Politics, Society and Development

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: Insights From Sikkim

AS/P

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Introduction

Sikkim is a small, but stable and peaceful state situated in the north eastern part of India. The political stability coupled with a vibrant administrative system has helped this small state to be free from the problems of insurgency that has affected all other north eastern states. Indeed, the political stability of the state that has made the latter a unique model is the resultant outcome of a long tradition of social harmony. The kind of tolerance, bond of unity and social cohesiveness that exist among different ethnic groups in the state – the Nepalese on the one hand, and the Lepchas and Bhutias on the other - have contributed heavily to the social integrity in the state. All these have resulted to the building of a separate identity transcending the existing ethnic boundaries – the Sikkimese identity. Needless to say, the social cohesion and the political stability and the resultant sikkimese identity have been the important determining variables that account for the kind of development the state has been witnessing so far. The strategic location of the state also makes its developmental imperatives get sufficient attention from the Union of India.

Until recently, Sikkim was under the rule of Namgyal dynasty which lasted for 333 years. The centralised Namgyal dynasty came to an end in 1975 when Sikkim was finally merged to the Indian union. This event has led to the change in the political system of the state from centralised (theocratic)

monarchical system to liberal democratic system. As many scholars from around the world argue that liberal democracy is the only suitable form of governance both for managing the modern state - which is now ubiquitous - and for mediating the forces of rapid economic and cultural change occurring in all the societies of the world. Fukuyama affirms that history has become one for all of humankind, and that liberal democracy constitutes the end of societal evolution. Whatever unfinished business of history may still remain will, according to him, soon be achieved with liberal democracy (Fukuyama 1992).

The emergence of liberal democracy as an alternative political model in Sikkim can be traced to the reformist movements of early 1940s. The acceptance of some aspect of liberal democracy gave birth to the institutions of party system, responsible government, local self-government and universal suffrage (Sinha 1975). The liberal state thus actually depends on the institutional mechanisms of representation to the political process, popular consent, protests and demands into state policies. Many developing countries of South Asia and South Africa after their independence from colonial rule switched over to this form of democracy. The most important attribute of liberal democracy is the competititon of ideas and views and the prospect of the inclusive politics.

The politics in Sikkim, until the emergence of liberal democracy, can be characterised as containing not only undemocratic and non-participatory processes but also centralised, authoritarian and most unsuited to the conditions and needs of expanding populations, limited human resources, and contemporary demand for human and civic rights. This problem with political structures manifested itself clearly in the sluggishness, lack of faith in, and conflict between the different levels of the political system. The electoral democracy was not institutionalised in the country. Even though the elections for councils had been held, democratisation was still very much an electoral issue, political parties were elitist and lacked internal democracy, institutions for popular participation were weakly embedded in society, and civic rights were not protected. The late 20th century has witnessed the breakdown of authoritarianism in many regions of the world. For some, the progress made in transforming authoritarian regimes into

democratic ones corroborates the superiority of liberal democracy over alternative forms of government. Thus, the change in the system is not unique to this country; rather, it was a global order which culminated into the establishment of governments based on the principles of democracy.

The end of the monarchical system was for long represented as the beginning of the era of new form of nationalism, presenting an ambitious project of nation-building, development and democracy. In reality, however, much of those projects remained elite ambitions or sometimes just elitist propaganda. The elite undertook to promote democracy through the very composition and institutional structures of the state. For a long time, the nation-building exercise was conceived to be one that simultaneously led to greater unity of the nation, and greater involvement and participation for the citizen in the institutions of the state. But in the case of Sikkim, the task of building a single new identity called the 'nation' encompassing several identities and affiliations was the most arduous job. A nation as defined by Rupert Emerson (1970) is identified as a community of people sharing 'significant elements of a common heritage' and 'a common destiny for the future'. Going by this definition, Sikkim had neither a common heritage nor a common destiny (Sinha 1975). There has always been an inter-tribal and ethnic differences, and building single identity was always a big problem in Sikkim. This was mainly because of two reasons– firstly, the acceptance of the Lamaist traditional model by the Nepalese amounted not only to their political eclipse but also to their religious, cultural and economic subservience to the Buddishts, and secondly, adoption of the liberal democratic model by the Buddhists would have meant the loss of their grip over the decision-making process. Thus, the ethno-political polarity between Bhutia-Lepcha minority and Nepalese majority was the main obstacle to the growth of national identity and nation-building. The former was more interested in preserving the tenets of theocratic political structure of lamaist Tibet, while the later was for the establishment of secular democratic government in Sikkim. The proponents of secular government wanted to separate religion from the sikkimese politics and demanded broad participation of general public in the decision-making processes.

