

PRINCESS PEMA TSEDEUN OF SIKKIM (1924-2008)
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Princess of Sikkim, Pema Tsedeun Yapshi Pheunkhang Lacham Kusho, passed away in Calcutta on December 2, 2008 at the age of 84.



Princess Pema Tsedeun was born on September 6, 1924 in Darjeeling, the daughter of Sir Tashi Namgyal, K.C.S.I., K.C.I.E. (1893-1963), the eleventh Chogyal of Sikkim, and Maharani Kunzang Dechen Tshomo Namgyal, the elder daughter of Rakashar Depon Tenzing Namgyal, a General in the Tibetan Army. She was born in a world when the Himalayan Kingdom of Sikkim, established by her ancestors in the 1640s, was still a protectorate of the British Empire, and when Tibet was still ruled by the 13th Dalai Lama. Educated at St-Joseph's Convent in Kalimpong, she married Sey Kusho Gampo Tsering Yapshi Pheunkhang (1918-1973) of the family of the 11th Dalai Lama in October 1941. Her husband was the Governor of Gyantse and his

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father Sawang Chenpo Yabshi Pheuntsog khangsar Kung, was the oldest of the four Ministers of Tibet. She travelled to her husband's house in Lhasa on horseback, retreating to her palanquin when going through towns. Together, they had three daughters and a son. Lacham Kusho once related to me the circumstances of her marriage:

When I got married, my father didn't interfere. Marriage was up to me. The Pheunkhang family wanted a Sikkimese princess for their eldest son. He was 23. They wrote to the Secretary at the Palace, and I asked Barmiok Athing to reply on my behalf. I wanted to wait and go to college but they insisted that their son had to be married now. They wanted me to marry both sons as it was common in Tibet but I refused. I replied that I would only marry the eldest. Nevertheless, during the wedding, both sons were sitting next to me, but I later told my husband that I would only marry him. When I left Sikkim for Lhasa, my father gave me two maids, one bearer and two horses.

Life among the Tibetan gentry of the 1940s was pleasant. Parties, picnics and festivals succeeded themselves and although she always missed Sikkim, Pheunkhang Lacham Kusho as she was now called, spent many happy years in Tibet where her first three children were born. In Lhasa, she met a number of British, European and American visitors who spoke very highly of her in their memoirs. Heinrich Harrer was one such personality and in his book *Seven Years in Tibet* (1953: 132) describes Lacham Kusho as

She possessed the indescribable charm of Asian women and the stamp of age-old oriental culture. At the same time she was clever, well educated, and thoroughly modern, and had been taught in one of the best schools in India. She was the first woman in Tibet to refuse to marry her husband's brothers because this did not conform with her principles. In conversation she was the equal of the most intelligent woman you would be likely to meet in a European salon. She was interested in politics, culture and all that was happening in the world. She often talked about equal rights for women... but Tibet has a long way before reaching that point.

When Sangharakshita later met the Princess in Kalimpong, a hill station not far from Sikkim, he describes the encounter in *Facing Mount Kangchenjunga*

as if a beautiful and exotic butterfly had suddenly fluttered across my path. She possessed four qualities which are hardly ever found in one woman: beauty, charm, intelligence, and vitality. She possessed all of them to a higher degree than they often have when present separately. Moreover, all four qualities found expression in even her smallest

actions—whether it was the quizzical way she looked up at one from under her long lashes, or slowly exhaled the smoke of a cigarette, or murmured a few words in her low, clear, musical voice. As if these things were not enough, they were perfectly set off by the splendid costume she wore, and by the unshakeable self-confidence that came from her consciousness that royal blood flowed in her veins. The total effect was subtly devastating (1991: 30).

