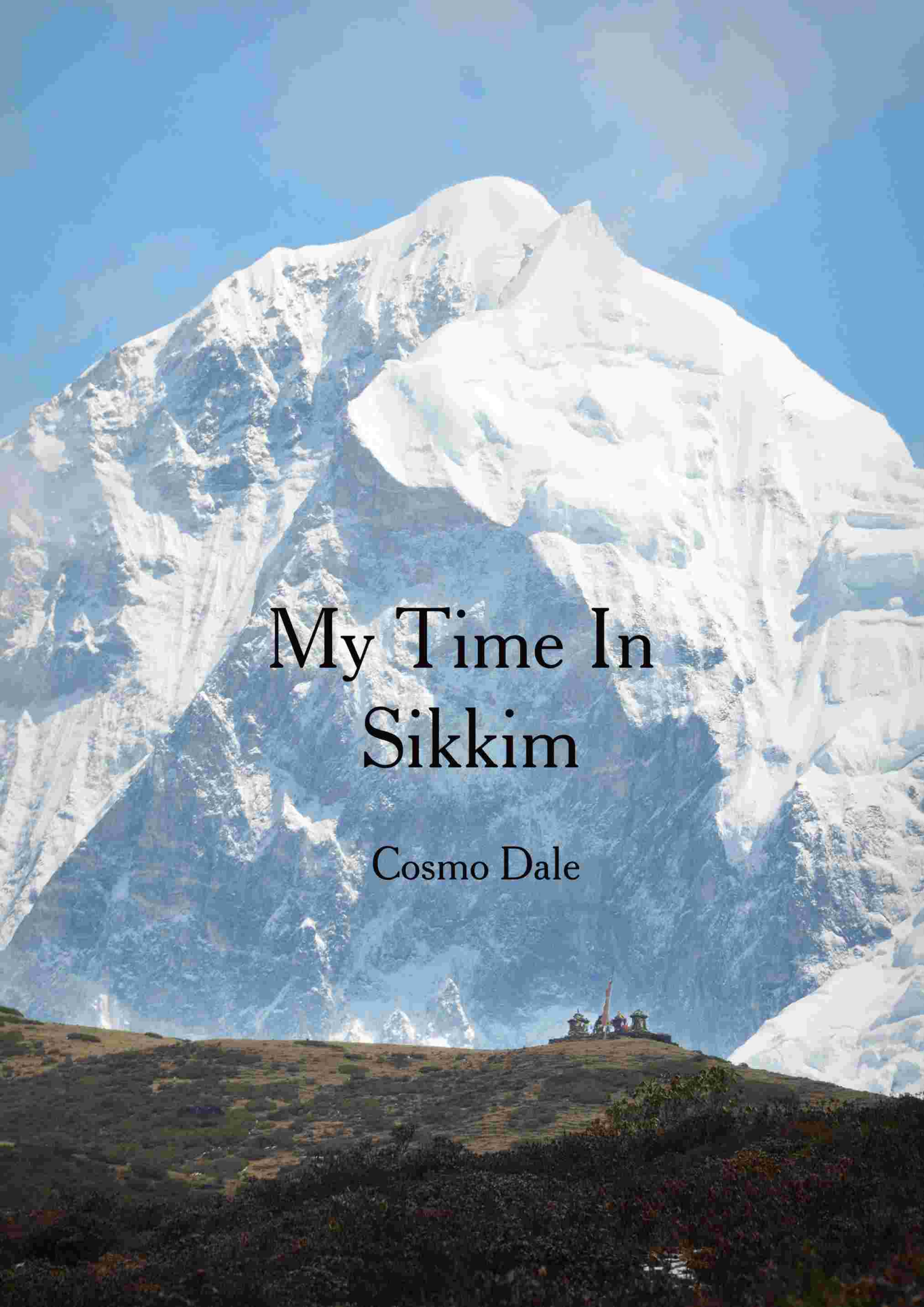




My Time In Sikkim

Cosmo Dale

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Acknowledgements

My deepest thanks to Hardy Plant Society and the Kenneth Black Bursary, Merlin Trust, RHS Gardens Club and Tresco and the Thistledown Bursary for helping to undertake this once in a lifetime trip.



Figure 1: Dubdi Monastery, Yaksom

Goechala Pass Trek Map

Tibet Autonomous Region

Nepal

Gangtok

Bhutan

West Bengal

Map is not to scale, and is reference only

Figure 2: Route To Goecha La

Introduction

On May 6th 2026 I boarded a plane at Heathrow airport bound for Delhi. This was the first step of my journey to the 4600m Goecha La pass in the northern Himalayas of India. I would be joining a tour ran by the Alpine Garden Society to witness the botanical, and non-botanical majesty of this region in late spring. With dreams of witnessing the private lives of *Rhododendrons*, *Arisaemas* and *Primulas* in their natural habitat, I had miraculously stuffed all my gear into a small, carry on sized, mountaineering rucksack and now was the time to realise a journey I had been planning for over half a year. The trip would roughly follow in the footsteps of the Victorian plant hunters of the 19th century, particularly that of Joseph Hooker. Hooker, later the director of Kew gardens, conducted various tours in the Himalayan region; returning a huge amount of plant material, particularly that of the *Rhododendron* genus. Species such as *R. falconeri* and *R. griffithianum* formed the bedrock of the landscape of cultivated Rhodendrons we have become so used to in gardens today. This trip would also fulfill a yearning of mine, founded in my teens watching Baraka. The yearning of witnessing those pure peaks towering above all our human worries, to allow myself to be carried above clouds to a land of the simplistic beauty and brutality of nature.

Day 1

The heat rushed in through the 737s open door to meet my tired face, I had reached the beginning of my journey by land. The airport was little more than a luggage conveyor belt with a coffee booth and some old Massey Ferguson's to lug the planes about. After escaping the livestock based chaos of the Siliguri we found ourselves racing through forests of *Lagerstroemia indica*, their purple spews of flowers shimmering in the haze of the midday heat. Suddenly the long straight asphalt coiled like an adder taken by surprise, we had reached the end of the planes and begin our climb into the foothills of the Himalaya. We climbed and climbed through what was by now an abundance of subtropical woodlands, the odd recognisable garden escapee could be seen, such as *Brugmansia* (fig.3) and *Bougainvillea* (fig.4).

After hours of experiencing every pothole from Siliguri to Yuksom, we finally laid our heads to rest on a pillow 1780 metres above sea level.