In this tug of war between theocracy and democracy, the Tripartitie Agreement of 1973 served as a solution to this dilemma of nation-building. The Agreement was signed between Chogyal, Foreign Secretary, Government of India and Leaders of political parties of Sikkim. The Agreement reduced the authority of Chogyal, appointed Chief Executive as a head of administration, and constituted State Assembly by replacing State Council. The May Agreement was followed by the passing of Government of Sikkim Act, 1974, which made the provision for the ruler to be the constitutional head of the state. In April 1975, the State Assembly finally passed a resolution that abolished the institution of monarchy in Sikkim, and declared Sikkim as a constituent unit of India. Accordingly, on the request from the Government of Sikkim, the Parliament of India enacted the 36th Constitution (Amendment) Act in 1975 which made Sikkim the 22nd state of Indian Republic, thereby ending the Lamaist theocratic rule of Namgyal dynasty. The entire power structure was re-organised where people, not the ruler, are considered supreme. The revolution which ushered in regimes of popular soverienty transferred the ruling power from the king onto a 'nation', or 'people'. Under a regime of popular soverienty, people are free, in a way that they are not under an absolute monarch or an entrenched aristocracy, for instance. In other words, a modern democratic state demands 'people' with a strong collective identity. Democracy obliges one to show much more solidarity and much more commitment to one another in the joint political project than was demanded by the hierarchical and authoritarian societies of yesteryears (Taylor 1999).

Like other developing political systems, the socio-political structure of earliest Sikkim is traditional and feudal in nature. The traditional society in Sikkim was characterised by three strata– the clergy, the nobles and aristocrats, and the commoners (Sinha 1975; 2008). Among the clergy, the monks were drawn from the Bhutias and Lepchas of high position. These monks played an important role in the management of monastery estates and administered justice, and in collaboration with Kazis, the clergymen also managed the affairs of the state.

The kazis and thikadars constituted the nobles and aristocrats of Sikkim's feudal society. The kazis were the regional lords and had authority to command the regional territories. They possessed the power to adjudicate minor disputes, and collected land revenue from people within their jurisdiction. They had no proprietory right in the land although they did have a kind of hereditary title to their office (Hope 1966). The peasants, wage earning people and skilled and semi-skilled workers, on the other hand, constituted the commoners. With the change of time, there was also a change in the social stratification in Sikkim. The present day society in Sikkim is characterised broadly by four distinct class - agrarian, business, wage-earning, and new (Datta 1991). The agrarian, comprises the big landowners, medium-sized land owners, small-sized landowners and landless farmers. The agrarian class is divided into these four classes depending on the size of land they possess. The big and petty businessmen, and also the owners of small scale industries are the main constituents of the business class. The agricultural labourers, manual workers including skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled belong to the wage-earning class. The educated members employed in the government services fall under the new class category.

The traditional and feudal society of early Sikkim gradually transformed into a modern and democratic society. The internal development and exposure to the wider world brought about some social and political changes. Contact with more advanced societies has been the principal force which has eroded the structure and values of traditional societies, and pushed it to a transitional process. In fact, the transition from feudal, peasant, agrarian society to a modern, democratic society cannot be accomplished without profound social changes. Among many issues, alteration of the class-structure deserves special attention because it involves entire incentive system of the society (Davis 1966). The post merger Sikkim paid special attention in this direction with necessary measures to make its society modern and developed. The contrast between the traditional and modern economy was not solely or perhaps even most significantly, a contrast in the standards of living and levels of consumption. In traditional societies, the normal thing was to accept one's status and frequently one's occupation

as determined by inheritance and customs. Modern economic activity, whether colonial or indegenious, has taken people out of their conventional roles and put them in new situations both of work and of life, which have greatly broadened their perception of the range of alternative activities in which they might engage. This increased mobility, and widened perception of alternatives has markedly weakened the stabilising elements in traditional society (Badra 1992).

