

Democracy and ethnic politics in Sikkim

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Introduction

Sikkim was an independent kingdom, founded in 1642 by Phuntso Namgyal (Namgyal dynasty), and merged lately into Indian union in 1975. The kingdom was divided into 12 administrative regions known as Dzongs (Sinha, 2005). At present, of the three major communities – Lepchas, Bhutias and Nepalis/Nepalese – the first was believed to be earliest settlers of Sikkim (Gowloog, 2013; Sinha, 2005). In terms of religious beliefs, the Nepalese comprising about two-thirds of total population follow Hinduism. Lepchas continued to be staunch believers of Shamanism. Although it has got mixed up with Buddhism, their tradition is still being preserved, while the Bhutias practise Tibetan Buddhism. In the recent past, conversion to Christianity has been witnessed in rural areas, especially among Lepchas (Gowloog, 2013). Though English is used as official language, Nepali is commonly spoken in the state now. Hindi is also commonly spoken and understood. Several other dialects such as Bhutia, Lepcha, Limbu (Limboo or Subba), Sherpa, Rai, Tibetan and Tamang are also found and spoken in the state.¹

Geographically, Sikkim lies on the northeastern part of India, sandwiched between Tibet (China) on its north and northeast, Nepal on its west and Bhutan on its east (see Figure 13.1). It covers an area of 7,096 sq. km. It once covered over a larger territory, much larger than the present area that touched Thang La in Tibet (China) in the north, Tagong La near Paro in Bhutan in the east and Titalia on the borders of West Bengal (India) and Bihar (India) in the south. The western border Timar Chorten on the Timar river in Nepal (Bhatt and Bhargava, 2005). In terms of population, it is estimated at 6.07 lakhs as per 2011 population census; it is the least populous state in the country. Nepalese constitutes around 65 per cent of the total population, followed by Bhutias and Lepchas with around eight per cent and seven per cent, respectively.

(d) the introduction of competitive elections and mass suffrage amidst weak institutions generate more pressures towards more equal distribution of power in the society. Likewise, Ganguly (2009) underlines the following causal conditions which have combined in different ways to produce ethnic conflict in India. They are – (a) the fear that assimilation could lead to cultural dilution and the unfulfilled national aspirations; (b) the process of modernisation; (c) the unequal development, poverty, exploitation, lack of opportunity and threats to existing group privileges and (d) the political factors such as endemic bad governance, anti-secular forces, institutional decay and vote-bank politics. Furthermore, Olzak and Nagel (1986) underline the basis for ethnic mobilisation – (a) urbanisation increases contact and competition between ethnic populations; (b) expansion of industrial and service sectors increases competition for jobs; (c) development of peripheral regions or the discovery of resources in a periphery occupied by an ethnic population and (d) processes of state building (including those following colonial independence) that implement policies targeting specific ethnic population increase the likelihood of ethnic collective action.

Ethnic groups who use ethnicity to make demands in the political arena for alteration in their status, economic well-being, civil rights and educational opportunities are also engaged in interest groups' politics, and the key factor that creates ethnic consciousness is not an emotional or psychological, but a political one (Brass, 1991). Many of the conflicts are sustained through the illusion of a unique and choice-less identity, because identity is an important element that shapes nationalism and societal development processes (Sen, 2006). When ethnic identity is given the highest importance there is likely to be a basis for political mobilisation (Gurr, 2002).

Ethnicity and state formation of Sikkim

Lepchas, the earliest settler, call themselves 'Rong', the people living in ravines and follow traditional religious beliefs. They are also known as 'Meri' and 'Monpa'. The name Monpa is apparently given to them by the Bhutias – the higher altitude dwelling community, as this term refers to lowlanders. Their eastern neighbours – the Drukpas called them as Meri. The Lepchas came in close contact with Drukpas after Kalimpong (presently falls under West Bengal) was conquered by Bhutan in 1706, following a war between the two communities (Gowloog, 2013). In Tibetan language, women are called Kyeme (Kye – being; Me – lower), implies weaker/lower men in the society. Similarly, Monpa or Menpa

implies people of the lower country (Men – lower; Pa – belonging). Therefore, in Tibetan language, the term Monpa has got more of status connotation rather than spatial (high or lowlanders) one. The same was applied to *Monpa* tribe of Arunachal Pradesh as well that they were treated as subordinate group by Tibetans.²

Bhutia/Bhotia/Bhote or Ngalops were believed to have migrated from Tibet in the fourteenth century (Pletcher, 2011), or still as early as thirteenth century (Gerke, 2012; Subba, 2011). They constitute a majority of the population of Bhutan now, where they live mainly in western and central parts of the country. Most Bhutias practice a form of Tibetan Buddhism, and more specifically are the followers of Drukpa subsect of Kagyu (Bka'-brgyud-pa), which is one of the two (of four) branches of Tibetan Buddhism.³ According to Gowloog (2013), *Drukpa* is the community which we called Bhutia of the present-day Sikkim, but the same claim was not accepted by the Sikkim Survival Council, the civil right group (SSC, 2014). As per the opinion of Gowloog (2013), *Drukpas* were originally migrated from Tibet (China), routed through Bhutan.

