

SIKKIM

ETHNICITY AND POLITICAL DYNAMICS

A TRIADIC PERSPECTIVE



resh Kumar Gurung

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PREFACE

Way back in early 1970s as a student of Jorhang Primary School (now a Senior Secondary) I remember the way we used to line up on both sides of the main road to greet the last Chogyal of Sikkim, P.T. Namgyal. Then I hardly had any idea that Sikkim was undergoing political turmoil which would change the face of Sikkim forever. The reminiscence of my school days proved to be so strong that some thirty five years down the line Sikkim became a passion for me and a subject of further academic enquiry.

Sikkim had been a monarchical state before its merger with India in 1975. During the 333 years of monarchical rule Sikkim had been exposed to number of invasions and influences at the hands of neighbouring countries which are distinctly reflected in the composition and way of life of the people, including the nature of politico-administrative structure and governance so designed to suit the convenience of the kingdom.

After the merger, a new political arrangement hitherto unknown in Sikkim was established. The principles of democracy, rule of law and the rights of the people, etc. were introduced as a basis of governance in a society which was predominantly traditional. Apparently contradiction began owing to presence of primordial belief system and emerging modernity. Politics never happens in vacuum. The contradiction became politically viable when political and non-political organizations emerged and used the issue for their respective political and socio-cultural advantages giving space for ethnic politics. Two important arguments run through out the book. The first argument is that any study of ethnic politics in Sikkim must involve historical perspective. The second argument emphasizes on the involvement of the entire political process, including state policies, for such a perspective facilitates inclusion of non-state political actors in the analysis.

In course of writing this book I met many people from different walks of life and without their support and cooperation this book certainly could not have seen the light of the day. I have the pleasure of particularly

expressing my heartfelt gratitude to my teacher, Sir Dyutis Chakrabarti, Reader in the Department of Political Science, University of North Bengal, with whom I spent years discussing the subject. I am also deeply indebted to Dr. H.P.Chhetri, for his unflinching support and providing relevant information.

I should also put on record the names of various personalities, including political leaders, office bearers of various socio-welfare organizations, government officials and private individual for their much needed support and cooperation in the process of collection of primary information and for valuable suggestions. A few of them deserve special mention: Late Lhendup Dorji Khangsarpa (Ex. Chief Minister), Shri N.B.Bhandari (Ex. Chief Minister), Shri C.D.Rai, Late K.C.Pradhan, Shri B.B.Gurung, Shri R.C.Poudyal, Shri Rasaily, Shri Bharat Basnet, Shri Birbal Limboo (Tamling), T. T. Bhutia, Shri Narboo Pintso Bhutia, Shri Meghraj Gurung, Shri N.T. Lepcha, Shri P.K.Pradhan, Mrs. D.K.Bhandari, and many others. Shri Bhaskar Basnet, Shri R.K.Shrestha and Mrs. Anna Balicki Denzongpa deserve special thanks for providing me file-full of rare documents, magazines and materials of pre-merger era and old issues of Bulletin of Tibetology respectively.

I must not also forget to mention here the cooperation extended by the staff and authorities of the Sikkim Archives, the Community Library, the Institute of Tibetology, the Record Section of the Home Department, Department of Law, Directorate of Economics, Statistics, Monitoring and Evaluation (earlier Bureau of Economics and Statistics), the Information and Public Relations office, Department of Industry, Department of Tourism, Assembly Secretariat, Land Revenue Department in Sikkim. Special thanks is also due for the staff and officials of the Central Library, NBU, Centre for Himalayan Studies, NBU, Deshbandhu District Library of Darjeeling and National Library, Calcutta. I am also deeply indebted to Shri Premji of Kunal Books, New Delhi, for wishing to publish this book in the first instance itself.

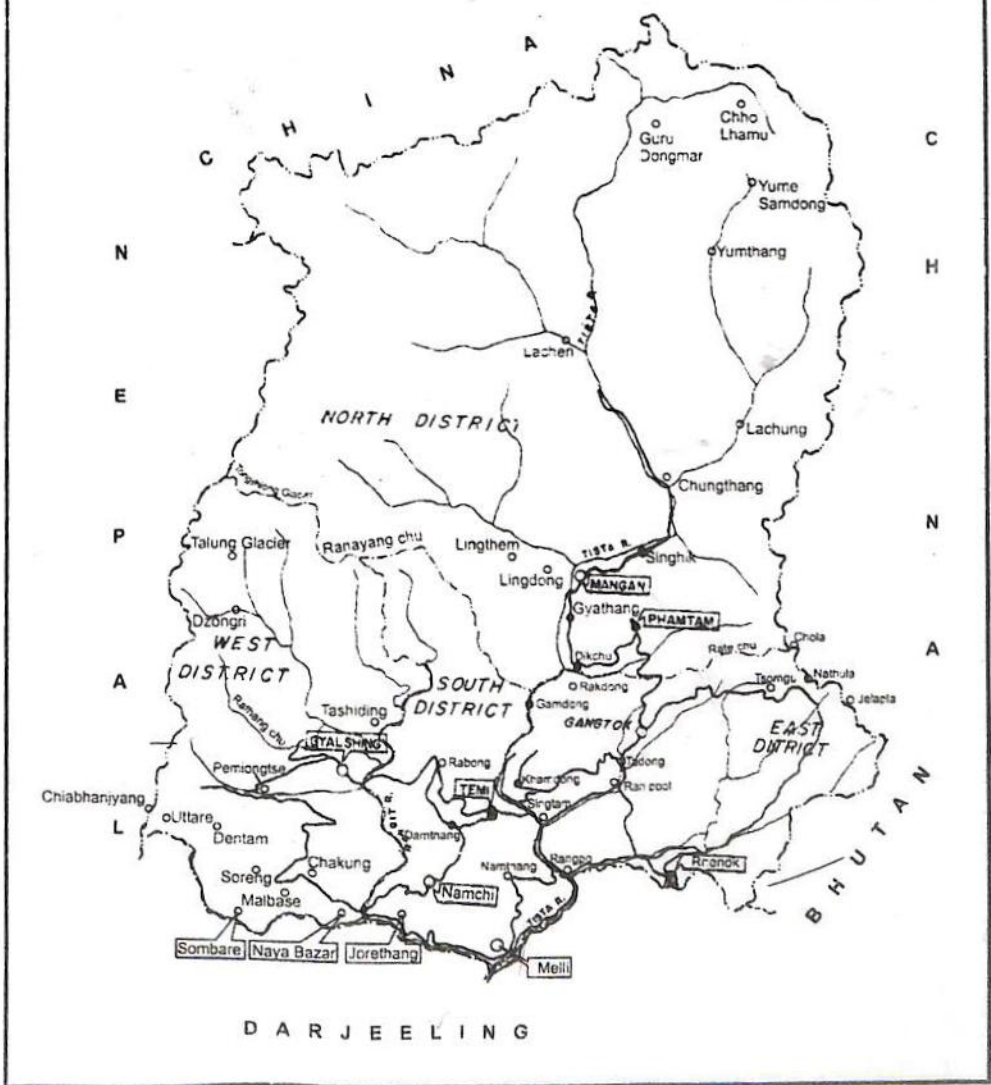
Finally, I owe a lot to my parents, my wife Subhadra and our loving daughter Stuttee for supporting me ungrudgingly right from the beginning of the work and making this endeavour a successful one.

