

New developments in South Asian archives

The Archivist



The Sikkim Palace Archive Digitisation Project

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THE INDIAN HIMALAYAN STATE of Sikkim, which separates Nepal to the west and Bhutan to the east, emerges into the historical record with the establishment of the Namgyal dynasty in the 1640s. As a Buddhist kingdom Sikkim's closest cultural links were with their northern neighbour Tibet, but during the 19th century they were increasingly drawn into the orbit of their southern neighbour, British India. The colonial government sought to establish diplomatic and trading relations with the Tibetans as well as to ensure the security of their northern frontier from any threat in that direction. Sikkim offered them a 'stepping stone' to Tibet and despite Sikkimese efforts to avoid alienating either of the two powers the British appointed a Political Officer in 1889 who ruled Sikkim under the Princely State system. A series of Political Officers then oversaw the administration of Sikkim down to Indian independence in 1947. In 1975 the 12th and final ruling Chogyal [King/Maharaja], Palden Thondup Namgyal (1923-1982), was deposed by India and Sikkim was merged into India. It exists today simply as a state of India, albeit with certain administrative distinctions.

With few exploitable resources, Sikkim was of little importance to the British during the colonial period, other than as a base for their relations with Tibet. But during the first three decades of British authority there, Sikkimese government and society underwent enormous transformations, with a reorganisation of the tax basis, the development of forestry and mining, and the introduction of Western education and health systems. Sikkim in the mid-19th century had a very small population, and around the late 1860s Sikkimese landlords had begun to employ migrant labour from Nepal in order to develop their land-holdings, despite opposition to this policy by the then Chogyal and sections of the aristocracy and monastic powers. Under British rule the numbers of Nepalese immigrants increased enormously and by the early 20th century if not earlier they outnumbered the Bhutia (Lhopo) and Lepcha (Rong) inhabitants.

In 1918, satisfied with both the security of their northern border and the path of development on which Sikkim was embarked, the British handed internal authority and government back to the Chogyal Tashi (later Sir Tashi) Namgyal (1893-1963). While British India always retained responsibility for Sikkim's defence and external relations, the Political Officers in Gangtok, who were always primarily concerned with Tibetan affairs, henceforth devoted little attention to Sikkim. After Indian Independence, however, the Indian Political Officers who inherited the British positions were increasingly concerned with events in this Himalayan state, and were part of the processes that led to the merger in 1975, an act which still remains controversial.

Scholars wishing to work on the history and culture of Sikkim and its neighbours have, however, faced a number of difficulties. Prior to the merger the state archives of Sikkim were maintained by the Palace secretary's office. As the personal possessions of the royal family the archives remained in the private keeping of that family after 1975 and were not accessible to scholarship. In addition, while the British Library holds a selection of files pertaining to the colonial period in Sikkim, the Indian government files on the region are difficult for scholars, particularly foreign researchers, to access. This is not only due to the controversial nature of the merger, but also to issues connected with India's northern border and its security, as well as to their wide dispersal in the National Archives.

A little over a decade ago a significant part of the royal archives, primarily documents in the Tibetan language concerning the pre-colonial period in Sikkim were deposited at the Namgyal Institute of Tibetology in Gangtok by the 13th Chogyal Wangchuk Namgyal. This collection was subsequently catalogued by Saul Mullard and Hissey Wangchuk.¹

More recently, the royal archives for the period around 1875-1975 have been made available for digitisation and dissemination by Chogyal Wangchuk Namgyal. Following an award by the Endangered Archives Programme, funded by Arcadia and administered by the British Library, the Sikkim Palace Archive Digitisation Project began work on this material on 1 September 2016. Project Director Pema Choeden Namgyal Abrahams and a team of young Sikkimese are cataloguing and digitising the material, enabling the transfer of a complete digitised version of the archive to the eventual host organisations. These will be the British Library (eap.bl.uk), the Namgyal Institute of Tibetology (tibetology.net/researchprojects), and Project Denjong (www.projectdenjong.com), a new non-profit organisation dedicated to making Sikkim's history and heritage accessible to a wider audience, not least young Sikkimese who are generally unaware of their heritage. Project Denjong's website will house access to the digitised collection, and annotated posts about specific documents and/or files will be made available on its blog/news page.