As of the institutionalising state politics, Lepcha leader Thokeng Tek was instrumental in the coronation of Phuntso Namgyal in 1642 by associating himself with Tibetan immigrants (Sinha, 2005). As a result, Bhutias became politically very influential (Gowloog, 2013). All the land under the kingdom that belonged to king were distributed to loyal landlords known as Kazis, and they were empowered to appoint headman who could rent land for cultivation and dwellings (Deo and Duncan, 2011).

Table 13.1 Decadal population growth of Sikkim

Decade	Decadal growth (%)
1901–11	48.98
1911–21	–7.05
1921–31	34.37
1931–41	10.67
1941–51	13.34
1951–61	17.76
1961–71	29.38
1971–81	50.77
1981–91	28.47
1991–01	33.07
2001–11	12.36

Source: Population Census (2011).

In terms of geopolitics, from the early seventeenth century, following frequent invasions mainly from Nepal and Bhutan, considerable portion of the kingdom was annexed – the lower Teesta basin by the Nepalese, and Bhutan occupied the eastern parts of Teesta, including the present-day Kalimpong and Jeleppla ranges along Sikkim's northern and eastern boundaries (Bali, 2003). In 1816, the kingdom regained its territory following an intervention by the British, in return of their support during the Anglo-Nepalese war (1814–16) between the kingdom of Nepal and the British India. Subsequently, it became a *de facto* protectorate of the former. In 1835, the British gained control of Darjeeling (the then part of Sikkim), and as a result, within no time, developers, shopkeepers, tea planters and hordes of labourers began to pour in this newly established hill station in search of opportunities (Sinha, 2005). Subsequently, a land lease system was introduced thereby encouraging Nepali immigration, and the forestlands were allocated to them for agricultural development so that revenue could be enlarged (ibid.: 278).

In the beginning of nineteenth century, a new phase in the history of kingdom was introduced with the Anglo-Gorkha War and thereby the signing of the Treaty of Sugauli in 1815 between Nepal and East India Company, followed by the Treaty of Titaliya in 1816 between Sikkim and East India Company. Thus, the year 1816 was landmarked in the relationship between British and Sikkim, otherwise the British influenced in the kingdom. When the relationship between the king and the European officers deteriorated, a military expedition was sent from Darjeeling on 1st February 1861, reached the capital *Tumlong* (erstwhile capital of Sikkim) in early March and imposed an agreement (the Tumlong Treaty). It guaranteed opening of trade between British territories and Sikkim and removal of all restrictions. The new king of the kingdom also offered possible help to the British authorities in their efforts to develop trade with Tibet. No armed forces belonging to any other country shall pass through the kingdom 'without the sanction of the British Government'. In short, Sikkim had virtually been turned into a princely native state and a British Residency was set up in the new capital Gangtok. A political officer, appointed in 1889, was assisted by a few advisors, and hence the king virtually became a nominal head of the kingdom. A British military expedition was sent to *Lhasa* in 1904 in which the Tibetans were forced upon to recognise British over-lordship of Sikkim and to open trade relations with India (Goldstein, 1989). The power and role of the king were considerably reduced merely into the administration through this political change (LSI, 2009).⁴

On the other hand, within the ethnic communities, following a long hegemony and the denial of equal political representation to its majority Nepali population by the Bhutia monarchy, the Sikkimese political parties (mainly Nepali) started a movement for curbing the legitimacy of the monarchy (Das, 2014). The process led to unrest in the kingdom. The Nepali onslaught on Sikkim led to a bad blood between the Bhutias and the Nepalese, and there was another reason for this mutual distrust – while Bhutias looked to Tibet as their political, religious and cultural fronts, Nepalese were of Hindu orientations in such matters and tended towards Nepal (Sinha, 2005). The disproportionate growth of population caused internal conflict. At the same time, following an apprehension of Chinese intervention in the kingdom, India after its independence was instigating directly or indirectly in aggravating local unrest, interfering in local politics and compelled the kingdom to depict inevitability to withstand (Das, 2014). Internal discord and the inability of the ruler to maintain control made Sikkim vulnerable (Hart, 2001). As a result of this, despite the king's resistance and fighting for self-determination, the kingdom was united with India in 1975 (Inoue, 2005; Rai, 2013). The fact is known by other neighbouring nations as well. In the opinion of Hart (2001), 'The Nepali speaking immigrants to Sikkim are generally considered by the Bhutanese authorities as responsible for the loss of that country's independence'.

