

The Politics of Identity Formation in Sikkim

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“Parhi guni ke kam, haolo joti mang” (what is the use of reading and writing, as ultimately you have to plough the field)”

—a popular Nepali saying in Sikkim.

Though formal education was introduced in Sikkim way back in 1906, when Bhutia Boarding School and Nepali Boarding School (1907) were opened, (which were amalgamated into Sir Tashi Namgyal Academy in 1924), Sikkim had its traditional monastic educational system mainly for training the Lamaist monks. However, the bulk of the Sikkimese were struggling under oppressive feudal system known for a variety of *beggars* (forced unpaid labour). And whatever education was available, it was meant for the wards of the lessees, the local land lease holders, who were invariably either Bhutia *Kazis* or Newar *Thikadars*. Commoners struggled to survive against the unbridled powers of the lessees, who could confiscate their properties, imprison them, flog them and even put them under their private gaols; they had policing and judicial rights over the tenants. Under these circumstances Sikkim State Congress started in 1947-48 an agitation on its three points demands: i. establishment of a popular government, ii. abolition of lessee system, and iii. Sikkim’s merger with India. Some of the demands were met at the time and the rest were hazed around for decades till Sikkim merged with India. This was the background on which Nepamul Bharatiyas (Sinha, A C: 2003) or the Nepamul in brief waged agitation for fulfilment of their various demands. Once the democracy was

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established and civic rights were granted to the people at large, various segments of the Nepalis began to assert their democratic rights granted under the Indian Constitution.

In this context, it is instructive to know that the literacy rates among the population aged 7 years and above have gone up from 17 percent in 1971 to 57 percent in 1991 and especially among the female the literacy rate jumped from 8.9 percent (1971) to 46 percent in 1991. Naturally, it created an awareness for the Constitutional rights among the communities at bottom of the social ladder of Sikkimese society. One finds that in 1990's, various communities other wise ranked at the bottom of the social ladder in Sikkim were demanding the rights with a view to securing social justice granted by the Indian Constitution. The struggle has passed through various phases: from recognition of Nepamul as an autonomous social entity to recognition of their language as an Indian language; agitation of the *Matwali* communities from among the Nepamul to demand for Other Backward Class (OBC) status; demand for the recognition of OBC as Scheduled Tribes. The last phase of the on-going agitation has taken the shape of demand for carving out a Kirat identity for nearly about a dozen communities within the Nepalese socio-cultural commonwealth distinct from that of the Nepalese caste structure and according them autonomous 'tribal' status .

Sikkim, one of the three Himalayan Kingdoms in pre-1975 phase of regional history of South Asia, was a British protectorate under a resident Political Officer up to 1947. Though there was democratic upsurge, but New Delhi chose in its wisdom to continue with the old British practice of Sikkimese protectorate under the British king. Way back in 1949, Sikkim State Congress, the Sikkimese branch of the Indian National Congress, waged its anti-feudal struggle on a three point charter of demands: (i) abolition of landlordism, (ii) formation of an interim government as a necessary precursor of a democratic and responsible government, and (iii) accession to India (Basnet, L B: 1974). It so happened that when State Congress struggle took momentum, the ruler, Tashi Namgyal requested the Government of India to take over the administration. India intervened and an interim Government of five ministers, three from the State Congress and two nominees of the Durbar, was installed on May 9, 1949. This hurriedly assembled interim government without defining its duties and obligations led to serious stalemet. On most of the significant issues , the Durbar nominees would not agree with the State Congree Chief

Minister, Tashi Tshering. Naturally, impatient cadres of the State Congress took to the street and that led to the collapse of the law and order in this sensitive border state. The Government intervened and the interim government was dismissed by the Indian Political Officer on the name of Government of India. The Government of India sent an Indian administrator, J C Lall, I C S as the Dewan to head the administration and with a view to assuaging the ruffled feelings of the State Congress and apprehensions of the Durbar, a State Council with an Executive Council was visualised on a type of restricted adult franchise. For the purpose of the electoral representation, a parity between the two ethnic blocks, about 25% of the Lepcha-Bhutias with that of about 67% Nepalese, was contrived. This practice of ethnic parity led to a lot of dissatisfaction among the Nepalese and a type of enmity between the two blocks of communities led to bitterness. This situation came to an end only when Sikkim merged with India in 1975 . Of course, paving the way for new type of problems.

