



# KALUK- SUZERAINTY OF KANCHENJUNGHA



By **SOMEN SENGUPTA**

**W**hen talks veer around visiting Sikkim, I am a persona non-grata to most of my co travellers, specially to my wife. She, over the years has cemented this idea in her mind that no civilized soul should accompany a person like me for hilly sojourns, one who goes into deep depression whenever cloud engulfs the sky.

For the rest of my family, a cloudy day in the hills is a charming one.

The fresh cool air of the mountain and the call of mystic from the dark woods of pine forests are good enough to make their holiday a hit. It is only me who looks for more.

This time in Sikkim a good friend suggested to us a small village named Kaluk. I was told that Kaluk will deliver me two things. It will colonize my heart with its serenity and silence, and if luck permits it will give me a chance to meet the 'Queen'.

"Why are you so down? We have 2 more days in hand" - my son tried his best to punch some energy in me and I regained from being pensive.

In Kaluk, we checked in our resort which had a massive open space facing towards the hill with no obstacle in between. The rolling hilly with lush green cover greeted us. For the naked eyes, the cloudy horizon was appearing like a mystic soul.

There I met 2 couples staying with us in the same resort. Nilarva and Nandini with their kid often explore Sikkim while Sudipta and Sanhita were on their honeymoon trip.

As we became friends in 10 minutes, we like typical Kolkata bongs started sharing our opinion on the best place to see Kanchenjunga from Sikkim. A resort employee joined in the conversation.

"Do not settle your opinion before seeing it from here," he remarked with a smile.

I was told that this village which is at 56000 ft above from sea level comes under the Eco Tourism Thrust Area of Sikkim Govt and it also comes under the buffer zone of Varsey Rhododendron Sanctuary. The rhododendron sanctuary of Varsey that lies in clandestine of the foothills of Singalila range of Himalaya marks a natural border between India and Nepal.

In village of Kaluk, rhododendron and other Himalayan floras are abandoned.

While having a bowlful of steaming thupka, a Tibetan food, I was planning how to spend the next day. My labour was minimised when I found my wife had already chalked out a day trip to visit a bridge and a monastery.

What is so special about a bridge in Sikkim? I asked and found she had done her homework well.

"We will visit Singshore, Asia's 2nd highest suspension bridge installed in one of the most difficult places. It is a must visit and please be ready," she sounded dominant.

Night enveloped Kaluk like a silent invader.

In that deep kingdom of silence not even the sound of a car was heard. The only music that our ears noticed was chirping of crickets and wind passing through the woods nearby. Soon dinner was served and by 8 pm the temperature started falling. The three families met over coffee and started speculation on our chances to see the 'Queen' from Kaluk.

With such thick clouds hovering over

the sky, the chance to espy the 'Queen' was slim - Sudipta and Nilarva both had same opinion.

Placing myself under two blankets, I tried to read a book in bed only to find my concentration wavering.

A gloomy and cloudy morning welcomed us next day. My broken heart found some healing touches when a perfect English breakfast was served with strong aromatic coffee.

We were soon on our way to visit the bridge.

Gliding the zigzag terrain of western Sikkim with many cardamom farms on our way we crossed several streams flowing over brown rocky surfaces. The green vegetation with red and pink rhododendrons was welcoming us on our way to an engineering marvel named Singshore bridge.

I had done a little research the previous night to know that this 100 ft high and 240 mt long steel rope bridge was built in 1997 and this is one of the oldest one in western Sikkim.

As we walked on the bridge, the wind passing through almost blew us off. The sound of the colourful Buddhist prayer flags was enough to create a thrill - full of fear yet enchanting.

Our next stop was Rinchenpong Buddhist monastery, the 3rd oldest monastery of Sikkim. It was built in 1730 by Ngadakpa Lama. I had a high interest in this monastery as I read that it enshrined idol of Adi Buddha. However it seemed we ran out of luck for we found the gate locked and no request was taken for consideration to open it. The simple yet remarkable Vajrayana style of monastery was supposed to be charming, but the pangs of not being able to see Adi Buddha was bugging hard.

Returning to resort and again waiting for another dawn to meet the 'Queen' was the only agenda left for the day. We had an early dinner and went to bed after setting the alarm for next morning.

Next morning I got up before that set timing.

Showers the night before had cleared all clouds. Removing the curtains of fog, Kanchenjunga the 'Queen' of all peaks was standing proudly over the horizon. As soon as the sun moved up, the golden rays flooded the snow. I first caught up Kabru - 1 and Kabru - 2, two of the most famous peaks of Kanchenjunga range. Soon with brighter beams falling over the mountain, all the five peaks of main range were visible clearly. Kanchenjunga which is an amazing amalgamation of five huge peaks, all except one are 8000 mt plus in height, gradually took over the horizon of Kaluk. The blue sky, white snow and green foothills came together to create an astonishing combination of colours that left us spellbound with considerable amount of excitement.

The gloom in my heart was vanished and my eyes were beaming in joy. I soon found my fingers were shivering, not because of cold but in sheer excitement of meeting the 'Queen' who beckons me to Sikkim every year.

"Didn't I ask you to be optimistic?" my son teased me cordially and I found reason to agree to him.

## Travel Logistics:

Kaluk is just 26 kms from Pelling and 2.7 km from Rinchenpong.

Nearest railway station and airport are NJP and Bagdogra - both are in Bengal.

From Bagdogra it takes nearly 5 hours by car to reach Kaluk.

Hotels are limited - So advance online booking is suggested.

Hotel provides car for local sightseeing. You can do direct negotiation as well.

Do not plan to go out after sundown.

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