

SIKKIM'S PROBLEM

Democratisation or Search for Identity ?

Shortly after December 1972, events in Sikkim took a dramatic turn. There was a massive popular agitation against the arbitrary actions of the Chogyal in arresting some popular leaders. The agitation forced the intervention of the Government of India which took over the administration of law and order and sought to resolve the conflict between the Chogyal and the people. These efforts on the part of Government of India led to some settlement which should put Sikkim on the path to constitutional democracy. But a constitution is only a device for achieving the ultimate goal of reconciliation and prosperity of all the peoples of Sikkim.

The fourth general election of Sikkim was held in April, 1970 and an Executive Council was nominated in July of the same year. The seven-member National Party (both factions) was allotted the post of Senior Executive Councillor and a Bhotia representation; and the only Nepali ever won on the ticket of this party also got a Nepali seat in the Executive Council. Out of the four State Congress councillors two were nominated on the Nepalese seats in the Executive Council. The National Congress representing the General, Tsong, Lepcha-Bhotia and the Nepalese seats was given only one seat out of the six member Executive Council. How the National Congress accepted this humiliating position under the simmering opposition from the rank and file of the party is another question. The president and representative of the National Congress in the Council, L.D. Kazi, is the only Sikkimese politician with 'national' image. His experiences, activities, policies and, over all the Sikkimese political scene have chiselled him into an effective popular leader. Moreover, with his joining the government nothing apparently changed so far as expectations of his party were concerned. The Kazi was hard pressed between choosing to be a tool of the establishment by his alignment with the palace or to fight once for all in his life time for the cause of democracy. Luckily for him the Kazi chose the latter course of action and proceeded on that path resolutely.

Events that led to Accenuation of the Progress :

The National Congress in its Bulletin No. 1, 15th August, 1971 besides other demands levelled two serious charges against the palace : Firstly, the foreign (Tibetan) refugees were granted subjecthood in place of the domiciled Sikkimese whose applications were lying pending. This was done to inflate the number of the Lamaists with a view to help the National Party. Secondly, the ruler's contribution of three lakhs of rupees to the Bangladesh Ruffugees Relief Fund was considered as political hypocrisy and the protecting power India was solicited to see that the democratic causes were upheld in Sikkim as well. The palace ignored this bulletin. The Bulletin No. 2, 26th January, 1972 of the National Congress proved too hot for the palace. This bulletin levelled various additional charges : The ruler took extravagant foreign tours at the expense of the starving masses ; and he was directly charged with corrupt practices in spending the money advanced by India for development works. The bulletin likened the Sikkimese political scene to that of Bangla Desh ; Fate of the National Congress to that of the Awami League and, implicitly, the Kazi was compared to Mujib Rehman. This caused a storm in the otherwise indolent Sikkimese political circle, and the wheel of events moved unexpectedly fast. It appears that the confrontation between the Lamaist traditionalism and liberal damocracy was coming to a head.

It seems the ruler took the bulletins as an affront to his authority. The publicity secretary of the National Congress was charged with sedition. The president and executive Councillor of the National Congress, L.D. Kazi, was charged by other Executive Councillors on the floor of the State Council for insinuating against the ruler and a no-confidence motion was passed against the Kazi. This parliamentary melodrama was a unique example in the annals of the parliamentary form of Governments. An Executive Councillor (Cabinet Minister) was charged by his own colleagues on the floor of the Council. The charges were not related to the portfolios delegated to the Executive Councillor concerned. Moreover, the Council was not empowered to discuss the affairs related to the ruler and the India-Sikkimese relations as per 1950 Indo-Sikkimese Treaty which the bulletins reported. The democratic practice is that when a censure motion is passed against a minister in the house, the entire cabinet is to resign. But nothing happened in Sikkim. Even the Executive Councillor against whom the censure motion was passed continued on his post for as long as 50 days and then he was dismissed. The ruler himself took over the administration on 1st June, 1972. This led to the framing of the sedition charges against the President and the Assistant Publicity Secretary of the National Congress

and warrants of arrest were issued against them. A reign of invigilance and suppression was let loose on the National Congress Leadership.

