

Regional Perspective of Development Programmes in Sikkim

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Sikkim is a small state; its population is smaller; its resources are limited; infra-structure for its development is yet to be developed; however, potential for the development are enough to meet the genuine demands of people; but the developmental activities in the past have been lop-sided. The recent political integration of the state with that of the Indian Union has generated ambitions and aspirations to improve the quality of life for the Sikkimese masses. The dynastic regime of the Chogyal was quasi-feudal and quasi-theocratic with some mild window dressing of the democratic trappings. Naturally, whatever developmental activities were undertaken, they were chosen with an apparent eye on display and, thus, they were addressed to the needs of the elite. In this way, all developments of the Sikkimese resources for the betterment of the Sikkimese masses were side-tracked. The new regime has yet to consolidate itself for undertakings such a stupendous task. The present paper, firstly, makes an attempt to describe the institutional infra-structure, which is to sustain the development programmes; secondly, reviews some of the schemes already undertaken; and lastly, provides some suggestive ways to successfully implement the development programmes in Sikkim.

The Sikkimese society has three distinct patterns of living. Firstly, it is basically a tribal society, in which Lepcha, Bhotia, Limbus, Rais, Magars, Basnets, Sherpas, etc. consider themselves first and foremost belonging to their respective tribes or castes. Thus, tribal or caste identity in Sikkimese life is of immense values. Secondly, the entire Sikkimese people may broadly be divided into two distinct religious stocks: Lamaists (the Lepcha, Bho-

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tia, Limbus etc) and the Hindus (the Brahmin, Basnet, Sarkis, Kamis. etc). The former Chogyals, who were lamaists, and had developed a type of parity between the lamaists and the Hindus had given a distinct tilt in favour of their own church. Thirdly, Lepchas, Bhotias and Limbus, who are lamaists, are settled in Sikkim for the last more than three centuries; but all of three taken together merely constitute between 25 to 30 percent of the total population. The Sikkimese Hindus are predominantly of the Nepali origin, who migrated to Sikkim during the last hundred years under the British patronage. However, there is another significant section of the Hindus, who are important in the economic sphere of Sikkim. They are the *Marwari* business men and the *Madesia* (Madhya-desias, those belong to the central heart land of India. i.e., the Gangetic plains-Uttar Pradesh and Bihar) petti shop keepers and hawkers.

So far social ecology is concerned, Gangtok, the capital town of the state, provides a real melting pot of the above stocks. There are areas (western parts) where Lepchas, Limbus and Bhotia reside side by side. There are other localities, specially in the south and western parts in which the Nepalese and the Lamaists co-exist. *Deswalis* or the *Madesias* inhabit some pockets of the southern Sikkim such as Khamdong and the cultivated river banks of the Tista and the Ranjit. Market places such as Gangtok, Rangpo, Singtam, Naya Bazar, Geyzing, Mangam, Pakyang, Rhenok have considerable population of the *Deswalis* and the *Marwaris*. In case one wants to generalize very broadly, Bhotia are the highlanders of the greater Himalayas in North and eastern Sikkim. The Lepchas are on the southern slopes of the Greater Himalayas and the Inner Himalayas in the western and central Sikkim. Their exclusive habitation has been the erstwhile private estates of the Chogyals' family in Dikchu and Dzongu. Nepalese are basically petti-cultivators in the southern Sikkim. Market centres on the banks of the Tista and Ranjit rivers are inhabited by the *Deswalis* and the *Marwaris*. In such a way, human ecology, which has made the respective stocks most proficient in the land use of the area, has become a greater factor than the human occupational specialization.

Besides the ethnic and religious alignments, there is another significant aspect of Sikkimese social life. Sikkim has been a theocratic state¹ since 1642, patterned on the Tibetan political culture. The Lamaist theocracy of Tibet provided a distinct social profile²: the monks, aristocrats and the commoners. With the establishment of the Namgyal dynasty, the Sikkimese social life was modelled on the same Tibetan pattern. Thus, there have been many monasteries, among them at least five have their rent-free monastery

estates. The monks have special status in the social, political and religious life of the land. They not only command reverence, but also influence political and social decisions. These monks and nuns are recruited from among the lamaists families of various tribes in Sikkim and neighbourhood.

