

FRONTIER FEUDALISM AND STATE FORMATION IN SIKKIM

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The principality of Sikkim was established in 1642 by a group of Tibetan adventurers in the land of the animistic Kiratis. It was a group of three Tibetan missionaries, who helped a Tibetan patriarch, Phuntsog Namgyal, to be consecrated as the first 'righteous ruler (*chho-rgyal*)' of *Denjong* (Tibetan term for Sikkim, meaning 'valley of rice'). The pre-lamaist Sikkim was known as *Neliang* by the Lepchas and *Suhim* by the Limbus. These Kirati tribes were organized under their *Kar-thaks* and *Athings*, followed a subsistence forest economy of hunting, collecting and occasional fishing. Kinship ties based on polyandry (in which Lepcha and Limbu males of same generation might have a common wife from either of the two tribes) were strong, and animism (in which snow-peaks, mountain ranges, trees and forests and other malvolent spirits were propitiated) was the accepted belief. There are some evidences to suggest that the Magars and Limbus were at times organized under chiefs, who, in course of time, established small principalities in Nepal. However, the Lepchas had been submissive and non-aggressive in their overall behaviour to other communities. On this multi-ethnic social base of near statelessness, the lamaist Namgyal rulers endeavoured to fashion a centralized feudal political authority. The reaction of the various Kirati tribes to the Bhotia rule was not the same. The Lepchas nearly submerged themselves in the Bhotias and some of the chiefs in fact joined the latter to carve out a Lamaist aristocracy composing of leading families of both the tribes. The Limbus were honoured as the 'mother' tribe and were offered entrance to important monasteries. However, the Magars appear to be openly hostile to the Bhotia overlordship and, consequently, they had to leave Sikkim. Ultimately, the

Bhotias emerged as the master of the land and the political system was shaped on the model of the Tibetan lamaist theocracy.

The above process of transformation of the stateless communities into an organized political community raises a number of issues. Firstly, has the ecological uniqueness of Sikkim played some significant role in political formations? Secondly, what is the pattern of inter-ethnic political intercourse in a region with plural ethnic base? Or what happens when a more elaborately organized ethnic group encounters a simple tribal stock in a shared territory? Third, when does a tribal formation become a state? Is there a choice involved in the process or is it a compulsive transformation? Fourthly, what are the minimum and necessary conditions for such a transition? Fifthly, how does a tribe adjust itself to an evolved state structure and how does an evolved state system maintain itself with an equalitarian tribal social system? And finally, what roles does the political culture (in terms of ideology, symbols and moral order) play in the consolidation of the state structure? While examining the above issues in the case of Sikkim, it will be profitable to review the two phases of the history of Sikkim: the pre-theocratic and the theocratic, which spans up to the 1880s.¹

ECOLOGICAL UNIQUENESS OF THE SIKKIMESE CULTURAL PERIPHERY

To begin with, Fredrik Barth's study of the Swat Pathans may be quoted in the case of Sikkim as well:

The distribution of ethnic groups is controlled by the distribution of the specific ecological niches which the group, with its particular economic and political organization, is able to exploit. . . . Different ethnic groups will establish themselves in stable co-residence in an area if they exploit different ecological niches and especially if they can thus establish symbiotic economic relations.²

Sikkim is essentially a Himalayan enclosed basin of nearly 40 miles width between two deeply dissected north-south tra-

verse ridges, each of them about 80 miles. Physically, it consists of the Greater Himalayan and Inner or Lesser Himalayan zones. The Greater Himalayan region in the north is snow desert, where highlander Bhotias graze their yaks and other herds during the summer and lead a nomadic-cum-pastoralist life. There are only three locations—Tsunghan, Lachen and Lachung—with permanent settlements, where efforts are being made to raise some cash crops such as potato and apples. Wool, cheese, butter, hide, apple and potato are the commercial commodities, which are not easily perishable and can be stored for longer period of time. Yak and ponies are the most precious pack animals. From time immemorial, these pastoralists had been following a practice of transhumance; and during the winter they used to cross the Great Himalaya towards the Tibetan plateau in the north. In this context, it may be remembered that Chumbi valley in the east of northern Sikkim has been a normal outlet for commercial, political, social and cultural inter course. In fact, the north Sikkimese pastoralists are Tibetans, who migrated from Tsang and Kham provinces of Tibet.

The Inner Himalayan Sikkim is a complex area of forest clad ranges, and river bank slopes. These ranges tend to compartmentalize certain populated pockets in the dense subtropical forests. The Inner Himalayan northern slopes are cold and dry, similar to the northern pasture land. The southern slopes of the hills and mountains have enough rainfall, suitable for slash-and-burn, type of rotational dry cultivation. Lepcha, Limbu Magar, Rai etc. (the Kirati Communities) produce dry rice, maize, millet, beans etc. and resort to hunting and collecting of the forest goods in their spare times to supplement their limited agricultural economy. Though the Singalila ridge (inclusive of the Kanchenjunga, 28168 feet peak) marks the boundary of modern Sikkim with Nepal, in olden days Limbuan (eastern Nepal) was said to be the part of Sikkim. In this way, the Inner Himalayan region of Sikkim is an extension of a much larger territory of the Kirati groups from the west (e.g., eastern Nepal extended upto Kathmandu valley). The low lying southern parts of the present day Darjeeling district of West Bengal (as a part of Sikkim up to 1835), in fact, was known as the *Morung* or *Terai*. It is well-known that 'the

northern' Terai (and Duars) are negative areas which add to the isolation of the Inner Himalayan valleys. Here the rain forests and malarial swamps inhabited by such wild animals as the tiger, elephant serve as barriers to easy access.³

In this context, it may be instructive to present Edward Shils' concept of "core" and "periphery" :

Society has a centre. There is a central zone in the structure of society. This central zone impinges in various ways on those who live within the ecological domain in which society exists The central zone is not, as such, a spatially located phenomenon. It is the bounded territory in which the society lives. Its centrality has, however, nothing to do with geometry and little with geography. The centre of central zone is a phenomenon of the realm of values and beliefs. It is the centre of the order of the symbols of values and beliefs, which govern the society. It is the centre because it is the ultimate and irreducible ; and it is felt to be such by many who cannot give explicit articulation to its irreducibility It is also a phenomenon of the realm of action. It is a structure of activities, of roles and persons, within the network of institutions. It is in these roles that the values and beliefs which are central and are embodied are propounded.⁴

Normally, the central institutional systems have a substantial amount of consensus. However, as one moves from the centre of society, the centre in which authority is possessed, to the hinterland or periphery, over which the authority is exercised, one realizes that attachment to the central values system becomes attenuated.

Keeping the above in mind, we find that the inhospitable Terai separated the Gangetic plains from Sikkim. Some limited contacts may not be ruled out ; but the Terai was very thinly populated by some forest dwelling Kirati people. From racial, linguistic, economic, social, cultural and religious points of view, the pastoralists of northern Sikkim are a part of the lamaist tradition from Ladakh to Kameng, which is again an extension of the cultural core of the Tibetan system from

Lhasa regions. In the same way, Lepcha, Limbu, Magar, Rai, Gurung etc. the Kirati tribes, though highly 'localized' in their over-all activities, by tradition look westward to their brothers. To some extent, the Kirati cluster of tribes in Sikkim, in fact, provides a cultural periphery to the core located in Nepal. From the Tibetan and the Nepalese, and much later, from the Indian points of views, Sikkim has been on the cultural and political frontiers and peripheries respective domains.

ETHNIC BASE OF THE SIKKIMESE FRONTIER SOCIETY

In case one examines the concepts of geographical heartland, political centre and cultural core within the political boundaries of a given state system such as India, China or the Soviet Union, concentration of various 'national' activities will be found inwardly directed. Conversely, such 'national' activities or specialized aspects may be found thinly distributed towards the fringe or frontiers of the state. These frontiers are, in fact, zones or belts of territory. They possess small or great areas, which are subject to continuous change as human agencies bring about modification in their character and utilization. In this way, frontiers refer to a transitional zone.

