservation principles specifically adapted to the museum's collection.

Finally, it should be noted that the year 2025 was devoted to the preparation of a new space for visitors. This interpretation centre will highlight the history of the Institute and introduce visitors to the museum collection through an interactive and engaging educational section. Its inauguration is planned for 2026.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it seems important to emphasize that the Namgyal Institute of Tibetology Museum has been genuinely pioneering in the history of museums in the Himalayas, not only because of its establishment as early as the 1960s, but also because of its contemporary approaches to the conservation of objects and the documentation of collections. In my view, it embodies a new approach to Himalayan art, one that privileges interdisciplinary research in order to better document objects, recognizes the distinct characteristics of regional identities, and reconsiders the place of the sacred within the museum. In particular, it integrates the intangible

Buddhist dimensions associated with objects into conservation and restoration practices.

Despite the challenges posed by preserving the collection in the climatic conditions of Sikkim, as well as the limitations in human and material resources, the Institute remains committed to documenting its holdings with rigour. Many questions concerning the provenance and dating of numerous objects in the collection remain unanswered. Research therefore continues, with the hope that it will eventually culminate in the publication of a comprehensive catalogue.

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A NEW ORTHOGRAPHY PROPOSAL FOR THE TAMANG LANGUAGE

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INTRODUCTION

The joint research project *Phonetics, Phonology and New Orthographies: Helping Native Language Communities in the Himalayas (PhoPhoNO)* (2017–2022) of Bern University, Switzerland, and International Christian University in Tōkyō, Japan, conducted phonological fieldwork on two languages of the Himalayas, namely Drenjongke and Tamang, with the aim to develop new orthographies for these languages. These new orthographies should focus on usability by the language community as much as on phonological adequacy. In this paper, we shall present the findings and output of one part of the project, namely a new orthography for Tamang.

Tamang is a Trans-Himalayan language spoken mainly in Nepal, in the districts Rasuvā, Nuvākoṭ, Dhādiṅg, Kābhrepalāñcok, Sindhupālcok, Sindhulī, Rāmechāp and Dolakhā. The Tamang language has approximately 1,350,000 speakers according to the 2011 Nepal Census (Central Bureau of Statistics 2012: 164), and shows a binary dialect division between Eastern and Western Tamang (cf. Varenkamp 1996: 9, van Driem 2001: 963), which coincides with social and cultural differences which are also saliently perceived by the speakers themselves.

Between 2017–2021, data on both Western and Eastern Tamang were collected in Kathmandu and in Bern, Switzerland, with native speakers of the language living there. The methods employed were lexical and grammatical elicitation, both to quickly get an overview of the language and its grammatical design as well as to collect as many data as possible. No texts were collected, since text transcription, discussion and translation are time-consuming and were not considered to be of primary relevance

for the present project, as data gained from elicitation were deemed to be sufficiently accurate for the aims of the project. We worked with speakers from different villages and districts within the Tamang speaking area, and with speakers of both sexes and all ages (except minors) to ensure a broad coverage of dialectal, idiolectal or sociolinguistic differences. The research resulted in a preliminary glossary, a preliminary sketch on the verbal and nominal morphology and a first analysis of the phoneme inventory and phonological processes of Western Tamang.

The structure of this paper is as follows. First, the phonology of Tamang will briefly be presented as a foundation for the ensuing discussion on orthography. In the next Section, we shall discuss some important prerequisites for the development of a practical orthography in the specific cultural context of the Tamang language. Then, we shall discuss previous proposals for writing Tamang and present our own proposal. The final Section provides an outlook.

PHONOLOGY OF TAMANG

Tamang has been described as a tonal language with four tones pertaining to the word level, tones 1 and 2 being high and pronounced with clear phonation, whereas the tones 3 and 4 are low and accompanied subphonemically by breathy voice and, in the case of stops and affricate initials, by voicing of the syllable initial (cf. Mazaudon 1973, 1978, 2003, 2005, 2017, Mazaudon & Michaud 2008). The phoneme inventory reached at by this tonal analysis is shown in Table 1, based on Mazaudon (2017: 469–470).

Table 1: Consonant phoneme inventory according to the tonal analysis

Labial	**Dental**		**Retroflex**	**Palatal**	**Velar**	**Glottal**
p [b~ bʱ]	t [d ~ dʱ]	ʦ [ʣ ~ ʣʱ]	ʈ [ɖ ~ ɖʱ]		k [g ~ gʱ]	
pʰ	tʰ	ʦʰ	ʈʰ		kʰ	
m [mʱ]	n [nʱ]				ŋ [ŋʱ]	
	s [sʱ]					h
	l [lʱ]					
	ɾ [ɾʱ]					
(w [wʱ])				(j [jʱ])		

In brackets, we give the phonetic value of certain phonemes if they appear as initials of a word bearing the low tones 3 and 4.

Hwang *et al.* (2019), on the other hand, argue that Tamang is not a tonal language, i.e. that tone is merely an acoustic epiphenomenon of other phonetic features, namely voice and phonation.[1] The phoneme inventory of Tamang according to this atonal analysis (cf. also Hyoñjan Tāmāṅ VS 2054: 1) is shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Consonant phoneme inventory according to the atonal analysis

Labial	**Dental**		**Retroflex**	**Palatal**	**Velar**	**Glottal**
p	t	ʦ	ʈ		k	
pʰ	tʰ	ʦʰ	ʈʰ		kʰ	
b	d	ʣ	ɖ		g	
bʱ	dʱ	ʣʱ	ɖʱ		gʱ	
m, mʱ	n, nʱ				ŋ, ŋʱ	
	s, sʱ					h
	l, lʱ					
	ɾ, ɾʱ					
w, wʱ				j, jʱ		

However, this analytical disagreement is of minor importance for the development of a practical orthography. Both the tonal and atonal interpretation of Tamang phonology assume almost the same number of phonological oppositions, and both analyses can readily be expressed by the same graphemic means, e.g. <pV> vs. <bV> can be read and understood equally well as [pV˥] vs. [pV˩] and as [pV] vs. [bV] (cf. also Mazaudon 1993). The major difference is that in the atonal analysis, the plain and the breathy series of consonants are phonemically distinct, whereas in the tonal approach, these two classes are both subphonemic allophones of the plain series with the low tones. The consequences of these differences for the development of an orthography are discussed below.

[1] Note that Mazaudon (1978, 2005) and Mazaudon & Michaud (2008) state that Tamang is a 'marginally tonal language', with the phonological feature of tone in Tamang not being primarily and exclusively expressed by the phonetic means of pitch, but by a bundle of phonetic features, including breathy phonation and voice.

The consonant cluster inventory of Tamang is shown in Table 3 (cf. Mazaudon 2017: 469).

Table 3: Consonant clusters

+/r/	pr, pʰr, br, bʱr, mr, mʱr, kr, kʰr, gr, gʱr, hr
+/l/	pl, pʰl, bl, bʱl, ml, mʱl, kl, kʰl, gl, gʱl, hl
+/j/	pj, pʰj, bj, bʱj, mj, mʱj, kj, kʰj, gj, gʱj, ŋj, ŋʱj, ʦj, ʦʰj, ʣj, ʣʱj, sj, sʱj
+/w/	pw, pʰw, bw, bʱw, tw, dw, dʱw, ʈw, ʈw, ɖw, ɖʱw, kw, kʰw, gw, gʱw, ʦw, ʦʰw, ʣw, ʣʱw, sw, sʱw, hw, lw, lʱw, rw, rʱw
+/rw/	prw, brw, bʱrw, mrw, mʱrw, hrw

In syllable-final position, only the voiceless stops, the plain nasals and /l/, /r/ and /s/ are found (cf. Mazaudon 2017: 469).

The vowel phoneme inventory of Tamang is presented in Table 4. According to Mazaudon (2017), nasalised vowels are also found in Tamang, although they are marginal and show no length distinction, always being long (Mazaudon 1973: 123). Table 5 shows the vowel sequences inventory according to Mazaudon (2017: 470). The height assignment refers to the first vowel of the sequences.

