

SIKKIM'S DEMOCRATIC EXPERIENCE

Political and Social Aspects



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Chapter 1

Curtain-Raiser

Endowed with exceptional natural beauty and resources, the tiny erstwhile Himalayan Kingdom of Sikkim grabbed the spotlight amongst the comity of nations in the modern times during a brief transitional period from 1973-1975 when Sikkim underwent a transformation from a kingdom to become the 22nd state of Indian Union. After 1975, Sikkim has undoubtedly experienced the process of tangible development and progress and today Sikkim is a happening state. Despite severe geographical constraints and locational disadvantage, Sikkim is in the fast track route of progress and after remaining like a pupa in its cocoon, she has grabbed the spotlight once again since the recent past for all positive reasons in all crucial domains of development-social, economic, political, cultural and environmental arena.

Generally, it is viewed that without looking at the history of any particular entity, we cannot understand its present. Although this book is not intended to focus on history of Sikkim as much have been written about it, but in case of Sikkim, it becomes imperative to look at her history as it is replete with peculiarities which has affected the present day Sikkim and may have its effect in Sikkim's future too.

Sikkim is the homeland of three main ethnic groups the Lepchas, the Bhutias and the Nepalese. Lepchas are considered to be the autochthons of Sikkim but with the passage of time they were outnumbered and overpowered by the Bhutias who migrated from Tibet into Sikkim in the seventeenth century. Bhutias and Lepchas were again outnumbered by the Nepalese who according to the records were already present in Sikkim but their population increased sharply after the advent of the British in Sikkim in the early 19th century. Other communities joined them later in different phases. I have discussed this in detail in Chapter 2.

Sikkim, the land of Lepchas was first organized as a Buddhist kingdom in the 17th century by the Bhutia migrants. The first Chogyal,¹ Phuntsok Namgyal was consecrated on the throne in 1642 at Yuksam. The Chogyals ruled the Himalayan kingdom till she joined the Indian Union in 1975.

The Kingdom of Sikkim was much bigger than it is today. It touched Thang-La in Tibet in North, Tagong-La near Paro in Bhutan in the East, Naxalbari and Titalia in the South and Timar Chorten on the Timar River in Nepal in the West. The Chogyal had divided his Kingdom into twelve Dzongs (districts) and placed each under 12 Lepcha Dzongpana (governors).² He had also appointed 12 councilors to aid and advice him who were later on came to be known as Kazis. They were mostly Bhutia landlords with a very few Lepchas who had attained relatively the equal status of the Bhutia Kazis through marital relations with Bhutia aristocrats, and loyalty to the then kings as well.³

After the advent of the British in Sikkim in the early 19th century, industrious Nepalese were encouraged to settle in Sikkim. Some of them were to be recruited to British armed forces and some were to clear the forests of newly-acquired hill areas of Darjeeling and Assam for tea plantation. It is also viewed that the British induced Nepalese settlement in these regions including Sikkim to counter-balance the growing power of the ruling Bhutia tribes in Sikkim. The subsequent growth of Nepali population led to socio-economic and political change in Sikkim. The British also exercised effective influence in the administration of Sikkim particularly after the appointment of John Claude White as the first British Political Officer of Sikkim (1889-1908) and reorganized the entire system while keeping its basic structure.⁴

By the end of the 19th century, Sikkimese society was characterized by three distinct ethnic communities; Lepchas, Bhutias and Nepalis. The minority Lepchas and Bhutias claimed to be original inhabitants of Sikkim and counterweighted jointly against the newly settled majority Nepalis. Interestingly, involvement of ethnicity in the politics started only after the independence of India in 1947. Before Indian independence, one could argue that most Sikkimese, no matter what their background, was commonly attached to Sikkim as homeland through two phenomena: 1) a deep reverence for their Buddhist ruler and 2) veneration of Mount Kangchendzonga or the guardian deity said to reside within the mountain.⁵

After the independence of India, like other small under-developed countries clamoring and struggling for political emancipation, Sikkim too became restless and became aware of their political objectives with the political progress in the neighboring country. As a result, a popular government led by Tashi Tshering was formed in Sikkim in 1949. Although

the government lasted only for 29 days, it necessitated the introduction of a system of government in which the representatives of all the interest of the people would be represented through election in the Advisory Council in ruling the Kingdom.

To maintain a balance between the three communities: Lepchas, Bhutias and Nepalese in the proposed State Council, a system of parity was evolved in 1951 which means the equal distribution of seats to the communities of Bhutias- Lepchas (represented as one composite group) and Nepalese of Sikkimese origin in the State Council. It was initially advocated for the distribution of political rights in the State Council but the system became the basis of distribution of other social and economic opportunities between the two communities.⁶

The system was of peculiar kind where the Nepalese who constituted a majority were equated with Bhutia-Lepcha minorities. Parity was justified on the principle that it would be unfair to deny the Bhutia- Lepcha minority, the earliest inhabitants of Sikkim, at least equal status with the more recent immigrant groups. The arrangement was formulated with the view to satisfy the majority on the one hand and to safeguard the minority on the other so as to avoid ethnic conflicts in the multi-ethnic Sikkimese society.