She often travelled the trade route back and forth between Tibet and Gangtok, sometimes accompanied by her small children bundled up in windowed boxes and carried by horse or mule. Unlike other female travellers, she rode her own horse, a rifle slung across her shoulder and a revolver in her pocket. “The route could be quite dangerous, especially from Gyantse to Phari,” Lacham Kusho recalled, “but as the caravans were well armed, people would think twice about attacking us.” The firearms she carried were not for show.

When she returned to Sikkim following China’s invasion of Tibet in the 1950s, for some ten years, she worked as the Chairman of the Sikkim Relief and Rehabilitation Committee for Tibetan Refugees funded by the Government of India. Desmond Doig recounts:

Princess Kukula, as most people call her, has an office in the corner of the palace. Sitting before a typewriter and surrounded by dozens of files, the Princess struggles valiantly to help the Tibetan refugees in Sikkim. She issues rations in a market warehouse, and squats on the palace lawn to distribute clothes. She visits the exhausted, sick, and disillusioned in a wool shed turned into a combination hospital and transit camp, and listens to refugee problems from the front seat of her jeep (*National Geographic*, March 1963: 417-18).

She also became Chairman of Sikkim’s Women Welfare Association and was a board member of the State Bank of Sikkim and Sikkim Jewels.

Her elder brother, Palden Thondup Namgyal (1923-1982) was enthroned as the twelfth Chogyal of Sikkim on April 4, 1965. When in turn, the Kingdom of Sikkim’s status as an Indian protectorate was being destabilised—events that eventually led to its merger with India in 1975—she took an active role in trying to retain Sikkim’s separate political status and unique character. As Nari Rustomji, the former Dewan of Sikkim relates: “She functioned as the Prince’s roving ambassador, whether in the corridors of power in New Delhi or socialising with the American President’s aides in Washington. She was the Prince’s chief hostess at State functions, as well as the chatelaine of his Palace” (*Sikkim: A Himalayan Tragedy*, 1987: 68), a

role which was later taken over by the Chogyal's American wife Hope Cooke. George N. Patterson, in *Peking versus Delhi* (1963: 241) talks about Lacham Kusho as

a most attractive woman, who delights to play politics after the manner of the eighteenth century women of France. Through her considerable charm and high-level friendships new factors are constantly arising from the most unexpected sources to further bedevil and obscure the already confused political and economic scene in Sikkim.

When the Namgyal Institute of Tibetology was established by the Chogyal in 1958, Lacham Kusho and her husband were among its twenty-four founder members. They donated manuscripts and a large silver plated stupa to hold the relics of two Ashokan monks, relics presented to the Institute by the Government of India in 1959. She was the last surviving founding member of the Institute and had actively participated in the Institute activities in recent years, even giving us permission to scan her photographic collection for the institute's archive so these may be preserved for posterity.

Unfortunately, she could not attend the Namgyal Institute's Golden Jubilee celebrations when an international multi-disciplinary conference was held 1-5 October 2008 with the theme *Buddhist Himalaya: Studies in Religion, History and Culture*. A total of 68 academic papers were presented by local, national and international scholars—many focusing on the history and culture of Sikkim—with foreign academic delegates coming from 16 different countries. She nevertheless contributed a message on the occasion of the Institute's Golden Jubilee and studied the conference's academic program.

My encounter with Lacham Kusho was more recent and less glamorous but the impressions she made on me were no less profound. Later in life, she was still charming and intelligent with a surprisingly excellent memory. She lived in a modest but lovely cottage on the outskirts of Gangtok, keeping up with events in Sikkim and world politics as well as her international correspondence. Forever inquisitive, she enjoyed her discussions with the scholars of Tibet and the Himalayas who invariably came knocking at her door. It was a great honour that together we celebrated the completion of my book on village religion in Sikkim with a bottle of champagne. She had never lost her spirit; may her soul rest in peace.

Lacham Kusho is survived by three of her children. The funeral took place on Wednesday December 10, 2008, at the royal cremation ground of Lukshyama in Sikkim. Rituals were held by the lamas of Pemayangtse Monastery.