It is usual to refer to an area in which people have intermingled, and a definite dividing line is difficult to draw as a frontier one. The frequent association of frontier in popular speech with a mountainous area is at least in Britain accidental. The frontier in this sense is a zone, which by reasons of topography, climate or ethnography, is difficult to control. The frontier most often in the minds of Britons in the past happened to be the Indian frontier, particularly the North-west Frontiers in the Himalaya, hence the association. For the people of India and Pakistan, the frontier remains in the mountains. . . . For the citizens of U.S.A. . . . frontiers then came to stand for the zone which demarcates a spirit of self reliance and adventure of self-interpret and toughness in the individual. . . . In South America, the term is sometimes applied to the zone of the "national territories" i.e., the developing territory and the reign still in a more or less primitive stage,

i.e., the zone between the settled areas of Brazil and the Amazonian forests.⁵

In case one accepts the plea the Lhasa region of Tibet, Kathmandu Valley of Nepal and the Gangetic plain of India, constitute the cultural cores, eastern Himalaya constitutes a type of cultural periphery to them. Again, from socio-political considerations, Sikkim as an inseparable part of the eastern Himalayan complex, presents an ideal ecological situation in which it is considered distant, unexplored and unchartered territory in which all the above authority systems could extend their respective domains. That is how Tibetan lamaism undertook the Sikkimese principality under its wings in 1642 and converted the animist Lepchas and Limbus to their faith. Nepal had consistently refused to accept any limit to its eastern expansion up to the second decade of the last century. And ultimately, socially and culturally, southern and western Sikkim became very much Nepalese. So far the Indian core is considered, the political and economic frontiers of the British Indian empire was extended upto the Himalayas in the nineteenth century and Sikkim became an Indian protectorate and a member of the Concord of the Princes of the Indian Princely States. To uncover the frontier character of Sikkim, it is imperative to examine the early political and social organizational bases of the important Sikkimese ethnic groups.

Limbus or Yakthambas (meaning : yak horders, traders and butchers) are supposed to have migrated to Limbuan (eastern Nepal and western Sikkim) from Tsang province of Tibet. Out of 13 brothers, who originally set out from Tibet to the valley of Tamar Khola (Limbuan), only 10 could reach their destination. They lived side by side with the Lepchas and had marital alliances as well. In the pre-lamaist phase of Sikkim, a Lepcha chief married a Limbu lady named, Thungwa Alukma, from Yangya Hang clan, residing on the bank of Arun river and brought her to his seat, Ilam. The newly wedded Limbu consort aptly named the place 'Suhim' (new home), which was corrupted to Sikkim. The Limbus are divided into three 'septs' : Kasigotra (the Hinduized one), Bhuiphuta or Phedap (the animists) and the Lhasa gotra (the Tsongs). The first two are hardly found in Sikkim and are in fact in eastern

Nepal now. The *Tsongs* were cultivated by the lamaist Bhotia rulers and a small number of them reside in the inaccessible areas along with the Lepchas and are engaged in marginal shifting cultivation.

The Lepcha (the Nepali *Lap* (vile) and *che* (speakers) i.e., vile speakers, a contemptuous name because the Lepchas spoke their own dialect and initially refused to adopt Nepali :

The Rong (the ravine folk) as they call themselves... are known to the Tibetans as 'Mon-ba' or 'Mon-rik', people of the Mon country—a general Tibetan name for the lower Himalayas from Kashmir to Assam and Burma.⁶

They called themselves ravine dwellers and named their land as the 'country of cavers that gave them shelter' (*Neliang*). They were hunters of nomadic habits, roaming at large in thickets in search of food. They lived in caves or bamboo huts amidst vast, wild, magnificent forests. Their needs were few, and the jungle provided all of them, including food. They cultivated patch of forest slopes for raising dry rice, maize, millet, buckwheat and *Murwa*. They were indolent by nature and not in habit of hard work. The Rongs are reported to be mild, timid and peaceful. Their entire 'outlook, religion, mores, culture and social usages were so formed as to reduce strife to a minimum... so the dominant characteristic of the Rong was to yield to anything and everything that demanded least strife.'⁷

In case one can rely on the mythological sources in the absence of the data on pre-lamaist Lepcha society, their folk stories provide two distinct phases of their history in which there 'is an atmosphere of animistic belief. Humans occupy here only a secondary position and the animals, insects, and plants receive the whole attention of the narrator. The second phase belongs to a culture of a much more advanced group and deals chiefly with heroes and demons'.⁸ As for the Lepcha myths, their heroes appear as orphan boys ; start their career very early in life ; are always moving about alone ; and 'we never hear of a crowd of admiring followers or attendants.' The heroes undertake the adventure as the result of the orders

of an ill-advised kind. Invariably the hero returns from his adventures with a number of wives; surplus wives may be presented to a friend or gambled for.

According to the Rong tradition Turve, Tur-ayek, Tursangpano and Tur-sung (Kings or chiefs) reigned apparently at the same time in the different parts of the country. However, the Limbu sources suggest that the earliest Lepcha King was Ime Hang, who established his capital at Ilam and built a fort known as "Ang-dang-Ilam-yokma". Again the first Lepcha chief is supposed to be of divine origin and Thekong-tek, a contemporary of Khye-Bumsa, was the sixth in direct descent. Mainwaring will like us to believe that Tibetan lamas lured the Lepchas to bring all their manuscripts and books and got them destroyed so that gospel of Buddhism could be preached to the Lepcha.⁹ It goes without saying that the Lepchas were animist and their spirit-world was divided into benevolent and malvolent spirits. The Rong considered the benevolent spirits too good to be worshipped, while malvolent spirits were propitiated. For them, religious duties meant ritual sacrifices. Their lore mentions no idols, no temples and none of the places of worships. The Lepcha worshipped the mountain spirit (Kanchenjunga) at Karbi offering *chi* (their national drink), rice (*zo*), Indian corn (*ta-fa*), fish (*gnu*), birds (*fo*), sugar cane (*nut pa-am*) and flowers (*rip*). These offerings were placed on plantain leave (*kor-dong-nyon*), resting on a bamboo mat in front of an altar to the north of the nine stones facing the Himalaya mountain. They were the representatives of the Lepcha crops and it was believed that the ceremony would guarantee good harvest and bring plentiful hunting and fishes. Needless to add that the above description fits with the Lepchas being a forest dwelling subsistence community.

The Rong social code permitted a man to inherit all the widows of his patrilineal relations e.g., brothers, uncles, and even grand uncles. However,

there was a strong tendency to avoid marriage, including any sexual connection, among members who have related for several generations not only on the father's side, but also the mother's. And the members within

these generations are all called "brother" and "sister" with a distinction between "older" and "younger", in the Lepcha kinship terminology. Kinship on the mother's side seems much less important in determining avoidance of marriage than on the father's side; empirically there is no marriage whatsoever between the members of the same patri-clan.¹⁰

The Bhotia population of Sikkim is descendant of the immigrants from Tibet in the 17th century, who laid the foundation of the kingdom of Sikkim. These immigrants included herdsmen in search of pastureland, petty cultivators in search of rice fields and the lamas looking for converts. The herdsmen occupied the pastureland in the north and eastern parts. The petty peasants took over some of the hillsides near the streams for terracing and rice cultivation, pushing the Lepchas to more inaccessible and forested terrain. The lamas played the most significant role in unifying the immigrants with the indigeneous people by converting the Lepchas in lamaism. The Lepcha, who were not used to a central political authority, were easily dominated by the well organized Bhotias. Under the instruction of the lamas the first ruler of Sikkim appointed 12 Lepcha chiefs as the dzongpens (the territorial governors), along with 12 Bhotia councillors.