From Table 13.1, one can infer that the growth of population, primarily due to immigration, had been very significant from the 1930s till 1980s during the British India and the post-independence period. Similarly, at the time of its merger, the Hindi-speaking population has also increased significantly (see Table 13.2). This proportionate increase of immigrants from within the country (from India) was higher than that of immigrants from abroad (Nepal, Bhutan and Tibet) to Sikkim in the merger period (Lama, 2001). Ethnic crisis in Bhutan⁵ in the 1990s between the Nepalese and the Dzongkha (Bhutanese) led to mass exodus of Nepalese who sought refuge in India including Sikkim and largely in Nepal. This might have probably added to some extent to the decadal growth of Sikkim's population that led to more than 33 per cent in the 1990s.

Since 20th March 1950, the British paramount over Sikkim was abolished and the new dominion of India assumed responsibility over external affairs, communications and defence. In 1953, a State Council was constituted, under which seats were equally divided among majority Nepalis and minority Bhutia-Lepchas with six seats each, respectively (LSI, 2009). Further, a tripartite agreement between India, Chogyal

and representatives of three political parties, namely – Janata Congress, National Congress and National Party, at Gangtok, was signed on 8th May 1973 to establish a ‘fully responsible’ government with a more democratic and greater legislative and executive powers for the elected representatives; a system of elections based on adult suffrage on the basis of the principle of one man one vote and the strengthening of Indo-Sikkim cooperation and interrelationship. In this process, finally, the kingdom which had defended its independence for over three centuries against powerful neighbours was united with India in 1975 and became the 22nd state of the Indian Union (Sikkim Observer, 2014).

As of the Sikkimese identity in totality, during the days of kingdom, a population register was maintained and the inclusion in the register was, like many other established countries, not restricted only to by virtue of birth. Anyone who migrated from the adjoining countries like India, Nepal, Bhutan and China (Tibet) were granted the privilege of citizenship option, of course based on some minimal tenure of continuous stay in the kingdom. Once the name was included in the register, a citizenship certificate called ‘Sikkim Subject Certificate’ was issued. When the kingdom united with India, the register was handed over to India and it became basis for beneficiary list to provide certain special privileges and protections, for example income tax exemption, reservation in the government jobs, right for trade licenses and so on. Further, the descendants of these citizens (Sikkim Subject Certificate holders) were given equal or similar privileges and issued a certificate called ‘Certificate of Identification’ by the state government. The certificate holders are in true sense termed as the Sikkimese. This was a holistic approach that had been thought of and adopted by the then visionary leaders during the merger period, to avoid further complication of immigrants in Sikkim. Nevertheless, the policy is not free from criticism. It has also become a victim of contamination with dubious members. According to an estimate, there are 150,469 fake citizenship card holders (31,180 Sikkim Subject Certificate and 119,289 Certificate of Identification card holders).⁶

Ethnic groups and party politics

As also mentioned earlier, Sikkim is inhabited by different ethnic groups, in which Lepchas, Bhutias and Nepalese are the major ones. The Lepchas are considered to be the oldest inhabitants, believed to have originated from the foot of Mount Kanchanzungha (Gowloog, 2013), from the hills of Assam as Sinha (2005) opined, while the Bhutias emigrated

from Tibet (China) in the thirteenth century (Gerke, 2012; Subba, 2011) and fourteenth century (Pletcher, 2011). The Nepalis are the most numerous group now, migrated from Nepal, which began in eighteenth century, intensified during colonial rule (Subba, 2011).

The Lepchas have not only slowly turned into an insignificant minority but also gradually lost their language, land, costumes, food habits, and even rites and rituals. The irony of the fact is that any attempt to bring them together under a common platform for protection of their culture and traditions was affected by a strong sense of divide within them between the so-called Buddhist Lepchas, who began to see themselves as true bearers of Lepcha culture and tradition, and the Christian Lepchas, who considered themselves superior to their Buddhist counterparts (Gowloog, 2013).

As population census 2011 by linguistic groups in Sikkim is not available in the public domain, the 2001 census is depicted in Table 13.2: the Nepali speakers comprised 62.6 per cent, and Bhutia speakers came in the second position with 7.7 per cent. In the third position, Hindi-speaking communities registered with 6.7 per cent and the Lepcha speakers have gone down to fourth position with 6.6 per cent. According to Turin (2008), the Nepali speakers comprised 67 per cent, followed by Bhutias with 10 per cent and Hindi speakers and Lepcha consisted of seven per cent and six per cent, respectively. Though there has been some

Table 13.2 Population of different linguistic groups in Sikkim (as per 2001 census)

<i>Linguistic group</i>	<i>Population</i>	<i>%</i>
Nepali	338,606	62.6
Bhutia	41,825	7.7
Hindi	36,072	6.7
Lepcha	35,728	6.6
Limbu	34,292	6.3
Sherpa	13,922	2.6
Tamang	10,089	1.9
Rai	8,856	1.6
Bengali	6,320	1.2
Urdu	2,930	0.5
Tibetan	1,977	0.4
Punjabi	1,364	0.3
Malayam	1,021	0.2
All population	540,851	100.0

difference in the statistics between the two sources, one can easily find a reverting trend of population equations, that an erstwhile majority Lepchas and uninterrupted Bhutias dynasty have reduced to minorities.