Meanwhile, the National Party was quietly preparing for the forthcoming fifth general election. Since long, there had been moves to integrate the fragmented Nepalese political forums on one platform. The delegates of the State Congress and the Janta Party formed a new party—Sikkim Janta Congress—on 15th August 1972. The palace encouraged formation of this new party with a view to alienating the Nepalese voters from the National Congress. The National Congress leadership notwithstanding the suppression let loose on it reportedly expressed apology to the ruler and got busy with consolidating the mass base. The palace seemed to be sure that pro-palace National Party and her ally, Janta Congress, would give a crushing defeat to the National Congress. The election was shifted from April 1973 to January 11 and 23, 1973. Two possible reasons may be provided for that; firstly, the pro-palace political parties were considered well organized to take benefit of the polls. Secondly, the National Congress was organizationally in disarray because of political suppression. It is significant to recollect that all these days, contrary to the stipulation of the Indo-Sikkimese Treaty of 1950, there was no Chief Administrator in Sikkim; and the ruler himself was the head of the State and the administration as well.

The results of the fifth general election were published in the Durbar Gazette (Extraordinary) on February 15, 1973, by which the National Party won all the Lepcha-Bhotia besides two Nepalese seats. The Janta Congress was badly beaten and could scrape through with only two seats in the new council. The Sangha and the Scheduled Caste seats were won by the pro-palace independents who ultimately chose to align with the National Party. However, the National Congress could manage to maintain its previous strength in the new Council with its five members. It retained the all-Sikkim General and Tsong seats and increased its Nepalese Councillors from the previous two to three. In this way, the results of the fifth general election came only half true to the expectation of the ruler.

As in the past, there were complaints of foul play in the election. But this time counting was boycotted by the National Congress and the Janta Congress. The ruler went ahead and selected six Executive Councillors: four from the National Party and one each from the National Congress and the Janta Congress. While the important leaders of the National Party were nominated as Executive Councillors, the leaders of two Congresses were ignored and relatively non-entities from them were included in the new Executive Council. The trouble started on the

day the new Executive Council was to take the oath of Office i.e. 26th March, 1973, when the members of two Congresses absented themselves. On 27th March the agitation began with demands for democratic and administrative reforms, and K.C. Pradhan, President of Janta Congress, was arrested. The movement spread in the far off South, East and West Sikkim Anti-Chogyal demonstrations were staged. Two persons went on indefinite hunger strike. In spite of all this chaos the State Council met with the National Party and the nominated members only and the budget was passed.

On 31st March 1973, both the Congresses formed the Joint Action Committee (JAC) under the presidentship of L.D. Kazi and framed a charter of 14 demands. An all-party meeting to sort out the political controversies, chaired by the President of the Chogyal Birthday Celebration Committee, ended in deadlok. This year on the ruler's birthday on 4th April, celebrated as a national day, the police resorted to firing. Even the heir apparent is reported to have fired on the agitators; and more than 200 persons were arrested. The ruler made a formal request to New Delhi for help in resolving the political deadlock. On the same day, an Additional Secretary, Foreign Affairs, reached Gangtok. Next day the ruler sought Indian military help to put the political chaos to an end. New Delhi agreed to station two battalions of Central Reserve Police in Sikkim. By this time the Durbar administration had completely collapsed. The JAC volunteers had formed Janta Police and Janta Jails; and virtually entire Sikkim except the northern reserve of Lepcha-Bhotia was ruled by them.

The JAC requested the Prime Minister of India to intervene in the deteriorating situation on 6th April 1973, and made a representation that 'any agreement (of the Sikkimese political leaders) with the ruler would be valid only if it was 'guaranteed' by the Government of India'. Meanwhile about 20,000 volunteers of the JAC proceeded on their 'march to Gangtok'. This aggravated the situation all the more. The Durbar officials shuttled between the palace and the India House in search of a settlement, but they were doomed to failure. Then they made a representation to the ruler requesting him to negotiate with the JAC or 'we (the Durbar officials) quit'. The president of National Party and Senior Executive Councillor led a delegation on 7th April, 1973 to the Political Officer and pleaded with him to 'ask New Delhi to take over the responsibility of maintaining law and order.' New Delhi advised the ruler through the Political Officer that 'the situation could be defused by political settlement and not by fire-play.' The president of the JAC claimed that the 'ruler's writ was only confined to the periphery of the palace compound.'

