

To  
Mr. Anmol Vellani  
India Foundation for the Arts  
Bangalore.

Date : 11.10.2006

Sir,

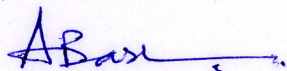
I am hereby sending you my interim narrative report and financial statement (for the year from 15<sup>th</sup> Oct'2005 to 15<sup>th</sup> Oct'2006) for the project Listener's Tale funded by IFA.

In this regard I also request you to kindly arrange for the payment of the unpaid balance of the fund at the earliest.

Please find alongwith the above mentioned reports and a collection of still photographs from the film in making.

Thanking you,

Yours Sincerely,



Arghya Basu

## **Narrative Report**

### **Kalimpong. October 2005**

A short walk down from Kalimpong Mall is Bom Busti where we have an old Lepcha monastery. Although most of the Lepcha population around this part of West Bengal (earlier frontiers of Sikkim) have converted into Christians the monastery stands aloof in quiet solitude receiving followers on special festive and ritual days. The peeling paintings on the wooden walls look down at faith-ful faces.

Sonam Tshering Lepcha asks us to meet him in Kalimpong around Dussera. We insist that he shows us his Lepcha museum that stands on the grounds of Lepcha monastery. When the contingent meeting actually happens excitement is mutual and within a very short while Sonam comes to his usual self... a trip to the museum graced by presence of the founder himself leads to long hours of discussions about the problems confronting an indigenous Lepcha cultural history, the significance of the museum objects with respect to emerging social values and recital of different Lepcha musical instruments.

Richard Lepcha manages to take time out of his busy festive schedule for the impromptu shoot. Before that we have to knock literally every Photo Studio in Kalimpong looking for a video camera with which to capture the traces of the Lepcha domain few like Sonam care for. Finally one of them is kind enough to go out of his way and contact Richard who in turn manages to convince, on the one hand some Rehmat Sheikh to lend his Hi 8 camera, and, on the other, makes it impossible for us to ignore the Christian benevolence aspect of the whole exercise and therefore agree to shoot with it, at a price at which one can hire a couple of Digital cameras in Kolkata. Richard is a self-taught Christian Lepcha cameraperson earning his living from freelance jobs for the local cable TV networks and referring initially to Sonam as the cranky old chatterbox. Kalimpong is teeming with tourists in all shapes, sizes and mannerisms. All video cameras are working over shifts to cope with the Puja mayhem. The chowk and the bylanes are thick with Bollywood noise and burnt fuel.

We hire a car to visit the ruins of Lepcha legend Geybu Achyuk's Doling Fort around a couple of hours drive from Kalimpong town. Sonam carries a chopper and a pack of incense sticks. Over the walk from motorable road to the ruins on top of the hill Sonam tells us anecdotes about the life and times of Doling. It is evident that what he points towards as autochthonous history stands at the crossroads of a larger migration of interlinked races fighting over resources at a time when democracy has highlighted the problematics of traditional monarchies and primitive societies alike ... the subject of rule immortalizes the rule and structure under which it invents its escape from that very structure and fabricates ecstatic Utopias. Sonam talks to himself, picks a few wild wayside flowers and begins to use his chopper to clear the way once in a while... It's a post-monsoon sunny morning over the hills spread out endlessly all around us. Most of them have similar or different stories unfolding and becoming true or false, important, indifferent or dated-ly useless. Sonam points at a heap of earth with dense overgrowth and begins to recount the architecture of Geybu Achyuk's erstwhile fort. He talks continuously and as if he can see all of the fort right there in spite of the glaring absences of any substantive proof of the story... I remember Saul Mullard, our Tibetologist friend, smirking the first time I mentioned about Geybu Achyuk... no official historian tends to take the legends of the Lepcha hero as historic fact, yet can't deny the importance of this set as index of a Lepcha cultural intervention in their changing socio-historic milieu under ceaseless flow of Tibetan nomad / settler(s) and rapidly becoming

colonial experiences. It is for this journey to the historic site that we have taken a lot of pain to acquire a video camera on our meeting Sonam in person. Now as the camera rolls one sees nothing recorded by it but for tales of absence... nameless mounds waiting to be resurrected through a recounting of their ancient tales. But in fact, they say nothing. Sonam seeks permission from the spirits of the hill to enter the territory. While returning, we are accosted by a local tour operator who claims sole credit for immortalizing the name of Geybu Achyuk.

