

CHAPTER VII
SIKKIM'S SEARCH FOR IDENTITY

BETWEEN LAMAS' PRAYER-WHEEL AND THE
NEPALIS *KHUKHRI* AND BEYOND

A.C. SINHA

It is a healthy symptom of an open society such as ours to examine the various issues associated with Sikkim's identity into the Indian melting pot. Perhaps the time has come for a deeper analysis beyond the individual manipulations and historical accidents. Possibly one may look into the quality of social forces that led to the events of mid 1970's. It is also imperative to delineate the social base of the ethnic politics. Associated with the ethnic issue is the problem of choice. Has Sikkim got a choice between Lamas' prayer wheels and the Gurkhas' *khukhri* in a symbolic sense? Or it is an absurd question: Why can't both co-exist in a tolerant, happier and prosperous Indian nation? It is a fact that ultimately the Sikkimese have to make a choice and see to it that it works to their maximum satisfaction. However, an academic analysis may project such courses of choice, options open and their implications for the common masses.

Had there been a line drawn to delineate the northern boundary of the British empire in the Eastern Himalaya, east of the river Mechi in 1826, it would have rarely touched the Himalayan foothills. Purnea, Dinajpur, Rangpur, Goalpara, Kamrup, Darang and Lakhimpur—all in the plains—were the

frontier districts. The British got a foothold in the Himalayas in 1817; got an ally in the form of the Gurkhas (Nepalese) and also took the vulnerable *Sikkimpatti* under their wings. The process began in 1835, when the grant of Darjeeling was secured from Sikkim. All through the treaty of 1861 between the two, the process was complete in 1868, when Sikkim became an Indian princely state within the British Empire. Kalimpong, Jalpaiguri, parts of Goalpara, Kamrup and Darang were acquired after the Duar was with Bhutan in 1864-'65 and a pliable principality was established in Bhutan in 1907 with acknowledged British support. And subsequently, the two Maharajas attended the Delhi Durbars knowing fully well that only the British feudatories did so.

Thutub Namgyal was consecrated as the ruler of Sikkim in 1874. In contrast with the Bhutan scene, the Sikkimese ruler had lost everything—his kingdom, his crown and the Crown Prince—and spent years in captivity at Kurseong. All these happened mainly because of his style of functioning was contrary to the then dominant British imperial forward policy to the Himalayan region. The *paharias* (The Gurkhas or the Nepalese) played a significant role in execution of this policy and that's how the present international boundaries in the Eastern Himalayas come to be established within three decades of the Sikkimese takeover. Slowly but steadily, the *paharias* emerged as the dark horse of the British metropolitan economy in the entire Himalayan foothills. They were encouraged to reclaim the malarial *tarai* and *duars* as farmers. They were engaged in cattle rearing, animal husbandary and dairy products. They were first hired to clear the forest and then employed in the flourishing timber industry. With the introduction of tea plantation they turned to be reliable plantation hands. All through they were employed in the armed and para-military forces, so much so that by the turn of the 19th century, they emerged as a very dominant ethnic force in the Eastern Himalayan foothills.

They were seen by the British as the most reliable forward columns of the British interests, Herbert Risely, who wrote the Gazetteer of Sikkim, identified the Sikkimese scenario in the context of the Nepalese :

“The Lepchas are rapidly dying out; while from the west the industrious... Gurkhas of Nepal are pressing forward Here also religion will play a leading part in Sikkim as in India Hinduism will assuredly cast out Buddhism and the praying wheel of Lama will give place to the sacrificial implement of the Brahmin. The land will follow the creed;.... Thus, race and religion... will settle the Sikkim difficulty for us in their own way”. (1894 : XXI)

This was the phase in the Sikkimese history, when Sikkim was administered by Claude White, the then Political Officer in Gangtok. The royal couple spent better part of their rule in exile and imprisonment and they lost two of their elder princes—the eldest one in voluntary exile and the younger one was killed by a callous medical diagnosis. Tashi Namgyal, the third prince of the Thutubs, was entirely a British creation as the next ruler. He was tutored, groomed and guided by the Political Officer. If his father was recalcitrant and indolent, he was weak, ineffective and of retiring nature. He was nominally the ruler and even his family affairs such as education and marital alliances were arranged by the Political Officers. Under such a strong British paternalistic care, the state emerged from the subsistence slash-and-burn and forest economy to the settled wet peasant economy. The Marwari and Deswali merchants had already established the strong roots of the British metropolitan economy. The earlier communal land-ownership was changed into contractual lease system on the feudal pattern, the Sikkim was well integrated into the British colonial system. As a result of all these, Sikkim occupied the most significant place in the chain of the buffer-states on the northern border of India ranging from Afganistan to Burma.