As the society start experiencing the process of modernisation, the profound changes take place in psychological, political and economic life of human beings. Psychologically, they must transform the old culture in ways which make it compatible with modern activities and institutions. The face to face relations and warm, powerful family ties of a traditional society must give way to a more impersonal system of evaluation (Weiner 1966). Politically, people start thinking about the new form of political organisation, which gives maximum freedom and choice in decision making. This condition prevails only in the democratic set up where the citizen involves in the formation of government through election. Economically, the occupation of the people shifted from traditional agricultural activities to employment-oriented services. The establishment of modern administration and small scale industries provided the new avenue of employment in various administrative, technical, professional and other industrial units.

Contemporary civil society in Sikkim consists of a large body of associations and civil institutions, most of which are modern, even though they take on traditional forms and symbols. They are mainly urban-based and include labour/ worker unions, religious associations, ethnic associations, women's organisations, professional associations, employers' and occupational bodies, student and youth groups, cooperative associations, special interest groups such as human rights organisations, and a new range of NGOs such as community and neighbourhood groups and philanthropic and welfare associations. In terms of historical development, this wide range of associations and civil institutions can be broadly grouped into the conventional older groups (trade unions, community organisations, self-help groups, ethnic associations, women's organisations, professional bodies, religious groups) and the

new groups, including some NGOs and human rights groups. It is the latter, with their new styles, global linkages, and heavily publicised advocacy that have prompted the much-trumpeted 'rediscovery' or 'emergence' of civil society. In reality, civil society has long existed in Sikkim but became dormant or stifled due to the authoritarian type of governance under Namgyal rule. Interest in civil society initiatives has been inspired in Sikkim by both the democratising impulses of nationalist leaders of India's independence as well as the neo-liberal interest in strengthening civil society as a counter-balance to the regulatory state. The political reforms being advocated today include the state withdrawing from some of the functions and responsibilities it had acquired under the influence of the planned development model. Civil society and social actors are being encouraged now to take up responsibility for the development and welfare functions which the state wants to shed.

These civil societies are mainly urban-based but not necessarily restricted to urban issues. Its effectiveness today is more or less tied up with the nature of the issues with which it is concerned; thus wider social justice or democratisation issues have broader constituencies and tends to have a larger impact than narrower. But the effectiveness of activities of civil associations depend on the role of leaders, their linkages with both the grass roots and the elite, the extent of the threat they pose to established interests, their links with effective power blocs both local and international, and their capacity to manage and sustain protests. Many civil associations lack effectiveness in running the organisations, and therefore, only few such societies/associations are active today in the state.

Political development of Sikkim is viewed by the authors as a changing political system– from authoritarian to democratic components (institutions, sructures, and practices) of polity that is in transition after merger. Daron Acemoglu and James A. Robinsonn (n.d) have identified three main paths of political development–first, there is a path that leads from non-democracy gradually but inexorably to democracy. Once created, democracy is never threatened, and it endures and consolidates. Second, there is a path that leads to democracy but where

democracy, once created, quickly collapses. Following this, the forces that led to the initial democratisation reassert themselves, but then democracy collapses again and the cycle repeats itself. Logically, and third, is a path in which a country remains non-democratic or democratisation is much delayed. As far as the political development in Sikkim is concerned, it comes under the first category, that is, the path leads from non-democracy to democracy.