Caste wise, the Scheduled Tribe covers the communities of (a) Bhutia (including Chumbipa, Dophap, Dukpa, Kagatey, Sherpa, Tibetan, Tromop, Yolmo), (b) Lepcha, (c) Limboo/Subba and (d) Tamang having a total population of 206,360, which is 33.8 per cent of the state's total population. The Bhutia comprised 63.1 per cent of the total Scheduled Tribes population followed by Lepchas with about 36.4 per cent in Sikkim (2001 census).

After Sikkim merged with India, the Nepalese gained control over the political system in the state. For instance, Tibetan, the official language till 1975 (Subba, 2011), was replaced by Nepali, Bhutia and Lepcha languages through the Sikkim Official Language Act 1977 (Subba, 2008). The first ever detailed study on linguistic survey of Sikkim – Languages in Education mentioned:

There are effectively three lingua-franca in Sikkim, they are – Nepali, English and Hindi and all of which operate in different functional domains of use, yet constantly interact with one another. The pragmatic utility of all three languages are – Nepali in the bazaar, English in school, Hindi on television and in Central government offices – prevents any one of them from becoming overly dominant. Sikkim can experience an explosion of plurilingualism. In Sikkim, ethnic and linguistic identities are not oppositional, rather they are more incorporative.

(Turin, 2008)

As of the population by religion (see Table 13.3), Hindu occupies the largest share with 61 per cent of total population, constitutes primarily of Nepalis and some sections of recent immigrants from India. Though Buddhism being the religion of the erstwhile rulers, its share has gone down; it comes in the second position with 28 per cent. It composes mainly of Bhutias, Lepcha (of course, Lepcha follows a mixture of Buddhism and Shamanism) and negligible sections of Nepalis. As of the Christianity, majority of them are from Lepcha community, and in the recent past, negligible numbers of Nepali, Bhutia, Tamang and Limbu/Subba have also converted into it. In fact, the Namgyal dynasty did not permit Christian missionaries to operate till 1975; it is rather a recent phenomenon (Gowloog, 2013). These components of population and religion are the primary basis for politics and ethnic mobilisation at present.

Table 13.3 Population by major religions in Sikkim (as per 2001 census)

<i>Religion</i>	<i>Population</i>	<i>% of total</i>
Hindu	329,548	60.9
Buddhist	152,042	28.1
Christian	36,115	6.7
Others	12,926	2.4
Muslim	7,693	1.4
Religion not stated	1,168	0.2
Total population	540,851	100.0

Source: India Census (2001).

Party politics started in the 1940s coincided with India's freedom movement. On the one hand, the Sikkim State Congress (SSC) supported by the Indian National Congress (INC) was set up in 1947 with the objectives of abolition of monarchy, establishment of an elected government and accession of Sikkim to India. An attempt was made to change the election system from confessional system to one man one vote principle, and its main constituents were the Nepali language speakers (Rai, 2013). On the other hand, the Sikkim National Party (SNP) was set up in 1948 with the backing of the Chogyal and his supporters in order to protect the monarchy and against the accession of Sikkim into India (Pletcher, 2011). According to Bareh (2001), the movement of SNP was against the accession on the three main following grounds – (a) Sikkim has closer affinities with Bhutan and Tibet historically and culturally; (b) Sikkim was not a part of India according to its geography and ethnicity and (c) being a Lamaist kingdom, Sikkim is distinct from India.

Under pressure from SSC, the Chogyal conceded to abolish the lessee system (land settlement), disbanded unpaid labour and judicial powers of the Kazis in 1948 (Sinha, 2005) and hence, they were stripped off their economic and political powers. In the election of the first State Council held in 1953, the SSC won all the six Nepali seats, while the SNP won all the six Bhutia–Lepcha (BL) seats. A split in SSC led to the formation of the Sikkim Swatantra Dal (SSD) ahead of the election of 1958. In that election, the SSC won six Nepali seats as well one BL seat, while the SNP won five BL seats and one Sangha (the associations of the monks) seat. Further, the dissidents of SSC set up the Sikkim National Congress (SNC) in 1960 which became the single largest political party winning eight seats out of the 18 seats in the election of 1967. In the

election held in 1970, the SNP became the single largest political party by winning nine seats.

