

The Kazi Patricians in the Sikkimese Polity

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The Sikkimese political culture, modelled on the Tibetan *Lamaist* polity, gave birth to an intricate system of Kazi aristocracy. This institution of the Kazi along with the Lamaist Church were the two pillars on which the Sikkimese theocratic rule of the Chogyals¹ was enshrined. However, the Kazis had played greater roles in transforming the simple tribal political system of the seventeenth century Sikkim into a complex feudal state of the twentieth century. They are the Sikkimese aristocrats belonging to the Lepcha and the Bhotia tribes. Because of the sheer longinity, political roles, economic dominance and functions of this institution in the body politics of the state, the Kazis have emerged as the patricians of the land. That is why any attempt to analyse the dynamics of the feudal Sikkimese political culture without reference to the Kazi patricians will be incomplete. In this paper, an attempt is being made to provide the genesis, growth and impact of the Kazi system on the Sikkimese polity of the predemocratic phase.

The institution of the Kazi had an obscure beginning. There are two schools suggesting two different versions of their origin even among the Kazis. The first believes that the institution is typically a product of the Sikkimese political system. The second opines that the institution of the Kazi along with the Lamaist Church was borrowed from Tibet. The former bases their claim on Thutub Namgyal's (the ninth ruler of Sikkim, r-1874-1914) observation that "having brought all the Lepchas and (the) Bhotias under his direct power he (Phuntsog Namgyal, r-1642-1670), the founder of the Namgyal dynasty, 1642-1975) selected twelve Kazis from among the superior families of Lepchas of Sikkim. Proclamations were made, promising due recognition and services, saying that the posts of ministers and prime ministers (Chag-mazod) would be conferred upon them."² However, the term Kazi seems to be taken

from the Muslim rulers of Indian plains. It seems to be derived from the Arabic *qadi*, a magistrate. Waddel finds the term "not generally used in the Tibetan, although the Tibetan spelling *bkagzigs* is recorded by Sandberg. The Tibetan equivalent of Kazi is said to be *blon-po* or ministers or *radzoug-dpon* (from commander). But the term *rodzong-dpon* is also the equivalent of a magistrate. The Kazis are called by the Bhutiyas *Lumbo* (Minister) and by the Lepchas *pano-sadambo* (King's Chiefs)."

The Nepalese sources suggest that the institution of the Kazi was introduced in Nepal during the reign of King Bijay Narain Rai (r-1584-1609).⁴ History of Nepal shows how the generals were elevated to the position of Kazihood irrespective of caste and religion. It also suggests that in many cases the Kazihood was hereditary. Among such hereditary inheritors of Kaziship mention may be made of Kazi Jagjit Pande, Kazi Ranjeet Singh Thapa, (son of Kazi Amar Singh Thapa), Kazi Chamn Bhandari, Kazi Uder (Uday) Man Singh and Kazi Bhakwar Singh.⁵ It may also be seen that the term is differently spelt and pronounced in Nepal : *Kaji, Quazi, Kaiee, Kazi*. In the beginning of the theocratic feudalism in Sikkim (from 1642 to 1888) the Gangetic plain, south of Sikkim, was under the Muslim rulers who had the institution of Kazi. In case the term was borrowed from Nepal, its broad currency and acceptance can be attributed to the transactions between the feudal chiefs of Sikkim and the representatives of their neighbouring Muslim rulers at Purneah and Dinajpur.⁶

Among the Bhotia families of repute, Risley mentioned 14 Kazi families, which might have been admitted to the sacred Pemiongchi monastery. There were 8 other families which were admitted to Pemiongchi monastery but only on payment of heavy entrance fees.⁷ As for the Lepchas, most of the present day aristocratic families trace their origin to the Lepcha chief, *Tho-Kung Tek*. Majority of the Lepcha Kazi houses such as Bermiok, Rhenock, Enchey, Rumtek, Fatong, and Gangtok belonged to the legendary *Barphungpa* stock (i.e. "following from on high" or the 'Patricians').⁸ Waddel⁹ mentioned 12 Kazi houses such as Lasso, Yang-thang, Gangtok, Rhenock, Dallam, Barmiok, Song, Tashiding, Libing, Maling, Simik, and Pendong. It is also to be noted that the *Imperial Gazetteer of India*, XXIII gives the number of the Kazis as 21 (p. 3072).

The Kazis had been contracting marital alliances with various Tibetan and Bhutanese aristocratic houses as well as with the Sikkimese ruling family. Their number has also been fluctuating in various periods. Warriors, prosperous traders and successful bureaucrats even of modest origin were elevated to kazihood, adding, thus, to the size of the feudal support of the ruler. Among such recent cases of elevation

of a commoner to kazihood is that of Rai Bahadur Lobzang Chhoden, a British employee, who joined the Sikkim Durbar Services, received rent free estates (Lingmo, Neh and Brom) and was, ultimately, recognized as a kazi. It is indeed difficult to identify the exact number of the kazi houses, because of the spurious claims. However, it will not be difficult to enumerate more than three dozen Kazi houses these days.