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Sketch Map of Sikkim



INTRODUCTION

BACKGROUND

Ever since the appearance of the term 'Ethnicity' in English language in 1950, the concept of ethnicity has not been only the subject of diverse interpretations but also lacked universally acknowledged definition. An early meaning of the term refers to either a racial or cultural group or even a minority in an 'exotic' cultural form. There is also a reference of inclusion of 'others' i.e. different from one's own group, and 'migrant people' within the ambit of the term.

Glazer and Moynihan (1975) consider any group of distinct culture and origin, including the majority, as an ethnic group. While studying the question of cultural-racial identity and mobilization process in the USA, they view ethnicity as a distinct category of social process, social differentiation, articulation and social mobilization. From this viewpoint cultural-racial identity or ethnic identity may be looked upon as a universal social phenomenon like the 'class'. G.De.Vos and L.R. Ross (1975) also subscribe to this viewpoint. Similarly, Clifford Geertz (1971) observes that the primordial ties continue to influence public action notwithstanding the establishment of a modern secular state. This is so because competing loyalties within a modern state i.e., class, party, business, union, professional loyalties etc., are considered feeble as compared to primordial loyalties. Today, ethnicity is conceived as a social phenomenon embracing anything and

everything of individual belonging to a particular cultural community, whether minority or majority, host or immigrant. Therefore, all cultural-linguistic movements which emphasize common history, territory and aspirations may be considered as ethnic movements.

One of the most comprehensive accounts of ethnicity and ethnic political mobilization is represented by the effort of J. Hutchinson and A.D. Smith (1996). Hutchinson and Smith offer a workable definition, analytical framework and different manifestations of ethnic politics along with valuable excerpts from the books of various authors. They, in their work, have attempted to classify researches on ethnic movements into two categories: instrumentalist argument and primordialist viewpoint or simply primordialism. Hutchinson and Smith's classification helps one to deal with the vast literature on the theme of ethnic political mobilization.

Primordialism, as various researchers suggest, however, is not something which is fixed; it is rather changing, revising, negotiating as per the circumstances, demands and interests. Jack Eller and Reed Coughlan (1993) argue that primordialism is a bankrupt concept so far as analysis and description of ethnicity is concerned. They continue, if primordialism is widened, as most writers do, to refer emotion, it would only mean unnecessary and unfortunate burden in ethnic analysis because 'emotion' cannot be primordial but, at best, it is sociogenesis. The counterpoint is that Eller and Coughlan have failed to understand that 'attachments' or 'ties' to objects necessarily postulates belief (here emotion or affect) about those objects followed by cognizance in order to become objects of attachments (Grosby: 1994). Another recent but radical primordial argument is found in P. Van Dan Berghe (1995) who believes that social groups are bonded together due to mechanisms of 'Nepotism' (of favour) and 'Inclusive fitness' (fit for inclusion in a biological social group).

The Instrumentalist version, which is comparatively richer in terms of publications, on the other, consider ethnicity as social,

mobilization process as a means for gaining political and economic goal. The arguments of D.L Harowitz (1985) and L.A.Despres (1975) belong to such variety. While, Despres views ethnic mobilization as a convenient tool for asserting or reasserting monopoly over resources; Harowitz links it with keeping of group's ethnic honor compared to others (i.e. of backward & forward). Similarly, for Brass (1991) conflict among elites for resources is a major cause behind ethnic mobilization. According to Barth (1969) it is the existence of 'set of prescriptions' (do's) and 'proscriptions' (don'ts) imposed by rulers to maintain control over a given society which fuels ethnic mobilization. Apart from these, Michael Hechter (1975) and B.Anderson (1991) consider ethnic differences, mobilization and national movements as inevitable corollaries of a particular type of economic development and domination in the age of capitalism. Hechter's analysis of the Celtic fringe of Great Britain indicates that modern capitalist market system has historically evolved a social-division of labour. As a result of this social spatial division of labour, different types of cultures have gradually emerged in different regions including the Celtic Welsh. Cultural identities and cultural conflicts are thus related to a particular type of division of labour and economic domination.