The ruler made a request in writing to the Political Officer suggesting that New Delhi should take-over the administration and depute an Indian Officer to preside over it. On 8th April, 1973, Government of India took over the Sikkim administration for making 'every effort to ensure the interests of the people and safeguard their march on the road to political stability and economic prosperity'. The next day Mr. B.S. Das was appointed administrator of Sikkim. JAC suspended the mass movement; took a procession in Gangtok, and burnt effigies of the ruler and his consort. On 11th April, Mr. Das took over the charge and only then the pro-palace National Party took a demonstration around the palace and besides airing their support to the ruler raised pro-Indian slogans. On 13th May the ruler opined, 'some half-a-dozen Sikkimese Naxalite-type elements might have been behind the recent acts of lawlessness.' However, the JAC urged New Delhi to set up an Advisory Council to assist the administrator. They also despatched a mass petition signed by thousands of demonstrators to the Prime Minister of India and urged that 'the people of Sikkim be 'liberated' from the 'despotic and tyrannical' Durbar. The Youth Congress, youth front of the JAC, demanded 'abolition of monarchy the biggest impediment in the way of democratization.'

With the restoration of an effective administration armed with the confidence reposed in him by the Durbar, to JAC and the pro-palace political elements, New Delhi made hectic efforts to find out an agreed solution to the Sikkimese political quagmire. Ultimately, this led to a tripartite agreement on 8th May, 1973 signed by the Indian Foreign Secretary, the ruler, and five representatives each of the three political parties: National Party, National Congress and the Janta Congress. The agreement envisaged the setting up of a legislative assembly elected on the basis of adult franchise and an executive council responsible to the assembly. The rights of the minorities were promised to be safeguarded. The agreement guaranteed complete independence of the judiciary. It was agreed that India would provide the head of the administration with enough authority and support to ensure democratization, good administration, communal harmony and rapid economic and social development. Pending election to the proposed Sikkim assembly an Advisory Council comprising five representatives of all the three political parties was constituted on 2nd August, 1973.

Political Polarization :

Soon after 1970 election, Durbar helped the factions of the National Party to unite and, thus, claim the largest number of the members in the State Council. The known pro-palace Nepalese and the mercurial politicians were encouraged to form the Sikkim Janta Congress in August

1972. Meanwhile a reign of persecution was let loose on the National Congress. All these days the ruler shed all the initial reluctance and emerged as the chief proponent of the Lamaist polity supported by the ill-educated leaders of the National Party. They went to the electorate for the fifth time with a promise 'to work for and to lead the country and her people towards prosperity and advancement under the able guidance of the Chogyal Chempo.' They stood for preservation of the parity system and were against broadening the political participation. They were against responsible government because in their opinion 'one ruler was enough to rule over 2818 square miles' of Sikkim. But when the election results were announced otherwise politically naive Senior Executive Councillor designate, Netook Tshering, expressed the ruler's aspirations in his words : 'we look forward to this (financial) continued assistance and feel confident that the Government of India will not lag behind in fulfilling the ambitions of our people in enabling us to enjoy the status like that of Nepal and Bhutan'.

On the other hand, the National Congress took up the cause of liberal democracy and its president, L.D. Kazi emerged as the chief spokesman of the democratic cause. Through the party bulletin, 'Sikkim Today', the Kazi demanded a written constitution, constitutional monarchy, fundamental rights, responsible government, abolition of the parity system, adult franchise, and independent judiciary. The Kazi, in a representation to the Prime Minister, said, "we have long suffered from arbitrary rule of the Chogyal without any democracy or justice. Here nepotism, corruption, favouritism and discrimination have ruled for the last 20 years. We, the people of Sikkim, cannot bear it any longer... We have no faith in the Chogyal and his mal-administration. Now we will not rest till the Government of India takes over the Government of Sikkim."

