

FILM

RAY'S SIKKIM

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Satyajit Ray's "Sikkim" (1971, colour, 60 mins, DVD) is a lovingly crafted, poetic wonder. Ray converts the frame into a sight seeing window and cultural longing for Sikkim, as it was in 1971, that is before the pre-1974 merger with India. Sikkim's Chogyal sponsored documentary moves from stone stupas with slokas carved and Tibetan lamas playing horns to stills of mountains, plants and flowers. The Teesta river rushes over rocks. A water fall and a hanging wooden bridge glide by. The camera pulls back from fluttering white prayer flags and focuses on transmission chords for aerial cars. Two parallel aerial cars, with luggage and passengers, glide by on parallel aerial suspensions. Varied camera angles encapsulate a dark sky, clouds on hills, falling rain and girls with umbrellas. The camera pans a hill town, markets and yaks grazing on hill slopes. The Himalayas had risen from a shallow stream. The photo camera absorbs the breathtaking cliffs. Ray's off-screen voice recalls the history of the Himalayas, as the camera glides over maps of the loftiest snow peaks of the world. Kanchenjunga mountain belongs to Sikkim, and the Sikkimese look upon it as a deity. Sikkim measures 70 sq. miles. The visuals are full of the grandeur of the Himalayan peaks. The cascading waters fall into the rivers of the valley. Rivers Rangit Rangpo and Lacheh flow into the Teesta.

The camera captures the true grandeur of Sikkim in the flora. Folk songs engulf as the camera pans over flowers and greenery. The rhododendron flowers abound. The flowers and orchids add to the beauty of the natural landscapes. Locally grown cardomium and organs are exported. Women peasants dig with shovels. Maize and rice are grown on terrace fields. Bullocks plough. Ninety percent of Sikkim's population live in villages. Lachum village and other rural hamlets flourished around monasteries. Goats and cows are led by children. People in Lashum belonged to a border tribe, that originally came from Tibet. The camera drifts over faces, and occasionally halts for a close up. Masons over iron stoves, craft horse shoes. Villages like Lachung and Lachang are expanding. The network of mountain jeepable roads is breathtaking. Hazards of landslides hold up travelers. The landslides are caused by land erosion, and the excessive height and steepness of the mountains. Labourers carry bricks in relays. Sunday markets bristle with activity. The chickens, goats and food items are on sale. The camera has nothing to buy, but watches the faces of the hill folk. The original tribes of Sikkim were Lepchas. Today Sikkim is a mix of Lepchas, Bhutias and Nepalese. The ornaments used by the women are caught in diverse camera close-ups. Various dialects catch the ears in Sikkim. Those from Nepal retained Hindusim. The Mahamaya Buddhism is the official religion of Sikkim. Prayer pillars, prayer wheels and stone tablets remain the sign posts of any inhabitation. The prayer flags keep evil spirits at bay.

In 1971, 25% of the budget is spent on education. Sikkim's only private public school is named after Tashi Namgyal. Schools commence with children standing outdoors, in folded

hands and closed eyes. At most schools, children sit cross legged on wooden floors of halls. At the cottage looms, there are hand crafted rugs and blankets on spinning wheels and raised looms. Designs of dragons abound. The Cottage Industries Institute is full of looms and crafts. The camera observes children playing basket ball. There are gifts for games of chance at fairs. Live events, like the Chogyal and queen Hope Cook visiting fairs, or distributing prizes in schools, are recorded unobtrusively, children stage musical performances.

Sikkim's religious tolerance finds focus at a Sunday market, where a religious group speaks on the Gospels.

The camera pans dances with swords and shields. Paper kites are burnt over fire cauldrons. A royal lunch is laid outdoors.

Ray's "Sikkim" documentary is an intimate look at Sikkim's landscape and its people. Though the film is no saga of the struggle for existence in mountainous terrain, the film has a moving eloquence on the beauties of nature. Ray's voice over narration is precious and completes the wider vision of nature's bounties. Soumendu Ray's camera is mobile with maze like patterns, as an illuminated manuscript of Satyajit Ray's off screen commentary. The location shot vistas are a pleasure in itself. The film's agenda is pro-life and pro-beautiful environment. But much of the film's visuals do not have anything to do with life at all. Ray's "Sikkim" never reflects on the poverty and deprivation of the mountain inhabitants, nor are there any enquiries on Chogyal's governance. Music by Ray binds the local horns, chords and cymbal to sturdy resonance the musical variations are a part of nature's sonority. The film had its first debut screening at the Kolkata Film Festival (Nov-2010). □□□