



A French woman of striking good looks and the daughter of a prominent activist, Alexandra David and Sidkeong Tulku – a reincarnated lama – who later became the king, were drawn to each other by their common passion of Buddhism

## The King and the Mystic

**A new book speaks about the lesser-known story of the romance between Alexandra David-Neel, who was the first woman to cross over into Tibet, and Sidkeong Tulku, the king of Sikkim**

**Parimal Bhattacharya**  
@mirrorfeedback.timesgroup.com

TWEETS @MumbaiMirror

**R**inchenpong, West Sikkim. From the tiny bazaar, a motorable path leads to the top of the mountain. The ancient monastery, made of wood and blocks of stone, sits on a clearing. A wind is blowing. Hundreds of silken prayer flags tied on bamboo poles lash the sky and produce the sound of beating hearts. As I walk towards the gompa, lines from a book I have read suddenly rush back to me.

*'Of yellow skin and short stature, he was wearing an orange brocaded dress. A diamond star glowed on his cap. It seemed as if a celestial being had descended from the mountains around. I had heard that he was a reincarnated lama and the crown prince of Sikkim.'*

It was Alexandra David-Neel, writing about prince Sidkeong Tulku, who would later become the king. The French woman had met him here, in 1912, when she had come to this land of Buddhism and eastern

mysticism. Sidkeong Tulku was a reincarnated lama, but he also had an Oxford degree. He and Alexandra became great friends, perhaps also fell in love with each other. Together they had come to this monastery and stood here, on this very ground, in this heart-thumping forest of prayer flags. Tulku was thirty-two then, Alexandra over forty. He would die four years later under mysterious circumstances. Alexandra David Neel would live on till she'd be one hundred and two. She would remember their first meeting until the last day of her life.

A woman of striking good looks and the daughter of a prominent activist, Alexandra was the cynosure of Parisian society during her youth. Among the men who feted her were heads of state and military generals, including Mussolini. She had dabbled with journalism and had even been an opera diva, until she married a rich manager of the French railroad company in Tunisia. But neither fame nor wealth could hold her back, because the Orient beckoned her. When she finally came to India in 1911,

Alexandra had reached middle age. The raw beauty of her youth had taken on a mellow grace. She spent some time in Calcutta and Benaras, studying different branches of Hindu philosophy, and then travelled to Sikkim. There she met the Prince.

Before coming to India, Alexandra had been to England to study Tibetan Buddhism. By the time she went to Sikkim and met Tulku, she was already a well-known Orientalist. The young Oxford-educated prince was charmed by this memsahib's passion for Buddhism. This common passion brought them closer together. Tulku had received his training at the Phodong monastery, near Gangtok; he later became its abbot. On his invitation, Alexandra came to Sikkim and stayed in the gompa for six months. A memorial hall there exhibits the letters the Prince and ex-diva wrote to each other, and other memorabilia she had later donated. In these letters, Tulku always addressed her as 'My dear sister' and signed off with, 'Your sincere

**CONTINUED ON PAGE 35**





## CONTINUED FROM PAGE 28

friend.' But in the writings of Alexandra, all the references to the Prince are marked with a glowing fascination:

*'I had doubts whether he was a person of flesh and blood. He was riding a splendidly decorated small horse, and was encircled by a retinue of men dressed in the colours of the rainbow. It seems the whole spectacle would vanish like a mirage at the wink of an eye.'*

Alexandra came to Sikkim again when Sidkeong Tulku had become the king, the first western-educated king in a land of rigid faiths and decadent customs. As the royal guest, she saw from up close how passionately Tulku had set about reforming the society in the liberal humanist model, curbing alcoholism and other corrupt practices of the lamas, banning primitive Lepcha rituals and working for the spread of Buddhism. On that visit, Alexandra went to Shigatse through north Sikkim. Tulku had accompanied her for some distance to see her off. It was the month of March. They were together for a few days, the king and the mystic, travelling side by side on horseback along mountain paths carpeted with rhododendron blossoms, camping in desolate Lonak valley by the side of a lake, far away from the capital and its prying eyes. He bade her farewell near the Jongsang-la pass, at 24,000 feet.

They would never see each other again. Barely ten months after assuming the throne, Sidkeong Tulku died under mysterious circumstances; he was probably poisoned. Alexandra managed to cross the border and met the ninth Panchen Lama in Tashilhunpo. Then she came back to Lachen, a tiny village in north Sikkim, and became the disciple of a tantric who was said to have magical powers. His name was Gomchen and he lived in a cave outside the village. Alexandra built a hovel near the cave, under an overhang, and spent three years there. She wrote about the supernatural energies that she had gained during this time; the power to generate heat energy within the body, for example. In fact when the training was completed, Alexandra had to give a test by sitting in meditation under a glacial spring, fully naked, through a full-moon night.

Meanwhile, the world outside was heating up: a war had broken out in Europe, involving all the major nations. The British government in India grew suspicious of the presence of a French woman near the Tibet border. They deported her.

But Alexandra was never a woman to be cowed down, even by an imperial power. She had set her eyes on Lhasa, the forbidden city, where a woman adventurer was yet to set foot. During her stay in Sikkim, she had adopted a fourteen-year old local boy named Yongden. Accompanied by him, Alexandra visited Lhasa. She entered Tibet through the other side, across Burma, Korea, Mongolia and China. It took her twelve years.

She travelled the entire length



**Alexandra travelled the entire length of China disguised as a nun**

of China from the east to the west, disguised as a nun, passed countless towns and villages where she had to sometimes bribe the local chieftains for her safety. At that time, the old decadent rule of the Manchu dynasty was slowly coming apart. Alexandra witnessed scenes of indescribable violence, fell sick, starved, and even survived on boiled leather boots. In the endless Gobi Desert she saw a flying lama, lost her way in the blizzards and crossed high mountain passes during peak winter season. She finally arrived in Lhasa disguised as a beggar, a revolver tucked under her bodice. The guards at the town's gate couldn't recognize the white lady covered in rags, her hair matted, her skin smeared with brown paint. It was 19th December, 1924. Alexandra was fifty-six.

She returned to France with Yongden and settled in Digne, a province near the Alps that reminded her of Sikkim: the same sub-alpine trees, rounded hills and narrow valleys. Yongden died in 1955. Alexandra continued with her writing and lecture tours until she died fourteen years later, at the age of 102. She was cremated and her ashes, together with Yongden's, were immersed in Ganga at Benaras. She had wished it that way.

I walk along the avenue of fluttering prayer flags and enter the dark temple hall. A recital of sutras has just ended and a thin young lama is rolling up the long narrow rugs. A butter lamp is burning on the altar. In its weak light a dark-skinned Buddha appears to be suspended in richly painted darkness. He sits cross-legged in the posture of meditation, but his eyes are opened wide in an expression of startled amazement. A naked white woman sits astride him on his lap, facing him, her arms and legs tied around his body in a tight embrace.

— Excerpted and narrated from **Bells of Shangri-la: Scholars, Spies, Invaders in Tibet**, published by Speaking Tiger in February 2019. Parimal Bhattacharya is a Kolkata-based bilingual writer, most recently, in **Bangla**, of Dodopakhider Gaan (Ababhash, 2019).