II

It is on record that the first Bhotia ruler of Sikkim had appointed twelve *Jongpens* (*Rdzong-spon*) from among the Lepcha chiefs and twelve *Kalons* from his Bhotia Warriors supporters. It is obvious that these two dozen families had been very influential during these days. Phuntso Namgyal, being a farsighted ruler, did not want to dissatisfy the Lepcha chiefs who had accepted him as their ruler and were converted to the Lamaism. So, he recognized them as Jongpens and commanded the Bhotia countiers to marry among the Lepchas. This practice of inter-marriage among the Lepcha and Bhotia was further strengthened by the prevalent custom of polyandry in both the tribes. Since it was the Lepchas who held the landed estates and, the institution of the Kazihood had been strongly based on ownership of landed estates, it was, therefore, natural for them to hold the first ever position of the Kazi. Such Lepcha chiefs could considerably increase their influence in the Bhotia state of Sikkim because of their numerical strength, control of the *Dzongs* and their militant resistance to the Nepalese intrusion and raids.

The Kazis also held ministerial positions and were commanded to maintain two residential premises : one, at their provincial estates where they ruled and another, in the capital around the palace of the king where they were traditional functionaries of the Durbar. Since these ministers and Jongpens were more in contact with the plains-folk than the highlander Bhotias they were sent to the courts of the adjoining Muglan (parts of Mughal India) for mutual transactions. At the same time, it must be kept in mind that the aristocracy in Sikkim from the very beginning was unified by the ties of the blood and rituals. As the central administration was maintained in the Tibetan style in which the Bhotias were adept in, they began to assert themselves. Apart from the ritual and marital alliances, large scale borrowing of cultural artifacts and ideologies provided an added prominence to the Bhotia aristocracy. Subsequently, very few self-respecting Kazi would claim a pure Lepcha aristocratic origin. And polyandrous family system provided them with suitable grounds to claim not only the Bhotia but also the Tibetan origin,

The combined efforts of the Church and the State created a situation in which the Kazis emerged as the model for the social intercourse between the Lepchas and the Bhotias. This led to inter-tribal marriages even at the lower level in the social hierarchy. Both the tribes had a practice of polyandry coupled with polygamy and system of the bride-price. Subsistence economy of the Lepchas left little saving to compete with the mercantile Bhotia herdsmen for the payment of a higher bride-price. However, inter-tribal fusion has not been achieved at all the levels. Miss N. Chie comes to the same conclusion: "The degree of social distance or discrimination between the two ethnic groups (the Lepchas and the Bhotias) appears strongly among the peasants and tend to decrease in professional circles. This in the upper strata aristocracy (the Kazis) who live in Gangtok, inter-marriage has taken place to a surprising degree. Throughout their history much inter-marriage including illegal liaisons have been found among the upper strata of the two ethnic groups. So far as these upper strata of the society are concerned, there is no feeling of superiority or inferiority. Both are very proud of being Lepcha or Bhotia. Both the ethnic groups have produced prime ministers...Practically speaking, even when they themselves claim to be Bhotias or Lepchas through patrilineal descent, it is hard to find biographically pure Lepchas or Bhotias among them owing to the inter-marriage."¹⁰

The Lamaist Kazi aristocracy, fashioned on the pattern of their Tibetan counterparts, had their own tradition of *literati* associated with the Lamaist Church. They were the regional rulers, dispensers of law and order and the agents of the Bhotia ruler in all the affairs in their localities. In the state capital too they were assigned a number of duties. Their most favoured occupation next to the traditional landlordism was the trade between India and Tibet. In this venture, they were supported by the ruler and the British. By virtue of their cordial relations with Tibetans, they were deemed at least until 1950 as the most efficacious agency to influence favourably the pro-British policies of the Tibetan theocracy. In their transaction of the Indo-Tibetan trade, the Kazis were immensely helped by the then existing system of unpaid labour. Thus, the Kazi houses, besides being the landed aristocracy, amassed wealth through trade and commerce, and made investments in urban centres of Gangtok, Darjeeling and Kalimpong.

These patricians show a marked coolness toward the rabble. However, they evince a scholarly taste and enthusiasm for books, curios and other exotic articles. Their houses are decorated and furnished on the Tibetan pattern. Most of them maintain the orchid nursery at their houses. Only a select few are invited to any social get-together at these houses. However, the patrician public men are accessible to

the people, and their doors are open for all the Sikkimese. Since the basic structure of society remains feudal and the political parties are organized around the personality of the individual leaders, their form of dealing with the none-elite masses are on the pattern of feudal patronage.

In spite of the abolition of special privileges of the aristocracy, the patricians could manage to retain their considerable rural estates in the form of paddy and cardamom fields and orange orchards. During the last twenty five years, they have made investments in the urban centres in and outside Sikkim. Their social status, scholarly taste and position in either the government or public life provide them legitimacy for the roles they perform. Plurality of their roles requires multiple membership affiliations. Apart from providing a much needed multiple source of influence in the form of various types of legitimacy the multiple roles of the patricians facilitate a broad range of publicity for them. In the absence of numerical strength in the wave of the liberal democratic process, these patricians derive their support from the multiple roles they play and a favoured treatment they got from the last ruler.

References :

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8. Risley, H.H. 1894, *Ibid*, p. 32.
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