The lamas induce the dzongpens to symbolically surrender their lands to the ruler. After some initial hesitation and suspicion, this was done. Subsequently, the lands were returned to the owners. This symbolic surrender has a significance in that [the] Sikkimese rulers have harboured the notion that the land belongs to them and that the occupants of the land are not the real owners, but trustees of the land in their possession."¹¹

From a sociological point of view the Bhotias are 'simply a cluster of small fragments of various clans'.

There are no localized clans or lineages, among the Bhotias...the clan has little sociological importance. For the Lepcha it is a matter of great concern as an

individual to which clan he belongs ; for example, a Lepcha introduces himself always by his clan name, while the Bhotia hardly mentions his clan name at all, unless he is asked for it. Many Bhotia clan names are associated with a locality, but there is no sense of a genealogical ideology involved. They do not regard the clan members as descendants from a common ancestor, as in the case of Lepchas. In fact, many Bhotia clan names are derived from the names of a place where their recent ancestors used to live.¹²

It appears that because of mobility and the periodic change in their settlement, the function of the clan organization among the Bhotias had been lost. That is the reason why the Bhotias are not interested in their genealogy and their genealogical memory is very poor.

By tradition, the Tibetan society has been divided into three categories : clergy, aristocracy and the commoners. Many of the lamas are householders. Even those who are not entitled to raising their own families, control the properties of the monasteries as the incarnate lamas. All the lamas have been engaged in trans-Himalayan trade with the help of pack animals. The aristocrats were landlords, regional chiefs beyond the monastery territories, and warriors. They used to maintain herds of cattle heads, a large number of slaves and were also engaged in trades across the mountain passes. They were explorers and adventurers at large. The commoners were divided into petty peasants and slaves, who were invariably tied to their lords or lamas. The southern portion of the Tibetan plateau adjoining the Himalaya in general and Sikkim in particular, is an area not known for its agricultural product. In fact, this is the region of dry marginal cultivation and pastureland. Again, because of the harshness of the environment, the people practice transhumance. In a broad way, the Lhopas (the southern Bhotias) are footloose and a mobile community, either in search of pastureland, or in search of temporary and seasonal agricultural plots or trading partners.

A society of pastoral nomade profits most from sheep, goats, cattle, yak, horse or camel or various percentage

of combinations of these different kinds of stocks not only according to region, but according to historical period. . . . They laid claim to definite pastures and to the control of routes for migration between those partners. War was normal concomitant of their pastoral way. . . . The horse, which gave the nomad his strategic mobility, was a part of normal economy. The bow, his chief weapon, was also in constant use for hunting. Collective hunts or drives for games were at the same time an exercise in cavalry manoeuvres. Moreover, both his dwelling and cattle, could be moved out of the way of attack, or could retreat, with the warriors after defeat. Any prolonged warfare on the frontier tended to make the frontier nomads military stronger and economically richer year by year. . . . War among the nomads tended to become a process in which strong leaders eliminated weaker leaders and gathered larger tribes under their rule. . . . One of these (the devices for building of larger tribes) was the principle of adoption, one form of which was "sworn brotherhood" in which each man acquired status in others clan by acknowledging his ancestors.¹³

Lattimore, who had done extensive studies on the central Asian communities, also reported on the levels of the subject :

"The subject herdsmen could, of course, if he deserted his lord, be returned under a gentleman's agreement by the lord with whom he sought refuge. In practice, however, if such a fugitive stole horses (and other forms of cattleheads), he had chance to buy himself immunity and warrior standing.¹⁴

CHARACTER OF THE FRONTIER FEUDALISM

Feudalism is considered to be a system of contractual relationship among the members of the upper class in medieval Europe, in which lords made grants of fiefs to vassals in return for pledges of military and political service. It flourishes especially in a closed agricultural economy and had certain general characteristics besides the mere presence of lords, vassals and fiefs. In such a society, those who fulfil official duties, whether civic or military, do not for the sake of an abstract notion of

“the state” or public service, but because of personal and freely accepted links with over-lords, receiving remuneration in the form of fiefs, which they hold as hereditary. Because various public functions are closely associated with the fiefs rather than the person who holds it, public authority becomes fragmented and decentralized.

By one school of scholars it is considered to be :

Primarily a method of government in which the essential relationship is not between ruler and ruled nor state and citizen, but between lord and vassal. . . . The performance of political functions depends on personal agreements and political authority is treated as a private possession. The system tends to be most effective at local level. . . the military leadership is usually an administrator, and the administrator is usually a judge.¹⁵

Another school does not agree with the above position and comes out with its own definition : “We see feudalism as the form of social order in which the possessing class appropriated the surplus produce of the peasants by exercising superior rights over their land and person.”¹⁶ Again, though closer to above, feudalism is considered :

as a period in the history of people, when the basis of production was the small peasant household, when the producer was not enslaved, but was, also not a free hired labourer, and was compelled to give up his surplus to the lord. . . . The social and economic status of producers and the mode of production are, according to Soviet Scholars, the basis for distinguishing feudal societies out of those organized otherwise.¹⁷

A third school considers feudalism as a complex of economic, social, military and administrative methods of organization. It is presumed, that all ‘feudalism grow out of period of warfare’. It is suggestive of a phase in human history when military striking power had expanded to such ecologically diverse regions when the exchange of food and goods of daily consumption could not be organized within a common market

because of technologically crude and economically expansive transportation. In the words of Owen Lattimore :

the difference between military range and market range largely accounts for institutionalized feudal warfare, to take by arms that which cannot be profitably acquired by trade. Because supplies cannot move as fast as the troops, feudal military operations have three variants : either they last for a relatively short time, even though, by living off the country, the troops may thrust to a considerable distance from the feudal base ; or there may be seasonal forays to collect loot or exact tribute or capture rivals to be held for ransom ; or a successful expedition may strike so far that it breaks away and founds by conquest a feudal unit—which may or may not continue to acknowledge the real or nominal overlordship of the parent unit. The administrative aspect of the feudal complex is midway between the military and economic aspect.¹⁸

On the basis of his studies on the pastoral and semi-pastoral societies of Central Asia, Lattimore draws an analogy between feudalism and barter economics. The duties, protection and services in feudalism are exchanged rather than bought or sold. However, in course of time, the relationship becomes more one of exploitation, as the superior tends to give less protection while demanding more duties and services. Then he goes on and provides us with “the bare bones” of a feudal economic system :

The economic function is weak. The major productive activity is agricultural. The unarmed cultivators pay tribute to the warriors and aristocrats who both protect and exploit them. The tribute is not in money ; it is partly in produce from the land which the peasant cultivates “for himself”, partly in labour on lords’ land, partly in other labour (e.g., on buildings), partly in manual service (which often includes house-hold service for the women).¹⁹

He also suggests, though experimentally, two types of

feudalism : evolutionary and relapse (or de-revolutionary). Again referring to the social base in rather an organismic way he observes :

There is the artificial kinship of "sworn-brotherhood" in which each sworn brother, becomes, by the power of oath, as if born into the each other's clan and bound to honour his ancestors. Then there is the submission of kin-group to the service and protection of an unrelated kin-group ; a collective submission in which the subordinate group retains its own chiefs, though fall to the status of 'headmen'.²⁰

Then he refers to the largely prevalent practice of the lord having the "companions", a low rank subordinate in attendance who may have been originally a captive but brought up in the tribe as a warrior.