Traditional Nepalese Social Structure and Stirring in it since 1991

The caste structure in the Nepalese society, though basically on the same pattern of purity and pollution as in India, is different in the sense that there are communities, whose status in the hierarchy is uncertain. It is also a fact that the enforcement of caste disabilities are relatively relaxed in the Nepalese social commonwealth. However, unlike in India a broad distinction among the castes known as '*tagadhari*' (the twice born) and '*matwali*' (those, who are permitted to drink alcoholic drinks) was maintained. Among the latter again, there were enslavable matwalis and 'untouchable' matwalis as per civil code (*Mulki Ain*) promulgated by Rana Jung Bahadur in 1854. All through the Rana period in the history of Nepal, the social scene in Nepal was governed by the same code of civil law. On occasions, the Nepamul in Sikkim and Bhutan were treated in the light of the Nepalese code of law (Sinha, A C: 2004). In spite of the democratic innovations in 1950's, the *Mulki Ain* continued in practice till it was abrogated in 1963 by King Mahendra, but ethnic situation remained frozen on the pattern of past practices. Then, there are a number of 'tribes', which were counted among the matwalis, but they were very much outside the Hindu caste structure and in fact, they fall under a more permissive Lamaist socio-

religious world. By and large, the deprived Nepamul in Sikkim did not have much time to waste on these nicities as long they fought against the Namgyal autocracy. But Sikkim Chief Minister, Nar Bahadur Bhandari's alleged schewed preferences in crucial appointments, arrogance with the colleagues, style of functioning and his impatience with any form of dissidence led to a silent revival of these broad social divisions.

Things began to change in Nepal in 1980's, when one learns the formation of *MAGURALI* (an informal federation of MAGAR-GURUNG-RAI-LIMBU 'tribes') for espousing their ethnic demands. So far Nepal was concerned, unlike India, it did not declare ethnic groups as 'scheduled tribes' with certain special privileges, but the ethnic groups were on stir, when Nepal was declared in 1990 as a multi-ethnic and multi-lingual state in spite of being a 'Hindu kingdom'. Very soon *Nepal Janajati Mahasangh (Nepal Federation of the Nationalities—NEFEN)* was initiated with a view to bring in all ethnic groups under one umbrella. To begin with NEFEN was founded as a federation of seven different organizations: Newar, Magar, Gurung Tamang, two bodies of Rais and a Limbu. By 1993 it had 21 federating units representing 21 ethnic groups. NEFEN maintains an anti-Brahmin attitude in its dealings with various communities and its members were supposed to be avowedly anti-Hindu. So much so that when the associations of Chhetris and Dalits tried to seek membership of NEFEN, they were asked to shun Hindu practices from among themselves before they could be welcomed to the 'club' and naturally their request was turned down (Gellner, D A: 1997:22). Thus, there is a trend among the ethnic groups of Nepal at large to distance them from the Hindu caste system, Brahminical practices and what came to be termed as the Hindu great traditions. The ethnic groups are now engaged in emphasizing their distinctive markings away from the caste Hindus. Further more, NEFEN defined itself as the "Indigenous People" of Nepal in 1994 in response to U N Resolution of December, 1993 calling for a decade of indigenous peoples by defining itself in six attributes, which are markedly as a show of distance from the Hindu social system of Nepal.