In addition to digitising the collection, the Endangered Archives Programme will enable greatly improved storage and preservation of the original archive by relocating the material into a climate controlled environment and acid-free archival boxes. This is an important part of the project, given that the documents have been at considerable risk of decay due to the basic office conditions in which they were stored at the palace. Sikkim has one of the highest rainfalls of any region in the world and experiences extremes of summer and

winter temperatures, factors which place paper documents at particular risk unless they are properly stored in a temperature-controlled environment.

The project, which is scheduled to be completed in one year, began with the team being given the necessary archival training and skill-sets by Director G. Sundar and Assistant Director R. Prakash from the Raja Mutiah Research Library (Chennai). Their expertise and knowledge transference skills proved invaluable and equipped the trainee staff for future roles utilizing this or other archival material. In addition, the historical implications of the collection and relevant historical methodology were explained by the Academic Advisor on the project.

The royal archive for the 1875-1975 period comprises approximately 735 files (or approximately 95,000 folios), the overwhelming majority of which are in the English language (with some material in Hindi, Nepali, and Tibetan). Its contents reveal a great deal about the land and people of Sikkim and its complex history at the crossroads of British India and Tibetan Buddhism. They shed light on both secular and religious matters, including law, land-use, taxation, court and inter-state ritual, distinguished visitors, border formation, and domestic affairs. Among the files are such items as handwritten letters from the Viceroys of India to the Sikkimese Chogyal, applications from the burgeoning Christian community to build Sikkim's first church; the planning and implementation of which representative and what gifts to send to Lhasa for the enthronement of the 14th Dalai Lama in 1940; prisoner lists and sentences from 1911; State Council Meeting Minute ledgers from the 1890s-1920s; and correspondence in later years with Jawaharlal Nehru and Indira Gandhi in the lead up to 1975, including the full testimony given by Khatiwara – a key political figure in Sikkim at the time – to India's Prime Minister Desai.

Wider outcomes of the digitisation project will include online and print catalogues, augmented with a biographical database of the key figures involved in this period of Sikkimese history, a workshop for local and regional students and scholars, media coverage in local and domestic Indian media and a series of publications in both popular and academic media. Equally significant is the provision to the local establishment of modern equipment and the training of young Sikkimese in digitisation processes and information technology storage and cataloguing, laying the groundwork for future safe storage and access provision for this and other relevant material, such as the future digitisation of the Palace photographic collection, prints, medium-format and glass-plate negatives. Given that other significant collections of historical material remain in private hands in Sikkim it may be hoped that the successful operation of this project will also encourage the emergence of that material into the public domain.

This hitherto closed archive will thus provide a fundamental primary source for socio-political enquiry into Sikkimese history in the 1875-1975 period, enabling – for the first time – a balanced understanding of the history of this region. The project's digitised material will make historical documents easily accessible to Sikkimese, allowing them as well as the broader research community to finally understand how local taxation, land holdings, political movements, social rituals, and religious milestones were enacted; and how social, cultural, economic, and political developments of the region were perceived in Sikkim. This collection will provide both the details expected from a local archive and an overview of late-19th and 20th century Sikkim, introducing the characters and events that shaped the development of the kingdom and its complex history.

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References

- 1 Mullard & Wangchuk. 2010. *Royal Records: A Catalogue of The Sikkimese Palace Archives*, Andiast: International Institute for Tibetan and Buddhist Studies.



Above: Project Director Pema Choeden Namgyal Abrahams with consultants Raja Mutiah Library Director G. Sundar and Assistant Director R. Prakash (centre).

Below right: The Sikkim Palace Archives Digitisation project team with consultants from the Raja Mutiah Library (Chennai).