In 1972, the SNC and the Janata Party (JP) came together to set up the Sikkim Janata Congress (SJC). With the influence of India, the first Sikkim assembly was formed through the election held in 1974 with 32 members. SJC won 31 seats out of 32 in the elections held in 1974, and finally united with the INC. In reality, the legislative assembly election of 1974 was held under the framework of Indian constitution. As of the seat sharing among the communities in Sikkim, of the total 32 seats, 15 seats were reserved for Nepalese of Sikkimese origin, another 15 for the BL and one seat each for the Sangha and Scheduled Castes. The SSC led by Kazi Lhendup Dorjee won 31 seats and one seat went in favour of SNP, and eventually Dorjee became the chief minister.

The Sikkim Janata Parishad (SJP) founded by Nar Bahadur Bhandari in 1977 won assembly election held in 1979 and Bhandari became the chief minister. The election was held in accordance with the new parity formula, that the Representation of the People (Amendment) Act of 1979 abolished the reserved seats for Nepali of Sikkimese origin and provided seats in the legislative assembly as – 12 reserved seats for Sikkimese of BL (BL seat or Schedule Tribes reserved) origin,⁷ two seats for Scheduled Castes,⁸ one seat for Sangha and the rest 17 seats were unreserved.⁹ Interestingly, the seat set aside for the Sangha has always been filled by the BL community.

In May 1984, the Bhandari-led ministry was sacked allegedly on grounds of corruption charges which led to imposition of the central rule (president's rule). B.B. Gurung of the Congress party was appointed as the chief minister, but it lasted just two weeks (11–24 May) leading to the reimposition of the central rule. Meanwhile, Bhandari dissolved the SJP to set up the Sikkim Sangram Parishad (SSP), successfully fought and won parliamentary election held in December 1984. The party won 31 seats in the assembly election held in 1985. Bhandari vacated Lok Sabha seat to become the chief minister. His wife Dil Kumari Bhandari was elected unopposed for the lone parliamentary (Lok Sabha) seat vacated by him. His party once again swept the elections held in 1989 winning all the seats. But, intense factional politics brought down the ministry in 1994 and Sanchaman Limboo became the chief minister for the remaining term (lasted for 179 days).

In 1993, Pawan Kumar Chamling, a former influential leader of the SSP, set up the Sikkim Democratic Front (SDF). In the election held in 1994, the new party won altogether 19 seats, 10 seats by the SSP and three seats by the Congress party. A new ministry under Chamling was constituted in December 1994. In September 1996, six members of the

SSP defected to the SDF. In the election held in 1999, the party won 25 seats and seven seats by the SSP. The party again became stronger winning 31 seats in the election held in 2004. In the election held in 2009, the party won all the seats and 22 in 2014. About a decade later, Prem Singh Tamang, also known as PS Golay, who was a close associate of Chamling, founded the Sikkim Krantikari Morcha (SKM) in 2013. It soon offered strong opposition to the ruling SDF. In the legislative assembly election held in 2014 it won 10 seats, constituting about 40.8 per cent votes. The election showed a straight fight between the two.

Several political parties including major pan-India and local parties (including registered/unregistered ones) have been contesting assembly and parliamentary elections since 1979. In the legislative assembly election held in 1979, national parties like Congress party secured just 15.55 per cent of total votes, as compared to 67.94 per cent votes secured by local parties; Independent candidates got 16.50 per cent. In 1985, national parties secured 25.46 per cent of total votes polled, while the local parties got 62.65 per cent. The Independent got 11.88 per cent votes. In 1989, national parties secured 18.05 per cent votes, while local parties got 79.21 per cent votes (and the Independent secured 2.7 per cent). In 1994, national parties secured 15.33 per cent of the total votes polled, while local parties secured 78.76 per cent (Independent 5.91 per cent). In 1999, national parties secured just 3.86 per cent, while local parties won 94.20 per cent (and the Independent got 1.94 per cent). In 2004, national parties polled 26.54 per cent of valid votes, while local parties got 71.71 per cent (and the Independent secured 1.76 per cent). In 2009, national parties secured 28.95 per cent of total votes polled, while local parties got 69.45 per cent (Independent got 1.60 per cent). In totality, local parties have been comfortably winning elections for a long time in which between 1979 and 2009, the average vote share was about 74 per cent as compared to 17 per cent secured by national parties. The share of votes polled by national political parties was lowest in 1999 (3.86 per cent). The votes polled by Independent candidates have significantly reduced since 1989. Unlike in other states, political party in power at the centre (Delhi) could not influence Sikkimese electoral politics. At the same time, except for the ruling party, most political parties were not firmly rooted and were active only during election period.

Issues and contenders

In a real sense of the term, the insider and outsider issue arises only when the immigrants cause in large-scale deprivation, displacement and discrimination of the native communities (Srikanth, 2014). Disproportionate

increase in population of one or two communities in a multicultural society often leads to contestation between them. Strident identity assertions and articulation of grievances in terms of the 'others' have given rise to contestations among the communities sharing the same habitat and yet defined separately by their distinct sociological and anthropological markers. How do these issues are handled in Sikkim is the crux of this chapter.