Table 4: Vowel phoneme inventory

	front		**back**
high	i, iː, ĩ		u, uː, ũ
mid	e, eː, ẽ		o, oː, õ
low	a, aː, ã		

Table 5: Inventory of vowel sequences

	front		**back**
high	iu, iuː, iui io, ioː, ioi ia, iaː, iai iau, iua, iuaː		ui ua, uaː, uai
mid			oi
low	ai, au		

PREREQUISITES FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF AN ORTHOGRAPHY FOR TAMANG

The prerequisites for a practical, user-oriented orthography are three-fold. First, the orthography should be user-friendly for the Tamang themselves and at the same time linguistically appropriate. Second, it should be usable on computers and mobile phones without specialist, that is linguistic keyboard, excluding both specific IPA-characters such as <ʈ> or <ɬ> and non-basic diacritica such as <V̤> or <ñ>. Finally, it should employ a writing system which is culturally appropriate, positively connoted in the speech community and, if possible, already known and used by the speakers.

Varenkamp (1996: 104), with regard to the question as to which script should be employed for a Tamang orthography, contends that the Tibetan script may be more appealing because the Tamang have a strong cultural and historical link to the Tibetan cultural sphere. This is visible directly in the fact that the Nepāl Tāmāṅ Gheduṅ, the association representing the Tamang in Nepal, is publishing school materials mainly in Tibetan script (e.g. Nepāl Tāmāṅ Gheduṅ VS 2069, VS 2072), and in the statements of Parshuram Tamang that only the Tibetan script is an adequate choice for Tamang on the basis of cultural and linguistic arguments (Krämer 1995: 47, cited in Varenkamp 1996: 30). Additionally, until the end of the Rāṇā government in 1950, Tamang was written only in the Tibetan script (Hyoñjan Tāmāṅ VS 2051: k, cited in Varenkamp 1996: 30).

On the other hand, the Devanāgarī script would be the preferable choice if the primary aim is to reach a wider audience and accelerate the political empowering of the Tamang community within Nepal, as the lingua franca of Nepal, Nepali, is also written in the Devanāgarī script (cf. Varenkamp 1996: 104).

To this, we may add that it would also be beneficial to have an orthography in Roman script, as this would prove highly useful in a world with modern communication technologies, i.e. chats and social media, for which the Tamang, by their own account, often use the Roman script besides the Devanāgarī script. Therefore, the aim of this project is to provide orthography proposals in these three scripts.

Before presenting our proposals, we shall first review proposals brought forth previously by other scholars, namely those by Hyoñjan Tāmāṅ, Mazaudon and the Nepāl Tāmāṅ Gheduṅ.

DISCUSSION OF PREVIOUS ORTHOGRAPHY PROPOSALS

Hyoñjan Tāmāṅ

Hyoñjan Tāmāṅ, in his publications, employs the Devanāgarī script to transcribe Tamang. Generally, Hyoñjan Tāmāṅ does not indicate tone, although in Hyoñjan Tāmāṅ (VS 2054: 22), he adopts Mazaudon's convention of writing tone with prefixed superscript numbers, although tones are not marked in the rest of that publication.

For breathy consonants, Hyoñjan Tāmāṅ uses a subscript dot < . >. He also employs this convention for breathy obstruents for which there are dedicated Devanāgarī letters, e.g. < ड़ > instead of < ढ >, both of which represent [ɖʱ]. Deviation from the Nepali orthography in Devanāgarī script may be intended as a conscious tool of cultural identification and political empowerment by speakers of languages of Nepal other than Nepali (cf. below). However, the specific convention of writing breathiness with a subscript dot has the disadvantage that the subscript dot in Devanāgarī script already has another function in Hindi, namely rendering consonant sounds not represented by the letter inventory of the script, e.g. < क > [k] → < क़ > [q], < ड > [ɖ] → < ड़ > [ɽ], or < ज > [ʤ] → < ज़ > [z]. Additionally, the subscript dot is not always clearly visible and may be mistaken for a simple stain. For vowel length, Hyoñjan Tāmāṅ (VS 2054: 1) employs the *visarga* < ः >.

Mazaudon

In her linguistic publications, Mazaudon (e.g. 2017) uses a linguistically informed Latin transcription of Tamang, including IPA symbols such as <ŋ>, specialist diacritica like < ː > and superscript numbers for the tones. Obviously, this scientific transcription aimed at a specialist audience is not usable for a practical, speaker-oriented orthography, since it contains a number of specialist symbols and is not intuitive for laymen (cf. the discussion above on the prerequisites of a practical orthography).

Mazaudon (1993) gives some preliminary suggestions on how to write Tamang in the Devanāgarī and Tibetan scripts, and these suggestions are discussed in the following.

For the Devanāgarī script, Mazaudon (1993) states that the use of voiced letters would be redundant, as they are subphonemic and an epiphenomenon of the low tones in her analysis. She proposes to mark tones by prefixed, superscript digits 1–4, e.g. ¹कु *¹ku* [˥ku] 'chest', ²कुः *²kuː* [˧kuː]

'nine', ³को *³ko* [˩go ~ ˩gǫ̣] 'back', ⁴क्वा *⁴kwa* [˩gwa ~ ˩gwạ] 'wheat' (data from Mazaudon 1978: 174–177). According to Mazaudon (1993), this solution has the disadvantage that people may find it too strange or complicated to write and may simply omit the digits, leading to confusion. For Mazaudon (1993), the fact that superscript digits are arbitrary is viewed as an advantage, whereas for the purpose of the present project, it constitutes a major disadvantage, as it may diminish the ability of the speaker to relate to the orthography intuitively.

Two alternatives discussed by Mazaudon (1993) are (1) the convention of Hyoñjan Tāmāṅ, i.e. the subscript dot and, in the case of stops, voiced letters to mark the low tones and breathiness, but supplemented with an apostrophe to distinguish tones 2 and 4 from tones 1 and 3, i.e. (using the same data as above, retaining the tonal value assigned by Mazaudon 1978: 174–177) कु *¹ku* [˥ku] 'chest', 'कुः *²ku:* [˦ku:] 'nine', गो *³ko* [˩go ~ ˩gǫ̣] 'back', 'ग्वा *⁴kwa* [˩gwa ~ ˩gwạ] 'wheat'; and (2) the system used by Doreen Taylor, i.e. use of the apostrophe to mark the tones 2 and 4, together with ligatures involving <h> for fricatives and sonorants and voiced letter for the stops to mark the tones 3 and 4 (thus writing the stops in the same way as Hyoñjan Tāmāṅ). To illustrate the three options with sonorants, cf. *¹la* [˥la] 'god', *²mi:* [˦mi:] 'eye', *³ri* [˩ri ~ ˩rị] 'hill', *⁴jo:* [˩jo: ~ ˩jǫ:] 'thief', written ¹ला, ²मीः, ³री, ⁴योः in Mazaudon's approach, ला, 'मीः, री, 'य़ोः in Hyoñjan Tāmāṅ's system and ला, 'मीः, रही, 'यहोः in Doreen Taylor's system (data from Mazaudon 1993).

Mazaudon (1993) states that using <h> to mark low tones together with continuant initials is a bad choice, as it may be mistaken for consonant clusters. However, as there are no clusters <Ch> in Tamang (cf. Mazaudon 2017: 469), this is a pseudo-problem that can be ignored.

For consonant clusters, Mazaudon (1993) proposes that no conjunct letters should be used, but only the full forms, e.g. < मल > <mala> instead of < म्ल > <mla> for [ml]. Her argument is that this would ostensibly be pedagogically easier, as the speakers only have to learn one form for each letter. However, Mazaudon's argument assumes the biased Occidental poise of complete unfamiliarity with the Devanāgarī script, whereas the Tamang themselves are all well acquainted with the Devanāgarī script due to its use in public life in Nepal, including schools etc. This again is a pseudo-problem.