Figure 3: *Brugmansia*

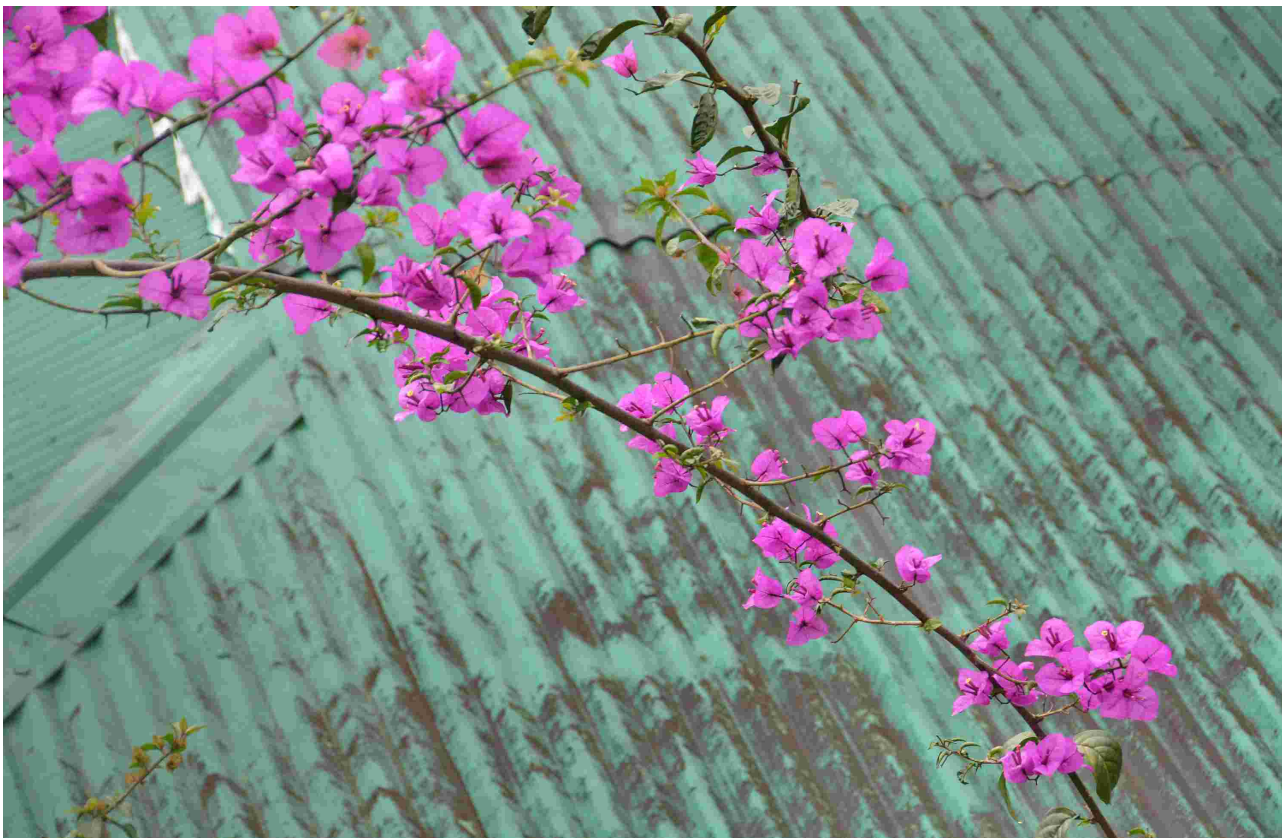


Figure 4: *Bougainvillea*

Day 2

Opening the curtains to our homestay's small windows I was immediately greeted by a very familiar sight: an immaculate lawn bordered by cultivated plants such as *Dicksonia* and *Sparrmannia*. Leaving our accommodation and walking into the town we were almost instantly greeted by the sexy *Arisaema speciosum* (fig.5) and its more exotic cousin *A. consanguineum* (fig.6). Bright *Pelargonium* cultivars lined small colourful houses (fig.7), with *Rosa* species twining themselves around bamboo trellises.

We wound our way past yaks and under colourfully painted gates to the Norbugang Chorten (fig.8), the site of the first crowning of the king of Sikkim in 1642. Looming over the smattering of small shrines and the throne itself were moss draped *Cupressus cashmeriana* (fig.9). specimens and clumps of giant Bamboo (*Dendrocalamus sp.*) (fig.10). To continue our history exploration of Yuksom we made the (almost 400m) climb to the Dubdi monastery which overlooks the town; established in 1701, it is the oldest monastery in Sikkim. As our lungs began to burn, we glimpsed the gem like flowers of *Bauhinia purpurea* (fig.11). This natural spectacle was followed by that of the man made monastery, sat above the village looking down on the world, I think we all felt the deep breath one takes to steady one's self before the oncoming challenge.