These 'companions' are probably a key phenomenon in an evolution toward feudalism because they are effective in destroying the old blood-kin standard and ready to hand as the raw material for a new feudal aristocracy ; it is from them that the successful war-leader picks up trusted men to whom to delegate territory and power. They destroy the old kinship base because they are warriors who will, if need be, fight against their own kin ; their supreme loyalty is to the war-leader whom they have chosen.²¹

In this way,

a new kinship structure supersedes the old, but it is now a feudally oriented, of war-created upper class. The subject class, those who actually work on the land or with cattle, have family only in the sense of wife and children, while the possessing classes have 'family' in the sense of a recorded genealogy which is important in determining their status. The lack of family name is phenomenon found both among European serfs and Mongol tribesmen in the last period of "feudalisation" under the Manchu empire.²²

The above exposition of Lattimore is with reference to frontier feudalism. The frontiers are ecologically diverse and difficult terrains. Economically, they are often parcelled into hunting pastoral, and agricultural economies at the bare subsistence levels. Socially, they are divided into a number of clans, originally affiliated to, or assumed to be, affiliated to the tribal organizations. Besides the consanguineous ties, 'sworn brotherhood' plays significant roles in inter-tribal relationship. Hunting, riding, swordmanship, archery etc. are considered to be special skills for those who claim distinction. Politically the frontiers have divided loyalties across the political boundaries. Administratively, they are unstable and unsettled and thus, they attract adventurers, fortune seekers, explorers, entrepreneurs and fugitives. Culturally, the frontier communities are spread across the political boundaries. Strategically, the frontiers are marginal and peripheral to the cultural core of the larger societies. If one proceeds from the cultural cores of the two adjoining societies toward the fringes, theoretically, there will be a zone of mixed cultural traits high up in the ecologically difficult and undulating distant areas. This is the frontier, which is difficult to be governed politically and even morally from either of the cores. In such a situation, a stable frontier is one on which equal pressures are exercised from both the neighbouring (and often opposite) cultural cores and political systems.

EVOLUTION OF THE SIKKIMESE PRINCIPALITY

The Tibetans knew Sikkim as 'the valley of rice' and India as the 'dark green bamboo country'. Because of availability of the flatland, Chumbi valley, east of Sikkim in Tibet, was the natural choice for the pastoral and marginal farming tribes ever since the fourteenth century of the Christian era. A Bhotia patriarch, Khye-Bumsa, with a legendary claim of an Indian ancestry and royal blood from Mynak (Kham, eastern Tibet) came to settle down in Chumbi valley. *The History of Sikkim* reports of him 'having yoked a pair of yaks, working among his followers in ploughing a field'.²³ He was said to be an influential person, famous for his physical prowess. Three of his brothers had migrated to Ha valley (in Bhutan). However,

he was destined to be the initiator of an inter-tribal intercourse, which was of far reaching consequences.

Khye Bumsa, being childless was advised to seek the blessings of the Rong elder, The-Kong Tek. Khye-Bumsa crossed into the Rong domain, where not only did he secure the Rong elder's blessings for the three sons but also the prophecy that his descendants would become the rulers of Sikkim, while The-Kong Tek's own people, the Rongs, would become their subjects, and servitors.²⁴

Then,

as eternal friendship was made between Gyad-Ubum-Gsag (Khye-Bumsa) and The-Kong-Tek, they agreed by this that all the males should be considered to be related to the sons and all the females (to) the daughters. The friendship was cemented by a ceremony at which several animals both domestic and wild were sacrificed and all the local deities invoked to bear witness to this solemn contract of friendship, binding the Lepchas and Bhotias in an inseparable bond. They sat together on the raw hides of animals, entwined the intrils around their persons, and put their feet together in a vessel filled with blood', thus, smearing the blood troth to each other.²⁵

Khye Bumsa went back to his place, ploughed his miserable plots, herded his cattle heads and died in Chumbi valley. However, three of his sons are said to have migrated and settled down in Sikkim. His grandson, Guru Tashi, son of Mipon Rab, shifted to Gangtok. Guru Tashi's great-grand-son, Phunt-sog was destined to be the founder of the Namgyal dynasty as the rulers of Sikkim. That was the great phase of upheaval in Tibetan history. The institution of the Dalai Lama was being laid down in Lhasa with the help of the Mongol Khans ; the first Shabdung was carving out a theocratic domain for himself in Bhutan ; and a number of Lama fugitives, oppressed by the inter-sect disputes in their homeland, were exploring in Sikkim

the possibilities of converting the animist tribes into lamaism. By then,

three generations of Tibetan colonists from adjoining Chumbi valley had settled on the eastern border of Sikkim, near Gangtok. And it is highly probable that these Tibetan settlers were privy to the entry of the lamas; as it is traditionally reported that the ancestor of the Sikkimite-Tibetan, who was promptly elected King of Sikkim, by Lhatsun Chembo (who played an instrumental role along with the other two lamas), was a protege and kinsman of the Sakya Grand Lama. And Lhatsun Chembo seems to have approached Sikkim via Sakya, and his incarnations subsequently appeared in the neighbourhood of Sakya, and even now (the year 1895) his spirit is believed to be incarnate in the body of the present Sakya Lama.²⁶

Lhatsun, born in 1595 at Kongbu, in the lower valley of the Tsangpo (Brahmaputra), which has a climatic and physical appearance similar to Sikkim, was an ingenious innovator. In his sacred wanderings, he discovered the hidden proofs that the Guru Padma Sambhava had visited Sikkim a hundred times. And to support his statement he also discovered that his own advent as the apostle of Sikkim had been foretold in detail, some nine hundred years before, by the *Guru* himself. He was certainly a man of considerable genius. He is said to have exclaimed, 'According to the prophecy of *Guru Rimpoche*, I must go and open the northern gate of the hidden country of the rice-valley-Demojong and I must develop that country religiously.' Thus, he started from Kongbu with 35 followers and 'proclaimed that it was the time for serious people to enter the sacred hidden land.' On the way, he saw villages and pasture lands and, ultimately, he reached the border of Tibet, Nepal and Sikkim. There he was surprised to see another lama, Kathong Kuntu Vozangpo negotiating the mountain passes with a view to entering Sikkim. Lhatsun is reported to have 'told him that the opening of the northern pass into Sikkim was allotted to him and to no one else and that the western pass was Kathog's share'.²⁷ While Lhatsun is

supposed to have flown across the Himalayas from north to Sikkim, Kathog Lama came to Sikkim via Nepal across the Singilila ranges. A third lama, Sabdung Ranchenpa, is said to have entered Sikkim via southern side, a rather incredible proposition. The lamas are said to have converged at *Yok-som* 'the three superior ones' or noblemen, a literal translation of 'the three lamas' and put forth their respective claims to the territory of Sikkim as the rulers :

The three Lamas held here a council at which Lhatsun said : "We three Lamas are in a new and irreligious country. We must have a 'dispenser of gifts (i.e., a king) to rule the country on our behalf". Then the Na-dak-pa Lama said : "I am descended from the celebrated Terton Na-dak Nan-rel, who was a king ; I should therefore be the king." While the Kar-tok-pa lama declared ; "As I too am of royal lineage I have the right to rule." Then Lha-tsun said : "In the prophecy of Guru Rim-poche it is written that four noble brothers shall meet in Sikkim and arrange for its government. We are three of these [who have] come from the north, west, and south. Towards the east, it is written, there is at this epoch a man named P'un-ts'ok, a descendant of brave ancestors of Kham in Eastern Tibet. According, therefore, to the prophecy of the Guru we should invite him." Two messengers were then dispatched to search for this P'un-ts'ok. Going towards the extreme east near Gangtok they met a man churning milk and asked him his name. He, without replying, invited them to sit down, and gave them milk to drink. After they were refreshed, he said his name was P'un-ts'ok. He was then conducted to the Lamas, who coronated him by placing the holy water-vase on his head and anointed him with the water ; and exhorting him to rule the country religiously, they gave him Lha-tsun's own surname of Nam-gye and the title of "religious king." P'un-ts'ok Nam-gye was at this time aged thirty-eight years, and he became a Lama in the same year, which is said to have been 1641 AD.²⁸ (Waddell ; 1974 : 50).

Here it may be noted that Phuntsog Namgyal was engaged in milking his cattle. It means he decidedly belonged to a pastoral community amidst the Kirat hunting tribes and it appears that lama Lhatsun knew him before hand.