With regard to the writing of the vowels, Mazaudon (1993) suggests that the vowel /a/ be written explicitly as 'long', i.e. *dīrgha* < आ, का >

instead of using the native script convention of an inherent *hrasva* vowel < अ, क >. Consequently, the *halant* or *virāma* symbol < ् > used to suppress an inherent vowel would not be necessary in writing Tamang so that a closed syllable could simply be indicated by the lack of a vowel sign. For example, the final letter symbol < -क > would be read as [-k], not [-kə].

For long vowels, Mazaudon (1993) suggests using the visarga < ः >. Although indicating vowel length is not the original function of the visarga, this symbol is used in this function for Newar and also for Tamang in the publications of Hyoñjan Tāmāṅ, see above. Devanāgarī script offers letters for long or *dīrgha* < ī >, < ū > and < ā >, namely ई, ऊ and आ, representing the long counterparts to the short or *hrasva* letters symbols for < i >, < u > and < a >, namely इ, उ and अ. In modern Nepali, however, these letters no longer express vowel length. Therefore, it would be confusing rather than helpful to use them to write long vowels, according to Mazaudon. Moreover, as Mazaudon (1993) points out, there are no corresponding letters for long <o> and <e>, so that long vowels with these qualities would still need the visarga to be denoted in writing, leading to a non-uniform system. For vowel sequences, Mazaudon (1993) proposes to use the diacritic vowel allograph for the first vowel and the free-standing vowel allograph for subsequent vowels, e.g. < ताइ > <tā.i> [tai]. Nasalised vowels can be written with the *candrabindu* < ँ > or the *anunāsika* < ं >, both used to express nasalisation in Nepali.

In the Tibetan script, there are no great difficulties with regard to expressing the differing vowel qualities of Tamang. At variance with the Tibetan script convention for expressing vowel length in transcribed Sanskrit, Mazaudon (1993) proposes to use the letter *ḥa* ཧ as a full letter symbol in final position, rather than traditionally as a subscripted letter, to indicate vowel length in Tamang, e.g. གི <ki> [ki] vs. གིཧ <kiḥ> [kiː]. Regarding the representation of Tamang nasalised vowels in Tibetan script, Mazaudon (1993) offers no solution on account of her unfamiliarity with the *sna-ldan* and other native Tibetan diacritic symbols. Vowel sequences can be written with the *ḥa* ཧ bearing the diacritic vowel sign denoting the second vowel of the sequence, whereas the first vowel is indicated by a diacritic allograph on the preceding consonant, e.g. ཏཻཧ <taḥi> [tai]. As there are no vowel sequences with a long first vowel, no graphemic confusion can arise between a long single vowel and a first short vowel of a vowel sequence.

Mazaudon (1993) likewise leaves unresolved the problem of how to write the tones in Tibetan script. One solution would be to write superscript digits just as in the Devanāgarī script (see above). However, another symbol or letter from the Tibetan script corresponding to the apostrophe used with the Devanāgarī script discussed above could be used instead, but Mazaudon (1993) provides no specific recommendation. For the writing of breathiness, Mazaudon (1993) argues against the use of the letter ཧ <h> [h], as, in Tibetan, this glottal fricative is voiceless and associated with a high tone, and she argues that use of the same symbol to indicate breathiness, which in Tamang, according to her analysis, is associated with low tone (cf. above), would cause confusion. Here too her familiarity with the ways that Tibetan script is conventionally used to transcribe Sanskrit is wanting.

Nepāl Tāmāṅ Gheduṅ

The Tamang themselves, through their organisation, the Nepāl Tāmāṅ Gheduṅ, mainly use the Tibetan script to write their language in official publications and documents, for example school books on and in Tamang, e.g. Nepāl Tāmāṅ Gheduṅ (ed.) (VS 2069, VS 2072). Interestingly, for the affricates, the Nepāl Tāmāṅ Gheduṅ uses the graphemically derived letters ཙ, ཚ, ཛ, which conventionally express dento-alveolar affricates, instead of the basic letters ཅ, ཆ, ཇ, which express palatal affricates. This choice is phonetically adequate, as the affricates in Tamang are dento-alveolar rather than alveopalatal or palatal (see Tables 1 and 2).

For the retroflex stops, the dedicated retroflex letters ཊ, ཋ, ཌ are used rather than clusters of dental stops + <r>, i.e. ཏྲ, ཐྲ, དྲ . This too is a good choice, as clusters of the form <Cr> exist in the Tamang language and need to be graphemically differentiated from plain retroflex stops. However, as the clusters /tr, tʰr, dr, dʰr/ are lacking in Tamang (see above), this too could have provided a viable option for writing retroflex stops.

Tamang syllable-final stops are written with voiceless letters, which is phonetically adequate and does not follow the convention in Tibetan for writing syllable-final stops, which instead uses the letters for voiced stops.[2]

[2] A possible historical explanation for the traditional Tibetan orthographic convention is provided by Namgyal & van Driem (2022).

In harmony with native conventions for the use of Tibetan script for the transcription of Sanskrit, Tamang breathy consonants are written as clusters with <h>, e.g. དྷ <dh> [dʱ], བྷ <bh> [bʱ], ཤྷ <sh> [sʱ], ཧྨ <mh> [mʱ], ཧླ <lh> [lʱ]. Although Mazaudon (1993) expresses reservations against this (cf. above), the use of this convention by the Tamang community is apt, and furnishes yet another strong argument for us to include this convention into our practical, user-oriented orthography (see below).

Vowel sequences are written by a full vowel letter immediately following the consonant letter which carries the first vowel of the sequence as a diacritic letter, e.g. ཏཨཻ <tai> [tai]. This quirk clashes with Mazaudon's (1993) proposal, more in consonance with Tibetan orthographic practice, to use the letter *ḥa* ཧ to mark the second vowel of a sequence, e.g. ཏཧི <taḥi> [tai].

Neither tones nor nasalised vowels seem to be expressed in the orthography employed by the Nepāl Tāmāṅ Gheduṅ, but voiced letters are used for voiced initials, and the combination <Ch> is employed to indicate breathiness. It is unclear whether the lack of tone marking reflects a judgement by the speakers about the existence of tones in their mother tongue or whether it is due to the lack of suitable tools to express tones in the Tibetan script. It should be kept in mind that the writing of voiced and breathy initials minimises the problem, as only two purported tonal contrasts are not distinguished overtly, viz. 1 vs. 2 and 3 vs. 4, whereas the contrast 1/2 vs. 3/4 is expressed by the distinction of voiceless vs. voiced letters. Whatever the reason for the choice not to write tones, this choice appears not to have led to any major problems for understanding and communication. Vowel length likewise does not seem to be expressed in the orthography employed by the Nepāl Tāmāṅ Gheduṅ.

In some publications, the Nepāl Tāmāṅ Gheduṅ also employs the Devanāgarī script. This is basically uncontroversial, except for the writing of free-standing vowels, i.e. vowels in naked syllables, with the free-standing allograph of अ <a>, marked with the respective diacritic allograph of the vowel to be expressed, e.g. ओ <'ो> for [i] or ओ <'े> for [e]. This innovative orthography is similar to the writing of the vowels in the Tibetan script, but unlike the writing of Nepali in Devanāgarī, where such vowels are written with their own respective free-standing grapheme for the vowel in question, e.g. इ [i], ए [e], with the exceptions in Devanāgarī of the graphemes ओ [o] and औ [ɔu], which are based on the free-standing allograph of <ā>. This somewhat strange convention employed by the

Nepāl Tāmāṅ Gheduṅ is discussed by Varenkamp (1996: 31), who notes that this convention may be adequate if the main goal is to set apart Tamang graphemically from Nepali and other languages written in the Devanāgarī script for reasons of group solidarity. However, at the same time, this convention is suboptimal from a pragmatic point of view, that is, for a quick and easy development and spreading of a Devanāgarī writing of Tamang, especially for speakers of Tamang acquainted with the Devanāgarī script through formal education in schools (Varenkamp 1996: 31). Accordingly, Varenkamp (1996: 104–105) critically concludes that

> [t]he pertinent question to be asked about any orthography is: Does this orthography provide a highway for education and information flow to the Tamang people, or does it create yet another road block?