Figure 6: *A. consanguineum*



Figure 5: *A. speciosum*

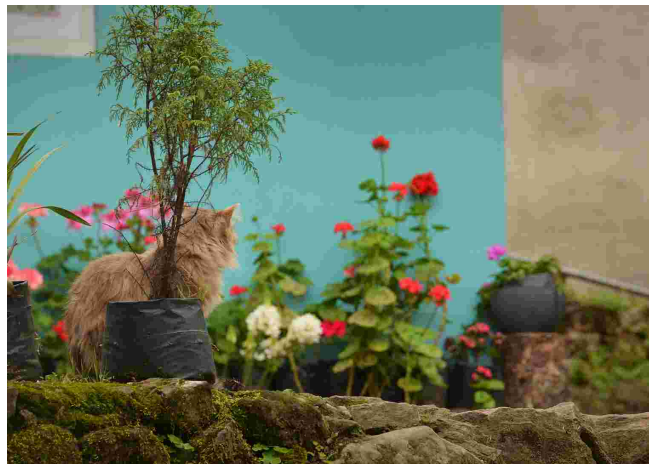


Figure 7: Feline contemplates pelargoniums



Figure 8: Statue of Thangtong Gyalpo

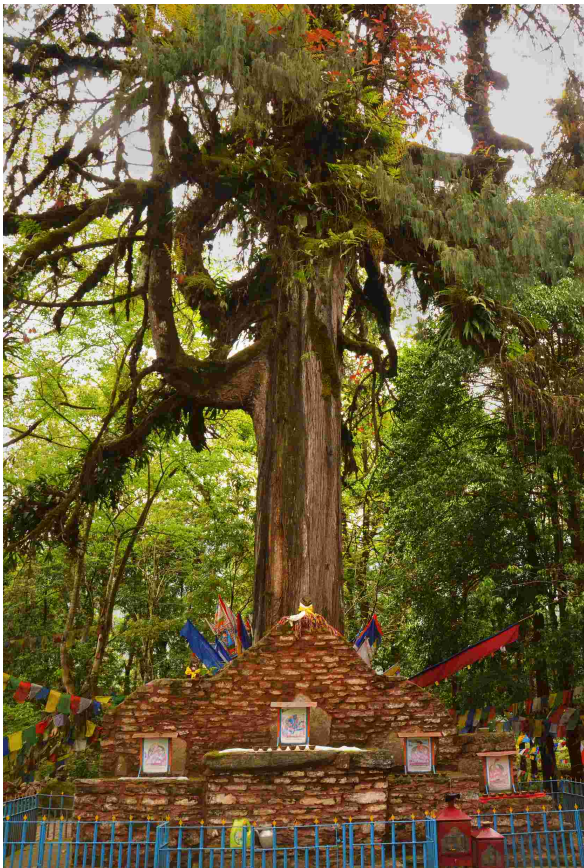


Figure 9: Cupressus



Figure 10: Bamboo coppice

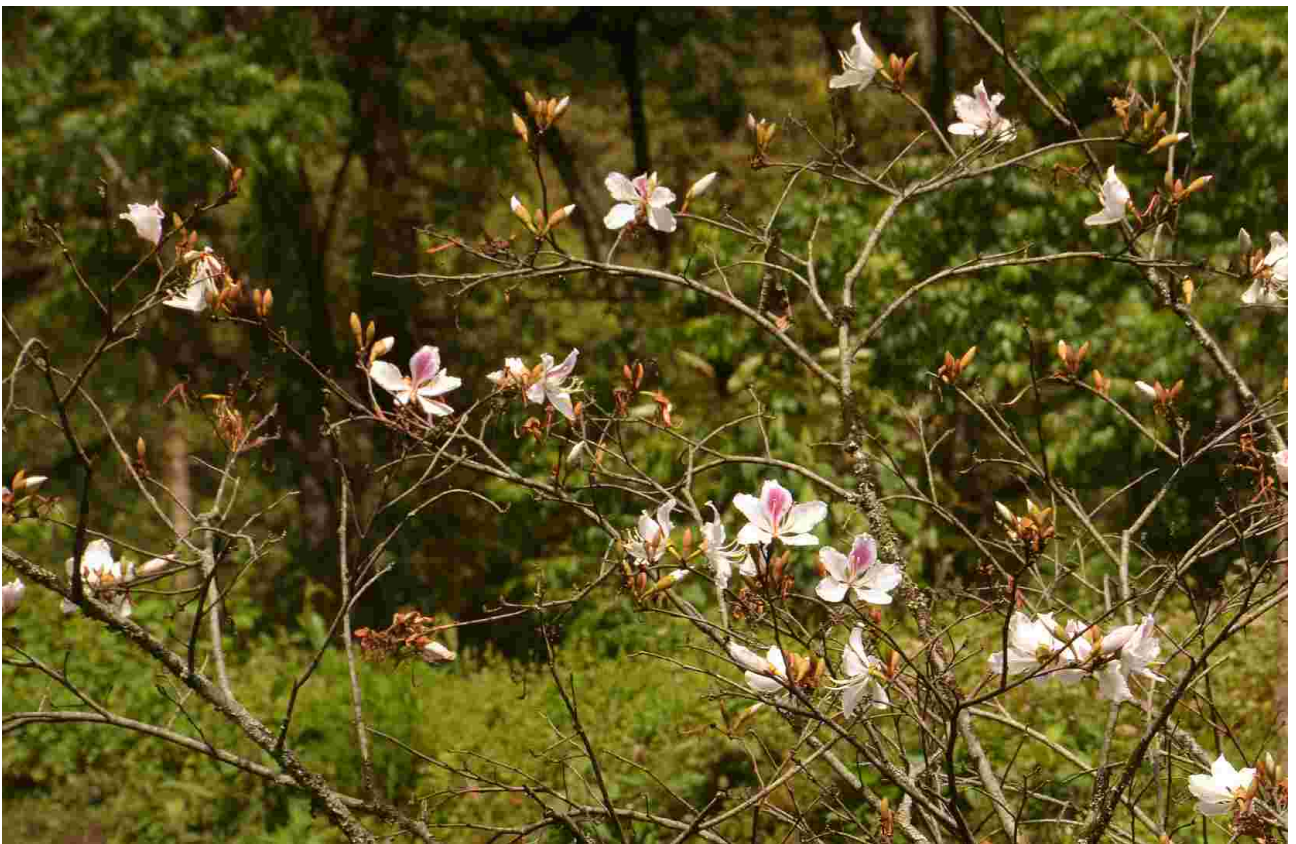


Figure 11: The arresting Bauhinia purpurea

Day 3

I awoke in my comfortable bed to the early morning light shining in through a crack in the patterned curtains, the day to begin our trek in earnest had arrived. Having completely dispossessed Yaksom of its omelette and coffee supply, we shouldered our packs and put boot to path. Today we would be following a valley that cut north into the hills, slowly gaining elevation. We quickly found ourselves high up on the valley side with small *Viola* (*canescens* or *Pilosa*) (fig.12) and Begonia (fig.13) species growing out of crevasses beside the worn path. The crashing of the river Rathong (fig.14) deep down in the valley echoes its way up through the trunks of introduced *Cryptomeria japonica*. *Cautleya spicata* (an epiphytic ginger) and *Rhaphidophora decursiva* (fig.15) clung to tree trunks which were strung together by moss draped vines. I found myself thinking back to my home in west Wales and the temperate rainforests there, the feeling of abundance that comes with such high levels of rainfall is comforting after a few years gardening in the south of England. This area receives such high levels of rainfall in the monsoon season that it is known by trekkers as Leech valley, and it is traditional to use salt to dry out the creature and remove it.