Sonam roams the forest of his tales, which now is Government property.

A village in the middle of non-motorable wilderness. A three hundred year old Lepcha house; its inhabitants as old as mankind.

At the museum, on our request, Sonam plays an instrument that he has re-introduced into Lepcha music. It's a string & bow instrument that has uncanny similarities with the Sarangi... We find some clay figures that are left in the sun to be installed into the frieze of life that Sonam keeps composing to represent lost Lepcha life. He agrees, nevertheless, that unfinished and unpainted clay figures set amidst natural objects like stone, leaves, moss etc. provides a much better setting for a telling of the narratives he lives by...

A couple of hour's drive from Kalimpong finds us at the Bhutanese Drukpa Kagyu monastery that we have been looking for. Once again, a mystic darkness, peeling paintings, monks who know so little about the religion they placate... Major. S R Bhutia, owner of the Bungalow that stands on the monastery premises, promises us all cooperation needed if we decide to shoot ... interesting part of the story is that, among the Bhutanese populace staying in this part of erstwhile Sikkim, Geybu Achyuk is a malignant demon and source of a host of natural calamities and perennial illness. It is for the propitiation of such spirits that the Chaam occurs here.

The trip to Kalimpong is a major pointer for the problems of an impromptu shoot... outside the domain of the metropolis, it seems next to impossible to access a decent camera at a reasonable price at the right moment. This makes it imperative to admit and confront that even the most casual of the reeves has the potential to turn into an interesting shooting experience, once forever... mostly one plans what to shoot, it is also suggested that one engages oneself at the technical level to deal with something that is conspicuously absent, the stories of absence, for our shoot, have most often persuaded us to make invisible rooms for the contingent to play its music of chance. The economics of a film production, as ours is, allows only calculated speculations, therefore ends in capturing on film, i.e. situating as matter, images which are preempted by primarily historic notions. But dealing with realities, fat chunks of which (albeit at the surface) are actually everyday affirmations of Structure, it is perhaps customary that one allows oneself a process/processes, as importantly as thought/thoughts, that optimizes free play of chance within the obligations of overall design, as an apology for dogma... form of practical experience being the seed of the artistic form, in order to preclude the monopoly of forms preempted by an industrial certainty... Kino glas is an invention of the homo symbolicum...

## **Gangtok. December 2005**

As always, our contact at the Sikkim Government finds it difficult not to share with us his own insecurities. Over the phone he informs that our permissions could be revoked and that we must oblige ourselves by addressing the situation in the most practical of terms, namely, financial...

This person calls himself a friend... and earlier even after creating a suffocating situation of mistrust by insisting that I pay a bribe he's refused it at the final moment... this time he is bound by honor it seems to make us believe that he'll refuse it again till only the final moment when actually he accepts the bribe, twice the amount permitted by our budget, apparently only on behalf of somebody else...

One has learnt a lesson since the Kalimpong trip; this time one's wise enough to carry a camera. Within the endless rounds to the obscure meetings with my official friend I look at Gangtok... under the surface of its streaming crowd and traffic, the souvenirs and the shop windows there are innumerable invisible stories like ours ... Saul Mullard again, ' in Sikkim everything happens only under the surface'...I meet up with Duduk at the craft center... after a long session of interviews with Duduk and Nima, the ex-monk and now Thanka painter, Duduk and I walk to the main chowk on MG Marg and shoot a sequence that for us stands as the interface between everyday writing and erasures ... Duduk, apparently the last of traditional mask makers, is also the last man standing who denies, as instinctively as possible ( often by the obliteration of personal schedules and commitments) the rule of the silver and at the same time has given himself in abundance to Playwin / Sikkim Lotto lotteries....

