

CONFERENCE REPORT: GOLDEN JUBILEE CONFERENCE  
OF THE NAMGYAL INSTITUTE OF TIBETOLOGY,  
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*International Association for Ladakh Studies*

The Namgyal Institute of Tibetology was founded 50 years ago by a distinguished group of scholars as well as political and religious leaders. H.H. the Dalai Lama laid the foundation stone. Indian Prime Minister Jawarharlal Nehru gave an address at the inauguration ceremony. The Founder President was then Sikkim Maharajkumar Palden Thondup Namgyal, and the 24 founder members included such luminaries as NK Rustomji, Jamyang Khyentse Rimpoche, the English Buddhist monk Sangharakshita, Babu Tharchin the Christian leader and newspaper publisher from Kalimpong, and the Indian academic NC Sinha. Since then, the Institute has built up one of the most comprehensive libraries of Tibetan literature in the world, established a museum, and brought out a series of valuable publications, including its biannual journal, the *Bulletin of Tibetology*. This Golden Jubilee conference therefore had much to celebrate.

The Opening Ceremony included speeches by Shri Balmiki Prasad Singh, the Governor of Sikkim; Chief Minister Dr Chamling; Senior Presiding Scholar Gene Smith, formerly of the US Library of Congress; Lama Chosphel Zotpa of the National Commission for Minorities; and Ashok Sinha, the son of former institute director NC Sinha. Lama Zotpa emphasised the importance of promoting the common cultural and linguistic heritage of communities in the Himalayan region from Ladakh in the west to Arunachal Pradesh in the east.

The overall theme of the conference was “Buddhist Himalaya: Studies in Religion, History and Culture”, and it attracted more than 60 papers as well as a series of workshops on topics such as thangka preservation, textbooks in minority languages and—with an eye to younger scholars—academic conventions on matters such as footnote citations. The participants included senior Sikkimese scholars as well as visitors from other parts of India, Nepal and Bhutan together with Austria, France, Germany Japan, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Poland, Switzerland, the UK and the US.

The conference theme was intended to be broad, in accordance with the Institute's Tibetological traditions. However, as explained by Research Coordinator Dr Anna Balikci-Denjongpa, there has recently been a greater focus on the study of Sikkim itself. She herself offered a review of the challenges and opportunities of anthropological research on the region.

Sikkim was represented by scholars such as the late Tashi Topden, who gave a poignant presentation on the "History and loss of Sikkimese culture". Among others, Khenpo Lha Tsering spoke on the establishment of the Nyingma tradition. S.D. Tsering discussed the religious aspects of the recent socio-economic census of Sikkim conducted by the Department of Economic Statistics, Monitoring and Evaluation; and Pema Wangchuk analysed the early British construction of Sikkimese history.

Notable contributions on Sikkim by foreign scholars included a paper by Saul Mullard of Oxford University, who has been carrying out groundbreaking documentary research on the formation of the Sikkimese state in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Elliot Sperling discussed the Tangut/Mi-nyag element in the lineage of the Sikkim Chogyal, while Isrun Engelhardt reviewed the photographs and findings of the 1938 Ernst Schäfer expedition to Sikkim and Tibet. George van Driem explained the history of the Limbu script.

Ranging further afield, Karma Phuntso from Bhutan gave a stimulating overview of "Tibetan Buddhist book culture", while Tsewang Jigme Tsarong discussed the Buddhist system of medicine. Peter Schwieger analysed the expansion of the power of the 5<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama in east and south-east Tibet in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, and Toni Huber analysed Tibetan political and economic interests in the far eastern Himalaya in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Altogether, the conference was distinguished both for its wide geographical range and its interdisciplinary character. Paper topics extended from Bhutan, Arunachal Pradesh and Kham in the east to Ladakh in the west, and covered art, linguistics, history, anthropology, 'sacred space', and the environment. It will undoubtedly prove a stimulus to further research, both in Sikkim itself, and in the wider Himalayan region.

Associated conference activities included an excursion to Rumtek monastery, as well as dinners hosted by the Governor at Raj Bhavan (the residence during British times of the Political Officer Sikkim) and by the Sikkim Culture Minister. The Institute also organised exhibitions of photographs illustrating the history of the Namgyal dynasty, and

Sikkim's relations with Bhutan. In the best Sikkimese tradition, the conference was notable for its warm hospitality, and the opportunities for fruitful contact between a wide range of local and international scholars. The participants owe an enormous debt to Institute Director Tashi Densapa, and to all their hosts in Sikkim.

Three volumes of conference papers will be published in due course under the editorship of Alex McKay (the academic convenor), Anna Balikci-Denjongpa and Tashi Tsering of the Amnye Machen Institute in Dharamasala.