An interesting argument is found in Walker Connor (1994) who equates ethnic-cultural mobilization with growth of nationalism. For him, ethnic development is almost like national development. Hence, Connor prefers to use the term ethno-nationalism instead of just ethnicity to address cultural-territorial issues. He emphasizes that the source of ethno-national loyalty cannot be explained in terms of either rationality or tangible interest. It is essentially affective and this sentiment is inherent in present societies. He, along with A.D.Smith (1971), shares the view that nationalism is a special type of consciousness, different from patriotism.

The cultural-territorial mobilizations and efforts to conceptualize them are not new in India. However, owing to the nature of mobilizations and factors influencing variation, scholars

have taken refuge to different terminological creations among which the terms like 'Nation' or 'Ethnicity' or 'Regionalism' are most commonly used. For instance, M.R. Barnett (1976) prefers to use 'Cultural Nationalism' to explain the Dravidic Movement in Tamilnadu. For her, cultural markers are the sole objective factor which determines the existence and non-existence of a nationality. Amalendu Guha (1980) in the context of Assam describes such cultural-territorial movements as 'Little-Nationalism. The term little-nationalism owes its origin to the sociological innovations like *little community* and *great community*. Little nationalism is like sub-nationalism which operates within the framework of great-nationalism. This is an attempt at demonstrating a dual identity or divided loyalty; one for linguistic cultural community and another for the nation-state. From this sense little nationalism may be viewed as a component or a reflection of the greater nationalism i.e. loyalty to the nation-state. The two, however, may come into conflict under certain circumstances.

Few other scholars have tried to understand the problem from the point of view of ethnicity. Urmila Phadnis (1989) and R.A. Schermenhon (1978) belong to this variety. A combined argument of both the instrumentalism and primordiality is presented by M. Weiner (1978). To him cultural nationalism is the result of conflict between the migrants and the natives over the resources. Weiner argues that cultural-nationalism or nativism in Assam, which attempts to legitimize the claim of the 'Bhumiputras' and exclusion of the migrants, essentially is an ethnic movement which demands resource distribution on the basis of cultural identity. P.R. Brass (1991) relates such cultural-mobilization with the elite conflict in a plural society.

Another way of describing such cultural-territorial mobilization in India is 'regionalism'. Regional movement indicates search for an intermediate control system for the purposes of resource sharing and control over local or intermediate level of administration. Iqbal Narain and A. Majeed (1984) and Sajal Basu (1992) identify such movements as regionalism alongside the presence of certain socio-economic reasons. This viewpoint

emphasizes territorial identity rather than the cultural one. S.K. Chaube (1973) treats ethnic problem in the north-eastern states of India as a manifestation of clashes between the modern values (nation-state) and primordial loyalties (i.e. loyalties towards clan, tribes, caste, race, language, tradition etc.) and emphasizes that any attempt to understanding the problem and finding reconciliation thereof must be based on the historical perspective. Authors like Susana B.C. Devalle (1992) and Dipankar Gupta (1997) are examples of consideration of such movements as a consequence of a historical context. Gupta argues that ascriptive collective identities (cultural markers) in themselves are not always sufficient for ethnic mobilization but it undergoes context dependent transformation and mutation. Gupta points out that the Sikhs identity has developed in relation to its opposition, i.e., Hindu identity. But the former has also developed in relation to its perception of a government which discriminated the Sikhs. Such perception about the governmental context legitimizes mobilization on the basis of Sikh cultural identity. Gupta advocates for inclusion of the state or state policies as a variable, but actually the entire political process should be considered as a significant factor, for such a perspective facilitates the inclusion of non-state political actors in the analysis. While emphasizing the historical context in which a particular identity i.e., the Jharkhandi identity, has gradually evolved, Devalle equates development of ethnic identity with development of a discourse.

Paul R. Brass (1991), in his later work, argues that conditions for identity formation among various groups or emergence of self-conscious communities in a particular situation and place can be linked with the alliance strategy and policies that the groups dominating the state structure follow in relation to ethnic or cultural groups. In other words, he portrays the State in three different forms: a) State as a resource over which groups engage in struggle for greater share of it; b) State as a distributor of resources which is nearly always done differentially or unequally; c) State, particularly in developing societies, acts as a promoter of new values and threat to locally dominant landed and religious elites. Thus,

gaining control over the State becomes elite's first priority and one who is successful must either suppress the rival elites or establish collaborative alliances with other elites to maintain dominance. When elites in conflict lack bureaucratic apparatus to compete effectively, they resort to use symbolic resources in the struggle. And when elites in conflict belong to different cultural, linguistic, or religious groups, they use these ascriptive differences as a means for mobilization. Thus, for Brass, ethnic conflict or mobilization arises when elites in conflict manipulate ethnic symbols for exercising control over state power or when the state dominated by particular elite pursues policies or affirmative actions favouring its own group or groups as against the other, it may precipitate a sense of discrimination or deprivation among those who are denied benefits. Thus, nature of elites controlling the state apparatus and the policy strategies it chooses to pursue becomes a potential source of ethnic politics.

An important analysis of ethnic mobilization for political purpose is found in the writings of Kanchan Chandra (2004). According to her, the success of ethnic parties is a natural by-product of the process by which ethnic identities become politically salient. The political entrepreneurs who float ethnic parties in ethnically divided societies find a ready-made clientele.....waiting to be laid. In the context of Sikkim, it may be safely said that ethnic political parties have seldom succeeded in capturing political power in the post merger period but since public sector is the major provider of resources (jobs and services) under which patronage democracy generally prosper, the analysis may be especially helpful in understanding reasons for ineffectiveness of the opposition parties in the state.

