

BOOK REVIEW

ANNA BALIKCI-DENJONGPA
Namgyal Institute of Tibetology

Sikkim Himalaya: Travels in the Cloud Kingdom by David Lang.
 Pomegranate Press, Lewes, Sussex, 2003, 200 pp. ISBN 0953349373.

Sikkim Himalaya by David Lang will be of interest primarily to naturalists curious about the flora and fauna of Sikkim. The book's main strength is its description of flowers photographed during the author's numerous expeditions to Sikkim between 1987 and 2001. For orchid enthusiasts, a very informative appendix by Mohan Pradhan about the extraordinary forest orchids of Sikkim will be particularly useful. The book is richly illustrated with the author's own photographs of Sikkim, although despite its title, the book somewhat confusingly opens with photographs of Bhutan.

A retired veterinary surgeon, amateur botanist and birdwatcher, Dr. Lang wrote his narrative as an illustrated journal in the style of an early British explorer showing his interest in botany and ornithology. Although this personal diary style lacks the structure and rigour of more informed texts, it does make for pleasant reading for travellers to Sikkim interested in botany and the state's northern regions. Throughout the account of his numerous expeditions to Sikkim's high altitude areas, the author introduces the names of flowers, along with when and where he encountered them. He makes use of Sir Joseph Hooker's original nineteenth century drawings of flowers and landscapes, matching them with his own recent photographs of the same.

Two introductory chapters deal with Sikkim's geography and briefly touch on the state's political history. Lang also surveys British political, scientific and mountaineering involvements in the region in greater detail. However, little or no mention is made of expeditions from other countries. Notably lacking are references to the German scientific Schäfer expedition that spent six months in Sikkim in 1938 (mostly in the northern regions) or the early research of anthropologists Geoffrey Gorer (*Himalayan Village: An Account of the Lepchas of Sikkim*, 1938) and Halfdan Siiger (*The Lepchas: Culture and Religion*

of Himalayan People, 1967), both of whom carried out extensive exploratory research among the Lepchas of north Sikkim in the first half of the twentieth century.

This same chapter contains, among various photos of Tibet, eighteen photographs taken in Sikkim between the late nineteenth and mid-twentieth century. This welcome addition gives the reader a visual sense of the Sikkimese royal family, the landlords, the missionaries and the British involved in the region during this period. Given that the author attempts to cover more than Sikkim's natural environment, the book would have greatly benefited from a brief overview of Sikkimese society, its ethnic groups, origins and social classes. This would have indeed helped the reader better appreciate not only the photographs but also Sikkim's unique history as a nation and state.

To conclude, the author has shown admirable perseverance and loyalty to Sikkim and his friends in the region. With this personal narrative, then, Dr. Lang allows the reader to share his fascination with the Sikkim Himalaya, one of the earth's richest bio-diversity hot spots.