

SEARCH FOR KIRAT IDENTITY TRENDS OF DE-SANSKRITIZATION AMONG THE *NEPAMUL* SIKKIMESE

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ABSTRACT

Communities choose their identities over time with distinct objectives in mind. *Nepamul* Sikkimese (Sikkimese of Nepali origin) had to struggle at various periods in the last 150 years for their citizenship, political rights and recognition of Nepali language as an Indian language. The year 1990 turned out to be critical for them. The democratic movement in Nepal let loose a movement of 'janajati', an under-current that spread in Sikkim as well. The movement received a momentum after the government of India accepted the recommendations of the Backward Class Commission that had termed most of the Sikkimese *Nepamul* as Other Backward Classes. When pressed for the implementation of the above decision of the government of India in Sikkim, the former Chief Minister of the state ruled out such a possibility, and lost the support of the majority in the State Assembly. Within the next few weeks his successor government promptly extended the 'OBC' status to as many as eight *Nepamul* communities and provided them with all the contingent constitutional facilities. Some years after that event, two OBCs, Limbus and Tamangs, were declared as 'Scheduled Tribes'. This has resulted in a mad rush among the rest of the 'OBCs' to clamour for 'Scheduled Tribe' status and as many as eight of them approached the State Government with their 'ethnographic reports'. These reports identify existence of myths, clothing, food habits, languages, architect, arts and crafts and other cultural traits painting each of them as distinct communities, disclaiming a common cultural tradition of *Nepamul*. The State is encouraging this trend with a distinct goal in view. This process of tribalization of the communities from within the *Nepamul* fold has serious conceptual and sociological implications, which we propose to uncover in the present paper.

Introduction

Will the multi-ethnic societies such as 'Nepali' necessarily emerge more cohesive, uniform and modern? One would like to celebrate Harka Gurung's (1997) optimism about multi-ethnic societies of Sikkim and Darjeeling, but recent events in Sikkim do not encourage one to do so. One must hasten that Gurung is in good

company of Michael Hutt, who approvingly quotes Lhotshampa technocrat Bhim Subba: “We have Rais, Magars, Tamangs, Chhetris, Bahuns, Kamis, Damais, Sarkis - all in one village. And we do not have a system of segregation, or on the other hand, suppression by supposed higher castes” (Hutt, 2003: 99). The present author found similar situation in Sikkim as well. The Sikkimese *Nepamul* appear to have bothered little about their social composition as long as they were struggling against the feudal oppression. As soon as they realized that economically they were relatively secured in a democratic set-up, which they controlled as per law of the land, they addressed themselves to larger issues such as citizenship, recognition of Nepali language and political representation in the state. Once the resolution to the above issues was within the reach, attention began to shift to the fate of the individual ethnic groups. It was realized that the time was ripe for advocating distinctive ethnic markers within the *Nepamul* social commonwealth and there came the ancient Kirat identity handy. This process is still on and indications are there for any body to see that multi-ethnic Sikkimese *Nepamul* society is passing through a serious phase of transition. So much so that some members of higher castes formed a ‘Chhetri-Bahun-Newar Association’ in 1995 to safeguard their interests. These three relatively developed castes were also subsequently accorded the status of OBC in Sikkim. In this paper, we have tried to map out the travails of the Sikkimese *Nepamul* since their arrival in Sikkim through the phase of social reforms, the anti-feudal movement, the merger of Sikkim with India, and at the end, highlight the on-going process of a larger Kirat identity formation. Many of our comments are tentative, as evidence is limited.