This question must be applied likewise to the orthography proposals reviewed in this Section, and potential 'road blocks' need to be removed as much as possible for a practical orthography to spread quickly and widely.

PROPOSED ORTHOGRAPHIES

The orthographies in Roman, Devanāgarī and Tibetan script worked out in this project build on the previous work described above, but focus more strictly on phonological adequacy and usability. Propositions from previous publications were considered wherever they matched with the aims of this project, viz. phonological adequacy and user-friendliness, but were rejected if deemed not to do so.

The overall structure of the orthographies presented here therefore is similar to the one of previous proposals, but deviates in important details, and so constitutes a synthesis of previous proposals, supplemented with new conventions.

The consonants of Tamang are written as shown in Tables 6–8.

Table 6: Proposed orthography for obstruents

Voiceless	Aspirated	Voiced	Murmured
k – क – ཀ	kh – ख – ཁ	g – ग – ག	gh – घ – གྷ
tr – ट – ཊ	thr – ठ – ཋ	dr – ड – ཌ	dhr – ढ – ཌྷ
c – च – ཅ	ch – छ – ཆ	j – ज – ཇ	jh – झ – ཇྷ
t – त – ཏ	th – थ – ཐ	d – द – ད	dh – ध – དྷ
p – प – པ	ph – फ – ཕ	b – ब – བ	bh – भ – བྷ

Table 7: Proposed orthography for nasals

Plain	Murmured
ng – ङ – ང	ngh – ङ्ह – ངྷ
n – न – ན	nh – न्ह – ནྷ
m – म – མ	mh – म्ह – མྷ

Table 8: Proposed orthography for fricatives and sonorants

Plain	Murmured
s – स – ས	sh – स्ह – ཤྷ
h – ह – ཧ	–
l – ल – ལ	lh – ल्ह – ལྷ
r – र – ར	rh – र्ह – རྷ
w – व – ཝ	wh – व्ह – ཝྷ
y – य – ཡ	yh – य्ह – ཡྷ

Breathy stops are written with the combination <Ch> in Latin, the respective graphemes in Devanāgarī and with subscripted <h> ྷ in Tibetan script. In so doing, we do not follow Hyoñjan Tāmāṅ in using the subscript dot for breathy obstruents in Devanāgarī script, but follow the Nepāl Tāmāṅ Gheduṅ for the Tibetan script, despite the criticism of Mazaudon (1993) (see above).

For breathy nasals, fricatives and sonorants, there are no specific graphemes in Devanāgarī. Consequently, they are written with the graphemic combination <Ch>. In Tibetan, they are again written with a subscript <h>, and in Roman script, they are written with the combination <Ch>. In Devanāgarī and Tibetan, the letter combination must always be <C+h> to differentiate these simple phonological segments from consonant clusters of the shape <h+C>, see Table 9. Retroflex stops are written with the combination <Cr> in Latin and with the respective graphemes in Devanāgarī and Tibetan. The velar nasal [ŋ] is written in Latin script with the digraph <ng>.

The palatal approximant in Latin script is written as <y> rather than phonetically precise as <j>, as the latter is already used for [ʤ] and because Tamang speakers using the Roman script will be more familiar with English, where <y> stands for [j], than with IPA or German, where <j> is used for [j]. The use of <c> for [ʦ] and of <j> for [ʤ] as well as for the aspirated or breathy phonemes may perhaps be debatable, but it must be tested in practical application of the orthography whether this convention is acceptable for the speakers or whether the spellings <ʦ, ʤ> or <ch, chh> may be more popular and usable. The *ad hoc* practice of using <ch> for the unaspirated affricate [ʨ, ʦ] and <chh> for the aspirated counterpart [ʨʰ, ʦʰ] is widespread in Nepal and, for some languages, also in India, but this unwieldy improvisation is objectionable from an aesthetic point of view, whereas the use of <ʦ> and <ʤ>, though phonetically adequate, is likely to be unfamiliar to Tamang. Our choice of <c>, <ch>, <j> and so forth also happen to be in harmony with the linguistically informed, Asian and non-colonial choices made by the Malay and Indonesian scholars who devised the orthographic conventions of the Roman orthographies of Malay and Indonesian.

Consonant clusters are written with juxtaposition in Latin script, with the respective conjunct letters and subscript letters in Devanāgarī and Tibetan scripts, respectively, as shown in Table 9.

Table 9: Proposed orthography for consonant clusters

+ r	pr, phr, br, bhr, mr, mhr, kr, khr, gr, ghr, hr
	प्र, फ्र, ब्र, भ्र, म्र, म्ह्र, क्र, ख्र, ग्र, घ्र, ह्र
	པྲ, ཕྲ, བྲ, བྷྲ, མྲ, མྷྲ, ཀྲ, ཁྲ, གྲ, གྷྲ, ཧྲ
+ l	pl, phl, bl, bhl, ml, mhl, kl, khl, gl, ghl, hl
	प्ल, फ्ल, ब्ल, भ्ल, म्ल, म्ह्ल, क्ल, ख्ल, ग्ल, घ्ल, ह्ल
	པླ, ཕླ, བླ, བྷླ, མླ, མྷླ, ཀླ, ཁླ, གླ, གྷླ, ཧླ
+ j	py, phy, by, bhy, my, mhy, ky, khy, gy, ghy, ngy, nghy, cy, chy, jy, jhy, sy, shy
	प्य, फ्य, ब्य, भ्य, म्य, म्ह्य, क्य, ख्य, ग्य, घ्य, ङ्य, ङ्ह्य, च्य, छ्य, ज्य, झ्य, स्य, स्ह्य
	པྱ, ཕྱ, བྱ, བྷྱ, མྱ, མྷྱ, ཀྱ, ཁྱ, གྱ, གྷྱ, ངྱ, ངྷྱ, ཅྱ, ཆྱ, ཇྱ, ཉྱ, ཤྱ, ཧྱ
+ w	pw, phw, bw, bhw, tw, dw, dhw, trw, trhw, drw, drhw, kw, khw, gw, ghw, cw, chw, jw, jhw, sw, shw, hw, lw, lhw, rw, rhw
	प्व, फ्व, ब्व, भ्व, त्व, थ्व, द्व, ध्व, द्र, ठ्व, ड्व, ढ्व, क्व, ख्व, ग्व, घ्व, च्व, छ्व, ज्व, झ्व, स्व, स्ह्व ह्व, ल्व, ल्ह्व, रव/र्व, रह्व/र्ह्व
	པྭ, ཕྭ, བྭ, བྷྭ, ཏྭ, ཐྭ, དྭ, ཌྭ, དྲ, ཊྲ, ཌྲ, ཌྷྲ, ཀྭ, ཁྭ, གྭ, གྷྭ, ཅྭ, ཆྭ, ཇྭ, ཉྭ, ཤྭ, ཧྭ, ལྭ, ཧླྭ, རྭ/ཝ, རྷྭ/ཧྭ
+ rw	prw, brw, bhrw, mrw, mhrw, hrw
	प्र्व, फ्र्व, ब्र्व, भ्र्व, म्र्व, म्ह्र्व, ह्र्व
	པྲྭ, ཕྲྭ, བྲྭ, བྷྲྭ, མྲྭ, མྷྲྭ, ཧྲྭ

The plain short and long vowels of Tamang are written as shown in Tables 10–11, with the independent allographs in Devanāgarī and Tibetan on the left side and the diacritic allographs on the right side. In Devanāgarī script, <a> is written with the *dīrgha* < आ > rather than with the *hrasva* letter < अ >, following the conventions of the Nepāl Tāmāṅ Gheduṅ.

