



A TWO-DAY INTERNATIONAL SEMINAR ON

*'Good Life' and Development:  
Exploring The Visual History and Culture of Sikkim and Beyond*

14-15 MARCH, 2024

Organised by  
Department of History  
Sikkim University

In Association with the  
Department of Higher Education, Government of Sikkim,  
Aarhus University, Denmark  
Namgyal Institute of Tibetology, IIT Madras,  
Harkamaya College of Education, and  
Loyola College of Education



**Chief Patron-** Prof. Avinash Khare, Vice Chancellor, Sikkim University

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## CONCEPT NOTE

### **The Region and History**

Visualising the History and Culture of Sikkim, North East India, the neighbouring Himalayan regions, and beyond, the Seminar is based on the Good Life, Development and all aspects of life. Sikkim, a landlocked kingdom under the Tibetan Kings of the Namgyal dynasty since 1642, merged with India in 1975 and has undergone various transformations. It is now under the administrative and financial jurisdiction of the North Eastern Council. It is one of the nine 'Category A' states for Special Central Assistance through the Integrated Tribal Development Project. Sikkim is a multi-ethnic, multi-lingual, and multi-cultural society, initially comprising the tribal homeland of the Lepchas, Limbu, Magar, and Bhutia. Today, the state comprises the Lepchas, Bhutias, and Nepalis. European explorers, political officials, travellers, Christian missionaries, and anthropologists have provided early historical accounts of Sikkim. Scholars believe J.D. Herbert and the Jesuit priest Desideri S.J. were the first to introduce Sikkim to the academic world, mentioning the land of *Bree-me-jong*, [*De-ma-jong* = *Denjong*], corresponding to modern-day Sikkim. British officials and explorers also produced texts and visual imagery on the indigenous communities during the era of the Chogyals. Visual representation has been integral to local communities' history and culture.

### **'Good Life' and Development- Conceptual Framings**

Starting from the rich historical and cultural legacy of Sikkim, but not limited to it, the Seminar focuses on the multiple visual expressions of the 'good life' and Development encountered in the region and beyond and suggests that these concepts operate on various levels, including biological, material, moral, spiritual, and religious aspects. The Seminar proposes viewing the "good life" and Development as different sides of the same coin and understanding their combinations.

The question remains: Can happiness or subjective well-being replace Development around consumption? Or should we think of Development and a good life together in their multitude of individual and collective forms informing each other? Easterlin's paradox (variance between happiness and economic growth) is still relevant, and good life combined with cultural, ethnic, temporal, and spatial dimensions could be a better entry point into discussions on Development vis-a-vis consumption. Ideas such as social respect, purposeful life, responsible consumption, organic lifestyle, and spiritual satisfaction are meaningful around registers such as education, religion, health, freedom, and more. While being materially procured, these registers bring non-material associations to the fore, such as social respect due to education and individual merits and achievements.

### **The Visual Side**

The visual, visibility, processes of visualisation and visual culture have become distinctive research fields in late modern and contemporary history, but also anthropology or humanities generally. Research in this area may vary depending on the historical visual phenomena, ranging from observing relations between images and the perception of their consumers to the production and use of images and media in both popular culture and the sciences, the study of iconographies and aesthetics; the relationship between media, power and perception; or to forms of mediatisation; to the study of how meaning is produced by and through images; the circulation of images in and across cultures; practices of seeing and studies of the social and cultural construction of visual experience in daily life, in media, in representations and the visual arts (Skoda., 2018). However, research is more comprehensive than these issues; it challenges scholars to engage with it and reinterpret its meaning in various ways. Visual culture has a comprehensive approach that includes not just conventional images but the broader symbolic landscape, the way the landscape has been transformed and where images are embedded in the broader sensorium(ibid.). While focusing on visual history, other sensorial dimensions, such as aural and olfactory aspects, should not be relegated to the background but rather stressed about the visual, text, and material dimensions (ibid). The visual, iconic and pictorial turn indirectly postulates dialogues between disciplines, which suggests a visual history and visual culture as a transdisciplinary and open field (Gerhard. 2011). Its goal is to understand the – historically changing - complex links between image structure, production, distribution and reception and the establishment of tradition in history- and historiography. Visual sources enrich our understanding of historical processes, may supplement or contradict text-based narratives, open new avenues for research of world-views, often bottom-up, and are deeply entangled with textual and oral traditions from the same period (Pachua., 2016).

### Seminar Questions-

While starting from the rich yet hitherto somewhat neglected visual culture and history of Sikkim and beyond, the Seminar papers focus not only on **Sikkim** but **also on the broader region (North- -East India, South Asia, Himalayas and beyond)**, deepening an understanding of visualising "**good life**" and **Development** as a central theme in all its visual dimensions about historiography, arts, popular culture etc. Therefore, historians and papers from all neighbouring disciplines are accommodated to foster cross-disciplinary, mutually enriching dialogues with the Sikkimese source during the Seminar.

Seeking to address the various levels on which ideas of good life and Development operate as well as their entanglements across the dimensions and concepts, the Seminar will be guided by questions like: how do we bring existing but somewhat disconnected theoretical literature to converse with Sikkimese and Indian lived reality in contemporary times and how does that literature transform/is transformed after such contact? What social/cultural sites can potentially complement our understanding of what constitutes a "good life" in Sikkim and beyond, and how does it overlap or differ from the imaginations of Development? How do these registers evolve in their implications for Development, and how do they contest/corroborate/contradict each other?

How do they cross-pollinate the material even while highlighting the non-material, and is there any ambivalence in the delivery of their expected outcomes? What are the performative strategies through which values are associated with various dimensions of contemporary Sikkimese life, Indian life, and beyond? To what extent are these registers and their expressions organic, and to what extent are they mediated?

### Note

For any seminar-related queries, participants may contact Dr Anira Phipon Lepcha (+91 7076722447), Mr Remond Rai (+91 9883969865), or Miss Nungyoungmit Lepcha (+91 8207221944).

### Other important information for participants

Sikkim University is located in Gangtok, the capital of Sikkim, and operates from several hired buildings along NH-10. The main administrative office is located at Samdur, 6th Mile, Tadong. The Permanent campus is coming up at Yangyang in South Sikkim.

**Food and Accommodation-** Provision of modest food and accommodation for all selected participants.

**Weather in Gangtok**—Gangtok, the capital of Sikkim, is the most populous city located at 5410 feet. With a spectacular view of Mt. Kanchendzonga, the town provides the perfect base for travel through the state. The weather during March is generally pleasant, with 7° Celsius to 18° Celsius as winter slowly fades away. As suggested by Sikkim Tourism, March is one of the best times to visit Sikkim.

### How to reach Gangtok

#### By Air

The nearest airport is Bagdogra Airport in Siliguri, West Bengal. From there, it is a 125-kilometer road trip that takes roughly four hours to complete. Taxis and private vehicles can be rented just outside the terminal.

#### By Rail

The nearest railway station to Gangtok is in the adjoining state of West Bengal, at New Jalpaiguri. Although the station is 117 kilometres distant, it is a popular route to Gangtok as it is well connected to the rest of the country. When you exit the train, taxis are available outside the station to take you the rest of the way to Gangtok.

#### By Road

Taxis are available outside the airport or train station for road trips to Gangtok. Whether driving down from Bagdogra, New Jalpaiguri, or another nearby city, you will ultimately reach Sevoke Road, which connects to NH10. From here, the path will take you along the scenic Teesta River and the town of Rangpo, located between West Bengal and Sikkim. Once you cross state lines, it's only 40 km to Gangtok.