A researcher may encounter several problems when it comes to publication on Sikkim. The historical accounts of the pre-Bhutia regime are almost non-existent and have been reduced to mere oral or folk stories. Some materials of the 17th century Sikkim still present difficulty in determining what is empirically viable and what is mythical. In other words, there is a dearth of secular publications on the 17th century political history of Sikkim, in

general, and on ethnic politics and/or race relations and the way such ethnic relations influence politics, in particular, though the actual political process represent frequent attempts at mobilizing people around the issues like Sikkimese – non-Sikkimese relations, rights of the minority Lepcha-Bhutia communities etc. Though such issues are present in the process of mass mobilization yet such ethnicised political issues are seldom properly attended. However, insightful discussions are available in historical and sociological accounts.

Risley's "Gazetteer of Sikkim" (1928/1993) is one of the earliest publications on the history and population of Sikkim. Apart from the discussion on the nature of governance under various rulers of Namgyal dynasty, it provides interesting reading on the purpose of the British involvement in Sikkim and adoption of ways and means, particularly racial and religious, to maintain its political control over the affairs of Sikkim and maximize economic benefits. Talking about the modus operandi of the British officials, Risley writes, "here (Sikkim) also religion will play a leading part. In Sikkim, as in India, Hinduism will assuredly cast out Buddhism, and the praying-wheel of the Lama will give place to the sacrificial implement of the Brahman..... Thus, race and religion, the prime movers of the Asiatic world, will settle the Sikkim difficulty for us, in their own way. We have only to look on and see that the operation of these causes is not artificially hindered by the interference of Tibet and Nepal." Similar accounts on the history and population of Sikkim can also be found in the writings and travelogues of many British officers among which J.D.Hooker (1854/1969), J.W.Edgar (1874/2005), Richard Temple (1875), Colman Macaulay (1885/1977/2005), J.C.White (1909/1999) are interesting for reading.

Apart from C.J. Morris's "Living with the Lepchas: A book about the Sikkim Himalayas" (1938), Geoffrey Gorer's "The Lepchas of Sikkim" (1938/1996) represent some of the pioneering works on the Lepcha community of Sikkim. Gorer believes that the confinement of the Lepchas in the Dzongu reserve area had far reaching consequences on the religious, educational and

economic backwardness of the community. A.R. Fonning's 'Lepcha: My Vanishing Tribe' (1987) is an inside view about the Lepchas. Tracing the cultural history of the Lepchas, the author provides valuable information about the Christian and Buddhist influence that were brought to bear on the tribe, and how the Lepcha habitat, "Mayal Lyang", fell into the hands of immigrants from other areas. K.P. Tamsang's 'The Unknown and Untold Reality about the Lepchas' (1983) highlights the perversion appearing in the cultural history of the Lepchas at the hands of both foreign and Indian writers. R.K. Sprigg, also called 'Lepcha Saheb' is perhaps the only living Englishman today who possesses an excellent knowledge on the Lepcha language, literature and history. His recent publication "Shedding Some Light on the History, Language and Literature of the Lepchas" (2005) provides some of the rarest information with documentary evidences about the history and life of the Lepcha community during the early nineteenth century.

The existence of multiple ethnic groups in Sikkim is as old as the Namgyal dynasty of Sikkim but mobilization of these ethnic categories for political purposes began only during the late 1940's. First hand information regarding arousal of ethnic consciousness and political manipulation of it at the party or organizational level can be found in Basnet's work, "Sikkim-A Short Political History" (1974). Basnet writes that with the emergence of the Sikkim National Party in 1948 the use of ethnic symbols such as race, culture, religion etc. for political purposes also began.

Another oft-quoted article on Sikkim is "A Plural Society in Sikkim: A Study of the Interrelations of Lepchas, Bhotias and Nepalis" by Chie Nakane (1966). On the basis of her field work carried out during February and March, 1955, in the vicinity of three monastarial hamlets of Gangtok namely Pabyuk, Phodong and Phensung, she provides an interesting views on the belief, way of life and inter-community relationship among the three communities of Sikkim, though the observation derived from a particular area, i.e. Pabyuk village, still poses difficulty in accepting the same as that of the whole of Sikkim. Her observation

on the Nepalis gives an impression that either she was blatantly oblivious to the then prevailing socio-political structure of Sikkim or she was trying to avoid them intentionally. At the outset it must be emphasized that not all of the castes and communities which now constitute Nepalis were immigrants or coolies or farm labourers. Furthermore, Nakane also seems to be unaware of the fact that the Limboos or Tsongs, Mangers etc. were living in Sikkim long before the establishment of the Namgyal dynasty in Sikkim.

B.S. Das (1983), who served as the Chief Executive Officer in Sikkim from 1973-74, argues that the ethnic melting pot situation was due to Sikkim's territorial contiguity with three international borders (Tibet, Nepal and Bhutan) and as well as competition prevailing among the major groups over economic and political resources of the State. He also explains that the changing political scenario in Tibet and Chogyal's invariable demand for independent status for Sikkim hastened the process for merger. Rao's (1978) observation is also of the same kind. On the other hand N. Sengupta (1985) and host of other writers consider ethnic divide in Sikkim as a consequence of the differential treatment meted out to the subjects at the hands of the ruling elite. Apart from this, the book also explains as to how disillusion prevail among the elites after the merger and in a parliamentary democratic set up.

Datta Ray's 'Smash and Grab: Annexation of Sikkim' (1984) and Rustomji's 'Sikkim – A Himalayan Tragedy (1987) are somewhat written as a biographical account of the last Chogyal, P.T.Namgyal. Both were personal friends of the Chogyal and, thus, both of them spoke against the merger though, owing to their profession, Datta Ray advances the concept of class conflict between the Lepcha Kazis and the Royal family/Bhutia Kazis, while Rustomji rely on bureaucratic maneuver of the Indian civil servants in order to explain the issue of merger.

An aspect of culture and history of Sikkim can be found in the writings of George Kotturan (1983), S.K.Jha & Mishra (1984), and P.K.Bhattacharya (1984). While Kotturan highlights on the political, administrative and economic set-up of the people of

Sikkim, Jha & Mishra focuses on the evolution of various organs of the government in the light of the changing institutional framework from a protectorate to a full-fledged State of India. Bhattacharya's book, though is a study of coinage of Sikkim, highlights the contribution of the Newars' in the economic development of Sikkim in earlier days.