The first Namgyal ruler of Sikkim is credited to have introduced a system of aristocracy in which Lepcha chiefs and Bhotia warriors were fashioned as the Kazi patricians³. These Kazis were the landlords, regional agents of the ruler in their respective areas and law-givers to their subjects. They had marital relations with the Namgyal family of Sikkim and the aristocrats of Tibet, Bhutan and Darjeeling district of West Bengal. Besides their own estates, they used to undertake trade between Tibet and British India. They were not only the courtiers of the Sikkimese rulers, but were also his important functionaries such as the ministers, ambassadors, court agents, warlords etc. Many a time some of the Kazi aristocrats were stronger than their masters—the Namgyal rulers. With the landed estates, political power and formal positions, they amassed wealth. Though these private estates were abolished some more than quarter a century ago, their close alliance with the ruler, position in the pre-democratic government, and investments in the urban areas have made them not only socially but also economically notables.

II

The Sikkimese economy may be termed as the primitive tribal subsistence one, in which slash-and-burn type of rotational rice and maize cultivation is undertaken in the Inner Himalayan upland and the valleys. Southern slopes and river banks have been terraced for the rice cultivation. So far cereals are concerned, it is a deficit state, which imports 10,000 tons of foodgrains annually to feed its 203,000 souls⁴. Sikkimese agriculture does not produce surplus for marketing. That is why in the interior areas barter is still valid mode of exchange of goods. The Greater Himalayan region in the north is a snow desert, where some Bhotia herds men graze their *yaks* during the summer. There are only three locations—Tsunghan, Lachen and Lachung—where permanent settlement is available and efforts are being made to raise apple crops. Central western part—specially the southern slopes of the Greater Himalayan ranges—constitutes of the areas where cardamom crop is raised. This significant cash-crop has traditionally been in the hands of the ex-Chogyal and the Kazi aristocrats. Western, central and eastern uplands raise maize crops, which is the staple food for

the Lepchas and the Nepalese tribes men. River beds and banks of the Tista and the Rangit are the fertile land where rice crop is raised. Since terracing of the hill sides annually requires immense hard work because of the heavy rain and periodic floods, this belt is pre-dominantly controlled by the industrious Nepalese.

Southern Sikkim is an area of the Nepalese habitation. They raise rice, maize, potato, tomato, ginger etc. in the small terraced fields. This area is famous for orange, another significant Sikkimese cash-crop, which is owned mainly by petty cultivators. Sikkim raises pine apple, bananas, mango and some other fruits. The fruit preservation factory (Gangtok), and wine distillery (Rangpo) have been using these products as raw material. There has been some experimental tea estates in the southern Sikkim near Darjeeling, which have yet to prove themselves commercially a success. Sikkim has enough forest resource (36.2% of the total 2828 square miles) which abounds in a large variety of the trees. A paper factory is being set up at Melli in South Sikkim to use these potential sources. It has an abundance of the live-stocks (2.09 lakhs⁵), whose flesh is consumed locally and a tannery has been established to use their leather and hide. Sikkim has some potential minerals such as copper, zinc, lead which are being extracted at Rangpo by the Sikkim Mining Corporation.