After the two World Wars the British policy towards the Himalayan states underwent sea-change because of the nationalist movement in India. Nepal and Afganistan were recognized as the independent entities. Bhutan was advised against the earlier efforts to show its distinctive character separate from India. And the British empire cautioned the new Indian rulers not to add to their communal problems by integrating Sikkim into India. As the strategic elites in Delhi had given a little

thought to the relationship between the Himalayan states vis-a-vis India such advices came handy to them.

The movement for democratization in the Himalayan states was addressed to the British empire as well as the feudal rulers. It was primarily a movement of the Nepalese peasants, which was led by semi-educated lower middle class leaders as a whole. They did neither the ideological sophistication, nor the organizational skill nor the larger political perspective. As a whole, it was a confused ad-hoc movement against some vague targets. Their slogans, symbols, and action programmes were not much relevant to their local situations. And that is why when the first Government in Sikkim was dismissed in May 1949 after its 29 days existence, the State Congress leadership was not only demoralized, but was also much confused because the State Congress drew inspiration from the Indian democratic ethos and leadership. It happened because the Indian Union under the Congress had changed its previous preference. In the new situation, Sikkim meant the Maharaja of Sikkim rather than the people of Sikkim. Thus, the administration was once more handed back to the paternalistic care of the bureaucrats. Perhaps this might have helped the staggering feudal structure to get strengthened at the cost of the democratic forces.

What resulted on the Sikkimese political scene came to be known as the democratic fraud of the *parity* formula, a concession to the feudal authority. The then Crown Prince got the Sikkim National Party, an anti-thesis to the Sikkim State Congress, floated with his fund and personnel. The *darbar* getting encouraged, started its manoeuvre against the State Congress, which had been espousing the anti-feudal democratic cause. It was a vulnerable movement because of its weak social base. Thus, it was divided on the communal and factional lines. Consequently, politics as a means to do away with the feudal oppression came to be identified with political horse-trading, manipulations, defections and fragility of the political parties.

Among the other reasons for 1973-74 happenings the unreasonable and inflated international personage of Sikkim propped up by the then ruler and some courtiers may be identified. And that is why what happened in Sikkim in 1973-'75 was neither an invasion nor a revolution. It was simply a matter of

changed priority from point of view of New Delhi. The then ruler had possibly overplayed his limited role; gone beyond his brief; and was already nursing an inflated international stature for himself. This should be restrained for greater interest of ✓ India. Give it any name, but that's what actually happened.

This could have also happened in 1949, had there been a positive democratic movement against the colonial and feudal structure. Because of the ethnic complexity, such a movement was also vulnerable to dissention. The Bhotias had identified themselves with the ruling dynasty, Kazi aristocracy, lamaist monastic privileges and an overall feudal-cum-theocratic anachronism. The autochthonous Lepchas were too weak and oppressed to assert themselves. Because of their mild, indolent and conflictless temper, they are normally clubbed with their coreligionists—the Bhotias. The Nepalese immigrants, broadly divided into the Kirati, Newari and the Gorkhali stocks, are further divided into various social segments of castes and tribes. They may be Hindus, lamaists or even the animists. Hindus are broadly divided into *tagodhari* (the refined) and *matwali* (those who may drink intoxicant drinks). However, the language, dress, food habits and a largely common cultural tradition unify them into an identifiable Nepali stock. It is an industrious perseverent and gregarious community. It is a mobile stock which had been expanding from its Nepalese base to Darjeeling, Sikkim, Bhutan and then to eastern frontier states. It is slow but steady flow of humanity from the impoverished and overpopulated Nepalese hills to the low density but plentiful untapped resource potential eastern hills.

With the above ethnic background, it may be easier to survey the Sikkimese democratic movement. Though it was led by the non-Nepali Sikkimese, it had always been effectively organised by the Nepalese younger activities. As their social base reflecting their own operational sphere, was always weak, these functionaries had sometimes been changing their political affiliations. In the process, none of them had a consistent image of a fighter for the cause of the oppressed masses. They also suffered from the neo-rich pretensions. In this way the present problem is not of selling or mortgaging the soul or body of Sikkim, but availability of an organizationally skilled and ex-

perienced political entrepreneur, who could galvanize the Sikkimese belaboured mass into an effective force.

The muddled political scenario of theocratic feudal Bhotia inwardness, the Lepcha's loss of nerve and the Nepalese propensity to manipulative politics and organizational unpredictability has created a number of paradoxes. These may be identified as three inter-related levels.