Thirty-two constituencies constitute its legislative assembly, of which 17 constituencies are unreserved, while the remaining 15 are reserved (12 for Bhutia–Lepcha origin, two for Scheduled Castes and one for Sangha) under the provisions of the Representation of the People (Amendment) Act of 1979. It states that:

- (a) in the case of a seat reserved for Sikkimese of Bhutia–Lepcha origin, he/she is a person either of Bhutia or Lepcha origin and is an elector for any assembly constituency in the state other than the constituency reserved for the Sanghas;
- (b) in the case of a seat reserved for the Scheduled Castes, he/she is a member of any of those castes in the state of Sikkim and is an elector for any assembly constituency in the state;
- (c) in the case of a seat reserved for Sanghas, he is an elector of the Sangha constituency; and
- (d) in the case of any other seat, he/she is an elector for any assembly constituency in the state.

If the constituencies are allocated in proportion to the size of population, the Nepalese will secure at least two-thirds of the seats in the legislative assembly. Even in reserved constituencies (except three in North Sikkim), the Bhutia–Lepcha voters do not necessarily constitute a majority of voters. Under current system, the Nepali legislators constitute the single largest group in the legislative assembly enjoying unified control of the legislature and hence the bureaucracy. On the other, despite the existing reservation, the pressure groups such as the Sikkim Lepcha Bhutia Apex Committee alleged that the Lepcha and Bhutia are under-represented in the council of ministers and other important bodies. In addition, they allege that their share of employment in the public sector in total employment has declined substantially. However, they did not give specific details of the alleged claim.

Although Limboos (Subbas) and Tamangs are also recognised as the Scheduled Tribes, the reservation of seats in the legislative assembly is granted on community basis and not as per their tribal status, as in other

parts of the country. As a result, they are not eligible to contest from reserved seats. It is therefore natural for them to demand suitable reservation in the legislative assembly.

In view of this, the state government has proposed to increase the number of seats in the legislative assembly from the existing 32–40. As a consequence, the Bhutia–Lepcha groups sought to increase their representation from 12 to 16. On the contrary, the Nepalese wanted allocation of seats in proportion to total population of the state. If so, they will constitute at least two-thirds of the legislative assembly,¹⁰ simply because they are the most numerous group. The Nepali pressure groups such as the Gorkha Apex Committee have maintained that the existing reservation of seats is ‘unfair’ and ‘unconstitutional’. It wanted the allocation of seats on the basis of population ratio. In this context, since Limboos and Tamangs also deserve to get reservation in the legislative assembly as in other parts of the country where seats are reserved for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in the legislative assemblies. Another contentious issue is the Article 371F of the Constitution of India which stated that:

all laws in force immediately before the appointed day in the territories comprised in the State of Sikkim or any part thereof shall continue to be in force therein until amended or repealed by a competent legislature or other competent authority . . . for the purpose of facilitating the application of any such law as is referred to in clause (K) in relation to the administration of the State of Sikkim and for the purpose of bringing the provisions of any such law into accord with the provisions of this Constitution, the President may, within two years from the appointed day, by order, make such adaptations and modifications of the law, whether by way of repeal or amendment, as may be necessary or expedient, and thereupon, every such law shall have effect subject to the adaptations and modifications so made, and any such adaptation or modification shall not be questioned in any court of law.

The Bhutia–Lepcha groups who feel protected by Article 371F want to retain old laws since they consider introduction of new laws will outlive the relevance of old laws. For instance, they had opposed the inclusion of Dukpa/Drukpa, Kagatey, Sherpa, Tibetan and Yolmo into Bhutia ethnic group under the provisions of the Constitution (Sikkim) Scheduled Tribe Order of 1978 since they (Bhutia–Lepcha) considered them (communities mentioned earlier) as ‘Nepali colonists’ of people of Nepali origin (SSC, 2014). Furthermore, they also wanted the

agreement that united Sikkim with India be recognised as the basis for future political arrangements including Article 371F. The Article 5 of the tripartite agreement between India, Chogyal and representatives of three political parties on 8 May 1973 states that:

The system of the election shall be so organized as to make the assembly adequately representative of the various sections of the population . . . Care being taken to ensure that no single section of the population acquires a dominating position due mainly to its ethnic origin, and that the rights and interests of the Sikkimese of Bhutia Lepcha origin and of the Sikkimese of Nepali which includes Tsong and Scheduled Castes origin are fully protected. (Sinha, 2005: 289)

The BL groups alleged that in the name of democracy, there has been a 'departure' from the 'real spirit and objectives' of the said agreement. They wanted restoration of seat reservation for Nepalese of Sikkimese origin in the legislative assembly. Additionally, they also wanted special reservation for BL in the Panchayat and Municipal bodies.