ENCOUNTER BETWEEN THE ADVENTURERS AND THE INDIGENEOUS TRIBES

It is invariably said that the Lepcha, Limbu and Magar communities were subservient to the Bhotia overlordship from the very beginning. Instance of the blood-brotherhood between the ancestors of the Namgyal rulers and the Lepcha is frequently cited. However, *the History of Sikkim* written by a descendant of Phuntsog Namgyal, some more than 250 years after (and claimed to be based on authentic Tibetan manuscripts and the Sikkim state records) provides some clues to the opposition from the Kirati communities to the new regime. There is an instance in which it was reported that Phuntsog Namgyal, after his consecration, was being led by the lamas and the followers (apparently 'Bhotias') from place to place. They reached a place Yangang, where there were Lepchas and Magars. The royal party happened to be riding on the horses and the riders were armed with matchlock guns. The natives who had never seen such displays, exclaimed that 'the entire party rode on the huge hogs and some of them bore sticks which when pointed towards you, produced great sound'.²⁹ The display of superior arms and horses may be taken as an instrument to create panic among the indigeneous peoples. While the lamas were said to be acting according to prophecies made by the saints to convert the irreligious peoples to the right path of religion, the Lepchas are invariably shown as wizards. The Lepcha wizards are said to have first encounter Lhatsun lama (or others) and they then are as being initiated into lamaism.³⁰

During the reign of king Chagdor Namgyal :

a body of 14 male and female *Bijuas* and *Bijuanis* of the Lepcha race called Boribons [were] employed to work mischief by black art [sorcery], but this produced no effect on Raja, who was now so incensed that he ordered the men to be arrested and brought up,

the person[s] thus possessed by the evil spirit was not immolated, but he was put among the slaves, and engaged in fetching water, splitting fuel, and sweeping the yards etc.³¹

Again,

five Lepchas...pretended to be the re-incarnation of Tashe-thing, the great ancient Lepcha Wizard chief, imposed upon credulity of the Raja, ... these impostors pretended that they could make the tops of the Rabdenbe palace and Pemiongche monastery meet, and tie a fountain into knot, suspend a stone in the sky, and draw figures on the surface of water and spin into a rope... the Lepcha Bongthings (seers) were engaged in showing people the sight of making the tops of the monastery and the palace meet together... the Lepchas had no miraculous powers, so they [the lamas] insisted upon their showing the miraculous powers and other boasted powers and sights. But they said that the time had not yet arrived. Then the Trapas [a rank of lamas] of the Pemiongchi insisted upon their showing the miraculous powers or else they would show the Lepcha, their physical powers; and they took each a piece of stone from their pockets, and began to labour the imposters with them and in spite of their attempting to run away they were pursued and killed at Tashe-lung-tzog and Tashe-garad... The Raja himself was convinced of their imposition and trickery, that he had been duped by heretical imposters.³²

In the first quarter of the eighteenth century,

a Lepcha subject of Sikkim, living on the plain frontier, called Tishe Bidur, pretended to be the Guru Rimpoche, exhibited some miraculous powers in the way of necromancy and divinations. He acquired such a notorious fame as to collect around him several followers until he thought himself powerful enough to stop the Raja's revenue from the plains with immunity; he also

sought the aid of Magar Raja and tried to raise rebellion, upon which Yugthing Desit (a courtier) was sent with a force to quell it by arms, which he accomplished successfully, and killed all the Tashes at Chakhung. Yugthing was seriously wounded by a poisoned arrow shot by the Tashe. Upon this Yugthing was exalted to the rank of Chikyap.³³

Apparently, the Lepchas had been pushed to the lower portions of the hills on the frontiers in the south and west from the higher elevation by now. Then the various 'building and fortification works, in which the *Tsongs* (or Limbus and Magars) were always employed, which drove them in disgust to leave the country in a body, and retired to a place called Limbuana land and it was the beginning of the alienation and finally the separation of this Limbuana land from Sikkim'.³⁴

CONSOLIDATION OF THE STATE STRUCTURE

Frontier Management

It appears that in the beginning the Bhotias extended their regime to the topography similar to their own in north and north-eastern Sikkim. Naturally, the Lepchas and Magars were pushed to the forested, hot, humid and malarial southern frontier plains. Since the Lepchas had accepted the Bhotia overlordship, logically Sikkimese frontier extended to the entire tract claimed by the associated Lepcha tribes. It is already noted that Khye Bumsa's brothers had migrated to Ha valley in Bhutan and raised some property. Thus, western Bhutan was also claimed to be the part of Sikkim. Namgyal dynasty maintained its own estate at Phari in the Chumbi valley. The lamas of Tibet had occasionally granted some estates to various Namgyal rulers in Tibet. Some of the important individuals of the Namgyal dynasty were supposed to be incarnations of some lamas of significant Tibetan monasteries, where they were offered estates. The Bhotia rulers were in habit of contracting marital alliances in Tibet. Many a times, their consorts also brought property in dowry, etc. However, one point must be noted that in the context of Tibet, Sikkim was like a small feudal unit. In fact, relations between Tibet and Sikkim can better be described as the one between the

patron and the supplicant, and occasionally between the God-King and the vassals.

On the claims of Sikkim on its western frontiers, a historian on Sikkim has the following to say :

At the time the Lepchas and the Bhutiyas were brought together, a small group of Limbus, called Tsongs in Sikkim, was also living in Sikkim. The Tsongs, according to [the] Tibetan traditions, were originally inhabitants of the Tsangpo valley in Tibet, from where they migrated to Sikkim and beyond, to Limbuan, in what is today eastern Nepal. The Tsongs or Limbus in Limbuan far out-numbered their kinsmen in Sikkim. There had been free intercourse between the Limbus of Limbuan and the Tsongs and the Lepchas of Sikkim before the advent of the Tibetans on the political stage of Sikkim. The establishment of the Bhutiya [Tibetan] rule in Sikkim did not in any way affect the free intercourse between Limbuan and Sikkim. Since the Limbus were not organized under any central authority, and since they looked east rather than west for their dealings, this loose link has been interpreted as the "whole" of Limbuan being a part of Sikkim of those days. The allegiance of the Sikkim Tsongs to the Sikkim ruler is primarily responsible for such misinterpretation. The lack of organized territorial units on its borders, at that time, must have been another factor lending support to such claims.³⁵

The History of Sikkim reports :

The boundaries of the new kingdom of Sikkim were next fixed (reign of Phuntsog Namgyal). They were : Dibdala in the north, Shingsa Dagpay, Walung, Yangang Khangchen, Yarlung and Timar Chorten in the west down along the Arun and Dudh Kosi rivers, down to Mahanadi Nuxalbari, Titalia in the south. On the east Tagongla and Tangla in the north.³⁶

Again the same claim was repeated in *Sikkim : A Concise Chronicle*, published by the Publicity Department, Govern-

ment of Sikkim, Gangtok in the 1960s ; 'The Kingdom was then many times its size. In the north it extended to Thangla [near Phari, Tibet] in the east to Tagongla [near Paro, Bhutan], in the south to Titalia [near the border of Bihar and West Bengal, India] and in the west to Timar chorten [Timar river, Nepal]'. ✓

A few points must be noted with reference to this claim. Firstly, Sikkim does not appear to have enough man power to control and administer such a huge territory. Secondly, the topography, lofty mountains and extensive ranges, dense forests and wild animals must have made the communication in these farflung areas, if not impossible, at least very difficult. Thirdly, many of the frontier points mentioned appears to be inhabited centres such as Titalia, Dibdala, Walung, Yarlung etc. which appears to be isolated outposts which might have been over-run by the competing rulers at different points of time in the past. By all reasonable estimate, it appears that the Bhotias were settled on the high Sikkimese ranges as the rulers with an effective communication line north-east-ward and were engaged in converting to their faith the Lepchas and the Limbus, who were occupying the adjoining territories in the south and west respectively. ✓

Revenue administration :