Construction of the ‘Paharia’ Image

Limbus, an inseparable part of Kirat identity, are counted among the earliest settlers of Sikkim. Even the term ‘Sikkim’ is of Limbu origin. It is claimed that a newly wedded Limbu lady, when welcomed by the groom’s party in a newly constructed house, exclaimed: *Sukhim* (new house). Limbu and Magar have old roots in Sikkim. Limbus were appropriated by the Namgyal rulers within

Lamaist scheme of things in the form of 'Lhomentsongsum' a 'commonwealth of Bhotias, Lepchas and Tsongs' (Sinha, 1975). Magars along with Limbus figured in the history of Sikkim as victims of Bhotia court intrigues in which they were forced to emigrate to Nepal. However, the remnants of their settlements can be identified in the form of 'Magarkots' or 'Magardzongs' in West District (Sinha, 2005). J W Edgar has reported them to be cultivating cardamom and oilseeds at Daramden in West District in his visit to Pemayangtse in 1874 (Edgar, 1969:74). Some years earlier, in 1867, two Newar brothers, Laxmidas and Chandrabir Maskey, were invited by a section of the Namgyal courtiers from Darjeeling to mine copper ore and mint coins for the state at an annual fee of Rs. 1200. Though their mining and minting enterprise did not last for more than a decade, they were responsible for bringing in Magar labourers for mining, introducing forest conservation, building of roads and bridges in the East District and establishing the lessee system of land tenure in Sikkim.

John C White, who was appointed in Gangtok as the Political Officer in 1889, found Sikkimese scenario in bleak and pathetic condition: "Chaos reigned everywhere, there was no revenue system, the Maharaja taking what he required as he wanted from the people...no court of justice, no police, no public works, no education for the younger generation. The task before me was a difficult one, but very fascinating; the country was new one and every thing was in my hands". Furthermore, he noted that: "The coffers were empty, and the first thing to be done was to devise some means by which we could raise a revenue... a basis for taxation and revenue was established. At the same time the forests were placed under control, excise was introduced, and by these means in about ten years the revenue was raised from Rs. 8,000 to Rs. 2,200,000. But the country was sparsely populated, and in order to bring more land under cultivation, it was necessary to encourage immigration, and this was done by giving land on favourable terms to Nepalese, who, as soon as they knew it was to be had, came in. Earlier in my service I had spent over a year in Nepal on special duty and had learnt some thing of the people and their ways, which

proved now to be useful in dealing with them” (White, 1971: 26-27). In his memorial book on his exploits in and around Sikkim, White used the word ‘Paharias’ to refer to the Sikkimese *Nepamul*.

By then the British had invented the ‘warrior gentlemen Gurkhas’ (Caplan, 1995) as a solid custodian of the frontier defence. This was also the phase in the British perception, when a positive twist was given to what is known as ‘forward policy to the Himalayas’, in which Tibetans were one of the prime targets. Herbert Risley wrote on the utilitarian aspect of the Nepalese factor in the defence scheme of the Eastern Himalayan frontiers: “Most of all our position be strengthened by the change which is insensibly but steadily taking place in the composition of the population of Sikkim. The Lepchas as has been stated, are rapidly dying out; while from the west, the industrious Newars and the Goorkhas of Nepal are pressing forward to clear and cultivate large areas of unoccupied land on which European tea planters of Darjeeling have already cast longing eyes. The influx of these hereditary enemies of Tibet is our surest guaranty against a revival of Tibetan influence. Here also religion will play a leading part. In Sikkim, as in India, Hinduism will assuredly cast out Budhhism and the praying wheel of the lama will give place to the sacrificial implements of the Brahman. The land will follow the creed; the Tibetan proprietors will be gradually dispossessed, and will take themselves to the petty trade for which they have an undeniable aptitude. Thus, race and religion, the prime movers of the Asiatic world, will settle the Sikkim difficulty for us, in their own way. We have only to look on and see the operation of these causes is not artificially hindered by the interference of Tibet or Nepal” (Risley, 1972).