Early response of the Government of Sikkim to the Cause of Social Justice

Coming to Sikkimese situation, the Government of India had issued the Scheduled Tribe and Scheduled Caste Order notifying Bhutias and

Lepchas as Scheduled Tribes and, Damai, Kami, Manjhi and Saraki as the Scheduled Castes on June 26, 1978. The Bill No. 9 (for rearranging seats in the State Legislative Assembly in Sikkim) was introduced in the Lok Sabha on May 18, 1979, which became an Act in 1981 during the Prime Minister ship of late Mrs. Indira Gandhi. This parliamentary provision had 12 seats reserved for the minority Lepcha –Bhutia communities (termed as the Scheduled Tribes), 2 seats for the Scheduled Castes and 1 for the monasteries (the *Sangha*) and remaining 17 were declared 'General' in which any Indian who is a bona fide voter in Sikkim can be elected. Keeping in mind that the Lepcha –Bhutias have distinct culture and traditions, they have been treated as the Scheduled Tribes under Article 342 of the Indian Constitution (Kazi, J N: 1994: 339). It is very pertinent to remember that elsewhere in India seats in the legislative bodies have been reserved for the Scheduled tribes of the particular state or the districts, but in case of Sikkim an exception has been made by mentioning Lepcha-Bhutia by name. Similarly, considering the unique role-played by the Buddhist monks and monasteries in the body politic of Sikkim in the past, secular India made a special provision to allot a seat to the monastic bodies, Sangha in the State Legislative.

Nar Bahadur Bandar's third term as the Chief Minister of Sikkim from 1989 onwards marked the gradual integration of Sikkim with Indian political system. The Government of India had decided to implement the recommendation of the Backward Class Report by reserving 27 percent seats in educational, welfare, and political and administrative offices to the communities listed by the Commission as the backward. Incidentally, the said Commission had listed all the communities in Sikkim as economically and educationally backward. Naturally, Sikkim could not remain untouched from this development. The Chief Minister Bhandari, hailing from the Chhetri caste, instead of responding positively to the demand of the Other Backward Classes (OBCs), was busy spearheading a demand for the recognition of the Nepali language as one of the Indian national languages. One of his long time associates, Pawan Kumar Chamling hailing from Rai community, and also a cabinet minister, raised the issue of implementing the recommendations of the Mandal Commission Report in Sikkim in 1992 and for that he was expelled from the Sikkim Sangram Parishad (S S P) Legislative Party. However, within a few months, a turning point came in 1994, when the State Assembly passed the resolution against the implementation of

the Mandal Commission Report. Within no time 19 out of 31 members of Bhandari's Legislative Party deserted him to form a parallel political forum, Sikkim Sangram Parishad (Sanchman). Bhandari was voted out of the office of the Chief Minister on May 19, 1994. The successor government immediately recommended to the Union Government to include seven communities from among the "Sikkimese of Nepali origin" as "socially and educationally backward Classes (OBCs)". Consequently, Bhujel, Gurung, Limbu, Magar, Rai, Sunuwar and Tamang were declared OBC in Sikkim on June 2, 1994.

The fourth general election for the state assembly in Sikkim was held on November 16, 1994 and P K Chamling fought it on slogan of "*Bhasha Na: Bhat*" (Language is immaterial for associating; it is the food which, that unites us) on behalf of his political party, Sikkim Democratic Front (SDF) against Bhandari's claim for getting the recognition of Nepali as a national language in India. Electorate rejected the latter and Chamling formed the government with 19 members in the house of 32. By the time fifth general election was declared in 1999, Chamling had consolidated his position by according recognition to ten ethnic languages (Nepali, Lepcha, Bhutia, Limbu, Magar, Rai, Gurung, Sherpa, Newari and Tamang) as the official languages of the state in 1995; promised to include all sections of Nepalese as the OBCs in 1996; and opposed merger of Sikkim with that of Darjeeling in 1997. His strength in the state assembly after the fifth general election rose to 24. By the time sixth general election was announced in 2004, P K Chamling had literally replaced N B Bhandari's S S P with his own political outfit, SDF in the State Assembly. By then Bhandari was the lone member occupying the opposition bench in the state assembly, as other six members elected as on his party tickets, had joined P K Chamling's fold. In such a situation, the result of the next election was almost certainly going in favour of Chamling's party. By getting all his 32 candidates elected to state assembly in 2004, Chamling repeated Bhandari's 1989 feat by winning all seats. One of the longest serving Chief ministers and state legislature in India, Bhandari found himself out side the state assembly for the first time in 25 years, letting Chamling to follow his achievements.