Figure 12: Viola

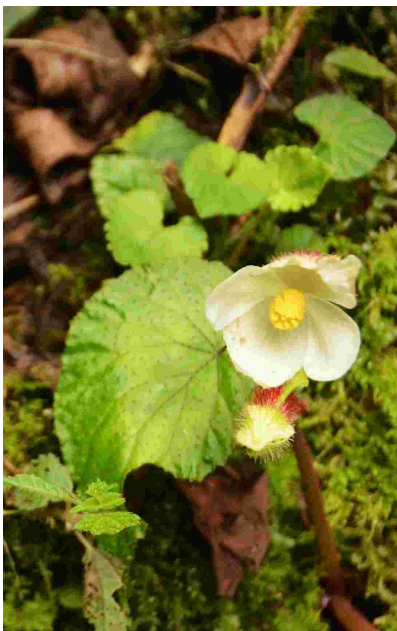


Figure 13: Begonia

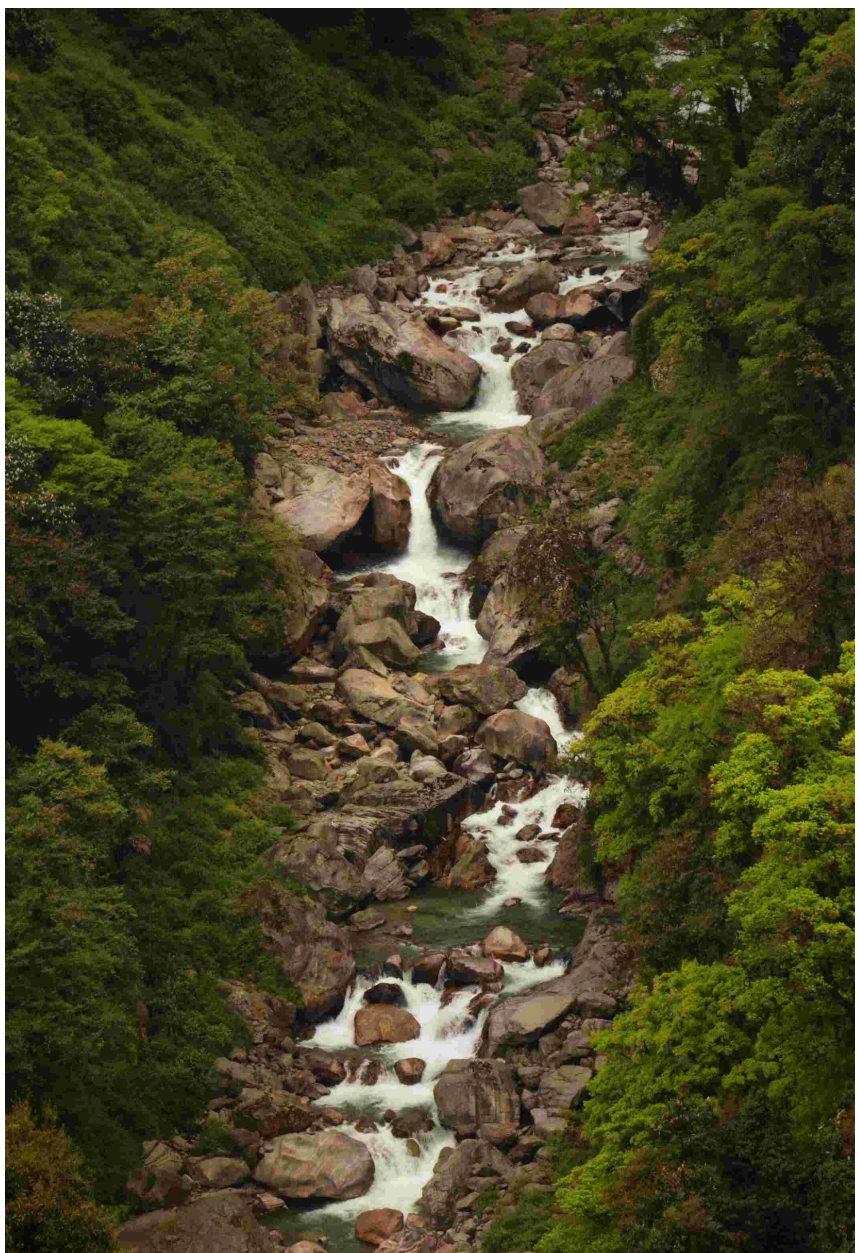


Figure 14: The tempestuous river Rathong



Figure 15: *Rhaphidophora decursiva*

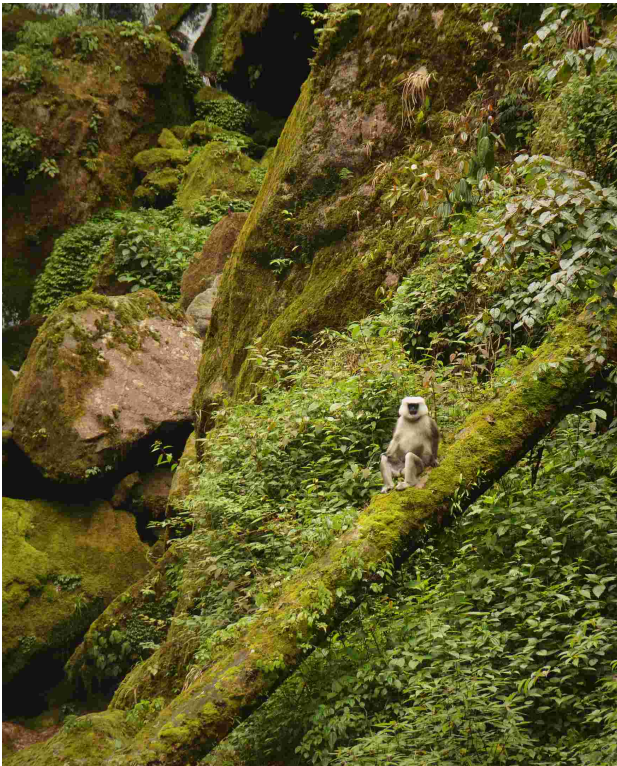


Figure 17: Old man on deck chair



Figure 19: *M. napaulensis*



Figure 18: *R. griffithianum*



Figure 20: *Liparis liliifolia*

Bryophyte clad suspension bridges (fig.16) bore us over crashing rapids and slowly up the valley. On the (structurally dubious) suspension cables of one such a bridge a troop of grey langurs picked their way towards us, eventually settling in the trees (fig.17) and peering down out or weary forms, with the sort of laziness that only a mammal on a warm day can posses. Shortly after that we were greeted by the first of our ericaceous friends that we had made such a large trip to see. A *Rhododendron griffithianum* (fig.18) spread its boughs over the top of the path, at this moment I could really imagine Hooker's sense of accomplishment after making this journey to find such a specimen. Shortly after this the early monsoon rains made themselves aware, and coincidentally the terrain seemed to turn into a rutted ninety degree slope. Battling uphill past *Mahonia napaulensis* (fig.19) and trying to balance my umbrella and camera I suddenly found myself face to face with the brown lipped flower of *Liparis liliifolia* (fig.20). Despite the long hours of walking and my rapidly bio-degrading toes, this small plant with its optimistic outlook gave me power to reach our bothy at Bakhim. I heard the bells of the pack train and a stone gable end appeared out of the curtains of rain. A cup of sweet milk tea and a curry soon restored me and I rested well in this hut on the top of my known world.



Figure 16: A way over

Day 4

We were awoken by the bells of our pack train, our stone bothy overlooking the early morning mists of north west Sikkim. After a breakfast of beany opulence, we shouldered our packs and began the first step of a day where we would ascend almost 1000m. Almost immediately I was greeted by the beautifully simple *Rosa sericea* (fig.21), a specimen found in east Asia 2000-4400. As I exited the more tropical altitudes I was greeted by my second Rhododendron of the trek, *R. arboreum* (fig.22), the bright red flowers piercing the morning haze. Not too far along the trail were an abundance of *Arisaema griffithii* (fig.23) covering the floor of the forest, their alien flower providing the undergrowth with an exotic, marine energy. It's common name the Cobra Lily relates to the inflorescence's wide 'gills' and long spathe, one of which we found that was almost two metres in length. This genus was a mainstay of our time in the Himalaya, along with *A. speciosum*, *A. utile* and *A. galeatu*.



Figure 21: *R. sericea*

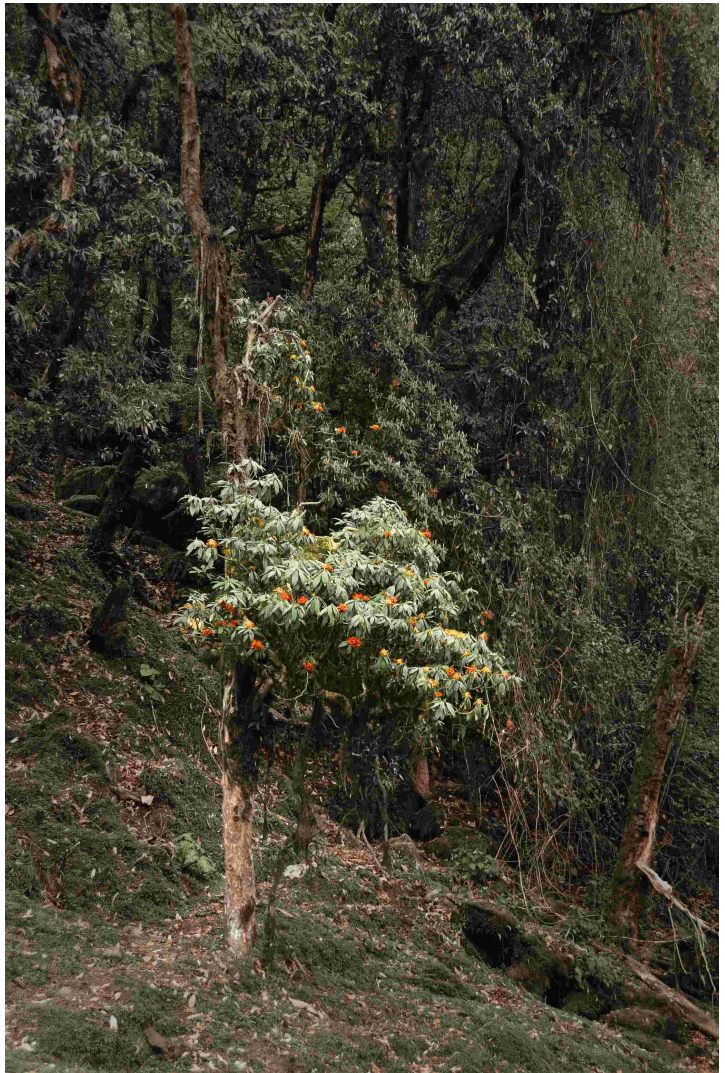


Figure 22: *R. arboreum*



Figure 23: *A. griffithii*

After passing the 3,000m altitude point I quickly found myself not in the green, rainforest environment but something completely different. The clouds had descended blocking out most of the views, leaving me feeling as though I had stepped into a lightbox studio. This eerie lighting was accompanied by the gangly shapes of bare, contorted Rhododendron forms. These parts of the Himalaya are often referred to as cloud forests, a biome where water vapour and bare trunks battle it out to block the travellers view of the distant, snow-capped peaks.