Table 10: Proposed orthography for short vowels

i – इ ि – ཨི ི	u – उ ु – ཨུ ུ
e – ए े – ཨེ ེ	o – ओ ो – ཨོ ོ
a – आ ा – ཨ	

Table 11: Proposed orthography for long vowels

ii – इः ि: – ཨཱི ཱི	uu – उः ु: – ཨཱུ ཱུ
ee – एः े: – ཨཻ ཻ	oo – ओः ो: – ཨཽ ཽ
aa – आः ा: – ཨཱ ཱ	

Generally, all vowels can easily be rendered in each script. We do not follow the Nepāl Tāmāṅ Gheduṅ in writing vowels in naked syllables in Devanāgarī with the basic letter <a>, supplemented with the diacritic allograph of the vowel in question (see above, but rather use the dedicated independent allograph of the vowel in question, that is इ instead of अी. For the diacritic allographs of /i/, we use the grapheme for the short vowel, ि, instead of the one for the long vowel, ी, since this is phonetically adequate and consistent with the use of 'short' or *hrasva* इ for the independent allograph, although the Nepāl Tāmāṅ Gheduṅ as well as publications of speech communities in Nepal other than Nepali often seem to prefer the 'long' or *dīrgha* diacritic letter to write the vowel [i], e.g. Mewāhāṅg Rāī Yākhommā (VS 2062).

Long vowels are written in Latin by doubling the grapheme, e.g. <ii> for [iː]. Another option would be to write long vowels with a circumflex, i.e. <î> for [iː], but we would like to withhold the use of the circumflex diacritic because of its optical similarity to the tilde, which is a potential candidate for the writing of nasalised vowels (see below). In the Devanāgarī script, long vowels are written using the *visarga* symbol < ः >, following Hyoñjan Tāmāṅ. In the Tibetan script, long vowels are designated by a subscripted letter *ḥa* ཧ, properly called a *ḥa-zur* < ཱ >. This conven-

tion superficially resembles the proposal by Mazaudon (1993), but we choose to write the *ḥa-zur* < ◌ཱ > in consonance with the native Tibetan orthographic conventions for the transcription of Sanskrit long vowels instead of as a full letter *ḥa* ཧ. The native Tibetan orthographic convention is also used in Phonological Dzongkha (Tshering and van Driem 2019: 641–642) and in Phonological Drenjongke (Namgyal & van Driem 2022).

Vowel sequences are written as shown in Table 12, with the dummy initial <k> used for illustration. For the Latin script, the individual vowel letters can simply be juxtaposed. For Devanāgarī, the first vowel of vowel sequences can be written with the diacritic allograph on the preceding consonant letter, whereas latter vowels can be written with the independent allograph. In the Tibetan script, the first letter is written as vowel diacritic, just as in Devanāgarī, and the following vowels are written using the dummy letter *ḥa* ཧ as the graphemic carrier, as suggested by Mazaudon (1993). This proposal by Mazaudon is nicely in consonance with traditional Tibetan orthographic conventions for the representation of vowel sequences. In this respect, the system of writing presently in use by the Nepāl Tāmāṅ Gheduṅ in their pedagogical publications is at variance with Tibetan orthographic convention, with their use of the letter *a* ཨ for this purpose thus suggesting an intervening glottal stop or glottal hiatus between each of the successive vowels making up the sequence. For Devanāgarī too, we diverge from the conventions of the Nepāl Tāmāṅ Gheduṅ in directly writing the free-standing allograph of the vowel in question instead of a diacritic allograph with the free-standing allograph of <a> (see above).

Table 12: Proposed orthography for vowel sequences (exemplary selection)

<table>
<tr><td>kiu, kiuu, kiui
किउ, किउः, किउइ
ཀིཨུ, ཀིཨུ་, ཀིཨུའི</td><td rowspan="2"></td><td>kua, kuaa, kuai
कुआ, कुआः, कुआइ
ཀུཨ, ཀུཨ་, ཀུཨའི</td></tr>
<tr><td></td><td>koi
कोइ
ཀོའི</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="3">kai, kau
काइ, काउ
ཀཨའི, ཀཨུ</td></tr>
</table>

Nasalised vowels can readily be written with the the *candrabindu* < ◌ँ > or the *anunāsika* < ◌ं > in Devanāgarī. For the Tibetan script, the *sna-ldan* < ◌ྃ >, here depicted on the vowel letter < ཨ >, and for Roman script the tilde < ◌̃ > can be used to represent nasalisation, although neither Tibetans nor speakers of Latin used these diacritics for native nasal sounds. The Tibetans devised the diacritic *sna-ldan* to represent nasality of vowels in Indic languages and in sacred syllables, whereas the tilde in Roman script was deliberately adapted from a mediaeval scriptural flourish that came to be used to mark letters representing nasal vowels that had arisen in European tongues.

It should be noted that in the publications of the Nepāl Tāmāṅ Gheduṅ, nasalisation is left unmarked in the Tibetan script. Mazaudon (1973, 2017) contends that nasalisation is but a marginal phonological feature of Tamang, and asserts that neglecting to represent Tamang vowel nasality orthographically may not cause major problems in writing, reading and understanding. Sidestepping the representation of a phonological feature in an orthography, however, would amount to a fundamental shortcoming, which is why we propose the use of the two conventional diacritics designed for this purpose in the Tibetan and Roman scripts.

The orthography proposed here allows Tamang to be read within a tonal framework too, but only to a limited degree: The voice difference can be read as a difference between high and low tone, but there are no means to differentiate between tones 1 and 2 nor between tones 3 and 4. Similarly, for the fricatives and sonorants, only the ones with following breathy voice in the atonal orthography give some indication of the tone value, since, in the tonal analysis, syllables with initial sonorants exhibit breathy articulation in the two low tones. However, the exact low tone cannot be retrieved. For the plain fricatives and sonorants, the imprecision in the translation into the tonal analysis would even be worse, since these sounds could have any of four tonal values in the tonal analysis. These translation problems are summarised in Table 13.

Table 13: Inadequacies of the present orthography for a tonal reading

Orthography with atonal value		**Corresponding tonal value**
voiceless stop	→	unaspirated stop, Tone 1 **or** 2
aspirated stop	→	aspirated stop, Tone 1 **or** 2
voiced stop	→	unaspirated stop, Tone 3 **or** 4
breathy stop	→	unaspirated stop, Tone 3 **or** 4
plain fricative	→	fricative, Tone 1 **or** 2 **or** 3 **or** 4
breathy fricative	→	fricative, Tone 3 **or** 4
plain sonorant	→	sonorant, Tone 1 **or** 2 **or** 3 **or** 4
breathy sonorant	→	sonorant, Tone 3 **or** 4

If the Tamang themselves wish to write the tonal contrasts, then the difference between the tones could be marked by the apostrophe for tones 2 and 4 in all three scripts, as proposed by Mazaudon (1993) (see above). Alternatively, the superscript numbers could also be used, although this is not very practical and would need some effort to be taught and learnt. It is not yet clear how this innovative and abstract solution would match with the cultural and religious traditions and values of the Tamang community. The writing of breathy voice should be retained, since it allows for the differentation of the two low tones from the two high tones.

Note, finally, that we do not offer any suggestions regarding marks of punctuation, except for the symbol *tsheg* < ་ > in the Tibetan script, which is used to separate syllables, as shown in examples (1)–(3) below. Other marks of punctuation will need to be developed by the speakers themselves or in collaboration with them.

To illustrate the orthographies proposed here, we give example sentences written in Latin, Devanāgarī and Tibetan script in (1)–(3). A fourth line provides the phonetic spelling based on the phoneme inventory given above.

1) Hyoñjan Tāmāṅ (VS 2054: 75)
nhanggar nga sailung niban mula
न्हाङगार ङा साइलुङ निबान मुला
ན྅ངགར་ ང་ སའིལུང་ ནི་བན་ མུ་ལ་
[nʱaŋgaɾ ŋa sailuŋ niban mula]
'Tomorrow, I will be going to Sailung.'