They were apprehensive of the new legislations including the Sikkim Regulation of Transfer of Land Bill of 2005. Its main objective is 'to make provision for the regulation of transfer of lands, covering wider section of the population in the State and other matters connected therewith. Whereas the old laws on transfer of land catered to certain section of the population in the State; and whereas it has been considered expedient to have law regulating transfer of land covering wider sections of the population in the State and strengthen the existing law further.' The Act prohibits the transfer of land belonging to any person, by way of sale, gift, exchange, mortgaged or sublet with possession shall be valid in favour of a person who is not an agriculturist. The Sikkim Bhutia-Lepcha Apex Committee (SBLAC) condemned this legislation as 'murder of democracy' primarily because they wanted to enjoy due protection under the old laws, enacted between 1926 and 1973. They felt that new legislations will further dilute the relevance of old laws which they considered are protected by the Article 371F of the Constitution of India.

Further, they were also alarmed by what they called 'distorting history' referring to the alleged 'errors' relating to the Buddhist festival of Pang Lhabsol in a government-sponsored study of 2004. It alleged that the festival was never celebrated on 2nd September as mentioned in the study instead it was from 8 to 15 day of the seventh month

of the Sikkimese lunar calendar corresponding to the month of late August or early September. They have also raised concern over the impact of the developmental projects on historical and sacred sites. In this context, a vigilante group BL Protection Force has been constituted. It had organised a convention in Gangtok in December 2013 to deliberate on the issues affecting the people. Although they invited the Lepcha–Bhutia members of the legislative assembly, none of them turned up. Besides, they also wanted an additional 10 per cent reservation in employment and education for the Lepchas, after they were recognised as a Scheduled Tribe in 2002, in addition to the benefits the community currently enjoys. Ahead of the April 2014 assembly election, the SBLAC offered to support the SKM primarily because they felt discriminated by the SDF. In short, the SBLAC (2003) had resolved:

- (a) proportionate increase of BL seats in case of increase of the number of legislative assembly seats from 32 to 40;
- (b) reservation of seats for BL at the Panchayat level on the basis of reservation principle as applied in assembly seats;
- (c) reservation of seats in higher studies and appointment on the basis of reservation principle as applied in assembly seats; and
- (d) delimitation of assembly constituencies on the basis of Census 2001 ensuring that BL voters remain in majority in the reserved BL constituencies.

Further, the SBLAC wanted stringent management of Sikkim's borders with Bhutan and Nepal to check illegal immigration. Tseten Tashi Bhutia, a prominent leader, has once stated:

Presence of and incoming large number of illegal emigrants or infiltrators from neighbouring countries which have caused immense social, political, economic and ethnic imbalance in the State . . . despite the best efforts by few social organizations to bring the focus on the serious consequences of growing influx, the policy-makers have not been able to check this unabated flow . . . The entry of foreign nationals from the two neighbouring countries existed ever since Sikkim became a protectorate Kingdom of British India and has been more pronounced since Sikkim became a State of India. The growth of population has been attributed to unabated immigration of people from outside the State and neighbouring countries.¹¹

Argument and concluding remarks

Different ethnic groups of Sikkim had historically migrated from different places, and have been living together in harmony. The diverse ethnicities sharing the same space are defined separately by their distinct social constructs. In reality, there are advantages for ethnic groups to realign themselves. Alternatively, rising competitive forces can cause reactive mobilisation on the part of numerically advantaged groups. Political disadvantage relates to systematic limitation of access to political office; economic disadvantages are systematic denial of economic goods and opportunities (Ginsburg and Dixon, 2011: 364).

Unlike other States of Northeast India¹² such as Manipur or Assam, Sikkim does follow a balanced and inclusive approach that takes all ethnicities together. This makes Sikkim a peaceful and prosperous place. In other states, several religious or ethnic communities sharing same space have their own exclusive political aspirations which led to struggles for independent homeland from others and often demands for more political autonomy, either within or outside the states. There are number of ethnicity-based political parties in other states, especially in the region. In the case of Sikkim, the land originally inhabited by Lepchas, founded Namgyal dynasty by the Bhutia immigrants from Tibet with the help of a Lepcha chief (Little, 2010; Sinha, 2005), is now headed by a Nepali Chief Minister Pawan Kumar Chamling. He is truly a dynamic leader. Besides, Bhutia monarchy did not force their predecessor Lepchas to convert into Buddhism. This is the reason why Lepchas can preserve their identity and religion till date, albeit negligible member of the community have converted into Christianity in the recent past. Despite some political parties that have been formed on the basis of political and economic benefits, no party was formed on the basis of religion and ethnicities in Sikkim. Content analysis of party election manifestoes tells an interesting story. After Sikkim united with India, ethnically inclined political parties became irrelevant. Election manifestoes of SDF highlighted forward-looking issues such as higher per capita income, high literate, tourism destination in South and South-East Asia, control pollution and disease, best performing state of the country and efficient mountain economy. In 2014, it gave special focus on youth-oriented and rural development programmes.