This was the heritage left behind by the British in terms of putting one community against another. Half a dozen British Political Officers between 1908 and 1947 maintained the same façade. The king was happy with his religious paintings and the ‘almighty’ Political Officer ruled the principality as he liked. The democratic movement against the British colonial rule in India disturbed the placid Sikkimese situation and the nervous king sent a

delegation consisting of his son and private secretary to represent his case before the 'Cabinet Mission' in New Delhi in May 1946. The Sikkim delegation failed to meet the Cabinet Mission and they were advised to return to Gangtok and wait for the decision. And for that the Political & Foreign Department, Government of India sent a 'Note' to the Political Officer in Gangtok on August 10, 1946, which states: "In practice, it may well prove difficult to secure a tidy solution of the future of Nepal, Sikkim and Bhutan and even the eastern marches of Kashmir. This will largely depend on the future policy and fate of China and hence of Tibet. The Government of the (Indian) Union must be prepared for complications on North East Frontier and evolve a policy to meet them. This may well have to be that of maintaining all the principalities in virtual independence of India, but as buffer, as far as possible, (as) client states. There may be greater advantages in according Sikkim a more independent status than in seeking to absorb Bhutan as well as Sikkim in the Indian Union, adding the communal problem of Buddhism to those of Islam and Hinduism...The Government will be well advised to avoid entering into fresh commitments with any one of those frontier states or seeking to redefine their status. Their importance is strategic in direct relation to Tibet and China and indirectly to Russia. Such adjustment of relations with the (Indian) Union can fully be affected by those political and strategic considerations ... account of which, it is hoped the treaty will take, rather than by constitutional niceties, which do not help defence policy" (see Sinha, 1998).

By the second decade of the twentieth century, the entire cultivable hill slopes of southern and western Sikkim were apportioned into revenue *elakas* (blocks), which were to be leased on fixed revenue returns. The land lease was granted first in 1915 and last in 1935. There were 104 revenue blocks, of which the *Nepamul* Sikkimese held 13 of them. A number of them went for western education invariably to the Christian mission-run institutions in adjoining district of Darjeeling and occupied salaried positions in various departments of the government. By the year 1891, Nepamul population had already reached more than 50

percent and when the British left India in 1947, more than 2/3rd population of the Himalayan principality belonged to them, a process that could not be reversed even by a die-hard Palden Thondup Namgyal, the last ruler of Sikkim. Sikkim also had the institution of Kazi aristocracy, but they did not have much to show in terms of either social status or material wealth in comparison to their Nepalese counterpart, the Ranas.

By the middle of the 20th century, a situation emerged in Sikkim in which broadly speaking two ethnic blocks emerged. One such block comprised the Bhotias, Lepchas and Limbus and the other block consisted of about a dozen and half communities belonging to the Sikkimese *Nepamul*. With the exception of Lepcha, Limbu and Bhotia, all other ethnic groups of Sikkim had forgotten their mother tongues, if they ever spoke them, and Nepali developed as their mother tongue, besides being the *lingua franca* of the principality. While most ethnic groups solicited the services of their sacred specialists during *rite de passage*, they often invited Brahmin priests for marriage and death rituals. Ethnic barriers in terms of social intercourse had largely disappeared, as most of the communities were numerically so small that individual caste/ethnic boundaries were not feasible to maintain. By tradition, land belonged either to Bhotia, Lepcha, Limbu or Newar, and most of the *Nepamul* in Sikkim were service castes such as Bahun, Chhetri, Damai, Kami, Sarki or were marginal farmers.

Building New Ethnic Blocks: Bhotia-Lepcha versus *Nepamul*

Soon after the British withdrawal from India, Sikkim State Congress was organized on December 7, 1947 to petition to the ruler on its three point demands: (i) abolition of the land lease holdings; (ii) formation of a popular government, and (iii) merger with India. Egged up by its fraternal support from elsewhere, the Congress launched an agitation in support of its charter of demands. The crown prince got a group of Bhotia landlords and his courtiers to establish the Sikkim National Party on April 30, 1948 as 'an anti-thesis of Sikkim State Congress' with a view to protecting special privileges of the feudal elements and Bhotia dominance in the

affairs of the state. The State Congress with its popular demands went on agitation for over a year. Thousands of Congress supporters cordoned off the palace on May 1, 1949 and demanded formation of a popular government. The king was forced to form a five member popular government with Tashi Tshering, the President of the State Congress, on May 9, 1949 without spelling out limits of authority and rules of operation. The expectations of the masses from this new government were very high but the crown prince was determined to sabotage this first experiment of democracy in Sikkim. The Congress leaders themselves did not help much in the matter. Once it was realized that differences between the two sides could not be resolved and the administration was at standstill, the Political Officer dismissed the government in the name of the Government of India and took over the administration. Very soon, New Delhi sent a senior bureaucrat as the Dewan to head the administration on its behalf.