(2) Hyoñjan Tāmāṅ (VS 2054: 97)
ai dhimri niu ahinsam nga nila
आइ धिमरि निउ आहिनसाम ङा निला
ཨའི་ དྷིམ་རི་ ནིའུ་ ཨ་ཧིན་སམ་ ང་ ནི་ལ་
[ai dʱimɾi niu ahinsam ŋa nila]
'Go home, otherwise I'll go!'

(3) Hyoñjan Tāmāṅ (VS 2054: 74)
syargyam dhini pheemula
स्यारग्याम धिनि फेःमुला
སྱར་ཇྱམ་ དྷི་ན་ ཕེ་མུ་ལ་
[sjaɾgjam dʱini pʰe:mula]
'The sun comes out from the East.'

OUTLOOK

Despite some minor problems and inadequacies that we could not adopt, the orthography used by the Nepāl Tāmāṅ Gheduṅ in its publications is already very elaborate and precise, and school and text books in this orthography are published, printed, distributed and used, e.g. in schools. Therefore, a good orthography of Tamang has already progressed considerably. However, the following points could be addressed to the community and to its representative, the Nepāl Tāmāṅ Gheduṅ:

(1) The Latin and Devanāgarī orthographies developed in this project and presented above could be discussed and, if accepted, implemented

alongside the Tibetan orthography that is already in use. The Latin orthography needs to be tested in empirical studies involving chats and social media.

(2) The Tibetan orthography of the Nepāl Tāmāṅ Gheduṅ could be improved in some minor details (see the discrepancies between their proposal and our proposal above). The ultimate adoption of our suggestions depends crucially on the opinion of the Tamang community. A unitary orthography is more important and useful for the development of the Tamang language and culture than a phonologically completely adequate orthography.

It is important to state that our orthographies are not authoritative, but rather suggestions to be discussed with and in the Tamang community. They are basically meant to be a tool for empowerment and for the development and preservation of the Tamang language and culture.

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BOOK REVIEW

Prem Poddar & Lisa Lindkvist Zhang. *Through the India–China Border: Kalimpong in the Himalayas*: Cambridge University Press; Cambridge etc., 2024. ISBN 978-1-009-49935-4 (Hardback)

Reviewed by ALEX C. MCKAY

The small, multi-ethnic Himalayan town of Kalimpong is effectively the product of the colonial era. Part of territory annexed to Bengal following the Anglo-Bhutanese war of 1864-65, it became the base for Christian missionaries seeking to access the Buddhist lands of Sikkim, Bhutan and Tibet from which they were firmly excluded. Its 1865 population of around 3,500 had grown to some 41,500 by 1901 and in the mid-20th century it gained further prominence as a centre for the Indo-Tibetan trade in wool and other goods. As an entrepôt "port" its economy briefly boomed in the 1940s and the town was firmly linked into wider regional trade networks. But during the period in which China's communists took over first China proper and then Tibet it became equally prominent as what India Prime Minister Nehru called 'a nest of spies'. Trade and espionage overlapped, aided by the blurred political and ethnic identities of this borderland setting, which became a primary interface between China and India.

The authors of *Through the India–China Border* have approached the history of Kalimpong in the period from the 1920s up until 1962 through a multi-disciplinary lens, revealing a complex interplay of actors and shifting identities framed within the economic and political processes of this period. Recognizing the fragmented nature of the sources and histories, horizontal rather than vertical linkages across borders are thus highlighted, with a focus on specific aspects of 'how concepts of "Chinese" and "China" became woven into the fabric of Kalimpong' (p.xvi).

Chapters are devoted to analysis of the representations of Kalimpong in the Chinese *People's Daily* in the 1950s and 1960s; the complex identification and certification of Chinese and Tibetans in Indian Foreigner Registration Files from the 1940s to the 1960s; the Kalimpong Chung Hwa school established for Chinese students and its internal intrigues and espionage role; and finally the role and heroic representations in modern China of the wealthy trader Ma Zhucai, who returned to China from

Kalimpong shortly before his death in 1963. While each adds to the understanding of a Chinese presence in India, there is also an implicit, and occasionally explicit path visible to the war of 1962, the history of which is still subject to revision and reinterpretation by successive generations.

This work does fill a gap in the literature. A considerable body of work exists on Kalimpong in a Tibetan and a European world (albeit the Sikkimese role remains largely unstudied), with the Chinese presence there the hostile "Other". *Through the India–China Border* provides a nuanced view of the Chinese Kalimpong, and how both prominent individuals such as Ma Zhucai and various borderland traders and "subalterns" chose or were forced into specific identity classifications by the Indian bureaucratic state. The authors have made good use here of Indian Intelligence Bureau files; indeed, the breadth and depth of research throughout this work is impressive, and suggests a lengthy gestation process of reflection and construction. At times, particularly in Chapter Four, the level of detail is perhaps unwarranted, but in general the book is perfectly readable, even literary, at undergraduate level, with the considerable theoretical material demarcated from the specific enquiries. In that sense this work should stimulate considerable classroom reflection and discussion.

While challenges to the centre-periphery model are hardly new in frontier and borderland studies, indeed are almost obligatory in such works today, there is a weight of implicit and explicit evidence here of local agency in the framing of categories such as "Chinese". But while noting the absence of any essentialised identity in this term, the authors prefer to avoid defining it. But the term "Chinese" is hardly devoid of all meaning and there is a want of definition of the term as it is to be understood here beyond non-Tibetan speakers within Qing territory, a definition so broad as to be problematic. While this reflects both methodology and the blurred categories of the sources used, access to some definition through such aspects as dress and diet might have been considered, albeit such definitions in the Sino-Indian-Tibetan world are further complicated by class, and aspiring class choices; the food of the Tibetan elites, for example, was generally Chinese.

But as the author's make clear, distinguishing Chinese from Tibetans was no simple matter, not least for Indian officials, many of whom doubtless came from far-off parts of India. Definition was further complicated by the Amdowas, who tended to see themselves as neither Chinese nor Tibetan. The Amdowas were, however, like so many other ethnic groups in the Indo-Tibetan borderlands forced into one or other category by the colonial and post-colonial classificatory regimes.

Among the numerous theoretical perspectives explored, the authors are rightly cautious in locating Kalimpong in Zomia, but take the approach of seeking to refine the term through an analysis of trade routes. In avoiding grand narratives and selecting specific issues to focus on, the authors both raise questions for, and leave considerable scope for, further research. One wonders, for example, about the earlier ethnic history of the region, whether Lepcha, Limbu or other groups predominated, and the impact of the missionary-centred colonial regime on those ethnicities, as well as the reverse of this work; an examination of India within China.

The book is well-edited with no obvious typos other than a lengthy quotation which occurs on both pages 63 and 134. While the writing is attributed to two authors, it is impossible to gauge the contribution of each and proper explanation of the division of labour should have been included. But in sum the work is a reflective and stimulating contribution to an active field, and in its exploration of various relevant theoretical modes of analysis should prove a lasting resource.

BOOK REVIEW

Roche, Gerald. 2024. *The Politics of Language Oppression in Tibet.* Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press. P. xvi+244. Pb. Octavo. Ethically sourced paper. Price: INR 3,742 (pb). ISBN: 978-1501777783 (pb), 978-1501777790 (Digital edition).

Reviewed by SAMAR SINHA
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The Politics of Language Oppression in Tibet by Gerald Roche is about the politics that underlie the language endangerment, in the context of a global language crisis. Roche acknowledges that *endangerment* linguistics has been fruitful in research, institution-building, and activism, while also arguing that it depoliticises language endangerment by turning the crisis into a technical problem.

As a point of departure to address the issue of language loss, he offers a new approach by examining the issue of 'language oppression': "The enforcement of language loss by physical, mental, social and spiritual coercion." (p. 4). Unlike endangerment linguistics, Roche's approach considers the world system and the way it consistently restricts people's choices about language. He examines "how constrained choice is produced through networks of power that connect the world system, the state, the community, and the family…" and "how people's choices about language are restricted by violence, domination, subordination, marginalization, and exclusion, and how this consistently leads to language loss in community…country…around the world." (p. 4).