Sikkim is typical example of landlocked mountainous topography which is devoid of the facilities of the railways, water-ways and airways. The nearest railhead is at Siliguri, some 60 k.m. south in West Bengal. The road network runs by the river-sides and is maintained as the life-line of Sikkim. Fossil energy resources such as coal and oil are not available in Sikkim. Undulating topography provides limited scope for expansion of the agricultural activities on large scale. It is needless to say that more than 91.4% Sikkimese are engaged in this occupation. Even the minerals found in Sikkim are not of the very high content. At the top of it, Sikkim which has only 12% of its inhabitants as literate, provides none of the skilled and trained personnel for manning the industrial establishments. It is needless to say that near subsistence economy of Sikkim is hardly in a position to raise internal revenues to support a capital intensive industrial enterprise. Even agriculture has very limited potential to gainfully employ such a large number. In fact, in its present stage of development, it is already bedevilled with excessive dependence of the Sikkimese. It is the country, where a petty farmer has some small patches of land, while a few ex-landlords may possess bigger arable acreage. Occupationally, the middle class is conspicuous by its absence. It is mainly because of the fact that secondary and tertiary sector of production is in its

III

Sikkim had her own share of political agitation against the colonial and feudal set up. Sikkim's status as an Indian protectorate and her ruler's autocracy both were anachronistic. This situation came to an end in mid-1975, when the Sikkimese people chose to merge themselves with the Indian Union. The Sikkim Congress, which emerged after the merger of the Janata Congress and the National Congress, took the reign of the power in its control and ex-Chogyal's fate was left in suspension. Theoretically, the theocratic feudal system came to an end and democratic set-up was enshrined. As an observer of the political behaviour, one may examine the character of the new regime and its roles in generating social participation in the development programmes.

The present author viewed the Sikkim Congress, on the eve of its merger with that of the Indian National Congress in December, 1975: "The Kazi (the present chief minister of Sikkim) is the father figure in the party and his immense popularity would have been an asset to any political party. But in spite of his advanced age, he leads an active life. Political manipulation has been so intense in Sikkim that he failed to carry out a second line of leadership in the party. That is why there is nobody matching or even approachable to his stature in the party. The Sikkim Congress lacks internal cohesion and organizational discipline. It is deeply divided within itself and torn by personal and political rivalry.....it gives an impression of a joint front of discordant elements representing dedicated activists, liberal democrats, young radicals, are communalists and rank opportunists. The functioning of the party smacks of the *Durbari* discipline rather than a political party addressed to democratic participation".⁶

Nothing has changed much since then for the better. The 'Janata' element of the Sikkim Congress felt ignored. Its former secretary and the first Sikkimese representative to the Indian Lok Sabha, was denied re-nomination and since then has dissociated himself with the party activities. Nar Bahadur Khatiwara, president of the Sikkim Youth Congress, has walked out of the Congress along with half a dozen members of the state assembly to form the Sikkimese branch of the Congress for Democracy. Some ex-political activists have come out to form the Sikkimese branch of Janata Party. To make the confusion still worse, the Sikkim Congress has recently passed a resolution to dissociate itself with that of the Indian National Congress and sought to merge itself with the new ruling party in New Delhi—the Janata Party. Thus, the monolith Sikkim Congress has no more a monopoly over Sikkimese politics. It seems that but for the change in the administration there has nothing changed so far the political horse trading is concerned.

Some others accuse the Kazi to substitute himself in place of the Chogyal. It is mainly because the Kazi has failed on some very sensitive issues. Ethnic balance between the Lepcha-Bhotia and the Nepalese is a legacy of the past dynastic rule. The same system of parity is continued so far allocation of the seats in the state assembly is concerned. Like the previous regime, the popular Nepalese leaders are still discriminated and ignored. The present regime is too sensitive to the special privileges of the Lepchas and the Bhotias at the cost of the major constituent of the populace. To divert the popular attention from the basic issues, the administration is making much publicity for watch factory, paper factory, hydro-electric generator and other capital intensive enterprises. On the other hand, recent political upheaval has caused an inflated ambition and unreasonably high aspirations among the emerging educated youngmen.