The lamas helped Phuntsog Namgyal in founding a new dynasty of rulers with a view to establish the 'rule of the law' in an irreligious country. In spite of all the tall claim of royal pedigree, Phuntsog and at least some of his ancestors were found to be engaged in manual work. At least in the beginning, Phuntsog's courtiers must have been warriors. In the Tibetan state structure there is no tradition of a standing army and the warriors were collected from individual households ; they were supposed to bring their own arms as well as food on conscription ; and there used to be a very weak military leadership. As soon as the emergency was to be over, in the absence of remuneration the soldiers were disbanded as an organized body and there was no motivating force to hold them back from returning to their farms and flocks. Phuntsog was himself converted into a lama on the day he was consecrated at the Chogyal (Rchho-rgyal : righteous ruler). His ✓

commitment was to the powerful monks and the faiths. Even the monks were holy beings and, not very in frequently, they used to retire in meditation and go on long religious wanderings. Thus, initially, there might not have been state expenditure involved in the maintenance of a body of monks. However, the monks had personal followings among the householders, who used to take care of their mundane needs. Again, the ruler granted certain areas to certain monasteries and monks for their maintenance. However, the most significant state expenditure was involved in the form of constructing the impressively structured monasteries. For this assignment, the subjects were conscripted to offer manual labour, which remained a permanent irritant with the subjects. The lamas themselves offered as designers, architects, carpenters, masons, calligraphers and so on. It appears that state revenue was extremely limited in the form of payments in kind. And the subjects must have paid the revenue as presents from their farm and forest produce.

It appears that even in early days of the Namgyal rulers, the main source of income was from the *Morung* or the plains :

In an old deed of grant or *Sanad* granted to Pemionchi lamas, conferring on them some lands in the plains as a donation, in the year of 1730 AD, it is said that the Phulbari land from the Sikkim state possession in the plains is given in perpetuity as *Jagir* to Gelong Rinzing Long-yang for service rendered to the state by him. But on the death of the Gelong the land was taken by the Pemionchi lamas, on the condition of their performing the periodic ceremonies for the sake of the deceased and the Ruler's future welfare. And this situation was allowed and endorsed by the Raja with the addition of the clause conferring it on the monastery for good. Henceforth the land called Phulbari in the plains is conferred on the Pemionchi lamas and Khanpo (Thinley Roplai Dorji) for as long as the Heavens last. They shall have the full rights to every plainsman raiyat, who dwells on the land.³⁷

On the same page, there is a reference to one Jong (pon?) Jomchan, a said descendant of the Lepcha chief, Thekong-tek. He was granted '100 doors or paces of land, with the right of enjoying the taxes accruing from the tenants' and he was to offer one third of the income accruing from the land.'

It appears that the first effort to introduce a revenue system in Sikkim was made by the Tibetan Regent, Rabden Sharpa in 1747. After conducting a fairly correct census with the gift of the plateful of salt, the Mongsher convention (Mongsher Duma) was called at Mongsher by the Regent. It is said that all the lamas, lay headmen and *raiya*s signed a constitution, enshrined their powers, privileges and the duties. For the first time a uniform system of taxation was introduced known as *zolung* (literal mean: handle of manufacture; a basketful of grain) as a regular source of income to the ruler, a sort of land tax and a duty on trade. This innovation might have paid dividend at that time. But in 1873 when John W. Edgar went to report on Sikkim he found :

The land is not assessed, and pays no revenue. The assessment is on the revenue-payer personally, and in theory he is allowed the use of the Rajah's land in order that he may live and be able to render to the Rajah the services which he is bound to do as the Rajah's live chattel; and possibly if the system were carried to theoretical perfection, he would be bound to give over to the Rajah all the produce of the land—that is, all the fruit of his labour beyond what might be actually necessary to support himself and his family. In practice the subject is only bound to give a certain portion of his labour, or of the fruit of his labour to the state; and when he does not give actual service, the amount of his property is roughly assessed, and his contribution to the state fixed accordingly; but such assessment is made without the slightest reference to the amount of land occupied by the subject. This value of his wives and children, cattle, furniture and co. are all taken into account, but not the extent of his field.³⁸

About 15 years after John Edgar's above observations, John Claude White found the situation very frustrating :

There was no revenue system, the *Maharaja* taking what he required as he wanted it from the people, those nearest the capital having to contribute the larger share, while those more remote had toll taken from them by the local officials in the name of the Raja, though little found its way to him ; no courts of justice, no police, no public works, no education for the younger generation.³⁹

One can understand the miserable state of affairs, when it was reported that the total annual revenue of Sikkim was Rs. 8000 only in the year 1888.⁴⁰ (White, J. C. 1974 : 27). All this very much indicate that unlike the settled peasant societies where immovable landed property is the measuring unit of a person's economic affluence, domestic units were frequently on the move—a feature of nomadism.

CARVING OUT THE SOCIAL BASE FOR THE REGIME

Evolved Pattern of Inter-ethnic Relations

From the very beginning, Sikkim appears to be a plural society. The Bhotia migrants imposed their theocratic authority on a tribal base. We have already noted that the attitude of the indigeneous peoples to the Bhotia authority was far from friendly. However, ecology provided various vocational possibilities to the tribes inhabiting different niches of the topography. It appears that the dry, cold and high Himalayan reign was appropriated by the Bhotias as their exclusive preserve for pasture-land and dairy products such as milk, cheese, butter, hide, wool, yak tails etc. to be traded against the light luxury goods such as silk, cotton, dye and, occasionally, rice. The Lepchas, Limbus and Magars were pushed to the hot, humid and densely forested southern region for marginal farming and hunting. However, the Bhotias innovated some novel mechanisms to counteract the potential local hostility to their authority.

First, the lamas spun a mythological support in which

it was reported that the Bhotia Patriarch, Khye-Bumsa, the ancestor of Phuntsog Namgyal, begged the divine blessings of the Lepcha seer and chief, The-Kong Tek, for begetting sons. The Lepcha chief not only obliged the petitioner, but also made the prophecy through which the two tribes became 'sworn-brothers' and the Lepchas had agreed to be the subjects of the Khye-Bumsa's progeny. Secondly, the same organic model was further utilized to secure the allegiance from the Limbus and the Lepchas again.

To win the confidence of the Kirati tribes he (Phuntsog Namgyal) invited all the tribal chiefs to a meeting where he proclaimed that the Sikkim Bhotias (the victorious Lhopas), the Lepchas (the Membas or the Mon-pas), and the Tsongs (the Yakthambas or the Limbus) were of one family. The King (a Lhopa) should be considered the father, the Lepchas (the Mon-pas) the mother and the Limbus (Tsongs), the sons of the same family, forming a council called '*Lhomontsong*'.⁴¹

To further cement the inter-ethnic ties, the Bhotia kings contracted matrimonial alliances with the Limbus and the Lepchas. Out of a dozen of the Bhotia rulers of Sikkim, at least seven of them had one of their consorts from the Limbu tribe.