Search for Kirat Identity

The belated step to label the Limbus as one of the OBCs did not satisfy their expectations. In fact, the community was nursing a grievance

against the democratic dispensation, which had lumped it along with rest of the Nepamul for political representation. They even fondly remembered that the Buddhist segment among them (the *Tshongs*) were allotted a seat in the State Council in 1967, which was done away with in 1974. Thus, they continued to press for recognition of their status as a scheduled tribe, as they claimed to be the original Kirat inhabitants of Sikkim along with Lepchas and Magars. At last, in December 2002, Limbus and Tamangs were accorded the status of the Scheduled Tribes in Sikkim and West Bengal. Further more, in partial modification of earlier orders of the State through the Notification No.2/WD of June 2, 1994 and Notification No. 236/SW/251(3) WD dated June 15, 2000, the Government of Sikkim declared (i) Bhujel, (ii) Dewan, (iii) Gurung, (iv) Jogi, (v) Kirat Rai, (vi) Magar, (vii) Sunuwar, and (viii) Thami as the "Most Backward Classes, MBC". Similarly, (I) Bahun, (ii) Chhetri, (iii) Newar, and (IV) Sanyasi were given the status of "Other Backward Classes, OBC" in Sikkim (Vida Sikkim Government Gazette: Extraordinary, No. 308 dated Gangtok, Friday 19th September, 2003). In this context, the readers may be reminded of a news item in the Gangtok Times, informing formation of a 'Bahun-Chhetri- Newar Association' with avowed objective of "protecting unity of the Sikkimese People" on the plea that though some of them were considered 'forward', but most of the members of the castes were poor and 'have-nots' (The Gangtok Times: Vol. 2 (no.16), dated April 29-May 4, 1995). By these notifications P K Chamling had fulfilled the promises made in 1996 to the State to bring every Nepamul community under OBC quota.

It may be noted that the State Assembly has 12 seats reserved for the Lepcha- Bhutia communities, and not for the Scheduled Tribes as elsewhere in India, a provision, which was challenged in the court of law. The highest court in India, the Supreme Court, upheld the provision as a part of the "Tripartite Agreement" signed on May 8, 1973 between the then ruler, representative of the Union Government and representatives of the political parties in Sikkim. Now, that the Limbu and Tamang, who have been recognized as the Scheduled Tribes, and they naturally demand political representation in State Assembly as elsewhere in the country, which has remained an enigma. Apparently, 12 seats reserved for the Lepcha- Bhutia by name cannot be shared with any body, even with the scheduled tribes, and there is no seat set aside for the Scheduled Tribes in the Assembly. The Government of Sikkim has come out with various suggestions to solve the problem.

but way out has not been found by now. This has not deterred many other communities from the Most Backward Classes or the MBCs from staking claims to be lumped among the omnibus ancient Kirat bandagan. As many eight ethnic groups (Bhujel, Dewan, Gurung, Jogi, Magar, Rai, Sunuwar and Thami) with the claim of being ancient Kirat tribes impressed upon the Government of Sikkim to accord them the status of the Scheduled Tribes. This earnestness is partly based among the claimants on the false assumption that the status of Scheduled tribe will ensure their representation in the State Assembly. Some way or other, the Government of Sikkim saw the merit in their claims and approached the Union Government to accord its approval, but they were advised to re-apply for the consideration along with an 'ethnographic report on the claims of the various communities'. The Government of Sikkim did that by the earliest by appointing a Committee¹ of four Experts headed by Prof. A C Sinha with an historian (Prof. J P Singh) and two anthropologists (Prof. T B Subba and Prof. S R Mandal) as members, to prepare an ethnographic report on the said communities' claim within 100 days. The Committee submitted its Report to the state government in the middle of 2005. The Government of Sikkim sent the report to the Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India without its own recommendations, which did not find favour with the Union Government once more. Then state Government came out with another idea to appoint a seven member Commission headed by an anthropologist, B K Ray Burman in December 2005 for the purpose 2. The Commission has held a series of seating in and outside Sikkim and submitted its Report in September, 2008.