In course of an intensive study of the social behaviour of the Sikkimese political elite in 1972, we found the Sikkimese elite identifying the programmes for social justice and equality and economic development giving universal acceptance.⁷ There is every reason to believe that such programmes have increased their acceptance and desirability since then. We also found "the elite desire to industrialize their country rapidly and re-orient the political programme in Sikkim. The concept of planned development has the unanimous approval..... They also believe that the Five Year Development Plans have raised the general standard of living of the Sikkimese.But gains of these plans.....have gone to the traditional vested interests of the old patricians, the neo-rich plebeians, the bureaucrats, and the contractors. There appear to be a unanimous agreement that the gains of the development plans should be spent for the amelioration of the weaker section of the society and for the nation-building projects."

IV

The cardinal point for development programmes is to improve upon the quality of life of the masses. This may successfully be attained only when natural resources of the land are utilized in a planned manner. The little state of Sikkim within its limited economic resources presents a common case of under-development. It lacks infra-structure, trained man-power and essential capital for raising the standard of life of her two lakh Sikkimese. However, the Central Government has assured the Sikkimese people for the required capital investment for development programmes. Since Sikkim is an integral part of India, trained and skilled hands can easily be made available by the Central Government. But the biggest problem is to develop the infra-structure. In the present situation, it seems uneconomic to extend rail-

ways to the Sikkimese soil. The waterways is almost impossible to be made commercially exploitable because of the undulating topography. Thus the entire stress is on the development of an ideal road net-work. Besides this the most significant step to be urgently taken is to harness the immense hydro-electric power resources in Sikkim. River Tista, which divides the land in to two halves, and its tributaries are snowfed rivers and there is heavy rainfall in their encatchment areas. Serious damage of live and property is caused by sudden inundation of the riverine zones in Sikkim, West Bengal and Bangladesh when the river is in high spate. This calamity may be turned into hydro-electricity, if a joint effort is made by Sikkim, West Bengal Bangladesh and the Central Government. This power generation will change the entire canvas of the region.

By now all efforts to raise the agricultural and industrial potentialities have suffered from an inward perspective. It is high time that Sikkim should be integrated with the problems of, if not North Bengal, at least, Darjeeling district. Undulating topography, un-skilled tribal population, little exploited natural resources, lack of modern infra-structure, endemic natural calamities, lack of capital, and age old neglecton are the features, which are shared by Sikkim and Darjeeling in common. Both the regions share a common past, present socio-cultural traditions, and a future destiny. If these two units join together to exploit their agricultural and industrial potentialities, there is every reason to believe that their efforts will lead to a prosperous future. Because of the topographic features, cereal production has a limitation. Once electric power is made available, agro-industries, some mineral extracting enterprises and forest based industries will emerge as potential revenue sources. In agricultural sector, production of cash crops is to be encouraged. Cardamom, ginger, pine apple fruits, orange, apple, banana etc. may be grown on a systematic scale. By now, their production has not been in the organised sector. These crops were left in the hands of the individual cultivators without coordination. There may be some plantations besides tea and cinchona. Fruits, herbal plants, tea, coffee gardens may profitably be operated. So far industries are concerned, paper pulp, match, wood work, medicine plants may be established, because raw materials are locally available. More profitable will be a combination of the agriculture and forest based enterprises where organized and unorganized sector of production may help each other to raise their revenue and ultimately make the enterprise viable.

We venture to repeat that since Sikkim has chosen to break the Himalayan isolation of yesterday by politically joining the Indian union, it has to join hands with her immediate southern neighbour exploiting the natu-

ral resources and making a more prosperous future. By joining together, they could avoid inter-state taxes, excise duties, road taxes and other formal legal provisions between Sikkim and West Bengal. With the generation of cheap hydro-electricity, plantation, forest and other agriculture-based industries will produce cheaper goods which could compete in the market favourably. Forest and agricultural raw materials will be used at ideal locales by the river-side townships, where new small and middle-scale industries may be established. By doing so Sikkimese peasants and factory hands will find a better price for their goods and toil just next door. This integrated regional approach will not only enrich the Sikkimese people and the inhabitants of North-Bengal, but in the final analysis, it will also contribute immensely to the national prosperity.

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