Saul and I sit together to plan our next schedule. Saul has been doing his explorations in some of the lesser-known monasteries in Sikkim, some of which are on our own production map. We flip through the stills that he has taken of some of these locations... it's not difficult for us to see why we must make an effort to visit these places, Namchi, Tashidzom, Tashiding, Zilnon etc. This trip that we finally zero in on is going to take us into the zone that is otherwise known as Inner Sikkim. Only a travel / trek operator can take us through this since we need accommodation, boarding and travel facilities for a 6 member crew along with provision for a generator to charge batteries for our camera etc. We visit almost all the major tour agents without any concrete suggestions or promise of help since this doesn't fit into any of the existing trek routes and there's, according to the travel agent, hardly anything to see or enjoy... we contemplate getting the whole thing arranged by ourselves. A few days go by trying in vain to get things in place. Saul is extremely excited to make the trip since he is sure of finding no better company than us for the time being and we need him to make our entries to these zones possible. Needless to say, a white skin and Queens' English commands more effective and well, workable awe and admiration perhaps, than the sense of intimacy engendered by a band of interested yet domicile filmmakers, namely us. But this is also the reason why we are suspect of being filthy rich and at the wrong end of a socio-economic exploitation of the land and its resources to make nothing but money at the end of the day. Finally, a desperate Travel operator accepts the challenge. Everything that we require is promised beforehand and we book the tour on paper.

Its only an hour before our jeep to Siliguri is due... we haven't yet received our permission. Everything seems to be falling apart... then, finally comes the moment of equilibrium... cash and permit exchange hands.

## Sikkim. December 2005

Late December I start for Sikkim with the camera; idea is that I sort out the necessary arrangements for our trek that begins from the 4<sup>th</sup> of January...Manas & Shubhodeep (Cameraperson, Sound Recordist) join us around the 3<sup>rd</sup>. From the moment we reach Gangtok, the place begins to stink of overfamiliarity... we get in touch with Saul and the same evening start for Namchi; we make an overnight stopover at Ravangla and carry on from there to Namchi early next morning.

Along the road to Ravangla through the pitch-dark hills Saul and I have an interesting exchange. It is customary that each time we meet we lock horns over almost every issue if only to mutually accept and criticize each other's observations and therefore challenge and confront our respective methodologies. This time on the discussion is on the pornographic aspect of the Tantric metaphysics...Saul insists that there are practices that he's accustomed with that involve intricate and graphic erotic communion of the Tantric with his secret consort. More out of obligation towards a lively debate than necessity I refer to the deliberated ambiguity that seems to enshrine the esoteric practices of the Tantric. It is true that researchers have found that in Tibetan voice chants that are rendition of the texts themselves there are often some syllables and allusions, which have no meaning outside the discursive praxis. It is said that the precaution is due to manifold reasons... to protect the privileged knowledge among the coterie of a select few, to protect thereby the auto-suggested sacredness of the texts, to create and instate in position the transcendental signified, and perhaps, most importantly, to find a formal balance between Buddhist philosophic rationale and religio-semiotic oeuvre of the esoteric realpolitik.