RESTRUCTURING AN ECONOMIC BASE AND CREATION OF AN ARISTOCRACY

When and how does an 'ethnic-group' get feudalized (if it so happens, and in case of Sikkim it did happen) and when does it become a 'nation'? The ethnic-group 'presupposes the linguistic and cultural community and homogeneity of geographical territory; also, and above all, there is consciousness of this cultural homogeneity, even if this be imperfect, with dialects, or religious cults differing between one "province" and another.⁴² The process of feudalization implies '(i) organization of society into two classes, that of the lords of the land (whose property is inalienable) and that of the serf-tenants; (ii) appropriation of the surplus by the lord of the land, as a matter of right ("dues") and not through commodity rela-

tions ; (iii) absence of commodity exchange inside the "domain", which constitutes the primary cell of this kind of society".⁴³ Feudal mode of production may lead to 'nationhood' when, over and above, the features mentioned for the ethnic-group, "a social class, controlling the central state machinery, ensures economic unity of the community's life. . . . When the organization of this dominant class of the generation, the circulation and the distribution of the surplus, welds together into one the fates of the various provinces".⁴⁴

The lamaist theocracy of Sikkim was established on an ethnic base by an alien authority which had crossed over certain ecological and cultural barriers. The two communities also represent two variants of the primitive economy : the former as pastoralists and latter as the shifting cultivators and the hunters. We shall be discussing the character of the Sikkimese frontier feudalism at the end of the presentation. Presently our endeavour is to identify the processes through which : certain surplus was generated ; and the nobility and aristocracy were fashioned on a primitive economic base. We have already noted how the Namgyal rulers came to be the masters of the entire land of the state, which was initially community land under the Lepcha chiefs. Then the kings appointed the regional vassals, who appropriated the maximum of the production of the cultivator in their favour on the name of the kings or the lamas. Here two points are to be noted. Firstly, the newly established principality maintained a near barter relationship between the state and the Bhotia pastoralists, who supplied milk, butter, cheese, wool, sheep, goat, yak, horse, meat and woollen etc. For the items symbolic to the religious and royal rituals, they relied on the supply from Tibet, which was invariably traded against the dairy products and rice from the valley. Secondly, for the maintenance of the state and the church functionaries, the Kirati tribes settled on the river beds or the southern *terai* slopes had to supply the consumer articles such as rice, *murwa*, millets, beans, vegetables, meat, fish and other forest products.

The Sikkimese land-holding law maintains that all land belongs to the king, and only usufructage, not outright ownership, devolves on the residents of the land.

The cultivators have no title to the soil, and a man may settle down on and cultivate any land he may find unoccupied without going through any formality whatsoever, and once he had occupied the land, no one but the Rajah can eject him at any time; and if he ceases to occupy the land, he would not retain any lien up on it. There is a kind of tenant-right, however, under which cultivators are enabled to dispose of unexhausted improvements... a man who has terraced a piece of hillside could not sell the land, but is allowed to sell the right of using the terraces.⁴⁵

The *qazis* and the officials enjoyed some authority, but the final authority rested with the king. In fact, 'the Kazis had no proprietary right in the lands although they did have a kind of hereditary title to their office'.⁴⁶

The lamas helped Phuntsog Namgyal to establish a centralized authority. But the problem was that the Bhotias were migrants to Sikkim, who were apparently small in number than that of the indigeneous tribes and again many of the migrants came to Sikkim as mercenaries with the lamas. In such a situation, it was logical for the rulers to carve out a loyal social base subservient to the regime. Apparently, then the entire land was under the Lepcha chiefs. Twelve influential (or the loyal) Lepcha chiefs were selected by the king and were appointed as the *dzongpons* (also spelt as *jongpon*—governors of the districts), a practice straight away borrowed from Tibet. This must have made the new regime vulnerable to the possible intrigues of the Lepcha *Dzongpons*. To counteract it, the King appointed another twelve men as his councillors (*kalongs*) from among his trusted Bhotia warriors, who had sided with him all along the establishment of the regime. Possibly, these were his companions in whom he could confide and seek advice in the hour of crisis.⁴⁷

These two dozen important state functionaries from both the tribes: the royal and the ruled, were commanded to marry in each other's families, among the families of the Limbu chiefs and the Tibetan and the Bhutanese 'notable' families. The kings themselves provided the example by acquiring a number of consorts from among Lepcha and Limbu families;

a practice which was followed by the *Jongpons* and the *Kalongs*. These two dozen families were granted estates after which the families came to be known as the Gangtok, Libing, Barmick etc. houses. These state functionaries were supposed to have two establishments: one, and the main one, at the place of their seat, where they actually controlled the land and the settlers; another, at the seat of the court in the company of the king as one of the functionaries. All Lepcha *Jongpons* were converted into lamaism. Thus, these two dozen families got themselves fused into an institution of aristocracy, a much needed contrivance for the new regime to survive on. And this was also the beginning of the two classes in Sikkim: the Barphungpuso ("following from on high") and the Adimpuso ("created, fashioned or formed"), the patricians and the plebians.⁴⁸

We have already noted how a new commonwealth of *Lhomontsong* was evolved to secure the allegiance of the various communities. The qazi functionaries of the Namgyal court developed themselves into a close-knit oligarchy by conversion to lamaism (in the case of Lepchas only), inter-ethnic marriages and adoption of various aristocratic traits from Tibet. Many a times, these functionaries were stronger than that of their sovereigns.

During the Mohamedan supremacy in Bengal, the Sikkim Raja's possession extended down to Titalia and Siliguria in the Purneah district. The *Maharaja* used to send Bhutea (?) officers (*jongpons* and *Kalongs*) from among landlords of his territories to administer justice. These officers were called Kazis after Mohamedan officers of Purneah and Dinajpur. Afterwards any Sikkim *zamindar* came to be designated by the title of *Kazi*.⁴⁹

In case, one proposes to generalize, the following features may be noted. An exogeneous regime of the Tibetan theocratic model was imposed on an equalitarian tribal base. This must have created a considerable amount of tension in their relationships. Till the time the resources such as land, forest, animals and humans were equally available to all the tribes-

men as their own usages, equalitarian system was not challenged. The new regime began to demand privileges and, in fact, larger share from the resources, which must have created an area of conflict. To resolve this conflict of resource appropriation between the Bhotias and the indigeneous tribes, a number of steps were undertaken. Certain myths were created to legitimize the Bhotia overlordship; chiefs were converted into lamaism; marital alliance were contracted; an aristocracy was carved out; and the aristocrats were appointed to the significant state officers. All these resulted in the formation of an ethn-economic stratification, in which the king (who also happened to be a lama; and many of the future kings were, in fact, incarnate lamas.) and the superior lamas were ranked at the top; followed by the qazis (composed of the 'notables' from the Bhotia and the Lepcha tribes); then the Bhotias, to be followed by the Lepchas and the Limbus; and the hostile Magars were put at the bottom. The regime was established within a known territory; and the sovereignty of the regime over the land and the people was duly recognized.

CHARACTER OF THE SIKKIMESE FRONTIER FEUDALISM

Sikkim is located on the common periphery of the Tibetan, tribal and Nepalese (and Hindu) cultural cores. From physiological point of view it is situated on a difficult, distant and relatively unidentified frontier. The lamaist theocratic monarchy was super-imposed on a plural society, multi-economic system and on varied ecological niches. All this results into an ethn-political system which may, for convenience, be termed as the frontier feudalism. Some of its distinctive characteristics may be identified in the following.

Quasi-divine and Quasi-charismatic legitimacy

For any new regime, especially for the one, which is established on an alien soil, the first problem is to legitimize its take-over. In case of Sikkim, the founding lamas of the regime undertook two steps to impress upon the subjects that the consecration of Phuntsog was a logical, a natural and an unavoidable development: one, based on mythological and oracular prophecies made by the holymen; another, by providing a grand but mythological genealogy to Phuntsog's pre-degree. Lhatsun lama is reported to have discovered a num-

ber of sacred and mystic texts from their hidden places originally propounded by the Guru Rimpoche, Padam Sambhava. His appearance on the Sikkimese scene and the consecration of Phuntsog as the Chhogyal were claimed to be foretold in those texts, which could be revealed only to the high lamas. Again, the genealogy of Phuntsog presents him with an exceptional background amid the animist tribes. His ancestor was a prince of Sakya family from India (in which lord Buddha was born) and who migrated to Tibet to be crowned as the King, *Ngya-Khri-gTsan-po* (meaning, enthroned on the shoulders). The famous Tibetan King, *Cho-gyal Srong-btan-Gampo*, is also claimed to belong to his ancestry. Then, there was *Se-hu rgyalpo*, who was a prince of Mynak (Kham) and whose descendant, *Khye-Bumsa*, came down to Chumbi valley and displayed a number of extra-ordinary acts of physical prowess. His name means 'equalling one lakh of men in strength'; he dwelt at Sakya and built a monastery for 400 lamas; he is said to have defeated a number of great adversaries and, finally, secured the blessings of the Lepcha chief. The-Khong Tek, for his progeny to be the rulers of the latter's descendants. The animist and non-aggressive Kirati tribes of Sikkim had little choice against such combination of divine and dynastic grandeur. Since the new rulers were from Tibetan cultural tradition across the frontiers, the indigeneous tribes could not verify the authenticity of the theocratic symbols thus presented.