The change in the course of socio-economic development gradually leads to the reduction of the authoritarian component and to the growth and entrenchment of the democratic values. It can be viewed as the first and the major regularity of the process of democratisation in Sikkim. The authoritarian component is conditioned first and foremost by the absence of a competitive party system, less involvement of citizens in planning and decision making. The democratic component becomes increasingly indispensable for transitional society approaching developed, one which is a changing society and as such, it requires orderly changes of governmental policies and consequently, orderly changes of political leadership. Hence, it can be said that the progress of developing society requires a political system that contains democratic components at the initial critical stage of democratisation. The process of democratisation is far from unilinear. It suffered setbacks and interruptions by spells of increased authoritarianism. While eventually resulting from socio-economic development, democracy is achieved through political struggle. The 1973 agitation was vital for establishing the democratic governace in Sikkim. The popular agitation compelled the governemt to sign an agreement which was followed by the enactment of the Act of 1974 that made the monarch a constitutional head, and the Chief Minister, elected directly by the people, the chief executive. The tripartite Agreement was signed by the king, Foreign Secretary, Government of India and representatives from political parties. The provision of agreement includes, among other things, elected legislative assembly, voting on the principle of one-man-one-vote, election on the basis of universal suffrage, and ministerial collective responsibility. The Agreement is important for many reasons. For the first time in Sikkim's history, the people, represented

by popular forces, became the acknowledged participants in the political process. Secondly, it has frustrated Chogyal's ambition to make Sikkim a soverign state (Rao 1978). These changes and growing consciousness of an autonomous political identity constitute the matrix of political development in Sikkim.

Sikkim's progress towards democracy and stability is marked by two historic developments–first, the introduction of electoral system based on adult suffrage, and second, the abolition of the institution of monarchy in the 1970s. Inspired by the ideals of Indian national movement, the conscious and educated Sikkimese formed various political parties to press their demand for the formation of democratic government. SSC in December 1947 was formed with the merger of three regional groups. Three main demands of the party were (i) abolition of landlordism, (ii) formation of popular government, and (iii) accession of Sikkim to India. Apart from formulating and presenting political issues of radical significance, SCP started to impart political education to the masses through campaigns and movements. The people, in association with newly emerged political parties, openly challenged the autocratic regime of the monarch and demanded the establishment of the popular government.

The constitutional changes that took place following the 1973 uprising and Government of Sikkim Act 1974 led to a dramatic change in the political and economic institutions that had important implications for the future of democracy. These changes emerged out of conflict between the monarchs' intent of maintaining and expanding their absolutist powers and the pro-democratic forces led by some educated leaders for the establishment of popular government in the state. The battle was won by the pro-democratic forces with the support from the masses. The outcome was the restructuring of political institutions that severely limited the monarch's powers and correspondingly increased those of Assembly. The change in political institutions led to the formation of a representative government which ensured greater participation of people in the decision making processes. The first important move toward democracy in Sikkim was the Government of Sikkim Act, 1974. This Act removed many of the worst inequities under the old political system where only few aristocrats and nobles

were part of the governmental system. The Act also established the right to vote based uniformly on the basis of universal adult suffrage.

As a result of socio-economic development since merger, but first and foremost of competitive general elections and formation of democratically elected local government, the traditionally downtrodden increasingly turned assertive in overcoming the age-long depression. Before this, the feudal structure of state did not permit the masses to organise themselves for the democratic rights. Many different countries after the downfall of authoritarian or totalitarian regime witnessed extensive multiplication of political parties. Incidentally, this was the case in Sikkim too–First in the early years of 1970s and later, so to say, in 1979. In the election of 1979, there were more than eight political parties that contested the Assembly election. This was the first election held on the principle of adult suffrage, and under the provision of the Constitution of India. After this, there were continuous elections of legislative assembly with an interval of five years. The democratic governance and universal adult suffrage since 1975 has undermined the influence of the kazis and aristocrats, and opened the avenues for mass participation in the policy decision-making processes.

However, a serious observation of the politics of Sikkim shows a unique trend of one-party dominance in the apparent multi-party system. For a considerably longer period, Sikkim Congress Party ruled the state with virtually no viable opposition. Similar had been the case with Nar Bahadur Bhandari's regime. At present too, SDF of Pawan Kumar Chamling enjoys absolute command over the politics of Sikkim with no opposition party having any significant presence in, and posing challenge to the contemporary politics of Sikkim.