During the recent turmoil, L.D. Kazi, president of the JAC, said that, they had only three alternatives : 'Firstly, the Joint Action Committee may have to run the administration in West, South and parts of East Sikkim, where the Durbar has lost every control ; secondly, failing that to migrate in mass to West Bengal (India) for shelter from the oppressive rule in Sikkim, and thirdly, they may have to march 25,000 Sikkimese people, collected at Gangtok Maidan to India House for pressing their demands'. He also informed the press reporters of a consensus among his supporters for 'virtually calling for the abdication of the Chogyal'.

In seeking Indian intervention politically and militarily, the ruler and the National Party apparently believed that the Indian armed forces would suppress the mass movement and hand over the administration to

the ruler. Although the JAC leaders had no reasons to doubt India's assurances to them, recalling the events of 1949, they made it clear after calling off the movement that they had asked their followers to stand by for another movement and march to Gangtok 'if New Delhi failed to fulfil its promise'. Rejecting the reasons for the movement as unconvincing, the ruler had said earlier, 'Instead of one-man-one-vote system we have one-man-votes which was decided upon after a consensus was obtained at a conference of all political parties in Sikkim in 1953. This was agreed to by the Government of India then'. The Senior Executive Councillor, Netook Tshering opined, 'Having contested elections, they (two political parties) should not have raised controversy over the electoral system and started an agitation. If they feel that there had been certain irregularities, the right course for them would have been to place their grievances before the election tribunal.'

The ruler could not directly accuse India of a hand in the upheaval but he gave an impression that the movement was inspired by outside elements. An Executive Councillor, Kunzan Dorjee, charged India and the Nepalese labourers working on the Border Road Organization of fomenting the trouble. Netook Tshering termed the agitators as a bunch of hooligans who destroyed the icons and gompas and burnt state and private properties. They also deprecated the Indian mass media for partiality to the agitators for giving an exaggerated picture of the movement. It appears that the ruler is still nursing his fond hope to shape the claimed Sikkimese nationalism on the basis of his ethno-religious paternalism. That is why he says, 'If you love the country, and wish to make Sikkim your home, all reforms will come sooner or later.' The crux of the problem is that the Chogyal wants to strengthen himself by burnishing the mystique of the ruler, a kind of God-King. The *London Times* termed the Sikkimese political system as 'an anachronistic Lamaist regime.'

Will the Dilemma of Nation-Building be Resolved ?

In Sikkim a tug of war between the past Tibetan theocracy and the liberal democracy is going on still. This has happened because the basic social structure of various tribal stocks remains close to primitive feudalism. The proximity of the democratic movement in India influenced a section of the Sikkimese to imbibe and follow a broad-based participative form of government. This led to the emergence of political parties and acceptance of some role of popular participation in decision making process. However, tribal, religious, racial and cultural traditions and interests have come in the way. Such basic interests die hard and there are well-entrenched elements to take benefit of their existence. In Sikkim the entire set of such primordial sentiments was reduced to a

bi-polar ethnoracial confrontation of the Bhotia-Lepcha and the Nepalese. In such a situation, a super-structure of Sikkimese identity is yet to emerge.

The recent tripartite treaty between New Delhi, the ruler and the political parties in Sikkim, has made two important innovations : Firstly, the new Chief Administrator has landed at Gangtok with far more authority than that of his predecessors. In a way, it is something like a transfer of power from the palace to Mintokang (the official residence of the Chief Administrator). Secondly, there has been a degree of restructuring of the power structure and a tighter control on the administrative apparatus of Sikkim by New Delhi. This can be seen in the new arrangement that differences between the ruler and the administrator are to be referred to the Political Officer. Perhaps these provisions are designed to impress a sense of realism against the inflated idea of the hitherto non-existent Sikkimese nationalism, as also to inspire confidence in the majority of Sikkim's population as regards their equal share in the political future of their land. How these new arrangements will work out in practice is still anybody's guess. But there is no doubt that under the circumstances these arrangements are necessary and in the right direction.