The assembly seat arrangement¹³ clearly reflects inclusive approach that 41 per cent (including Sangha seat) of the total assembly seat is reserved for 16–20 per cent of BL population. Sikkim is the first state in the region to reserve assembly seat for Buddhist monk (Sangha) community. The well-thought policy, considering its multicultural society

could take all the communities together. Therefore, Nepalese demand for reallocation of assembly seats in proportion to the total population of the state, in reality, is not an illogical, rather a legitimate one. When it comes to a unified ethnicities of Bhutias and Lepchas, their primarily contention is to counteract the numerically dominant Nepali-speaking people. Despite criticism from different quarters for different reasons, the SDF, ruling for five consecutive terms since 1994, have adopted accommodative approaches to make Sikkim one of the most peaceful and prosperous states in the country.

Although the minorities are united together to pursue political objectives against the majority, their aim is not to establish domination over the majority group, only to secure special concessions from the government, not to impose religious hegemony. At the same time, the majority group also seeks to retain its hold on political and economic powers and cultural influence. Nevertheless, the differences between ethnicities are being balanced by the spirit of accommodative, sharing and humanity approaches of the communities living in the state. Reservation of seats is one way to ensure representations of minorities in the legislative assembly. As discontentment arises, on the issues of reservation, the government should seriously strive to increase the constituencies of the legislative assembly and recognise the special needs of the minorities.

What is unique to Sikkim is that despite polarisation of ethnicities, a strong Sikkimese identity is prevalent which clearly overrides ethnic identity differences. Ethnically inclined political parties such as SSC and SNP have been completely sidelined by the inclusive model of the political parties such as SDF. This is an extraordinary achievement and exceptional, unlike the ethnically inclined political parties in the other parts of Northeast India. In this context, political parties and their leaders play a major role. Effective leaders are important to solve problem of how to organise collective effort; consequently, they are the key to organisational effectiveness, in the context of the state of Sikkim.

Notes

- 1 Retrieved from <http://www.bharatonline.com/sikkim/culture/languages.html>.
- 2 This section was contributed by Mr Nyima Tenzin, research scholar, Department of Economics, Sikkim University. Being a Tibetan origin, born and brought up in Arunachal Pradesh and settled in Sikkim, he is well aware of the facts and genesis of the issue.
- 3 Excerpted from <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/64255/Bhutia>.

- 4 This section is excerpted from the Linguistic Survey of India (2009): Section I – Brief History of Sikkim.
- 5 In September 1990, against the Bhutan's policy of Bhutanisation, thousands of ethnic Nepalis, especially the southern part of the country (bordering Sikkim, West Bengal and Assam), protested in large scale. The government's response to the demonstrations was reportedly swift and harsh, and the months that followed saw widespread arbitrary arrests, ill treatment and torture, followed by an exodus from the country of thousands of ethnic Nepalese from southern Bhutan.
- 6 An open letter sent to chief minister of Sikkim on fake 'Sikkim subjects' issue', by Bhutia, Tseten Tashi (Ex-MLA of Sikkim) on 25/08/2014. Retrieved from http://jigmenkazisikkim.blogspot.in/2014_08_01_archive.html.
- 7 The constituencies reserved for BL are Yoksam-Tashiding, Rinchenpong, Daramdin in West district, Barfung, Tumen-Lingi in South district, Gnathang-Machong, Shyari, Martam-Rumtek and Gangtok in East district, and Kabi Lungchuk, Djongu and Lachen Mangan in North district.
- 8 The four Scheduled Castes – Kami, Damai, Sarki and Majhi – belong to the Nepali community.
- 9 In 1979, fifteen seats reserved for Nepali community were abolished, it was started in 1953. The fifteen seats reserved for BL have been reduced to twelve, retaining one seat for Sangha (Buddhists monk group) and two seats for Scheduled Castes.
- 10 Refer to National Commission for Scheduled Tribes (<http://ncst.nic.in/writereaddata/linkimages/agenda171109-V6813613364.pdf>).
- 11 Refer to the document of *Sikkim Bhutia-Lepcha Apex Committee*, 20th December 2003. Retrieved from http://www.siblac.org/chronicle_2003.html.
- 12 India's NER consists of seven states – Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura. Later on, the state of Sikkim joined in the region's fabric in 2002 and with it, now NER consists of eight states.
- 13 Presently, in Sikkim legislative assembly, the seat arrangement is made as: twelve reserved seats for BL, two seats for Scheduled Castes, one seat for Sangha and the rest of the seventeen seats were declared as general seats.

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