Coming to the Committee's Report, prior to approaching the Union Government in 2004, the Government of Sikkim asked their concerned officials to request the community organizations of the MBCs to prepare their respective ethnographic reports. In terms of their demographic size, some of them are in thousands, for example, Rais have many as 72, 418 individuals as per the last census conducted in 2001. Gurung (37, 105) and Magar (10, 858) are other two numerically important communities. However, there are as may as five communities between 3, 326 (Bhujel) to as less as 223 (Thami). Six of the communities (Bhujel, Dewan, Gurung, Kirat Rai, Magar and Sunuwar) presented their respective reports for the consideration of the appointed Committee for the purpose. It is interesting to learn that even the officers of the Department of Social Welfare, Government of Sikkim failed to locate

any social or welfare organization among two of the numerically smaller communities(Jogi and Thami) and thus, there was no 'report' presented to the Committee on their behalf. There was a 'report' on behalf of Dewans, but no community with this nomenclature is known to the Indian Census Operation.

Three of the communities, Magar, Sunuwar and Rai, had published their history and ethnography in the recent past. The first two did it in Nepali and last one in English. It is apparent that a great deal of expectations has been created among the communities and no body wants to miss this golden opportunity to be listed among the Scheduled Tribes. And, no doubt, the respective associations of the various communities went out to look afresh on their unique customs, dress, food item and habit, art, craft, architect, vocations, implements, ornaments, marital pattern, and any thing, which was exclusive to them and earnestly recorded in their reports. However, even a casual probing reveals that cultural traits claimed to be uniquely special attribute of the claimed community is shared with the neighbours. Perhaps in the words of sociologist of culture, Bennett M Berger, they "want to assert, argue, persuade that such symbols/meanings, like baskets, pots, and watches, are about getting us through the days and nights we are more or less stuck with, and in doing so providing us with a sense of having got through with some dignity_ dignity itself, of course, is a precious piece of culture...that to see the matter this way is not to demean (de-mean) the dignity; it is only to look it hard in the face, and ask it tough questions"(Berger, B M : 1995:8-9).

Reading these Reports gives the impression that all these communities were descendants of the ancient Kiratas or Kirants; they were forced by the Hindu kings and the Brahmin priests to follow Sanskritic traditions and Brahminical rituals. All of them emphasized their differences with other fellow Kiratas. Again, all of them, with exception of Jogi, claim to speak distinct dialects of their own. But pressed for information as to whether they speak the claimed tongue at home, it was found that all of them speak Nepali among themselves at home as the mother tongues. However, State has recognized their languages as official languages and some token teachers have been appointed to teach them in some of the schools. But there are no pupils around to teach and in many cases the text -books are yet to be produced and written. Interestingly, most of them inter-marry among the communities claiming Kirat nomenclature. Their rite de passage

exhibits a common pattern along with other caste Hindus in terms of rituals and other personal effects. Many of the communities have their own sacred specialists, but they invite Brahmin priests on the eve of marriage and death rituals. Most of these communities face the problem of a mixed settlement with communities not necessarily of the eastern Himalayan region. "The Kiratas of the eastern Himalayas are today suffering from a lack of national symbols which would represent them and simultaneously differentiate them from the Tagadharis and Untouchables, whose culture is so similar to that of the Tagadharis. The question of difference with Other Mongoloids is perhaps the most vexing one for various reasons. It is important for the Kiratas to construct powerful symbol of differences with the Tagadharis for it is mainly the latter that they hold responsible for their present state of affairs. It is again the latter against whom they occur to be fighting. But this fight is uneasy: the symbol of difference between them are not so powerful as the Kirata leaders would like them to be...other facts of their lives and living such as economic interdependence, language, dress, ecology and destiny bind them together rather than separate them. Retreating to an ideal and convenient past to construct the symbol of difference is common but in no way easy for the Kiratas" (Subba, T B : 1999: 106).