'Politics of Sikkim- A Sociological Study' by A.C.Sinha (1975) is a sociological investigation into the world of political elite in Sikkim. The book has three segments – the first segment deals with the political evolutions, presence of various social forces with specialized interests and pursuits, The Second segment analyses perception of the elites in Sikkim in the context of socio-economic and political parameters. His findings suggest that religious elite (i.e. the Lamas) was not only politically salient but also in many ways responsible for propagation of communal feeling in the society. The third segment deals with the dilemma regarding adaptation and re-structuring of the power hierarchy in a new democratic atmosphere in post-1947 era and institutional accomplishment.

T.B.Subba's 'Dynamics Of A Hill Society' (1989) is another sociological study on the Nepalis of Sikkim and Darjeeling hills. It attempts to understand caste-class relationships in view of the growing occupational mobility and effects of modernization among the Nepalis. In his 'Politics of Culture' (1999) Subba attempts to unravel the genesis of Kirata politics in Sikkim and Nepal, particularly the identity consciousness emerging among the three Kirata tribes namely Limboos (Tsongs), Khambus (Rais) and Yakhas (Dewans). He shares his view with Michael Foucault (1980) and considers Kirata consciousness for identity as "insurrection of subjugated knowledge". He believes that political transformation in both Sikkim and Nepal has been crucial behind the surge of Kirata identity though due to prevalence of overlapping identities and regional variations within the larger Kirata groups, he is uncertain about the future of the Kirata politics. Another ethnographic detail on various castes and communities of Sikkim is found in K.S. Singh's (Ed.) work 'Sikkim' (1993). It

is the first ever-ethnographic survey by the Anthropological Survey of India under the project entitled, "People of India". This comprehensive work offers detail information on the biological, religio-linguistic and cultural profile of all the three ethnic communities of Sikkim, including other sub-cultural groups within the larger Nepali community. Sikkim Study Series, volume III & V, also provides interesting discussions on the linguistic and cultural profile of various communities of Sikkim and government's interest in the protection and promotion of the languages and cultures of these communities.

The role of ethnicity in determining political outcome in Sikkim cannot be denied. An analytical presentation of interplay between ethnic forces and political alignment during the 1979 election is found in Urmila Phadnis's 'Ethnic dimension of Sikkimese Politics-The 1979 election' (1980). The author has highlighted on the significant implication of emerging elite and their ethnic backgrounds in the process of readjusting power relations. In similar vein, S.K. Chaube (1987) provides valuable discussion on the effect of various ethnic and social forces in the post-1947 political development in Sikkim and concludes that factional politics has overshadowed ethnic alignment in new democratic setup. He suggests that though politics has gained stability, political parties have not.

Since the beginning of institutionalized politics of the 17th century to till present time, maintenance of ethnic equilibrium has been the primary political goal upon which rested the success and failure of the rulers/leaders/political elite in Sikkim. The question of power and privilege has given way to the issues of equal rights (economic, social and political) and of opportunity which, to a large extent, depended upon the ingenuity of political leaders to maintain ethnic balance without harming or causing to harm the interests of other ethnic communities and endangering prospect for development of the State. A discussion of this variation is found in Dhamala's article "Ethnicity and Development in Sikkim". On the basis of various social indices she contends that the leadership pattern has changed in Sikkim with the emergence of young,

secular and educated politicians, though ethnic representation continue to be a thorny problem. In yet another article, 'Struggle for Identity Maintenance: The Bhutias of Sikkim' (1999) she maintains that the transformation in the status of the Bhutias from a socially and politically dominant group before 1975 to that of a subordinate in the post-merger period has created an identity crisis among the Bhutias which is manifested in the formation of various socio-political organization.

J.N.Kazi's 'Inside Sikkim – Against the Tide' (1993) is a journalistic view on the political development of Sikkim, particularly during the 14yrs rules of the Chief Minister Mr. N.B.Bhandari. The book is an attempt to highlight the political conditions of Sikkim during the period and exposes the hollowness of the democratic system. This book is resourceful in terms of perception of the ethnic Bhutias on various issues of socio-political importance. Pahalman Subba's "Who Ruined Sikkim" (1998) also belongs to the same category.

Although the demand for merger of Sikkim and Darjeeling is not new, the re-emergence of the demand in recent past has acquired lot of attention among the authors. Fred Pinn's 'The Road of Destiny-Darjeeling Letters - 1839' (1986) is one such historical account on the transfer of Darjeeling by the Chogyal of Sikkim Taking clue from Pinn's work, S.B.Wangyal, (2002) explains the extent of insincerity on the part of Major Lloyd. He argues that the Deed of Darjeeling Grant was neither binding nor was it signed on 25 February, 1835.

Though the issue of merger of Sikkim and Darjeeling is not the subject of the book, he, however, believes that the social peculiarities together with elements of proximity of the people of Darjeeling and Sikkim are such that a good number of people believe, and even fear, that the two areas will one day amalgamate to form a bigger and a more viable state. Relevant documents regarding Darjeeling and Sikkim can be found in R.Moktan's, 'Sikkim: Darjeeling - Compendium of Documents' (2004).

Among the edited books containing articles on Sikkim, mentioned must be made of 'The Himalaya: Aspects of Change (1981) edited by F.S.Hall, 'The Himalayas: Profiles of Modernization and Adaptation' (1985) edited by S.K.Chaube, 'Eastern Himalayas: Environment and Economy (1986) edited by R.L.Sarkar and M.P.Lama, 'The Himalayan Heritage' (1987) edited by M.K.Raha, 'Religion and Society in the Himalayas' (1991) edited by T.B.Subba & Karubaki Datta, 'Sikkim – Society, Polity, Economy & Environment' (1994) edited by M.P.Lama, provide introspective views and valuable information about Sikkim and its people.