Considering language as a social and political institution, and carving ideas from sociolinguistics, linguistic anthropology and political theory, he is inspired by Foucault's stance to examine power relations from the bottom up. On the methodological front, following Standpoint Theory, he examines the lived experiences of the Tibetan people in his analysis of power relations in Tibet from the state to individual speakers, to contest rather than understand language oppression or merely "reproducing the voices of those people" (p. 8).

Roche calls his approach militant, decolonial anthropology, intending to achieve what the speakers "want for themselves and their languages," he builds his theory of a biopolitical approach to understanding language oppression to combat it and to support language maintenance and reclamation as an alternative to the approaches of endangerment linguistics "to produce a better world, rather than a better anthropology..." (p. 6). *The Politics of Language Oppression in Tibet* resonates with the political anthropology of language, analogous to the sociology of language.

Roche begins his chapter *in medias res* - "I can understand you." He points to 'rupture' in the intergenerational transmission of Manegacha language[1] between the speaking parents and their non-speaking but Manegacha understanding children. It also points to a language shift among the Tibetans. In his pursuit to comprehend the rupture, he begins to address how parents' choices, circumstances, etc., are moulded by power, and how power shapes people's choices regarding language in Tibet and the People's Republic of China (PRC) and globally.

Like English, Hindi and Chinese, Tibetan is ethnically and linguistically diverse rather than a monolithic construct as it portrays. In Tibet, there are more than thirty distinct languages (like Namuyi, Ngandehua, Manegacha, etc.) - 'minoritized language' in addition to Tibetan and Tibetan Sign Language by the Tibetan community. In the PRC, the Tibetan community, one of the fifty-six minorities (*minzu*), is considered a single population with the Tibetan language (and subordinate to the Han people and Mandarin). In turn, the thirty distinct languages of the Tibetan community face the state's 'erasure': "wilful, deliberate omission of these languages from discourse and policies" (p. 13). Roche shows how the PRC manoeuvres Tibetan as both an oppressed (vis-à-vis the Han people and language) and an oppressor (vis-à-vis thirty distinct languages and their speakers belonging to the Tibetan community). He reflects on "the predicament of these languages, and many others, is primarily the result of the state's distinction between compulsory, optional, and erased languages" (p. 72). Further, he argues that language "oppression operates by distorting people's perceptions and analysis of their own predicament" (p. 8).

In order to understand and contest language oppression, the book explores linguistic ideologies and practices in 'the regime of sovereign power' in Tibet before 1958, and in 'the regime of biopower' under the PRC (see Arpi, 2001, for Tibet's history). It has been found that, despite

[1] Manegacha is the name of a small minority language spoken by Tibetans in Qinghai on the northeastern Tibetan Plateau.

the use of various 'minoritized' languages in everyday activities for centuries, Tibetan has facilitated communication across numerous communities among the Tibetans. After the spread of Buddhism in Tibet, Tonmi Sambhota (traditionally credited as "the supposed inventor of the Tibetan writing system") borrowed the then Brahmi-derived Gupta script (now known as the Sambhota script), which was adopted to write the Tibetan language (see Arpi, 2001: 28 for the old Brahmi script of the pre-Buddhist era). The script was meant to serve the correct and exact pronunciation of Buddhist texts, mainly by monks, to mediate connections with cosmic entities, as in the Vedic tradition, and to spread Buddhism. In contrast to this ideology, the written and the spoken Tibetan languages not only differed but also assumed different statuses and roles over time. In pre-1958 Tibet, those who wielded sovereign power—local rulers, self-governing communities and monasteries—were multiple and limited, and the linguistic repertoire of the specific individuals in the defined contexts was targeted. Roche shows that language oppression was not a social reality then.

After the downfall of the sovereign power, the post-1958 Tibet saw the establishment of 'the regime of biopower' under the PRC, where the older institutions were replaced by the 'state racism'—a technique of rule, targeting the population rather than the individuals. Mandarin, which is not the native speech of any community nor of the Han majority community, but created for political purposes, was promoted as the national language, made compulsory in education and projected as the language of progress, modernity and science. Although the languages of the *minzu* were recognised constitutionally, any other minoritised language of the *minzu,* like Manegacha of the Tibetan community, is not recognised. The Tibetan power brokers, as well as elites, too advocated "for recognising Tibetan as a single group with a common language, culture, customs, and territory," which is coherent with the PRC's state racism. In addition, all other languages fell within the penumbra of Mandarin, leading to code-switching, hybridity, and pervasive language anxiety among non-Mandarin mother-tongue speakers. Thus, through the case studies of the various communities, Roche shows that the PRC's state racism denies the existence of these languages, erases them from discourse, and were slated for elimination.

Tibetan identity is not a new phenomenon among the Tibetans, but aligns with the aspects of identity within 'the regime of sovereign power' in Tibet. In 2008, Tibetans in Tibet protested in support of the Tibetan nation's distinct status within the PRC, rather than accepting the Chinese state's monolithic projection of the Tibetans. These protests also echoed

forms of Tibetan nationalism in existence before the PRC, as well as the Tibetan nationalism developed in exile after 1958.

Interestingly, this contemporary Tibetan identity, which emerged as a resistance to state power and through the state power, although it seems novel, is a united aspiration renewing "awareness of nationality, culture and territory" among the Tibetans. Both Tibetan nationalism in the PRC and in exile, which projects a homogenous identity devaluing diversity, is a double-edged sword: fuelling nation-building as well as lacking resistance to the PRC's state racism.

Roche points out that linguistic pluralism was taken for granted in earlier times. On the other hand, with the advent of Tibetan nationalism in the PRC, along with "territory, descent, participation, and essence" (p. 64), the Tibetan language emerged as its stable, core feature and the foremost amongst the other multiple identities of the Tibetans. Further, this "philological nationalism," coupled with linguistic purism, has resulted in "*pakay tsangma*" (pure father tongue), though it acknowledges Sanskrit as its heritage and prestige. In addition to its role as a sacred language and grammar, and as a source of wisdom, and in its study as a religious enterprise, "*pakay tsangma*," undoubtedly, is not only a Sinophobic lexical purism, but also of other 'minoritized' languages of the Tibetan community.

Tibetan nationalism, further, finds its articulation in pop music, asserting "a link between the Tibetan language, script and nation" (p. 70). It also leads to the anthropomorphisation of language, social ostracism, punitive measures, and self-immolation. Roche discusses the Tibetan nationalist movement, where Tibetanness is defined and defended to avoid annihilation as a race war. He argues that this race war is an act of state violence as it is not a choice of the Tibetans, but a condition forced upon them to participate. Although it is aimed at the state, it contributes to the elimination of the 'minoritized' languages. This, in turn, resonates with the PRC's objective.

After the exile of His Holiness Dalai Lama to India in 1959, global Tibetophonie (akin to Francophonie), a worldwide socio-political group, emerged to promote Tibet's cause, promoting Tibetan as the sole language of the Tibetan community. Although the Central Tibetan Administration (CTA) in Dharamsala does not have a formal language policy, through its Department of Religion and Culture, Department of Education, Department of Information and International Relations, the Tibet Policy Institute, support groups like International Tibet Network, etc., campaign for the Tibetan language rather than also for the minoritised languages of

the Tibetan community. In other words, the Tibetophonie does not critique or resist but resonates with the PRC's objective.

India not only hosts the Tibetan refugees but also supports the CTA's initiative regarding education, language, culture, etc., where only Tibetan figures prominently. Apart from historical, religious and geo-political motives, the Indian view on language seems to be based on the CTA's view rather than its own, neglecting the linguistic tapestry of the Tibetans. The latter would contradict its support for the Tibetan cause. Roche argues that all these actors amplify the PRC's objective.

