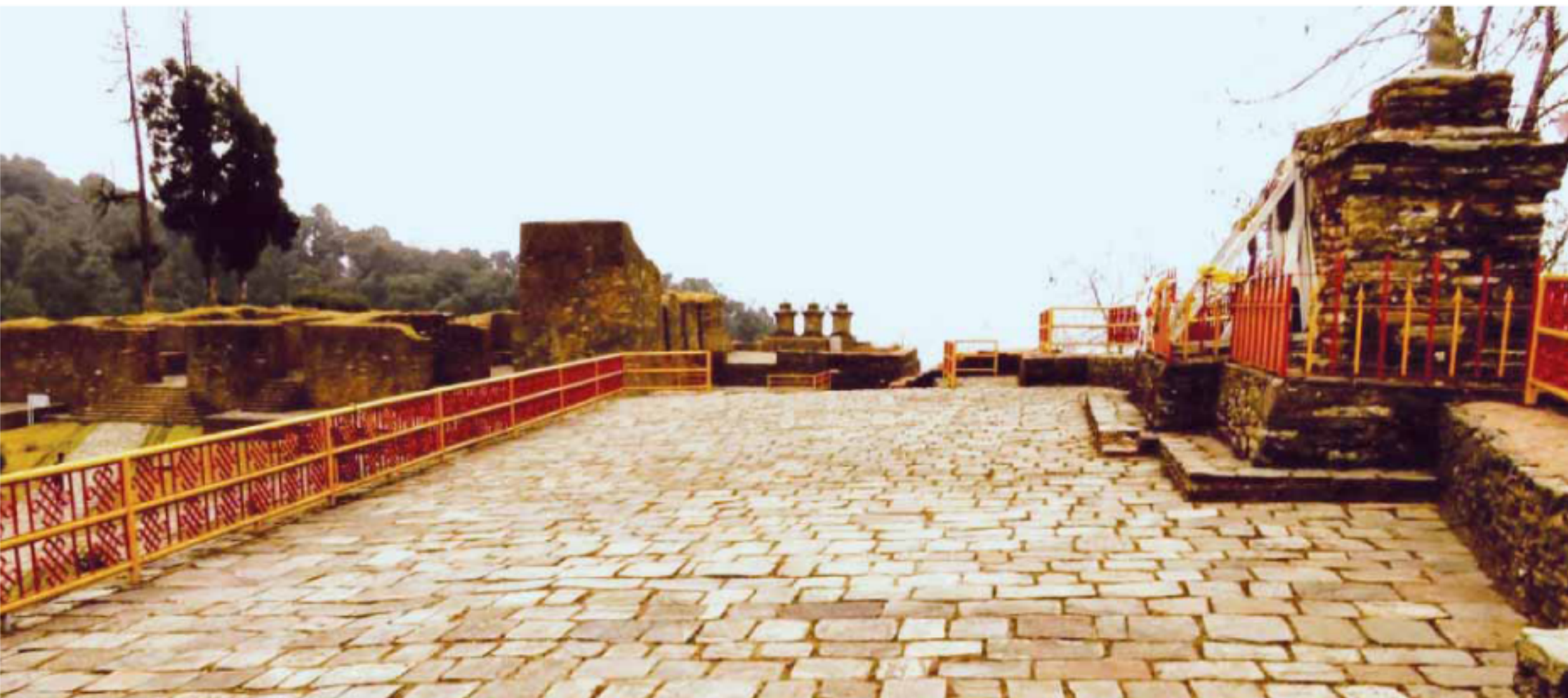




SIKKIM HAS GIVEN US MANY  
POPULAR PERSONALITIES,  
SUCH AS FOOTBALL PLAYER  
BHAICHUNG BHUTIA AND  
ACTOR DANNY DENZONGPA



# Rabdentse tells Sikkim's story of glory

The walls and floor of this ruinous city reveal a thousand stories of power and glory, and also carry the burning torch of the rich Indian heritage, which not many of us are aware of, writes SOMEN SENGUPTA

**T**his is a little known fact that under the shadow of the majestic Kangchenjunga, there is a kingdom of rubble nesting silently on a hilltop near Pelling, a place in west Sikkim frequented by tourists. Though Pelling is known as the nearest civilised point to enjoy Kangchenjunga's breathtaking beauty, this is also a place to get acquainted with the past.

Needless to say, not many are aware of this 350-year-old saga. The ruinous structure of Rabdentse is a burning testimony of Sikkim's ancient glory, which for long was not known to people living in other parts of India. Once a bustling human settlement, Rabdentse — which was the ancient capital of the royals of Sikkim — is now a crumbling ruin of Indus civilisation. However, that is only if it is seen from a distance.

Once some historical facts are gathered, it clearly gives an indication that the ruin is full of the rich saga of politics that can engross anyone who loves to explore historical monuments. Once its stone-laid lanes are walked on, and its crumbling walls are touched, a bygone era slowly unfolds and takes one back to the past.

The walls and floor of the ruinous city of Rabdentse reveal a thousand stories of power and glory. Sadly, they also reflect invisible patches of blood on the walls — common in every regency in ancient times where fighting for the throne was a tradition.