All these publications on society and politics of the State of Sikkim constitute a valuable information-store on which the present work relies heavily to understand the process of evolution of emergence of cultural-territorial or ethnic politics in Sikkim. However, the present work is different from previous publications in the sense that the present study addresses the issue of interrelations between political process and emergence of cultural-ethnic politics directly.

The Problem:

A steady growth in cultural-territorial identity and mobilization based on it has been seen in different parts of the world since the late 20th century. Such cultural-territorial movements have been described or conceptualized with reference to different terms such as ethnicity, tribalism, cultural-nationalism, internal colonialism, regionalism etc. The lack of unanimity among scholars may be due to the nature of mobilization itself as well as divergent disciplinary background of scholars. However, among various factors, a great deal of primacy is assigned to economic reasons and the issue of cultural identity. Sometimes, the theme of elite manipulation of economic and cultural issues is emphasized and sometimes discussions on such cultural-territorial movements expose multiple dimensions of such mobilizations which are generally conceptualized as ethnic mobilizations. The above dimensions of cultural-territorial identity and mobilization included changing

nature of cultural identity, structure of identity, political-economic foundations ranging from relative deprivation to internal colonialism of such movements, symbols and pattern of mobilization etc. Very often researchers also focus on integrative / disintegrative role of such movements.

India, being a multi-racial and multi-linguistic country, is also not altogether untouched by the problem of cultural-territorial identity and movements. In fact such identity related issues and mobilizations have been a part and parcel of Indian politics since the beginning of the 20th century. The demand for linguistic states after the independence also constituted a significant part of Indian politics. However, after the 1980s there has been a phenomenal growth in the number of occurrences of such movements and very often demands for political autonomy and secession have been advanced as an integral part of the movement. Attempts have been made to conceptualize this cultural-territorial mobilization of a culturally self-defined community in India in various ways among which ethnicity, cultural-nationalism, regionalism, elite manipulation, incompatibility between modernity and primordial loyalties are considered significant. Sometimes the historical context and development of a typical cultural discourse have been also highlighted as factors contributing towards the emergence of such cultural-territorial movements.

The cultural assertion as well as redistribution of resources, conflicts over cultural identity as well as over resources, is not free of power distribution. Assertion as well as promotion of a particular cultural identity needs the support of authority without which cultural protection is not conceivable. Similarly, redistribution of resources in modern times requires changes in the legal system, policies and decisions by the political authority. Hence it is impossible to separate culture and resource distribution from the concept of power and domination.

Another basic paradox underlying ethnic-cultural mobilization is that it intends to accommodate the old notion of community space and community rights with modern democratic values like equality

and individual rights. Political parties and organizations which raise the issue of community rights actually also deny those same rights to other communities. Often such denials are legitimized in the name of territorial claim of indigenous people. Indigenousness is not substantiated with reference to history but is done with the aid of interpretations / reinterpretation of history by the majority or those who are in power. It is also to be noted that the whole idea of individual rights guaranteed by the constitution or legal system is paid scant attention in the face of assertion of community rights. Such denials (rights) cannot be completed through the process of social or economic reconstruction but they evolve through political mobilization, bargaining and finally decisions.

The substitution of individual rights by community rights is done through a particular type of political articulation and political mobilization. Therefore, political organizations play a critical role in moderating as well as aggravating ethnic-cultural consciousness and demands.

Sikkim, which was a tiny Himalayan kingdom tucked between China and India till its merger with the latter in 1975, is at present one of the smallest states of North East India. Sikkimese society consists of multiple cultural-racial groups like Nepalis, Lepchas, Bhutias etc. of which Nepalis constitute the majority. Together with them, there exist some smaller groups like Sherpas, Tsongs (Limboos) etc. who are identified as Nepalis in Sikkim.

Sikkim, like other parts of India, has been invaded by attempts at cultural-territorial mobilization or popularly known as ethnic mobilization since the introduction of parliamentary democracy after the merger with India. Before the merger, the ruling Namgyal dynasty belonging to a minority Bhutia racial community was ruling over subjects belonging to different racial-cultural communities; and this helped the Bhutia community to acquire a predominant position though members of other communities also occupied important positions in the monarchical administration. Cultural-territorial mobilizations or ethnic mobilizations were not altogether unknown under the monarchical form of government

in Sikkim. Incidents of Lepcha or Nepali, including the Tsongs (Limboos), protests against the Bhutia dominations did occur, but such mobilizations though had community orientation were not cultural or ethnic mobilizations in the modern sense; they were primarily directed against the state or its agents. Attempts at cultural-ethnic mobilization became discernible with the emergence of political parties during the second half of the 20th century. There were political parties like Sikkim National Party, formed in April, 1948, which articulated interests of a particular community. Such community interests, however, were never presented as the interest of any particular community. Rather such community interests were aggregated and presented as the general interests of Sikkim. Even when the general subjects of whom Nepalis constituted the majority, protested against the discriminatory and oppressive rule of the Bhutia king and elites, the protest movement was not known as the movement by the Nepalis. Rather it was the grievances surfaced in the form of movement for introduction of democracy in Sikkim.

After the merger Parliamentary democracy and notions of equality, individual freedom, and modern legal system have been introduced. It was hoped that the cultural differences and ethnic politics would be gradually marginalized with slow permeation of notions of individual rights and equality. But, contrary to the general expectations, cultural or ethnic consciousness and the political actions based on cultural or ethnic identity have become more frequent. New political parties and organizations have been formed with community oriented claims and demands, and are competing with each other for the ethnic space. A cursory look at the manifestoes of various political parties since 1977 generally reflect attempts at mobilization of ethnic categories by raising community oriented issues either in isolation (i.e. emphasizing a particular community interests) or in conglomerate form (i.e. common issues concerning more than one group). By raising community oriented issues political parties have facilitated the process of articulation or aggregation as well as legitimization of demands of various cultural categories.