This book builds on a vast array of stimulating works in various fields that gives the insights of various developments in Sikkim. This volume is spread over fifteen chapters each focussing on a specific theme.

M. Choudhury in his paper titled 'Challenges of Urban Management and Sustainability of Towns in Sikkim' argues that urbanisation is an inevitable process in any country, state or province irrespective of difficult terrain or oppressive climate.

However, in the Indian Himalayas, according to her, urbanisation in modern sense did not happen as a natural process of evolution. It was introduced by the British colonial rulers for the first time in the 19th century. Therefore, urban centres emerged in the Himalayas only after the entry of British rulers who needed summer stations and sanatoriums for themselves. The paper highlights the issue of challenges of urban management, and sustainability of towns in the mountains with special reference to Sikkim. The author discusses in length the urbanisation process in Sikkim in two phases–pre-merger and post-merger. The paper concludes that this tiny mountain state has already discovered ways to sustain towns in spite of deficiencies in industrial development.

Vibha Arora in her article on 'The Democratic Challenge to Secularising Sikkim's 'Sacred' Landscape' has portrayed the contradiction that prevails in Sikkim's professed secularism that accompanied the democratisation process, and the opposition to state-led development process by ethnic groups on ethno-religious grounds, thus, posing a question on the very legitimacy of the developmental initiatives by a secular government. This contradiction has led the author to raise the question – does contemporary Sikkim reflect the successful transformation of a feudal theocracy in a secular democratic polity? The author delves deep into the ethnic imagery of the sacred landscape, and points to the difficulties faced by the secular state in implementing modern development projects, thereby 'fostering an economics-oriented definition of the landscape' and rooting secularism in the face of social movements by the indigenous Lepcha-Bhutia groups against the development projects in their perceived sacred land.

State Policies and Tribal Communities of Sikkim: An Ethnic Perspective by Gurung argues that there has been a steady growth in cultural-territorial identity and mobilisation in different parts of the country. According to the author, the dimensions of cultural-territorial identity and mobilisation 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 mobilisation, etc. Sikkim, like other parts of India, has been invaded by attempts on cultural-territorial

mobilisation (popularly known as ethnic mobilisation) since the introduction of parliamentary democracy after the merger with India. The author argues that though the 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 was sustained and proliferated further in Sikkim in recent past. It is in this context, Gurung's chapter tries to explain one aspect of this problem while focusing on the policies of the government on tribal issues in Sikkim.

Anjan Chakrabarti's article 'From Share Tenancy to Agrarian Reform: Sikkim in Perspective' attempts to review the changing trajectories of agrarian structure and land tenure system that was prevalent in Sikkim. It also takes stock of the agrarian reform initiated by the state government. The basic contention here is that the policy pursued by the state on the land reform since merger is still viewed as an unfinished agenda, at least in the distributive sense. The author argues that the state has failed to augment agrarian reforms despite the fact that various laws in this effect have been passed.

The essay by Padam Nepal is an earnest attempt to engage with and explores the nexus between the cultural/spiritual and the material by examining the ways in which religion and development interact and pose the issues of sustainability of development processes. It juxtaposes development dynamics, religio-cultural spaces, and the politics of ecology in the context of the protest movement of the Lepchas waged against the development project in Dzongu area of Sikkim under the plea of sustainability of development on the one hand, and of a community, as a response to the perceived threat of erasure of their religio-cultural spaces on the other hand.

Empowerment of women is central to human development. Human development, as a process of enlarging people's choices, cannot occur when the choices of half the humanity are restricted. Moreover, gender discrimination, unequal access to resources, and opportunities and decision making not only hinder the progress of women but the whole society and state at large. The article by Durga P Chhetri and Mohammad Yasin on 'Empowerment, Development and Status of Women in Sikkim' examines the socio-economic and political conditions of women. The chapter discusses three important dimension

of empowerment– social, economic and political. The authors arrive at the conclusion that women in the state though enjoy relatively better position than their counterpart in the other states of India, are still deprived of many benefits of development. In the end, the authors have suggested some remedial measures to improve the status of women in the state.