One needs to walk a treacherous path to reach Rabdentse. To reach these magical ruins, one has to cover a 2-km hilly path that runs through the dense chestnut trees. The path is often enveloped in dense fog, and its isolation adds to the thrill of finding an unknown world. You will find several signboards along the way that have been erected by the Archaeological Survey of India's Kolkata circle, with motivational messages for the tourists such as: "Do not get tired; great excitement is awaiting."

Once the height is scaled and one catches the first sight of the ruins, it still does not unfold much of its magic. The true magic of Rabdentse is revealed when one crosses the gate and sees a stone throne. Here three stones, which are known as Namphogang, are seen. This was the place where the highest judge gave his judgments to the king's subjects.

A small stone tablet briefly states the history of the place and its importance. The history of Rabdentse seems straight out of an action movie. The history of Sikkim is not well known across India because of its separation from the mainstream till 1975. Before that, this Himalayan kingdom was almost independent, and to a great extent, isolated from the world.

In the early 1970s, maverick filmmaker Satyajit Ray made an iconic documentary on Sikkim, covering its rich yet unknown history and cultural heritage. This opened many doors of interest in Sikkim, but the film was soon banned and its print was lost for many years.

After that, India under the late Prime Minister Indira Gandhi absorbed Sikkim into its fold, tourism bloomed, and finally its many archeological sites were opened up for exploration. Rabdentse, the second ancient capital of Sikkim, was explored and excavated by the ASI. It was a gem discovered in a land where people hardly went to experience the history.

The historical saga of Sikkim's royal family was no different from that of any other royal family ruling another part of the country. In 1670, the capital was shifted here from Yuksam by King Tensung Namgyal of Chogyal dynasty, and soon a stone city was built. Tensung's son Chador Namgyal, who was born from his second wife, took the power after the death of his father in 1700. However, his authority was challenged by his step-sister Pendiongm, the daughter of Tensung and his first wife, who was a Bhutanese. She also took help from the Bhutan royals.

The young vanquished king fled to Tibet and spent many years in exile in Lhasa. During this time, Chador adopted Buddhism and won the heart of the Dalai Lama, the spiritual leader of Tibet. Soon, Tibetan forces attacked Rabdentse to free it from the Bhutanese. Chador was able to get Rabdentse back, and lived here till 1716 when his step-sister murdered him. Soon, she was also killed after a palace conspiracy.

Chador's son Gurmed Namgyal got the throne and when he died in 1733, he announced that a nun in some monastery was carrying his child. When the nun gave birth to a boy after the death of Gurmed, he was announced as the king of Sikkim in



**TRAVEL LOGISTICS**

Rabdentse ruins are located on the outskirts of Pelling city in west Sikkim

The beaten track that leads to Rabdentse passes through a dense forest. However, signboards in every other corner help tourists find their way easily

The area has provision for drinking water, clean toilet, tea stall etc

Photography is allowed

The nearby Pemayangtse monastery can also be visited



PICS: SOMEN SENGUPTA

the palace of Rabdentse. Named Phuntsog Namgyal, the weak king was no good to Sikkim as during his reign, both Nepalese and Bhutanese attacked and captured many areas of Sikkim.

His son, Tenzing Namgyal, was an equally weak king who finally fled Rabdentse; he went to Tibet and never returned. After his death in 1780, his son reclaimed Rabdentse with help of China in 1793. It was the end of a glorious saga for Rabdentse as in 1814, the capital was moved out, thanks to its proximity to Nepal — an enemy land for Sikkim. Subsequent attacks by Nepal and Bhutan and finally the shifting of the capital to Tumlong led to Rabdentse gradually becoming a ghost city.

In mid 19th century, it banished into oblivion. It turned into a huge pile of debris with almost no known history. Today's Rabdentse is not even a shadow of its past. Still, its stone pathways and bylanes give one a chilling thrill; its stairs lead to the top of the fort from where the breathtaking Mount Kangchenjunga — the highest peak in India and third highest peak in the world — can be seen. On a clear day, when the mountains are seen over the horizon behind the background of historical ruins of Rabdentse, the atmosphere is electric. The extraordinary combination of nature and man-made marvels create an aura that will stay in your memory for a long time.



The remaining relics in Rabdentse bear testimony to its glorious history where the royal palace was once situated; a flight of stairs and some criss-cross stone walled lanes will also lead to the same place. This is the most thrilling place of the archaeological ruins.

Constant excavation and exploration has exposed a plethora of interesting things. This palace-cum-monastery was once as majestic as any other residence of the royals. Till now, the prayer place of the royals, locally known as Dabhangang, is there. A recent exploration identified important places like the bedroom of the

king, guard room assembly room, royal kitchen, and most accurately, the public courtyard, pointing to a royal life equipped with all amenities and luxury.

Rabdentse carries the burning torch of Indian heritage despite being rampaged and looted by the Nepalese, who also destroyed the relics of this once grand fort. However, the extraordinary efforts of the ASI have helped preserve the glorious part of our heritage. The ever-increasing flow of tourists at these ruins points to its appeal for many people who were not even aware such a place existed till a few years ago.