Apparently, cultural and /or ethnic mobilizations process in Sikkim cannot be regarded as an expected development. As mentioned earlier that Sikkim does not have a long history of conflict among different communities though some communities were discriminated against. There are evidences showing cultural exchanges and inter-community marriages among the members of the three major communities in the past though it was not as common as in the present day.

(The Bhutias and Lepchas are Buddhists while Nepalis are predominantly Hindus (certain sections of the Nepalis, particularly Tamangs, Gurungs and Shakyas are Buddhists). But there is no history of perpetual religious conflict or a history of ethnic violence and social conflict among the groups apart from the resentment expressed sporadically against the rulers and their agents. In other words, history does not appear to be a strong basis for emergence of ethnic or cultural politics in Sikkim. Yet cultural-ethnic politics did not only emerge, it is sustained and proliferated further in Sikkim in recent past.

The growth in caste/community consciousness among different groups and sub-groups has led to mushrooming of several caste/community organizations with claims and demands of their own. The Lepcha organizations like Rangjyong Mutanchi Rong-Ong Shejum (Sikkim Lepcha Youth Association) demands for fifty percent reservation in the State Assembly, education and public employment, legal protection of their land, separate delimitation etc. The Bhutia dominated organizations like Survival Sikkimese and Sikkim Bhutia Lepcha Apex Committee emphasize for restoration of rights and privileges of the community which they had been enjoying before the merger. On the other hand, the Nepali organization like Gorkha Apex Committee has demanded for equal treatment at par with the Lepchas and Bhutias, and extension of 'creamy layer' concept to exclude members of royal family and Kazis from the tribal list. Thus, when political mobilization takes place, appeals to these caste/community organizations naturally take place and the community centered demands and grievances are also represented in the political arena.

An interesting 'spill-over effect' of such proliferation of cultural-racial-ethnic mobilization by major communities like Nepalis, Bhutias and Lepchas, is that certain smaller communities which were considered as sub-groups of larger communities have also started to assert their distinct language, culture and identity. For instance, the Tsongs (Limboos) are acknowledged as a Nepali tribe in adjacent district of Darjeeling, but in Sikkim the Tsongs now claim to be a separate community with their own language and culture, distinct from the Nepali community. Contrarily, the Bhutias in recent times have demanded for exclusion of Sherpas from the Bhutia fold though the Sherpas for generations are acknowledged as Bhutias. All these developments are indicative of a sharp increase in community consciousness and community identity in which redefinition of ethnic boundary of the community and community's name is also underway.

Thus, the matter of determination of ethnic boundary is still flexible and in a dyadic stage in Sikkim. The prevalence of different layers of identities and their political uses poses difficulty in carrying out an enquiry into identity categorization because what is a sub-category from one perspective is regarded as an ethnic category from another. This attempt at creating political-civil identity on the basis of ethnic-cultural affiliation has been a major issue in Sikkimese politics, though the trend towards politicization of ethnicity is universal.

Another aspect of ethnic cultural politics in Sikkim is that community oriented demands or attempts at community oriented political mobilization is common but ethnic parties, however, are not electorally successful. Besides, ethnic organizations with very aggressive community oriented approach also have so far failed to capture popular imagination. For example, the Nepalis have so far not raised any serious demand for abolition of Bhutia-Lepcha reserved seats in the State Assembly except for reorganization on the basis of population. Similarly, aggressive Bhutia organizations like Survival Sikkimese or Sikkim Bhutia Lepcha Apex Committee also could not become electorally or politically very effective. Thus, ethnic politics is there because demands and issues are raised

and even manipulated by non-ethnic parties, but aggressive ethnic mobilization is not effective.

The process of political development in Sikkim, therefore, presents a problem of understanding. Sikkimese society, conspicuous by the absence of a long history of ethnic or religious conflict, has increasingly become subject to assertive cultural or ethnic mobilization despite the introduction of parliamentary democracy and individual oriented legal system after its merger with India. Community and ethnic assertiveness of recent years is demonstrated by rediscovery of hitherto neglected ethnic names and boundaries. Political parties and organizations also are actively participating in this process, though these organizations defend individual rights and modern political institutions as well. Such attempts at combining traditional community identity and modern legal-political institutions themselves demand special attention.

Political parties in a democratic setup are expected to represent public interest rather than segmented or exclusive interest though due to ideological differences polarization of opinion is possible. From the structural-functional viewpoint, various social organizations or interest groups are expected to articulate interests and issues whereas political parties are involved in interest aggregation. But in case of India, or Sikkim, such clear divisions of spheres of activities are non-existence.

Thus, by articulating and aggregating demands and aspirations of a group of people, political parties and organizations mobilize people in support of the issue or demand, and generate consciousness regarding the demands. Thus, through political parties and organizations, aspirations and demands of cultural-linguistic groups are expressed and legitimized.

Similarly, it is generally acknowledged that norms of politics are not fixed. In an ethnically divided society or societies, political parties often rely on social bonds, community sentiments, and symbols in order to garner popular support. In this way the relationship between the political parties and social/ethnic organizations is established for mutual benefit - political parties

use community or ethnic category as vote bank while ethnic groups use political parties to legitimize group interest and influence the decision making process.