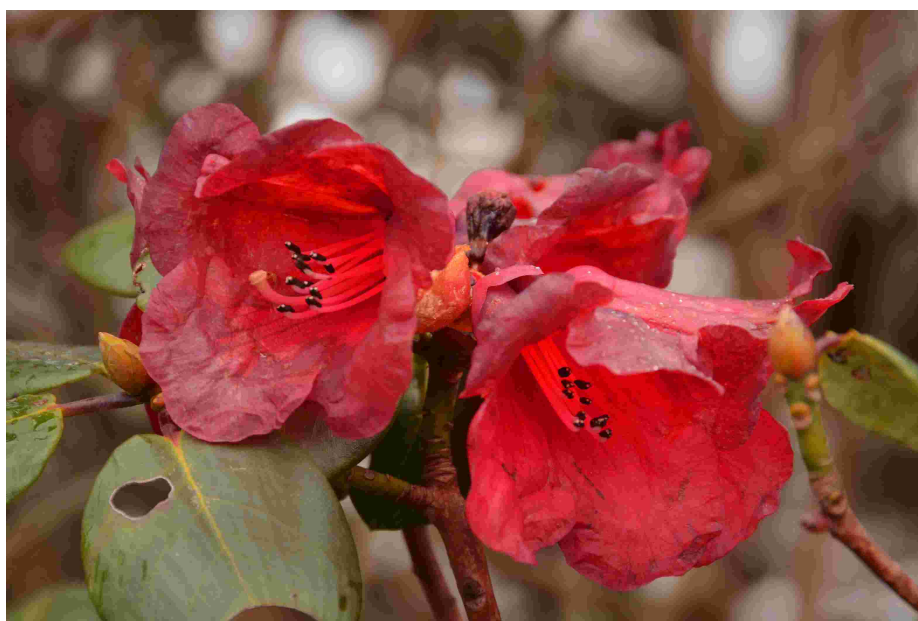


Figure 235 *R. thompsonii*

One of the major players at this altitude in Sikkim are the *R. hodgsonii* (fig.24). Their white, peeling stems zig zag upwards parallel to one another until they reach the line where leaves and flowers all decide to sprout in unison. The effect creating layers of white, green and then the bright pinks and subtle oranges of the plant's inflorescence. The bright flowers shone like lights through the mist, reminding me of the tales of will o' the wisps from back home. I reached a small hut and clearing known as Phedang, a place for travellers to stop and have some food and rest before the almost 600m climb to Dzongri where most would be staying the night. Surrounding me were countless dustings of the luxurious red and black flowers of *Rhododendron thompsonii* (fig.25), standing their like the free cousins of the specimens I had seen in the gardens back in the UK. As charming as the thompsoniis were, I quickly moved on as I knew much of the hard walking of the day had yet to be accomplished.

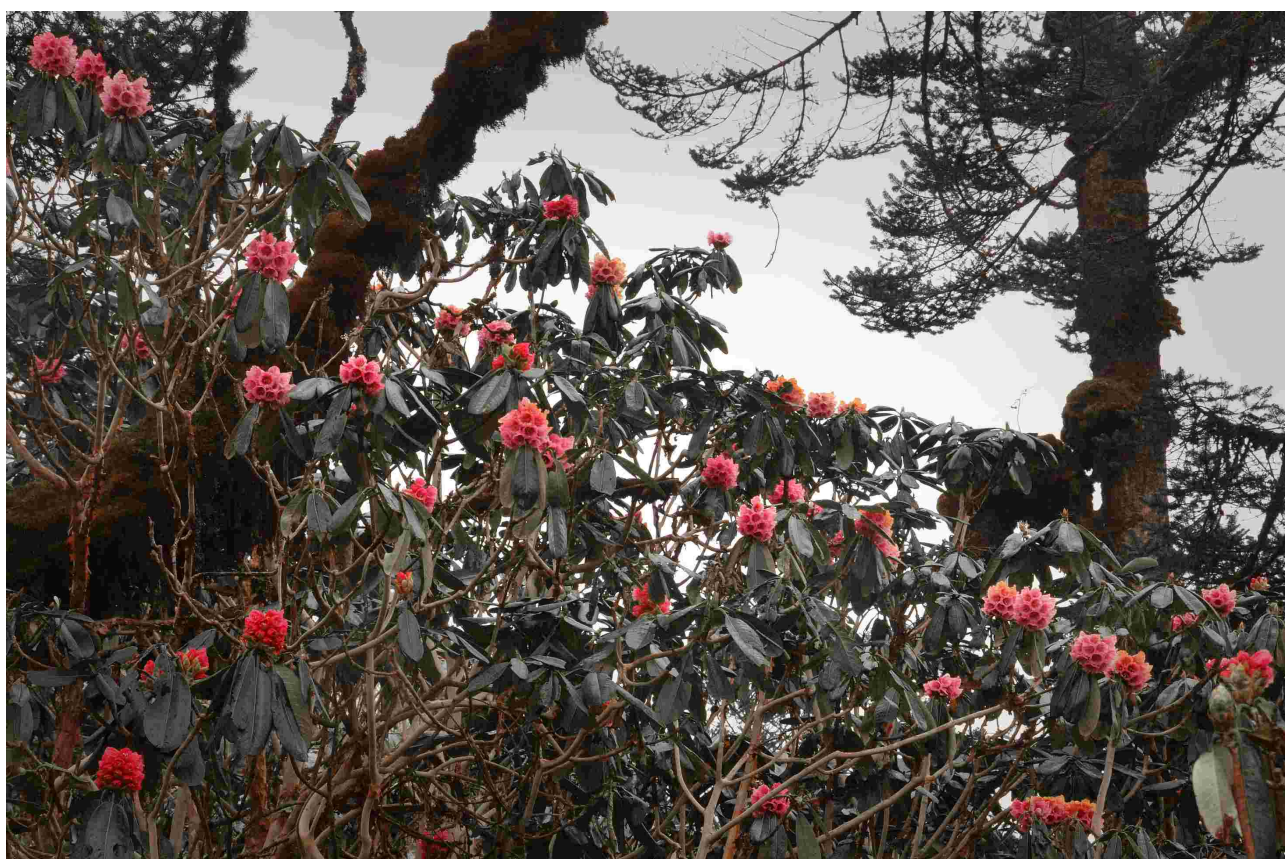


Figure 24 *R. hodgsonii*

What followed was hours of slogging, in the now consistent rain up a rutted, slippery almost 90 degree angle. The eventual release of getting to our bothy and sitting down with some warm chai is a feeling that cannot be described through words, but it lets just say it was ample reward for the days work. As I sat there I was gifted with the clearing, of what I had assumed to be permanent cloud cover, to reveal one of the most breathtaking sights I had ever witnessed (fig.26). The range of mountains that separate India from Nepal and contain Kangchenjunga and Pandim. This challenging and awe-inspiring day had set in to the bones of our party, so after a decadent meal and a few rounds of gin rummy we went to our mildly comfortable beds. Mentally preparing for an early climb the next morning to witness the sunrise over the third highest mountain on earth, Mount Kangchenjunga.