On the road to Namchi next morning we come across a structure that looks like a Sikkimese answer to the stoa. It takes us some amount of speculation to situate it as a cremation site. The day inches towards a glaring afternoon and we struggle against time to find our way to the abandoned Ngadak Gompa which is supposed to have been the erstwhile residence and assassination site of Pandi Wangmo (Chakdor Namgyal's Bhutanese step-sister). Earlier I have seen photographs of the dilapidated building that stands on the grounds of a newly established Ngadak monastery, where today Puja is being held. Saul and I use our permit with Govt. seal to make way through initial skepticism and objection on part of the monks. The fact that a phirang like Saul speaks Tibetan and some words of Sikkimese Bhutia is of invaluable help in circumstances such as this. The monastery is now a wreck. The walls along with the paintings are simply peeling down due to lack of conservation. It is a house haunted by a past of which no one is anymore sure. Saul keeps talking to the Dorje Lopon (head lama) of the monastery about the life and works of Rinzin Gudemchen, arguably the pioneer of the Tibetan Lamas who discover Sikkim as Padmasambhava's hidden land. Rikdzin Gudemchen, according to historians, is responsible for the naming of Kanchendzongha and pre-dates the legendary advent of Lhatsun Chenpo (Sikkim's patron saint) and the Ngadak and Kartok Lamas in the 17<sup>th</sup> century by around three hundred odd years. Prior to this quasi-historic landmark of Tibetan monarchic regime in Sikkim, the Chatrang Lineage represented by Rikdzin Gudemchen commanded most of the respect and revenue. With the advent of Lhatsun, the Mindoling Lineage came to contest the authority of the Ngadak. Echoes of this come back to us when we can finally see through the semiotic jigsaw of the Pang Lhabsol (commemoration of the lepcha-bhutia blood brotherhood). In this historic observance Kanchendzongha, as a local god transformed into a warrior deity, shares the stage with the fierce dharma protector deity Mahakala (an emanation of Avalokiteswara). Now, keeping in mind that the Pangtoed Chaam that is performed to represent this socio-religious spectacle is the only Chaam in Sikkim that has been scripted and choreographed by a mortal, Chakdor Namgyal himself (albeit in a trance), given the fact that Kanchendzongha is named by Rikdzin Gudemchen and also that Chakdor Namgyal meets up with Lhatsun's reincarnation,

Jigmed Pawo, on his return from exile in Tibet and goes on to found the Pemayangtse monastery, following the Mindoling Lineage, as the central law-giving religio-political institution in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and finally the tale of sibling rivalry between Chakdor Nagyal & Pandi Wangmo which results in death of both the protagonists, etc. etc. it is not difficult to interpret the Pang Lhabsol as an iconic representation of the growing supremacy of one émigré Tibeatn lineage over its historic antecedent. We have shot the Pang Lhabsol earlier at Rabtenling monastery. It takes us around two years and several hundreds of kilometers of calculated travel across the entire length and breadth of a rapidly modernizing Sikkim to draw this connection among the scattered fragments of a fractured history bound together by the mythopoeic texture of symbolic forms...

### **Inner Sikkim**

The walk through hills, valleys and forests dotted by obscure, out of use monasteries lasts for a week. Traveling with a group of around ten members, tents, generator, three zemus (cross between cow & yak) and necessary equipment we lose complete perspective of the time that lies around the eternal moment of Inner Sikkim. The area is called so because this is historically the domain from where the Nyingmapa sect established its political domination over Beyul Demazong, Padmasambhava's hidden valley of treasures...with Tashiding stupa as the nervecentre, the Buddhist notion of the Mandala / perfect universe is projected over the geopolitical sphere, thereby transforming and consecrating the whole of Sikkim as a metaphysical refuge for the dispossessed émigré driven out of his territory, Tibet, to look for a regenerative ground for the Dharmic principles, codes and institutions...

