

BOOK REVIEW

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Khangchendzonga: Sacred Summit by Pema Wangchuk and Mita Zulca
 Little Kingdom, Gangtok, Sikkim, 2007, 372 pp.

Pema Wangchuk is the talented editor of *NOW!*, the English-language daily published in Gangtok and focused on the politics and social life of Sikkim. Together with Mita Zulca, an equally skilled journalist and award-winning filmmaker, he has co-authored *Khangchendzonga: Sacred Summit*, a magnificent work that I discovered on my last trip to Gangtok. Enticed by its lavish illustrations and encyclopedic documentation, I could not resist the impulse to immediately devour the book. Through this collection of narratives, historical documents, ethnographic details, drawings, and photographs, Wangchuk and Zulca have succeeded in painting a very special portrait of Khangchendzonga, the peak feared, worshipped, and revered by ‘the people living in its shadows,’ gazing at its snows, and venturing upon its slopes.

The diversity of people touched by Khangchendzonga—indigenous communities, surveyors, botanists, explorers, mountaineers, artists, and travelers—are all represented in the pages of this comprehensive book divided into sixteen chapters. While Khangchendzonga abuts Sikkim, Nepal, and Darjeeling, the authors have wisely chosen to narrow their scope by exploring the mountain’s historical, religious, political and cultural connections with Sikkim.

The first three chapters focus on the relationship between Khangchendzonga and three of the oldest communities associated with Sikkim—the Lepchas, the Limbus, and the Bhutias. With rich, though not first-hand, detail, these descriptions are perfect orientation for further exploration of Khangchendzonga. The first chapter, ‘The Original Big Stone,’ harks back to the mythical origins of Khangchendzonga and its association with the aboriginal inhabitants of Sikkim, the Lepchas. To the Lepchas, the mountain is Kongchen Konglo, the ‘Big Stone,’ as well as eldest brother, the first creation of their Mother Creator. Dzongu, an area of north Sikkim reserved for the Lepchas, is the valley of the first permanent Lepcha settlement and offers the finest views of Khangchendzonga. “Dzongu is obviously not

a reservation carved out on a whim,” observe the authors (p. 37). The Lepcha tie to Khangchendzonga resounds in ancient songs still sung, though sadly less frequently; some underscore the centuries-old bond between the Sikkimese king and the Lepcha people. In this chapter, the well-known Danish ethnographer, Halfdan Siiger, is remembered for his research in Dzongu in 1947 and his collections and translations of oral poetry praising the mountain. Several impressive photographs, including a portrait of the last Khangchendzonga Bongthing (Lepcha priest), complement the chapter narrative.

Chapter two, ‘Fount of Wisdom,’ and three, ‘Protector of the Faith,’ respectively deal with the relationship between Khangchendzonga and the Sikkimese Limbus and the Bhutias, who also worship the mountain. For those alpine climbers who have experienced the absolute physical power of the mountain, a view of the mountain as ‘protector of faith’ is particularly germane.

According to Buddhist tradition, the great warrior-god Dzonga, guardian deity of Sikkim, resides in the mountain and, together with his dark acolyte, Yabdu, must be obeyed and appeased, or tragedy—illness, landslides, earthquakes—will strike. The unique dance ritual, Pangtoed Cham, was performed by laypeople in homage of and gratitude to the mountain deity.

The following three chapters narrate in fresh, though not exhaustive, ways, the early British and Indian explorers and local guides, and their ‘own battles of heights.’ Sir Joseph Dalton Hooker, the accomplished botanist, is profiled and his work illustrated with amazing engravings (1868) from his private collections. Other wonderful black and white photographs of people, monasteries, and misty landscapes artfully displayed with informative captions, conjure up fantasies of a bygone era. “Pundits who spied, surveyed, and explored” for the British include: in the early 1860s, Captain Montgomerie; in 1879, Babu Sarat Chandra Das, the “headmaster of the Bhutia Boarding School in Darjeeling” (p. 145); and the amazing Kintup, a Sikkimese Lepcha living in Darjeeling, captured in the only photograph ever taken of him, in Simla in 1913-14. There, he was rewarded for “his services rendered to the Survey Office of India through four years of slavery and penury in Tibet between 1879-83” (p. 151). We also learn about the bravery of other Sikkimese who guided foreign expeditions and usually led the way to success. Rinzin Namgyal, the Malling Kazi of Mangan, was “the first person to make a complete circuit of Khangchendzonga and produced the first authentic map of the valley and ridges in the region” (p. 154). Other fabulous