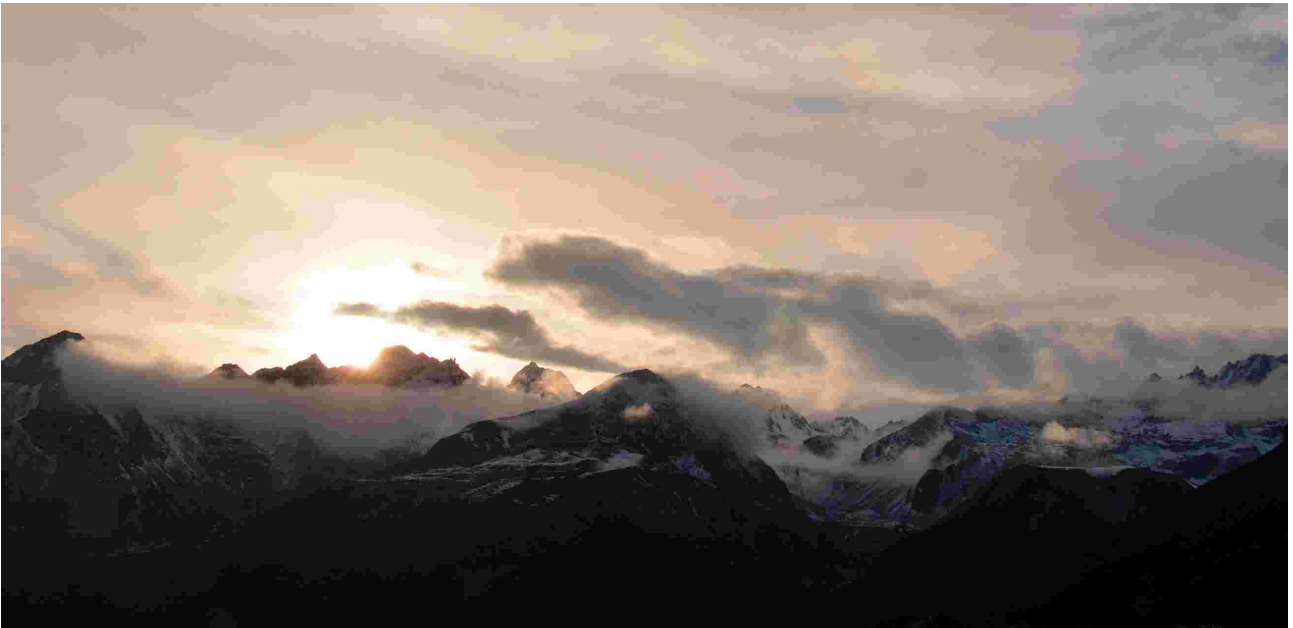


Figure 26: Sun falls west into Nepal

Day 5

The morning dawned early and we were shivering our way out of our sleeping bags before the stars had retreated to their daytime anonymity. The idea was to head up another 200m in elevation to Dzongri top to witness the sunrise over Mt Pandim. After hiking through alpine fields of dwarf *Rhododendron anthopogon*, *R. setosum* and *R. lepidotum* and leaving much of the party behind, I glimpsed the outlines of Pandim and Kangchenjunga (fig.27) beckoning me from over the brow of the shrubby hill. The majesty of being isolated on an island high above the ocean of slowly dispersing cloud 4200m above sea level, with nothing but the cold peaks and some prayer flags whispering in the dawn is something that will stay with me long after I forget how to identify a *Rhododendron* by its indumentum. As the sun set fire to the snow-capped peaks (fig.28) that towered above the highest point I had ever been in my small life, it began to make sense why I had put myself through such challenge to get here.



Figure 29: *P. whitei*

We then hiked across country past many a dainty *Primula whitei* (fig.29), one of the only plants flowering this early up at such an altitude. Our guide, Alistair informed me that in a few months, come the monsoon, these bleak alpine fields would come alive with heaths, *Fritilaria* and the monarchical *Meconopsis*. We reached a ridge where I had to wade through foot deep snow (something I don't think I have ever had to do before), and below us the clouds cleared and in the distance was visible the valley leading up to the Himalayan Mountaineering Institute's base camp. The fact that I was still a good few hundred below this 'base camp' did well to calm the euphoric triumph I had felt after climbing Dzongri Top. Just as we were to turn back we caught sight of a flash of turquoise between icicles, we had laid eyes on the rare Himalayan Monal. On this high we returned back down to the base at Dzongri for a night of cards, huddled in the rattly old hut holding us safe in this wild place.

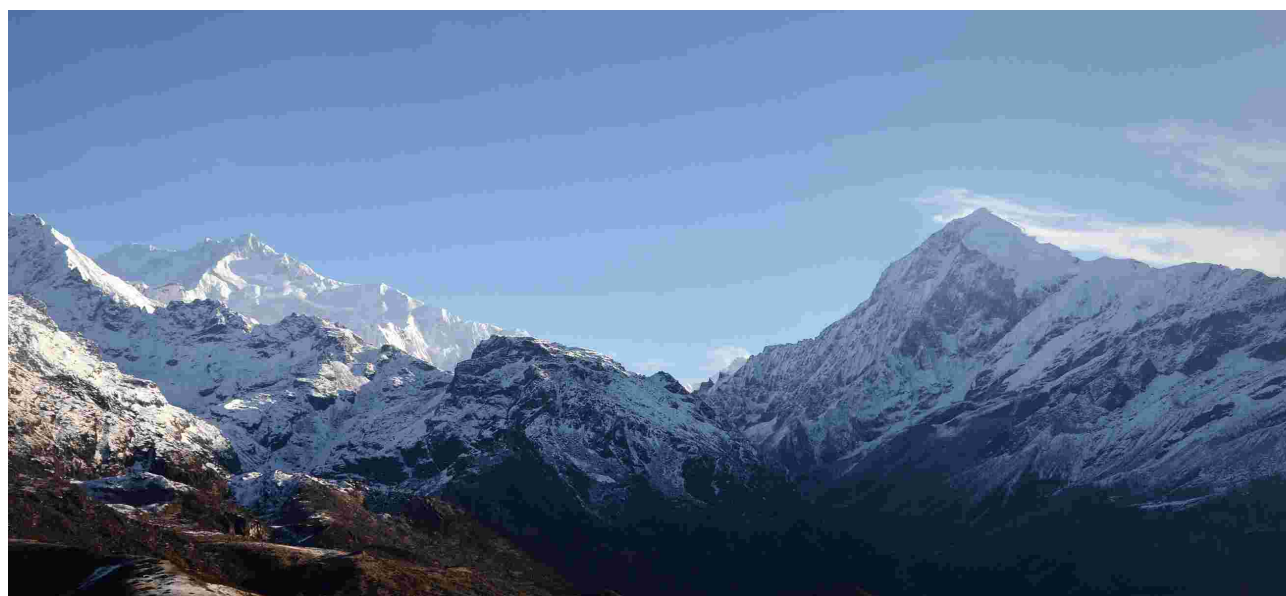


Figure 27: Mt Pandim 6691m (right) and Mt Kangchenjunga 8586m (left)



Figure 28: Sun rises over Kangchenjunga

Day 6

Once again I found myself leaving the, by now familiar, comfort of Dzongri, with our eyes set on the distant site Thangsing (fig.30). This would be our base for reaching the Goecha La pass, and it was actually located almost 200m lower than our abode for the last two nights. Despite this we would be climbing about 600m, thanks to the inhumane terrain of this landscape. First trekking over these alpine planes with only the peaks and yaks for company (fig.31). Eventually beginning to descend through *Pinus wallichiana* and *R. arboreum* woodlands (fig.32). Upon reaching Kokchurang, the lowest elevation of the days walking, I was greeted by the most welcome sight of carpets of *Primula caulderiana* (fig.33). They spread themselves like jewels on the banks of the crystal stream running through this valley, truly an idyllic sight to fortify me before the climb. The next stage was following the glacial Prek Chu river up a rocky gulley which seemed to go on for hours (fig.34), until suddenly I found myself in the typical Himalayan image of a small hut in a lush valley surrounded by white, teeth-like peaks: Thangsing. After a few rounds of chess and more food than my altitude sickness could take I drifted off into dreams of Thomas Hardy's south west, a world so distant from here.