The political institution like State may also precipitate formation of identities among various categories through equalizing policies like “affirmative actions” or “protective discriminations”. In fact, in a country like India certain equalizing policies seem inevitable and the State may do so, according to Brass (1991), for variety of reasons such as: (a) the State may be controlled by a class or ethnic group or some combination of classes and / or ethnic groups, whose members the State chooses to favour; or (b) the dominant group may seek support among certain categories in the population and may adopt an ‘equalitarian’ policy for that purpose; or (c) the State may choose a particular equalitarian strategy for its own administrative convenience. Both post-industrial and contemporary developing societies represent these features but mere formulation of equalizing policies may not precipitate organization or mobilization among all relevant categories. On the contrary, it is the selection of particular leadership, elites and organizations within the ethnic group by the government or state as instruments or channels of distribution of government patronage. The leadership or the elites often initiate policies, slogans, or particular patterns of mobilization which aggravate ethnic cleavages. The selection criteria itself is based on the criteria of reliability and high level of political loyalty (Rothschild: 1981). In such a case, not only the government / state tends to work or shape policies on the advice of such selected leaders or elites, but, sometimes a particular leadership within a group may even gain control over an entire area of government policy and the institutions associated with it and use them as means for consolidating the leadership of their own community. The domination of a particular group / groups in state affairs may result in disproportionate distribution or sharing of state resources causing resentment among others who have been denied benefits. Thus, due to its own political compulsions and composite elements, the state is unlikely to be a harbinger of distributive justice. Its

policies may benefit some groups and communities but it may as well be a potential threat to others. It is this perceived threat or denial which strengthens community consciousness in both categories (the favoured group consider it a right and resist any policy diversifying benefits to others while the group which is denied mobilizes its own forces to win concession from the government) and ultimately manifest in the form of organizations articulating community interests.

Thus ethnic-politics in general and growth of ethnicity-oriented political mobilization in Sikkim in particular, throw up a number of interrelated theoretical problems which create uncertainties in the process of understanding. In this connection, the basic problem that a student of political science confronts is related to the behaviour of the state and other democratic political organizations which are expected to promote democratic structure and values in lieu of traditional community orientation. But, in Sikkim, the state machinery and political organizations have been seen doing the contrary, though cultural-territorial mobilization intends to limit the scope of democratic, legal-constitutional rights of individual. Then there is the paradox of growth of cultural-territorial mobilization though electorally aggressive cultural mobilization has not been very beneficial in Sikkim. Besides, the question of assertion of identity by smaller communities also needs to be addressed.

Methodology:

Political mobilization based on social and cultural and territorial identity has been primarily conceptualized with reference to the idea of ethnicity, which is the derivative of the original Greek word "Ethnikos" meaning 'living together'. It is identified formerly with the elements of culture and race and even refers to minority groups or 'groups in an exotic primitive culture'. During the 1970s Glazer and Moynihan (1970) further elaborated the concept to include any group of distinct culture or origin, including the majority, as an ethnic group. And a recent analysis of the concept includes both objective and subjective ingredients

besides the interplay of historical forces. For instance, Hutchinson and Smith (1996) draw attention towards certain features which they consider important in any ethnic group such as (a) A common name of the community; (b) An idea or a myth of common origin; (c) Shared memories of a common past, events, heroes etc.; (d) One or more elements of common culture including language, customs, religion etc.; (e) Idea of a common homeland; and (f) A sense of solidarity, at least among a substantial section of the group.

The above mentioned features of ethnicity indicate that it is essentially a group identity in which group boundary is created and group solidarity is maintained by involving essentiality and permanence of certain selective cultural elements and historical events, real or mythical. Existence of such a group identity is not unnatural in societies, ancient or modern, but the problem arises when such identity is presented as the sole ingredient around which political articulation, mobilization and decisions should occur. The modern idea of politics, particularly development of ideas and institutions during the post-French revolutionary days, has emphasized the values of equality, individual freedom, secularization etc. and the ideas of legal equality, representative government, adult suffrage etc. Division of society on cultural lines and political decision on cultural basis become incompatible with such a concept of politics. Thus, ethnic cultural political mobilization, in a sense, creates problem for the concept of modern politics which is based on either individual or class, and not cultural communities. It creates a dichotomy between the concept of politics and actual behaviour of people engaged in it. The research problem which arises from this dichotomy concerns how it does happen and why does it happen?

The present work focuses on the general question of why, how and under what circumstances ethnic-cultural identity and consciousness become instruments of political action. The study further attempts at, in a specific sense, an examination of the relationship between political institutions, organizations in the one hand and ethnic politics on the other. To examine such questions, the present work attempts an analysis of the issue of

ethnic politics in Sikkim. For such an analysis, generally either the primordialist or the instrumentalist perspective is employed. But the present study avoids either of these two perspectives as they emphasize on one single element: either the cultural factor or economic interest of a group.

It tends to make the work primarily mono-causal. Rather the perspective of 'triadic' analysis is more acceptable as it examines the political or governmental context in which an ethnic mobilization occurs. Similarly, the present work is based on contextual analysis of ethnic politics, i.e., it attempts at an examination of Sikkim's ethnic politics by situating it in the socio-economic and political context which has nurtured it. At the same time, historical and analytical methods has been used to examine the process of development of ethnic politics in Sikkim and to analyze the relationship among various elements/factors; generalizations have been formulated partly on the basis of the norms of case-study method as observations are based on the findings about the specific case of Sikkim.

The findings are based on both secondary and primary sources of information and through interviews of important political activists and members of ethnic organizations though structured interviews have not been emphasized. Observations have been drawn on the basis of analysis of information in the context of actual socio-economic and political situation.

As has been stated above, a very little work focusing on ethnic politics on Sikkim has been carried out so far. Therefore, the present attempt would be a significant contribution in the field of ethnic politics. More importantly the ethnic issue is one of the burning questions of recent time and has been a major concern for both the government and the scholars alike. There is an urgency to understand ethnic movements or ethnicity oriented politics particularly the causes behind such issues. The present work, in its own little way, expects to contribute in this process of understanding though it does not claim to provide a comprehensive theory of ethnicity.

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