But the parity system was unsatisfactory to the majority Nepalese. Besides, since the inception of electoral system in 1953, the voting pattern was basically on communal lines. As a consequence, the political conditions of the Kingdom gradually started becoming complex on the eve of the 1973 elections. After the elections, there was a general uprising against the Palace. Political parties like Sikkim National Congress⁷ and Sikkim Janata Congress⁸ put forward the demands of full-fledged democracy in Sikkim, written constitution, fundamental rights, one man one vote and abolition of parity system to the Sikkim Government. The outcome of the uprising was a famous Tripartite Agreement of 8 May, 1973, between the Chogyal, the leaders of the political parties representing the people of Sikkim and the Government of India.

The agreement provided the basis for future constitutional set up of Sikkim and its relation with India. It sought to establish a responsible government in Sikkim with a more democratic constitution, guaranteeing fundamental rights, rule of law, independent judiciary and greater legislative and executive powers for the representatives of the people and adult franchise based on one man, one vote.

On the basis of the Tripartite Agreement, elections were held for the first time under the guidance of the Elections Commissioners of India in 1974. The Election Commission provided for the State Legislative Assembly of 32 seats. These 32 seats were divided as: 15 reserved for Bhutia-Lepchas 15 for Nepalese, one for the Sangha⁹ and one for the Scheduled Castes.

The one man one vote system only partially met the people's demand for 'non-communal' and democratic system of election. The communal character of voting remained strongly entrenched. In fact the retention of 'parity' between the B-L and the Nepali communities aggravated the communal character under the one man one vote system. Nevertheless, Sikkim went for the polls and the Sikkim Congress led by Kazi Lhendup Dorjee Khangsherpa captured 31 seats in the House of 32 in the election.

After the formation of Kazi Government, a Bill was passed in the Assembly on June 28, 1974 which made Sikkim an Associate State of India.¹⁰ It provided for a democratic setup with the Chogyal as its constitutional head. The political situation in Sikkim after the event was far from stable. There were frictions between various political parties and the Chogyal on the controversial Bill passed by the Assembly in June 1974.

Consequently, the Sikkim Assembly finally passed a resolution in the emergency session on April 10, 1975, abolishing the institution of the Chogyal, alleged to be an obstacle in fulfilling the democratic aspirations of the people of Sikkim and declared Sikkim to be a Constituent Unit of India.¹¹ The resolution was then placed before the people for its approval. The majority of the people said to have voted in favor of the resolution although the special poll still remains to be a topic of controversy. Nevertheless, accepting the verdict of the people expressed in the controversial poll, the Indian Parliament passed the Constitution (Thirty-sixth Amendment) Act, 1975, making Sikkim the 22nd State of the Indian Union.

The Act inserted Article 371F in the Indian Constitution which provides special status to Sikkim unlike other states like Bengal and Bihar and allows Sikkim to maintain its distinct identity and retain its old laws. On the basis of clause (f) of the Article, the Government of India contemplated to do away with parity formula of seat reservation between the Bhutia-Lepchas and Nepalese in the eve of 1979 elections. The Bill proposed to reserve 12 seats for the B-Ls, one for the Sangha and two for the Scheduled Castes. The remaining 17 seats would be kept general.¹²

Under the new arrangement, however, no seat was reserved for the Nepalese even though 12 were reserved for B-Ls. With the only Sangha seat in their hand, the B-L had the advantage of 13 seats.¹³ The Nepalese lost the benefit of reservation, while the people from the plains were granted right to contest the general seats.

The reservation for B-Ls in the Legislative Assembly should have been proportionate to their numerical strength (22%) vis-a-vis the rest of the population. By this yardstick they should have been allocated, at best, 6 or 7 seats, and not 12 as stipulated in the Bill. It would reduce the majority community in the state to a minority in the Assembly and elevate the minority community into an effective majority.¹⁴ The arrangement did not give any advantage to the majority Nepali and placed Bhutia- Lepcha as decisive factor in state governance.

There were protests and oppositions from Nepali population against the seat reservation. Nevertheless, with the new arrangement, the first election after the merger of Sikkim was conducted in 1979. Nar Bahadur Bhandari's Sikkim Janata Parishad came out victorious in the election. He again came to power with his newly formed party, the Sikkim Sangram Parishad (SSP) in 1985. He became the elected chief minister for the third consecutive time in 1989. With each election, his party became stronger. He ruled the state with an iron hand for 15 years between 1979 and 1994, except for two breaks in between.¹⁵ His rule was described as one of 'high-handed and dictatorial'. I have focused on Bhandari's rule in Sikkim in detail in Chapters 3 and 4.

The undemocratic rule in Sikkim by Bhandari resulted in his downfall and led to the emergence of Sikkim Democratic Front led by Pawan Chamling. It came to power in 1994. Chamling's rule has out won Bhandari's regime and has dominated Sikkim's politics since 1994 till date. Barring 2014 elections,¹⁶ his party has also come to power in a more convincing manner than the previous elections. Chapter 5 deals with the evolution and the rule of SDF in Sikkim.