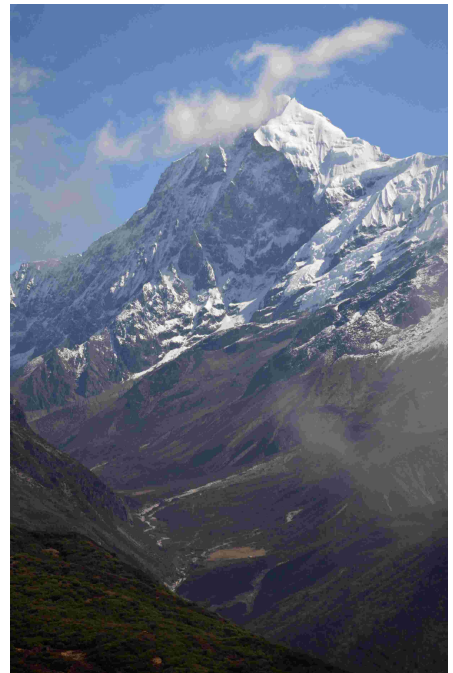


Figure 30: Thangsing below Mt Pandim



Figure 33: *P. caulderiana*

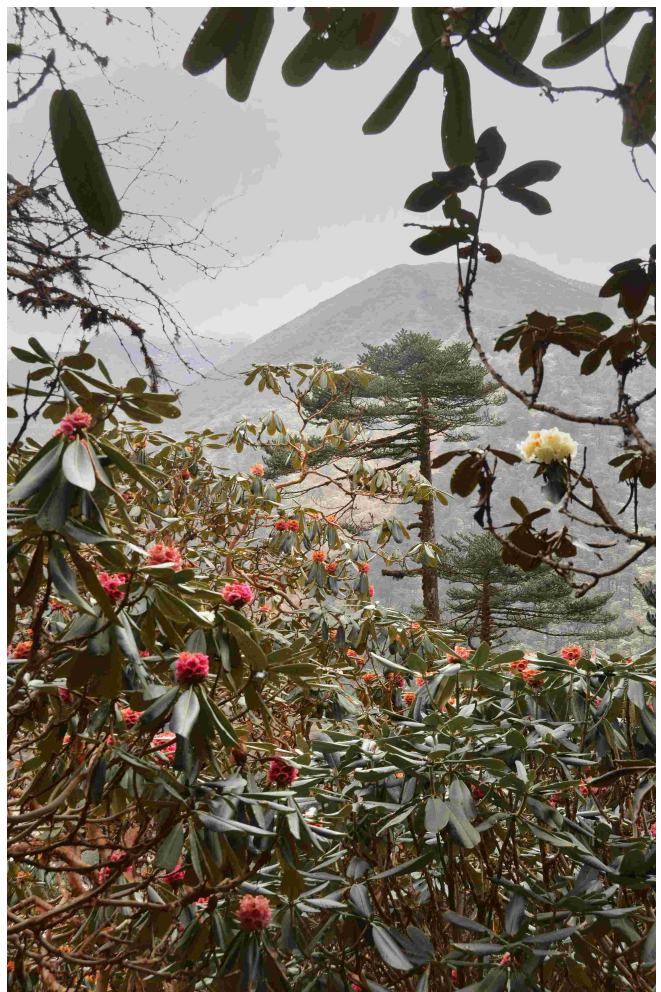


Figure 32: A steep descent



Figure: 31: A yak passes the time...

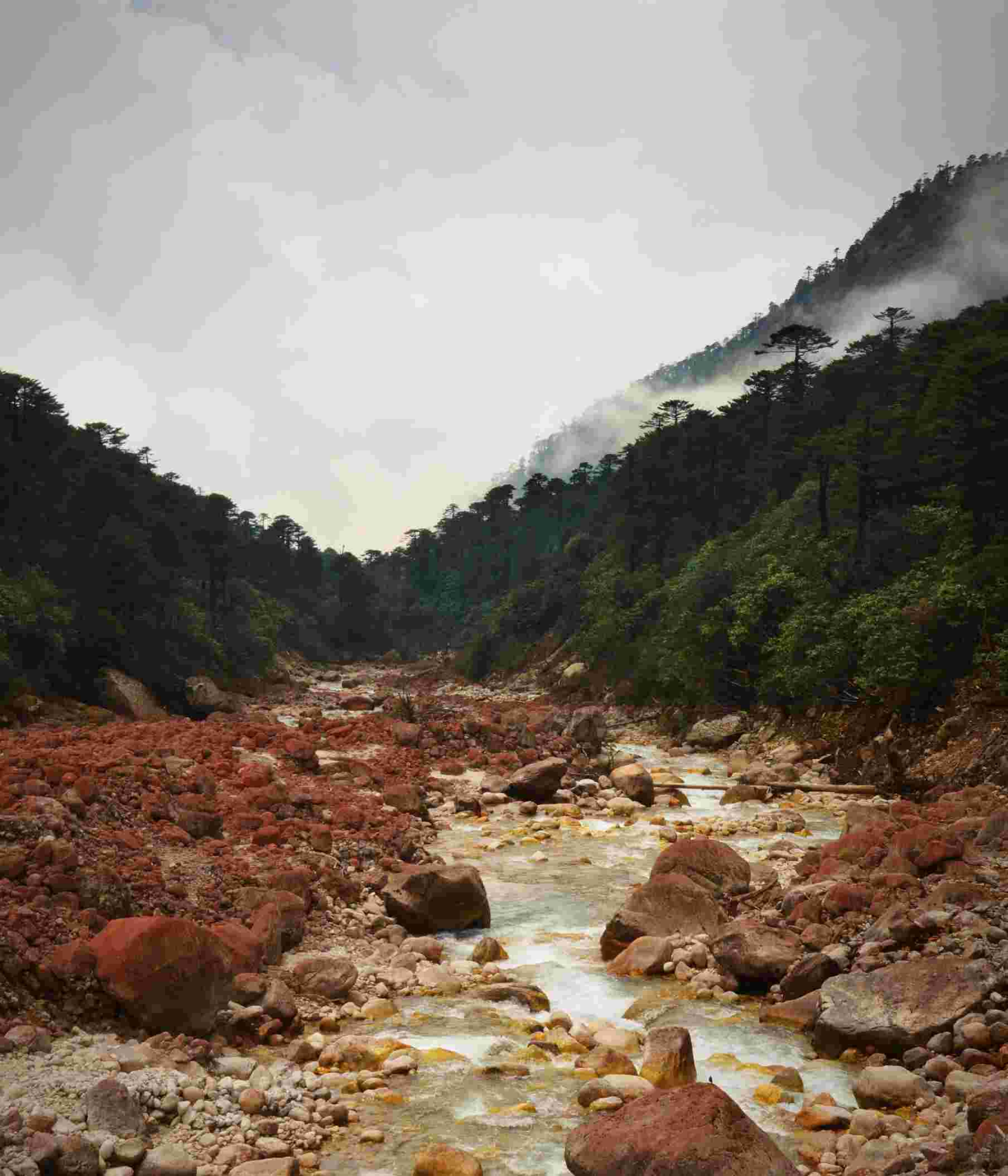


Figure 34: Prek Chu river

Day 7

The day in which we would reach our ultimate altitude had arrived, and after a sleepless night listening to the bells of our pack, I'm not sure how ready I felt. Despite this, we were soon on the trail up the Thangsing valley, the familiar thud thud of boot on path that I had been listening to for the last week, like a conversation with a close friend. Familiar specimens dotted the landscape: *Salix sikkimensis* and *S. daphnoides*, with more unknown (to me) species such as *Androsace tapete* (fig.35) and *Potentilla eriocarpa*. After some climbing into the mist, I was greeted by the vast expanse of the sacred Samiti Lake (Bunmoten Choo in sikkimise) (fig.36), the source of the river we had been following previously. Rituals are performed here annually by the Buddhist monks of Yuksom, as this place was blessed by an 8th century tantric master on his journeys, the offerings of prayer flags and other items made this clear. After a nap and a fantastic sighting of the delicate *Chesneya purpurea* (fig.37), we continued onward.

