



ཨ་མ་རྒྱལ་གྱི་འཇམ་མཁའ་ལྷན་ཁང་།

Namgyal Institute of Tibetology

## Visual Sikkim: The Collecting of Historic Photographs

### The project and its objectives

This project was initiated in 2003 by the Namgyal Institute of Tibetology.

Its objectives are:

1. to locate and digitalise existing historic photographs of Sikkim, both from India and abroad, so these may be preserved for posterity;
2. to document these photographs (people, location, event, date) and establish a central digital image database at the Institute;
3. to provide photographs for exhibitions and the publication of a book on historic Sikkim.

Since the project's inception, over 1000 photographs were digitised from private and public collections from Sikkim, the UK, Germany and Italy. A number of private individuals and museums, including Sikkim's IPR department, graciously came forward and contributed their collections to this central image bank.

It is our hope that more people will come forward to get their personal collection scanned and preserved in our database. The Institute does not retain original photographs and the copyrights remain with the original owner. The Institute does not re-distribute digital or printed photographs to a third party under any circumstance unless a close family member is recognised and prior permission is obtained by the copyright owner. The photographs are only used for educational purposes and prior permission is always sought from the copyright owner in case of publication.

### About collecting

In the process of hunting down collections and information about the photographs, the project staff made interesting encounters.

Among these was Henri Baker, former Radio Operator Gangtok 1941-1944. For so many years, Henri Baker preserved his Sikkimese albums and was delighted to return these to Sikkim in digital format after so many years.

Since he did not possess a camera while stationed at Gangtok, Henri Baker like so many others, purchased photographs from Yap Tse Ten Tashi's shop on MG Marg.

Thus, a number of photographs of Sikkim taken by the well-known Sikkimese photographer, which are no longer available locally, were recovered from Henri Baker's albums.

In Germany, Bruno Beger, now 93 years old and the last surviving member of the 1938 German Schäfer Expedition to Tibet, was equally delighted when we took an interest in his numerous photographic albums of Sikkim.

Bruno Beger's collection was unusual since he took hundreds of photographs of Bhutia and Lepcha villagers in the North District.

But what delighted Bruno Beger the most was to hear from his old Sikkimese friend and expedition co-member, German Akay. Thanks to this project, Dr Beger and late German Akay were able to get back in touch and exchange letters after 64 years.

Late German Akay of Tathangchen viewing Dr Beger's 1938 expedition photographs in 2004. For the first time, his family was able to see photographs of himself as a young expedition member.

Another collection, traced but not yet digitised, is that of the Danish anthropologist Halfdan Siiger who spent five months in Dzongu in 1949. We were able to collect memories from people of Tingvong village who had assisted him in various ways.

From a photograph, an old Lepcha Bongthing could recognise his own pellet bow he had presented to Siiger some 56 years earlier. From another, a young Lepcha could finally see a photograph of his father he hardly knew.

In such a way, through photographs and memories, aspects of a seemingly unimportant and forgotten history of Sikkim can be documented and pieced together.

This project is only in its infancy and its success largely depends on the local people's interest and contributions. We intend to hold regular exhibitions in order to involve local people and invite them to rediscover their own history.

Please get in touch with us if you think you could help!

Project staff:

Tenzin C. Tashi

Anna Balikci-Denjongpa