After the merger with India in 1975, Sikkim has witnessed two distinct regimes of representative governments – the first led by Nar Bahadur Bhandari from 1979-1994 followed by Pawan Chamling from 1994 till date. A close view at Sikkim's democratic history reflects three striking trends: one, the trend of a dominant one party system, where the ruling party, whether it was SSP then or SDF now, enjoys absolute majority and the opposition remains virtually non-existent both from the regional as well as national political parties; two, replacement of dominance of one

party by the dominance of another party thus, resisting the emergence of competitive party politics; three, increasing role of ethnicity in power politics due to uneven distribution of Assembly seats which had its roots in the 'Parity System' evolved in 1951.

Although, Sikkim is very young to be equated with party politics and electoral trends of other states, however, it is imperative to analyze this peculiar system of one - party -system and one - man - rule in Sikkim after the introduction of representative form of government. In this connection, the reasons behind the political domination of SSP and SDF in politics of Sikkim and the impact of such trend on the state politics should be analyzed. It should be examined why and how ethnicity plays a crucial role in stabilizing or destabilizing the political domination of regimes. Most importantly, it should be examined whether in this environment, political democracy has taken its root in Sikkimese society, how it has evolved over the years under the leadership of different political leaders in the post merger era and whether people's aspirations for democracy, the main reason for merger of Sikkim with India, is fulfilled.

This book will help us find answers to these issues. It will help us understand the circumstances which led to the merger and more particularly, the political scenario after the merger, the governance and achievements of the SSP and the SDF as a regional party and their role to bring about political democracy in Sikkim. The book proceeds as follows. Chapter 2 deals with the historical background of Sikkim. It deals with the Chogyals and their reigns and the series of developments during their reigns which paved the way for the beginning of political democracy and finally the end of Chogyal era in Sikkim.

Chapter 3 discusses the politics in Sikkim after the merger, the inexperienced political parties in the new democratic set-up and particularly, the rule of Kazi as the first chief minister and the rise of Nar Bahadur Bhandari with his Sikkim Janata Party. Chapter 4 entirely deals with political dominance of Sikkim Sangram Parishad led by Nar Bahadur Bhandari. It turns to show the performance of SSP as a regional party in the politics of Sikkim for fifteen years and the role of opposition during its rule. The chapter concludes with discussion of state of affairs and reasons for the fall of SSP Government.

In chapter 5, I explore the emergence and evolution of Sikkim Democratic Front as a regional political party under the leadership of Pawan Chamling and assess the performance of SDF as an alternative to political domination

of SSP. I have also reviewed the role of opposition in the SDF Government. Chapter 6 presents summary and conclusions. The chapter explores answers to the issues presented above as the main objective of this book and gleans the findings supported by interviews and surveys.

Reference

1. Chogyal means the king who rules with righteousness.
2. J. N.Kazi, *Sikkim for Sikkimese Distinct Identity withn the Union* (2009).
3. H. Bareh, *Enclyclopedia of North- East India : Sikkim* (2001).
4. J. N.Kazi, *Sikkim for Sikkimese Distinct Identity withn the Union* (2009).
5. J.Hiltz, "Constructing Sikkimese national identity in the 1960s and 1970s," *Bulletin of Tibetology*, p.73 (November, 2003)
6. N. Sengupta, *State Government and Politics of Sikkim*. (1985)
7. Sikkim National Congress was formed through the amalgamation of L.D.Kazi's Swatantra Dal, the dissident group of SSC and the dissident group of SNP in 1960.
8. Sikkim Janata Congress was formed on the eve of the 1973 elections under the leadership of Nakul Pradhan.
9. The Sangha (monasteries) constituency is a unique feature of not only Sikkim but also for the whole of India. It is reserved seat for the representation of the monasteries of Sikkim as a whole and their Lamas. This constituency was to elect one member through an electoral college of the Sanghas whose members were not eligible to vote for any other constituency.
10. *Proceedings of the Sikkim Legislative Assembly*, (June 28, 1974).
11. S. Sharma, *Documents on Sikkim and Bhutan* (1998).
12. N. Sengupta, *State Government and Politics of Sikkim*. (1985)
13. The Sangha seat may be counted as B-L seat as almost all the voters of the Sangha are from B-L community.
14. U. Phadnis, "Ethnic Dimension of Sikkimese Politics-The 1979 Election," *Asian Survey*, 1245-46 (1980).
15. Bhandari was dismissed as Chief Minister of Sikkim in May 11, 1984 by the then Governor of Sikkim H.J. Taleyarkhan and in May 17, 1994, Bhandari lost the Motion of Confidence in his favour.
16. SDF won 22 out of 32 seats in the 2014 Assembly elections, 10 seats were captured by the newly formed Sikkim Krantikari Morcha led by Prem Singh Goley.