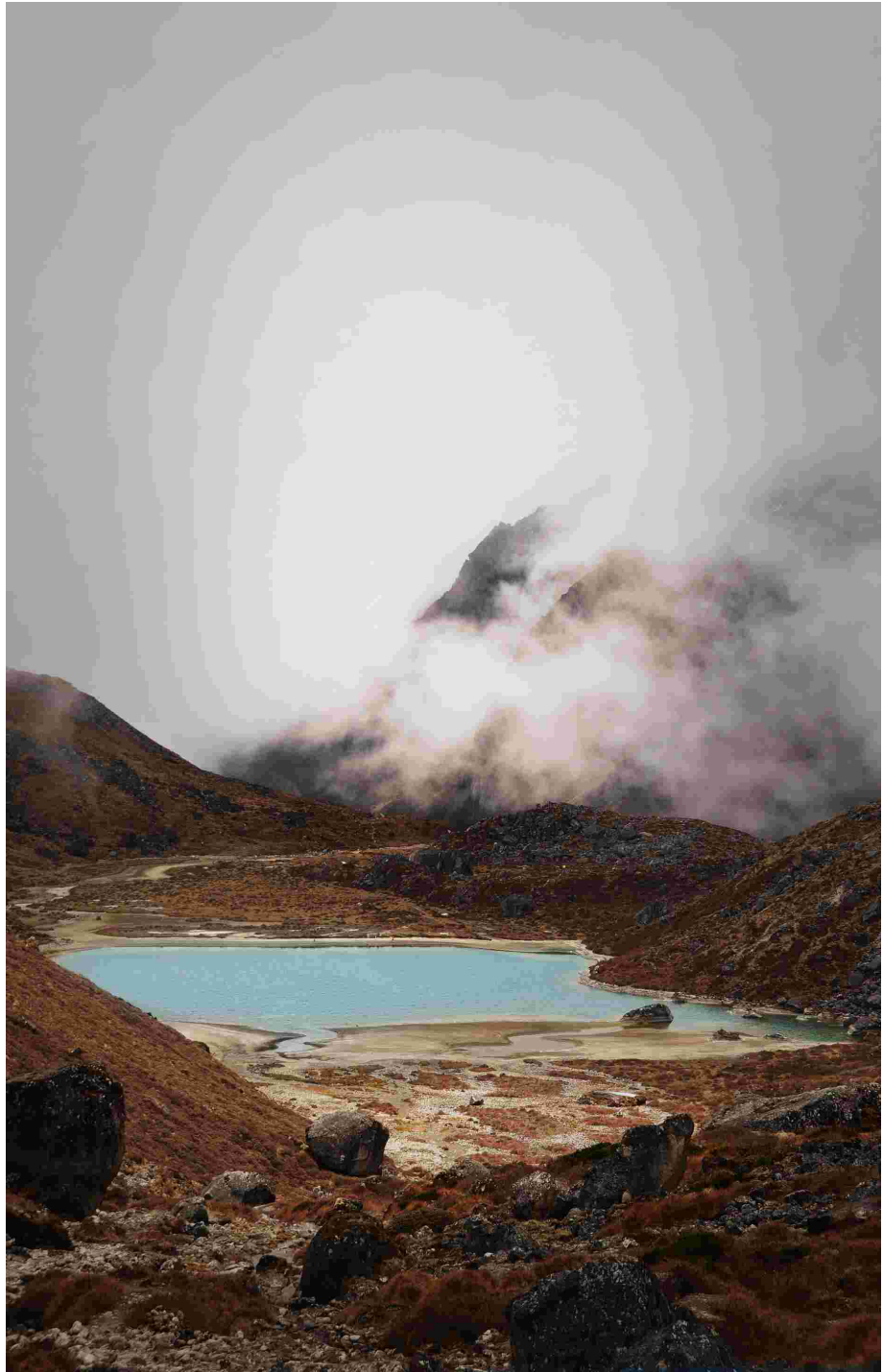


Figure 35: Lake samiti

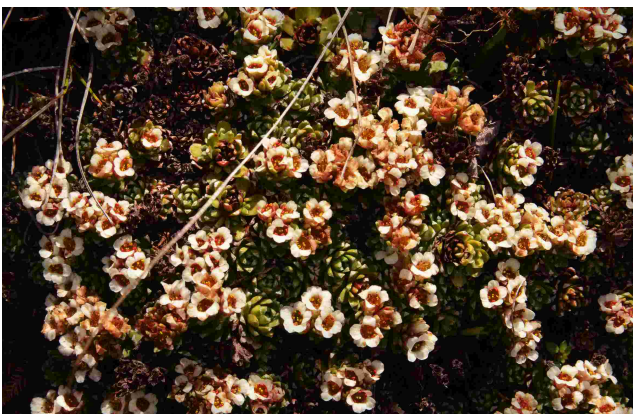


Figure 35: *Androsace tapete*



Figure 37: *Chesneya purpurea*

As we climbed flocks of sparkling Grandalas seemed to almost guide us up to the viewpoint (fig.38), a species only found above 2500m above sea level in the Himalayas. By now the flora had diminished to lichen on the rocky landscape around, and visibility had reduced to the 10m or so in our immediate surroundings. As we turned a corner, a glimpse of primary red and yellow was glimpsed through the mist, this marked the cairn at what is colloquially known as 'viewpoint one', the highest point of our trek. I wish I could admit to some sort of feeling of deep fulfilment at this moment, after a week we had finally reached the viewpoint, 4600m above sea level (fig.39), but with the mist around me and lack of wind, I could have been up Pen Y Fan rather than deep in the Himalayas. After a delightful lunch of what I can only describe as a pasty, and a brief glimpse of Blood Pheasant (the national bird of Sikkim) (fig.40), it was time to turn our feet homeward.



Figure 40: Blood pheasant

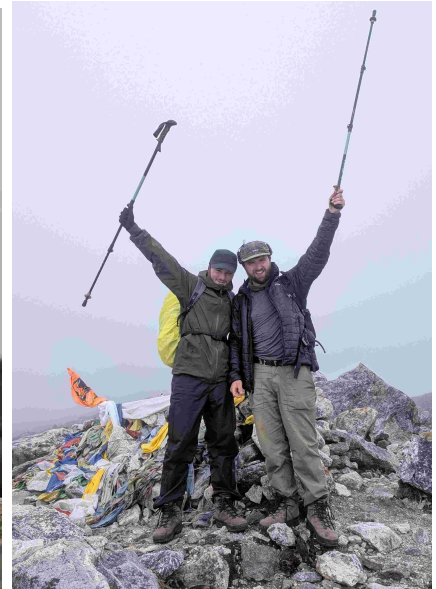


Figure 39: The apex of our journey



Figure 38: The regal Grandala

Day 8

After waking in Thangsing, I quickly set to the long trek back, skirting round Dablhagang and Dzongri and eventually coming to Bakhim, our first shelter out from Yuksom. I think in that moment, glimpsing the *Magnolia campbellii* above the bothy, I felt more a sense of homecoming than getting off the plane at Heathrow. To sit with the hut keeper: Jiten and talk of these mountains, their history, ecology and culture was like the message of the mind I required after what had been one of the most intense weeks I had experienced for a good while.

Day 9

I slithered down that steep hill back to Yuksom, like in a dream I remembered what felt like a different self that had experienced this not that long ago. A waved to some goats coming the other direction, with what I perceived as the same naive joy that I had experienced in their shoes (hooves?), and can only be accessed at that very specific time when one has just begun a long journey. Just before reaching the final stretch to Yuksom, like some relative waving a last goodbye, I witnessed the joy of *Rhododendron dalhousiae* (fig.41). The colourful front garden of our homestay from so long ago seemed like a return to eden, I slept well that night.



Figure 41: *R. dalhousiae*

The End