In their paper titled 'Sikkim: A Historical Perspective on the Politics of Merger', K.R. Chakravarti and Y.P. Nepal present a comprehensive account on the politics of merger in Sikkim. The authors highlight several details of the events that lead to the end of Namgyal dynasty of about 333 years, and the change of political system from theocracy to democracy.

Vimal Khawas' contribution on the 'Agriculture in the Sikkim Himalaya: A Geographical Note' makes an attempt to understand agriculture in the context of larger Himalayan geography and environmental specificities. According to the author, the physiography of the region has made agricultural conditions extremely diverse. Agriculture is greatly impacted by altitude and slope aspect. The nature of terrain and varied micro-climatic conditions influences agriculture in Sikkim to a great extent.

Food security exists when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life. Food security depends on both the availability and access to food. The challenge of achieving food security for all remains a real one even today. Anjan Chakrabarti in his essay takes up the question of food security in Sikkim. He observed that the state is gradually moving from food-surplus to food-deficient State. He concludes that fall in cultivable land, fall in productivity and rise in population are among the major factors affecting the food grain production adversely.

Decentralisation and democratisation reflects genuinely the spirit and substance of local government all over the world. In recent times, there is an increasing realisation that genuine decentralisation leads to development. It is also felt that decentralisation of power to the local units of government is one of the best ways of bringing government close to the

people, promoting public participation and increasing efficiency. According to Human Development Report (1993) where decentralisation has taken place, it has often been fairly successful in encouraging local participation, increasing accountability of local officials, reducing the costs and increasing efficiency. It is in this backdrop, the essay by Durga P Chhetri on Reinventing Municipal Administration in Sikkim dwells on the status of urban decentralisation in pre and post merger Sikkim. On the whole, an overview has been presented on the current status of urban decentralisation experience in Sikkim. The author opines that apart from legal backing, further changes in laws and attitudes of bureaucracy, implementation of citizen charter, transparency and political will are required for the success and empowerment of good municipal administration.

A.B. Subba in his article 'Multilingualism and the Development of Limboo Language: Contextualising the Language Policy in Sikkim' presents a comprehensive account of development of Limboo language in Sikkim. He tries to contextualise the development of Limboo in the broader framework of multilingualism practiced in the state. The author argues that the multiculturalism practiced in Sikkim is quite ambivalent in the sense that the languages which are on the verge of extinction with a very few speakers, have not been recognised; hence, the opportunity to bring the languages back suffers. This shows that electoral compulsions, among other things, underpin the process of recognition of languages in Sikkim. The author suggests the balanced linguistic policy for the development of the various languages, especially in a linguistic diversity state like Sikkim.

Chandrani Chhetri in her article 'Development of Education in Sikkim: The Changing Scenario' has highlighted the development of education system in pre-and post-merger Sikkim. She opines that over the last three decades, there has been a tremendous progress in the education sector in the state. Also there has been sharp increase in the literacy rate especially after 1980s, though a gap in the male-female literacy still persists. According to the author, in spite of this happy development in the field of education, the issues like dropout rates, inadequate infrastructures, quality education, etc. still remain the matter of concern in education scenario. She further

observes that in order to overcome these problems and achieve an inclusive education in the state, more concerted effort by the government and the officials concerned is needed.

The paper by Navin Pandey 'Geography of Unmet need for Family Planning and Factors Non-use of Contraception' reports the results of a study undertaken in Dzongu, North Sikkim. His research was conducted in the reserved areas of Lepcha tribes, and attempt was made to estimate the total unmet need for family planning, and identify the major factors that are responsible for non-use of contraceptives. The study shows that the level of unmet need among the Lepcha society in Dzongu is recorded to be high as compared to other societies. It is due to the fact that this tribe is more isolated, and is not exposed to the influence of any social phenomenon of other social groups.

K.R. Chakravarti and Y.N. Nepal in their paper 'Sikkim: The Nathula Silk Trade Route: A Cradle of New Relationship between India and China' provides an account of reopening of historic trade route after 44 years in the border of India and China. The paper also presents a detailed list of export and import items. According to the authors, the reopening of trade route has led to massive development and helps in the bilateral relation between India and China.

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