By exploring the imagined lives of three generations from one family of Manegacha speakers, Roche retells the local history of state-building and the emergence of the biopolitical state in three periods: 'the communal period' (1958-1981), 'the economic liberalisation period' (1982-2000) and 'the intense market developmentalism period' (2000 onwards). The communal period witnessed two significant campaigns - the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution. In this period, the Tibetan language corpus planning took place, aimed at pruning the feudal aspects in the language and introducing the political vocabulary, and synchronising spoken and written forms of Tibetan. This resulted in modern Tibetan being lexically and grammatically distinct from the written classical Tibetan. Importantly, Tibetan grew in symbolic power and prestige, reflecting modernity and means of education, cited as a literary language too. On the other hand, Mandarin too was imposed on the speakers.

In 'the economic liberalisation period,' Manegacha speakers were stigmatised and discriminated against based on their linguistic repertoire - "neither good Tibetan, nor good Mandarin" (p. 106). With the advent of the new electronic media, the Tibetan language entered the Manegacha homes, replacing their folk institutions, and Manegacha continued to be further excluded. From 2000 onwards, Roche shows that Tibetan gained prominence over the Manegacha-language media in the emerging media, although this process had originally begun with the dominance of Mandarin in higher education, in built environment, the linguistic landscape, etc., ultimately leading to the erasure of Menegacha from the public space.

Roche also examines negative stereotypes, aggressive, hate-mongering in the social media, slurs, jokes, insults, basically discrimination and prejudice against Manegacha speakers in particular, and the 'minoritized' languages in general. He explores dehumanisation, a form of language oppression, which deprives the Manegacha speakers not only of being Tibetans, but also of being human, and reduces them to things, monsters, or animals.

On the linguistic front, identified and labelled on shibboleth, a telltale linguistic feature that enables someone to identify a speaker and their speech variety, the language is reduced to noise, animal sounds, or ghost-talk, mixed language (vs. pure language), languageless, disparagement humour, in everyday life. As a matter of fact, it is considered a threat to the Tibetan language and culture. Hence, there is monitoring and disciplining known as accentism.

On the other hand, trivialisation (downplay), positivization (highlighting positive effects) and naturalisation (blaming self and context rather than the perpetrators), further internalise the subordination, which is viewed as a social phenomenon, and its internalisation, which is immune to critique, is personal rather than political. From the Manegacha standpoint, it is a war of elimination of possibilities on "what might be otherwise."

Building his theory, Roche argues that state-building is "a slow-moving war consisting of trends and patterns rather than events and incidents" (p. 115) to establish a biopolitical state, promoting Han supremacy as a war of state racism where Tibetan nationalism is a "race war of resistance" to the PRC's objectives.

As a form of infrastructural violence, the "Manegacha speakers reflect on the predicament of their language…rather than the structural support network that the language has been denied" (p. 117). Roche projects that rather than on "the predicament of the language and its speakers," it is the state that "denied utility through racist state-building." In addition, the 'minoritized' speakers, like Manegacha, are abandoned by the state, and the violence against them by their acquaintances and friends, who behave as "petty sovereigns," amounts to banal violence. Paradoxically, all these practices are empowered and sanctioned by and towards the state's objective, resulting in a "biosovereign assemblage." Invoking Foucault's governmentality, through choices, hopes, desires, expectations, plans and actions rather than explicit laws or force, the individual people are governed. Further, he aims to combat language oppression: resolve conflicts and contradictions within the community (Fishman's ideological clarification) to overcome the revitalisation paradox (i.e. the predicament of desire without action) and to overcome fear produced by the state as a part of its governmentality through "endurance" by speaking their language. In turn, he enlarges the scope of language reclamation as a social movement, where understanding the political history of the state is imperative to revitalise language through activism, networking and importantly through solidarity's effectiveness in exposing, resisting and

interrupting the power flow at the multiple sites of the global circuit. He also points out that it is essential to combat "broader political developments" so that activism continues in the increasingly hostile environment.

The Politics of Language Oppression in Tibet is based on Roche's fieldwork in Tibet for more than eight years, supported by grants from various universities and institutions, as mentioned in his acknowledgements (p. ix). He has incorporated already published materials, but not exactly as they were published. It is enriched with figures (photos and maps), tables, lyrics, a note on transcription, followed by 40 and 41 pages of endnotes and references, respectively. Though an index is missing, it is supplemented with quotes and pointers to make reading pleasant. He has made use of Tibetan and other speech forms, proverbs, etc., as well as script and innovatively — (m-dash) for slur and has made his reader well acquainted with various socio-cultural institutions, belief systems and conceptual categories, curating the reader's curiosity and necessity as well as to present the community's worldview. In a similar vein, several concepts and theories from various disciplines are well described and easily accessible to lay readers, too.

Anchoring on his engagement with "how this form of government emerged and how it enables *the state* to carry out its biopolitical imperatives" (p. 153, *italics mine*), and "broader political developments," in the context of contemporary India, Roche has mentioned Hindutva in the wake of cultural nationalism, but not its language ideology, the role assigned to Sanskrit, and the refuting of the language families and even language endangerment (see Bharatiya Bhasa Samiti, 2025: 12, and its critique in Kidwai, 2026; Annamalai, 2026; Devy, 2026).

On a more serious note, it is also essential to look into the Tibetan government in its past and in the present. An idea of Tibet is differently conceptualised by the Tibetans. It is not a Eurocentric perspective, not even an Indic one (see Abbi 2022), and none can impose or preconceive on what it should be or ought to be or what is expected or its lack of precedence. As is known, the Tibetan approach is based on the dyad of Priest-Patron *(choe-yon)* relationship (see Arpi, 2001: 58), both in its internal and external world affairs, as well as in the domains of cosmic forces. It is upon this dyad that language ideology and nationalism — Tibetan and its constituent communities, Tibet and the Tibetan language, and Tibetan language and script, as well as nation and autonomy or even sojourn (p. 25, fn. 24, p. 168) and even 'Tibetanization' are predicated. Tibetan language, in contrast to Mandarin, has a history and legacy that connect past and

present, temporal and spiritual (including healing amulets), and relates to written as visible speech (see Brookes 2023 also). Moreover, it also serves the Priest-Patron relationship in the PRC, as it does in relation to Sanskrit. Drawing an analogy, on the lighter vein, Roche coins the term *singua franca* (akin to lingua franca) to mean 'Tibetan written lyrics memorised for singing.' Similarly, it can be extended to the script as a *script franca* (of the Tibetic languages whose host communities are under the suzerainty of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, also called 'Tibetanization').

The philological and the philosophical dimensions of script, the written 'Sacred Scripture,' have been integral to its imagination since the reign of Thori Nyatsen of the Yarlung dynasty in the fifth century AD. Historically, the title "Inventor of Written Script" (see Arpi, 2001: 61) was conferred on Choegyal Phagpa, and Tonmi Sambhota's mission to India suggests the significance of the *graphic politics* (see Choksi, 2021, and its review in Sinha, 2024; contra Abbi, 2022; Das, 2024; van Schaik, 2011) and as a recurring theme of the Tibetan pop music. Hence, the script has ideological, material, as well as (spi)ritual significance, unlike in the phonocentric world. It is this form of nationalism, which is not afresh but a paradigmatic shift, may we call it *'graphic nationalism'* or *'scriptorial nationalism'* (contra philological nationalism) that eschews speeches for script, or diversity for unity, even intra for inter in the contemporary political scenario where 'free Tibet' is more pressing, reflecting 'thick' and 'pragmatic solidarity' of the oppressed *minzu* people and their 'banished' members in Tibet and of the Tibetan refugees in exile. However, I leave this under-discussed idea open for further exploration.

Gerald Roche's *The Politics of Language Oppression in Tibet* is not only a pioneering work in the study of language oppression in Tibet, but also has a global call, knocking, stimulating, awakening, and activating the spirit to think enough to pursue making "a better world." In a way, it also reinforces the belief that linguistics can address contemporary problems by translating them into terms that our tools are especially equipped to address (Dasgupta 1999). It is one of the finest books that I have read, and it has made my own deliberations on endangered languages (see Sinha, 2020; Sinha & Turin, *in press*) paler and shallower. It made me review it to combat language oppression.

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