The above quote is to a great extent out of mark in Sikkimese situation, as the Kiratas are already in power and they do control the lever of authority as per law of the land. Their main adversaries in Sikkim had been the Bhutias and not the Tagadharis, who were themselves underdogs. In fact, the Bhutias did incorporate a section of the Limbu in their fold through the mechanism of 'lhomontshong', a cultural commonwealth of Bhutias, Lepchas and the Tshongs (Sinha, A C: 1975). But Subba could see the writings on the walls, when he concluded: "The redressals sought by the various Kiratas or allied organizations in the region are incidentally within the nation-state framework. Most of such organizations would be satisfied with some kind of constitutional safe-guards as those that exist in India for the scheduled castes, tribes and backward classes" (Subba, T B: 1999:128). Does it sound as if the issue is resolved?

Ethnicity is nothing, but a myth of collective ancestry, which usually carries with it the traits believed to be innate. Immigrants from Nepal to Sikkim had a mixed heritage, divided in to castes and tribes. And there was hardly a village, which entirely belonged to one

community alone. First as the ‘, paharias’ and then as the “Nepalese”, they had to suffer against the feudal oppression in the Buddhist kingdom of Sikkim ruled by a Bhutia king. The immigrants were treated as hewers of the wood and drawers of the water for landed gentry, which was largely Buddhist Kazis. They, had to pay a higher rate of land rent in cash compared to the older subjects of the principality, who paid it in kind. They were subjected to a series of exploitative labour obligations in form of **kurwa, bethi, jharlangi, kalobhari**. Against all these oppression, they stood together in their Nepali dress, converse in their lingua franca, Nepali and it were the ill-educated and invariably self-taught roving Brahmin priests, who helped them to keep their body and soul together with the help of ritual performance, singing the mythologies, and reminding them of their ‘karma’ in this birth. They had pride to be ‘Nepalese’, who were known as the fighters, and they were fighting the unequal and unjust feudal system, which was deliberately tilted against them. In a way, this fight came to an end in 1975, when the feudal dispensation came to an end and they tried to choose a series of identities available to them with a view to appropriating certain resources (Sinha, A C: 1981).

Since then, Nepamul Bharatiyas are engaged in a different kind of struggle. And this struggle is addressed to finding an honourable place in Indian political system. First, they fought for recognition of their language, Nepali as an Indian language, getting citizenship rights to the left- over Nepamul Sikkimese and separate seats, reserved for them in the state legislative assembly. They succeeded in first two and are trying to maneuver the third one. If you cannot beat the system, you join it; and that’s what they have decided to do now by taking advantage of the constitutional provisions of providing special treatment to the “educationally, economically and socially backward communities”. In the light of that one may appreciate ethnic rush for “Kirat identity” among discrete communities. This move poses fewer problems for the Lamaist communities from the Kiratis such as Limbus, Tamangs and Gurungs, but for the rest such as Rais, Magar, Sunuwar etc, it also amounts to distancing from Hinduism to certain extent. However, the consolation is that “Hinduism works as an integrative factor for the whole of the Hindu society only for so long as the lower castes accept the legitimacy of their own position. Even in the past that acceptance was never total, and it does not exist today” (Whelpton, John: 1997:92). Right now society in Sikkim presents an image of fragmented entity,

divided communally and ethnically. Is it real state of affairs or postures adopted for the purpose on the occasion to appropriate political, economic, and social space? The above quote in the beginning appears to remind the past mind set of the community, which is now aiming for new possibilities within the Indian constitutional frame work.

Notes:

1. Government of Sikkim, Home Department, Gangtok, No 16, Home/2005, Dated 23.02.2005.
2. The Commission is to review the “constitutional status of castes and communities in historical, cultural, ecological, political, economic context and to measures to improve the quality of life of all sections of the population of Sikkim”. Sikkim Government Gazette Extra-ordinary, No.445, Gangtok, 1st December, 2005.

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