photographs in this chapter include Vittorio Sella's 'Sunset over Khangchendzonga' (p. 161), Benjamin Simpson's 1860 portrait of female porters resting at the end of a cane bridge (p. 185), and Dr. Alexander Mitchell Kellas's 1911 portrait of two 'roped up Sherpas looking at home' below a formidable ice fall (p. 191).

Chapter seven, 'Formidable Antagonists,' is one of five chapters that chronicles the dangers and challenges of climbing Khangchendzonga. One British mountaineer, Frank Smythe, survived the unsuccessful expedition of 1930 by luck and his wits. He pitched his camp in the only safe place in the cirque and spent the night under the "hanging glaciers clinging precariously to the hollow of precipices." He wrote in his diary, "Were one of these catastrophic ice avalanches—the collapse of hanging glacier—such are common among the Himalayas, to take place, we would be brushed like a speck of dust from the earth" (p. 206).

As I read about these expeditions, I could not help but recall my 1981 experience as a lucky survivor (and researcher) of an expedition to the Nepalese side of the mountain on the way to Walungchung gola. Our leader, Jean-Jacques Ricouard, was a 29-year-old French mountain guide from Chamonix. Together with Michel Parmentier, he reached the summit, but, tragically, died on the descent. Michel returned alone to the slope in search of his friend and discovered Jean-Jacques' body 2000 meters below the spot where he fell. Two years later, Michel disappeared while climbing Mount Everest.

Over the years, many climbers have scaled Khangchendzonga or stopped just short of the top out of respect for the Sikkimese belief that summiting the peak defiles it. The first successful ascent of the mountain, described in 'No Summit More Sacred,' was the 1955 British expedition led by Charles Evans. The team turned back just before reaching the top—out of deference to the orders of the Chogyal, Sir Tashi Namgyal. Fifty years later, the Government of Sikkim presented the surviving members of the British expedition with an award honoring the respect they showed to local sentiment by leaving Khangchendzonga the 'untrodden peak.'

'Final Challenge' chronicles the Indian Army expedition of 1977 led by Colonel Narinder Kumar. The elite female climbers are described in 'Lady Killers.' "The mountain has been especially harsh on women," recalls author Zulca, who is well acquainted with female censorship. In the 1980s, Wanda Rutkiewicz, a Polish alpine climber, was legendary for her fearlessness and bravery. She had summited seven peaks over 8000 meters but died in a 1992 attempt on

Khangchendzonga. Her male counterparts would do well to meditate upon her words of mountain wisdom: “What you can’t do is dominate the mountain. Mountains never forgive mistakes, which is why I keep dialogue with them...You don’t have to be icy cool and fearless, but you have to control your fears and get in direct contact with Nature or God’s creation.”

The peak has also inspired poets, philosophers, and artists whose musings and paintings are the subject of chapters fourteen and fifteen. Among several fascinating narratives, portraits and illustrations, we can appreciate Edward Lear’s ‘Kinchinjunga from Darjeeling,’ Mark Twain’s travels through the region, and Nicholas Roerich’s ‘spiritual secrets.’

This well-constructed and absorbing overview of Khangchendzonga’s treasures and resources deserves a place in the library of every Khangchendzonga devotee. Wangchuk and Zulca’s homage to the ‘sacred mountain’ offers much food for thought. Would not NOW be the right time to think deeply about global warming, environmental destruction and disasters triggered by short-sighted development schemes? Many such plans have resoundingly failed in other countries and now threaten Sikkim, especially its northern reaches. We must devise new models of development to protect sacred places like Khangchendzonga.

Khangchendzonga: Sacred Summit can be ordered directly from the author Pema Wangchuk at nowbooks@gmail.com for India and astill.tony@googlemail.com for elsewhere.