RULER'S LOCATION IN THE REGIONAL POWER STRUCTURE

We have already noted the newly emerged ethnic stratification within Sikkim. We have also noted that between Tibet and Sikkim, there was a relationship of patron-suppliant in political terms. There were a number of territorial enclaves of Sikkim within Tibet, which were ruled and managed by the Sikkimese functionaries on behalf of the Namgyal rulers. Needless to add that the Sikkimese ruler, who was the sovereign in his territory, was considered to be a vassal in Tibet. There is little evidence in our possession to comment on the character of Sikkim's relation with her southern neighbours. With Bhutan and Nepal she tried to maintain certain level of equality. However, there were occasions, when Sikkim was attacked by

either of the above two countries. In such a situation, Sikkim fought against the aggressors with her Bhotia, Lepcha and Limbu bands of the soldiers, organized temporarily under their own ethnic chiefs against the contingency. Such a temporary arrangement naturally met numerous disasters. In case of defeat, the rulers used to appeal to the Tibetan patron for the help and complain against the aggressor. During the reign of the third ruler, Chagdor Namgyal, Bhutan invaded Sikkim and the King had to seek refuge in Tibet. On his petitioning to the Tibetan authorities against the Bhutanese attack, the Government of Tibet sent a letter to the Government of Bhutan 'to the effect that the Tibetan Government should be the father, the Bhutanese the mother and the Sikkim State, the child. That they should bear friendship and love to each other, as they are one nation'.⁵⁰

Shifting Seat of Political Authority

Population in the Himalayan kingdoms has been sparse. There was little economic surplus for commercial transaction to be based in an organized urban centre. The Kings and lamas used to maintain a mobile kind of headquarters. Whenever they were on the move, the ritual silk umbrella, bearings their insignia, used to be mounted on a horse. Whenever the horse used to stop, the subjects could understand that their sovereign with the courtiers in attendance could be approached there. Apparently, there were not many civic functionaries and no special service castes to serve them. We have already noted the practice of having two residential establishments by the Sikkimese *qazis*. In the same way, the Sikkim rulers always had two capitals : one, at Phari, Chumbi valley in Tibet across the Sikkimese frontier ; and another, in Sikkim. Phuntsog Namgyal was consecrated as the Chhogyal at Yuksam and he ruled his subjects from there. King Tensung Namgyal Phuntsog's son shifted his capital to Rabdantse in 1670. Belaboured by the Nepalese attack, king Sugphud moved his capital from Rabdantse, which was closer to Nepal, to Tumlong, which was centrally located. Edgar reports about Tumlong in 1873 :

Besides the Rajah's dwelling and the monasteries (three in number), there are scattered over the Toom-

long hill a number of substantial looking houses, belonging to various officials. Each house is surrounded by some cultivated land, in which are generally a few clumps of bamboos or fruit trees. Many of these houses were unoccupied at the time of my visit. . . . I saw two officers who were styled *Dewans*, and who had been left at Toomlong in charge of the state affairs (in the absence of the king).⁵¹

Edgar also mentions the heaps of building materials left on Gangtok ridge for constructing another residence for the king. It was J. C. White, who built up the modern capital of Sikkim, Gangtok, after 1888. Edgar does not mention existence of a market centre. Such was the economic specialization that as soon as the capital got shifted from one place to another, the former used to be lost in the woods. In fact, the places of the royal seat, before it was moved to Gangtok, did not transform the frontier ruler setting to an urban centre.

Significance attached to the Pastoral Economy

We have noted above that the ruler came to possess the entire land under his jurisdiction, which was divided into the *dzong* and estates and put under vassals, the *qazis*. However, the kings continued to possess the private estates and the herds of the cattleheads, which were actually cultivated and herded by the 'servants' (serfs). Edgar found in 1873 in the eastern Sikkimese highland 'many black yar-hair tents of the Rajah's herdsmen, on their way from upland pastures, with great herds of yaks, all of which are said to belong to the Rajah'.⁵² The land was cultivated by the bonded families and the slaves in the lamaist countries such as Sikkim as well as Bhutan, who were taxed according to their prosperity. The *qazis* used to engage in the slaves for cultivation, free labour for construction work and domestic services. Life of the subjects (whether they were marginal peasants or slaves may be an academic issue) was really miserable. And many a time they used to desert their masters in favour of a prospect for better living conditions. All through from 1840s to 1860s, one of the reasons for the Sikkimese-British disputes over Darjeeling was

the existence of Darjeeling as a sanctuary for the fugitive slaves from Sikkim.

For all the practical purposes Sikkim emphasized its Tibetan linkages. Their entire style of life was patterned on the Tibetan practices. In food habit, drinking, dress, etiquettes, manners, architect etc. they followed the Tibetan models. The state used to consider yaks, yak tails, sheep, blankets, butter, cheese, mules, ponies, flour and salt as the significant products, unique to the state, which used to be presented to the visiting dignitaries. Needless to add that the ruler, the lamas and the qazis used to have control over the above articles of importance, which could be secured from the Bhotia pastoralists. Incidentally, these are the articles which were prized in Tibet and various nomadic and quasi-nomadic communities used to present the same articles to the authorities across the Sikkimese boundary. In fact, there were settlements, communities and certain natural resources such as pasture land, which were under the control of the two neighbouring regimes. A British administrator, who reported on the frontier, has the following to say :

The people of the village (Kubbi) pay their chief revenue to Thibet, but are bound to do certain services for the Sikkim Rajah, and to supply some food for his household. . . the people were really Thibetans, and that though they happened to live at present in the territory of Sikkim Rajah, and to cultivate land there, this did not release them from their obligations to their own state.⁵³

A feudal system is based on the principle of social inequality, in which possession of the landed property is the key criterion of social relationship. In other words, feudal system is super-imposed on an agricultural base. However, in an undulating topographic region, where agriculture may not be the main economic activity, some of the features of the feudalism may be specifically identified. In the eastern Himalayan region bordering Tibet, herding the the cattle heads on the dry uplands has been the main economic activity supported by marginal farming and occasional hunting. In such a situation ownership of the individual agricultural plots is not as important

as in the case of a basically agricultural society. In fact, ownership of the bigger topographical niches is more desirable for transhumance. This can be affected only when an individual excels in physical prowess, chivalry, riding, archery, swordsmanship etc. Such individual heroes refuse to accept the geographical divides and establish their sway not only across the ecologically uneven regions, but their overlordship transcends the cultural and social frontiers as well.

We have examined the process of state formation in Sikkim as a case of frontier feudalism. We have shown Sikkim located on the cultural periphery and socio-economic frontiers in the high Himalayas. The highlanders were semi-nomadic herdsmen, who practised transhumance across the greater Himalayan ranges. Some of enterprising pastoralists backed by the lamas descended on the Sikkimese ranges and established a new theocratic regime. The structure of this new regime was fashioned on the pattern of the Tibetan theocratic feudalism. This was done through securing the recognition of the Dalai Lama to the Namgyal rulers, who is reported to have sent ceremonial presents : This was the first symbolic step to legitimize the new regime. Besides the quasi divine sanction secured from the Tibetan god-king, Phuntsog Namgyal was provided with a royal mythological genealogy, through which he was presented to be the most eligible contender to be recognized as the ruler of the valley of the rice. The new regime borrowed very heavily from the Tibetan sources, the various royal insignia and state symbols and adopted them as their own. Needless to add that Sikkim state as a moral order was modelled on the Tibetan theocratic pattern in which only the Bhotias could be at the top and the Lepcha, Limbu and Magar were to be ranked lower, occupying a less privileged status.

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