This trek is all about slowness and patience... over a week it's about fifty odd kilometers that one has to travel on foot, relying on nothing but one's own humor since most of what one wishes or expects to confront are overwritten by the rhythm of solitary lives, radical incomprehension and fatigue. The Trek operator is the primary problem...he expects us to be thrilled at the prospect of sleeping in tents and walking on endlessly from one destination to next. Whenever there's a change of plan or course, the team gets apprehensive and only the tinker of dough stands to level the difference of opinion between us. And it happens all the while... the route we have taken is seldom traversed by trekkers, time and again we are told that our journey is most out of the way and results in thrifty makeshift arrangements wherever we put up the tents. Tashiding, Zilnon, Tashidzom, Dubri... a travel of this extensive an order takes strange tests of the wanderer. Time stands still, and it is only one's own movement, at snail's pace, connecting one experience with another that seems to be the only meaning of this inscrutable reality. Our travel takes us mostly through Lepcha settlements where monasteries are now taken over by the Government for eternally deferred renovations...in most of the places there's no one who can tell us about the historic facts. It is extremely frustrating for the educated city slicker to accept the hagiographies as they offer themselves in lieu of historic truth. Till only slowly one realizes that to the people who are governed by this kind of truth, our intrusion into the sacred recesses of this mythic landscape prompts a negotiation brought to existence through mutual indifference, cultivated historically on both sides of the cultural divide. The other problems have their origin in the imperceptible cross purposes that Saul and us embody. The methodological differences are, as they reveal themselves are primarily generated by the ideological schemata that both of us chalk out for each self. To the orthodox historian driven by perennially replenished dashes of humanism along with a insatiable hunger for the undiscovered, everything must finally give way to the institutionalized practices of scientific enquiry...at the same time it is the modern historian himself who is baffled by the exotic inspirations of a reclusive metaphysics, the totalitarian throes of a religious epiphany. We try our own methods and, thankfully, things work out; not just because we turn, more often than not, conventions inside out as and when needed, but simply because it gets closest to Chance.

## **Future Plans & Schedule**

The future schedules are at place as planned. With minor alterations and keeping ourselves open to the prospect of valuable changes we plan to go ahead with the remaining schedule as planned. In fact, all these changes cannot be speculated at the moment owing to the nature and capacity of our research...for instance, if resources and the people concerned permit, we would like to explore some areas like Kalimpong, as mentioned earlier, for further inroads into the Sikkimese Buddhist religio-cultural practices in relation to the contesting paradigms.

Since the commencement of the grant, there have been several changes in our modus operandi. The primary change is of course at the level of content...as is said, in Sikkim everything is under the surface; in the course of our research we have come across objects (as in the cinematographic object) which could have been perceived only after one spends long and grueling hours of study on the surface of social history...the cultural practices that we have encountered and explored in recent times are products, to some extent, of the persuasive nature of our project.... We have clubbed schedules, changed our focus from the study of some forms into creating within these forms relationships that bring to light the syncretistic, transcultural aspects of Sikkimese Buddhism. In the earlier schedules the shoots have been more object driven... rituals, observances, festivals, paintings etc. Through this long and reflexive tryst with Buddhist semiotic operations we are approaching rarefaction in terms of content and methodology...

At present, the constructive principles of our film, the amount and nature of the footages acquired, the shifts in our own perception of Sikkimese Buddhist cultural history as it exists in relation to alternative practices and paradigms etc. suggest that we break the film down into parts in order to create conditions in which the often conflicting discourses can be dealt with without the risk of the film becoming misbalanced owing to its sprawling discursive framework. The first part of the series is almost ready for circulation (in another couple of months). It would require that we structure the existing footages and the future shoots to provide for realization of aspects of the Buddhist experience that one is privileged to encounter only after one has gone a long way into the realms of this cinematographic journey. There have been situations where the existing pattern of budgetary breakdowns have not worked at all... payments had to be made, people had to be bribed, typicalities of the landscape, weather etc. have at times stretched schedules beyond their planned limits etc. We are considering the possibility of accessing additional resources to cover the costs that the alterations and shifts that we face at the moment. Needless to say, in case of a co-production scenario, the rights of film and footage stays exclusively with us and any third party will have shared rights only over what will be produced beyond the film that is on the anvil.

Another possibility of dissemination that offers itself to us is that we create an archive based on the findings and materials collected in the course of our project. The nature of the project generates data and information not all of which can be contextualized by the film(s). These materials nevertheless are important resource matter for Cultural history scholars, anthropologists and others and need to be disseminated in other forms such as Still Photographs, Audio samples, Video clips, monographs etc. In the meanwhile we have made contacts with some archives such as Tibet Himalaya Digital Library, Documentary Education Resources etc. and have received favorable feedbacks. One could consider uploading the materials through the Internet for larger access.

ABadi

11.10.2006