The actual status of the Nepalese, a large immigrant community from another sovereign state, has to be determined. How do they belong to the Indian commonwealth of various cultural nationalities as others do? In what ways their language, culture, traditions and history are Indian? Will the efforts of the Nepalese to seek for the Indian identity be construed as the extension of the genuine policies, programmes and traditions of Nepal? Before one tries to answer the above issues one must be frank enough in accepting certain reservations in India about the Nepalese. Firstly, some of the leaders of the Indian freedom movement had thought a section of the Nepalese as the faithful British allies. Secondly, the Nepalese belong to a country which claims to be the only Hindu country in the world; while India proclaims from the house-top her recently acquisitioned secular political culture. Will these two genuine strands of the traditions not lead to a possible conflict of the values? Thirdly, the issue of the Indian Nepalese may be linked with the problems of the immigrant Indians in Nepal. During the last two hundred years the Nepalese rulers encouraged the peasants from the Gangetic plains to clear the hot, humid and malarial *terai* forests. While the hillmen from the interior and eastern Nepal were migrating eastward in India, the Deswalis were engaged in turning the negative *terai* into the most precious economic bastion. It is also a fact that the Deswalis and the *Paharis* fought shoulder to shoulder against the feudal oppression. Both have their kinsmen across the border and share some common cultural and religious tradition. Not only that; more privileged among them, educated at Varanasi, Lucknow, Patna and Calcutta, saw little difference between Hindi and Nepali written in *devnagri* script.

Since 1960, much water has flown in the Bagmati. The resurgent ('Rising' as they call it) Nepal has changed its priorities. Instead of the past common heritage of culture, religion,

and history, she emphasizes her distinct identity. On the other hand, Nepal considers herself as the natural custodian of the larger Nepalese interests. And that is why the real and putative problems of the Nepalese immigrants in the North Eastern Frontier of India are not easily acceptable. This is a complex issue. The Bhotias in Sikkim invariably inform their visitors that most of the Sikkimese Nepalese have multiple identities—Sikkimese, Bhutanese, Indian and Nepalese. Many of them are reported to have immovable properties in Nepal and also perhaps voting rights. However, this atmosphere of unreal, murky suspicion, and past reservation has to be changed with something positive. We have to face the problem squarely: How far have we been able to accommodate the aspirations of the Nepalese in the body politic of India?

Because of its past experience the Sikkimese regionalism is similar to that of Manipur, Tripura and other eastern states. There is a very small white collar (or blue coat) middle class professionals, who actually provide base to the political parties. Similarly, traditional system of landownership based on communal holdings provides bastion for ethnic base for or against a political party. In such a situation a political party is floated by some one who has resources of his own commands (ethnic, religion or communal) followers, and political ideologies may be turned to demand for or against certain privileges. Consequently, such political activists (or operators) are in a great hurry to achieve a position of power, authority and eminence. In case they are out of position of power, they tend to join the club of powerful quickly because they cannot afford to survive for long politically without access to distributive sphere of governmental activities. And in such a situation small, fragile and shapeless regional political parties, which are the means (and not an end in themselves) to achieve the position of power, come handy. For such politicians the national political parties are cumbersome, inconvenient and are something like obstacles. For them the national politics, ideologies and political structure remain vague, opaque, mysterious and too much impersonal. One does not know for sure what type of contribution the Sikkimese politics will make to enrich the national political culture; however the present political scenario of conflicting regional and

national perspectives has yet to be provided with a settled pattern.

This leads us to the third dilemma in the sense that much of the regionalism is addressed to the ethnic issues. As per the constitutional provision to safeguard the interests of the weaker section of the society, localized ethnic groups tend to forge their solidarity. This solidarity is claimed on the basis of subjective, putative and objective criteria of culture, language, history, etc. The articulate among the ethnic elite may raise the issue of their exploitation by the non-ethnics, could be some of them, may also be the exploiters of their own brethren. Being a tribal (or local) ensures certain access to resources such as lands, reservations in the jobs and preferential opportunity for admission to certain professions. It is conceded that an indulgent preferential treatment may go against the principle of the equality.

What is happening in Sikkim is very much similar to the above scenario. The Nepalese, who constituted about 70% of the total population, were equated by the Chogyal with the 25% Lepcha-Bhotia combine for representation to the State Council. This principle of parity between the two continued till 1979. That was the year in which Sikkim was brought on all India pattern of democratic representation. Out of 32 seats in the State Assembly, 12 were reserved for the Lepcha-Bhotia, two for the Scheduled castes and one for the monastic bodies and rest of 17 seats were left open to be contested by any Indian citizen. Some Sikkimese Nepalese feel deprived by this stipulation. They declare that their status as the Sikkimese (and Indian) has a chequered saga of suffering, humiliation and struggle against the feudal and colonial rule. They claim to be the Sikkimese.

The above analysis may provide a way to understand the complex problem. Too much reliance on the historical background may lead to draw wrong lessons by putting the lamas' prayer wheel against the Nepalese *khukhris*. However, like many colonial predilections, we have been able to prove the above prophecy wrong. Sikkim has come to stay as an Indian state. The Bhotias and the Lepchas have got their secured constitutional status. It is the turn of the Nepalese to make their final choice as a community. As the dominant ethnic group of Sikkim they

require to demonstrate their political maturity and rise above the parochial issues and integrate themselves with national political structure.

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