The Government of India became a party to the democratic fraud through its Dewan, when the ruler issued the State Council and Executive Council Proclamation, 1953 with a view “to associating people more and more closely with the governance of the state”. The Proclamation stipulated an intricate arrangement of electoral process with a limited, complex, controversial and purposive political representation, which came to be known as the “Parity System”. First of all, it created an artificial parity between two ethnic groups, Lepcha-Bhutias on one side and the *Nepamul* on the other, turning the entire politico-administrative structure communal. Secondly, a deliberately complicated voting and counting procedure was introduced, which could be manipulated in favour or against somebody, if and when required. Thirdly, the ruler and his administration did try to display that State Congress represented ‘Nepalese’ only and his own creation, National Party, represented Lepcha- Bhutias combine. The first general election for the State Council was held in 1953 for an 18-member house in which six seats were reserved for Lepcha-Bhutias, six for the Nepalese and another six were nominated by the ruler. Needless to say that the administration saw to it that Nepalese were elected on

seat meant for the community only as the candidates of the State Congress and Lepcha-Bhutias did the same as the candidates of the National Party.

The above situation continued for the next two decades. By the end of 1960s the last ruler of Namgyal dynasty, Palden Thondup Namgyal, began to nurse an ambition of membership to the United Nations Organization (UNO) for Sikkim and this made him desperate to identify more and more with the vanishing Bhutia practices as the Sikkimese practices. This design was not appreciated by bulk of the Sikkimese masses, who were discriminated by the ruler in favour of the arrogant Bhutia aristocracy and bureaucracy. The situation was so explosive that a small controversy with reference to counting of the votes at Gangtok after 1973 election was good enough to ignite frayed patience of the political activists for cancellation of the election and launching a movement for political reforms. The ruler ignored the demands and went ahead with the preparation of his golden jubilee celebration as the national day on April 4, 1973. Within no time the agitation spread to the interior and agitators established people's regime at places after chasing away the state functionaries from their posts. The newly formed political outfit, Sikkim Janata Congress, spear-heading the agitation, articulated the popular aspirations by demanding: full-fledged democracy, a written Constitution, fundamental rights, one man one vote principle based on adult franchise, and abolition of the notorious 'parity system'. The agitation turned violent and the ruler lost all his control on the state. In the circumstances, for the second time after 1949, the ruler of Sikkim had to request the Government of India to take over the administration of the state.

The next two years were a period of uncertainty, turmoil, demonstration for and against the regime, dramatic decline in ruler's support base and demise of his domesticated political factotem, Sikkim National Party, in the body politics of Sikkim. It also marked the emergence of Kazi Lhendup Dorji as the most significant political player in the state with Nar Bahadur Khatiwada,

Ram Chandra Poudyal and Krishna Chandra Pradhan as his trouble shooters. In the confused and uncertain environment, 'there were charges that Indian armed forces were instrumental in support of agitators, while poor Maharaja was reported to store arms and ammunitions for a possible resistance (Dutta Ray, 1983). What resulted in was a very fast change of the events: ruler's refusal to compromise with the agitating politicians, invalidation of 1973 election, fresh election to the State Council in 1974, demand for associating Sikkim with India, ruler's visit to Kathmandu against the advice of the government of India, State Council's resolution to abolish the office of the Chogyal, referendum to decide Sikkim's future and its merger with India in May 1975. As an interim arrangement, the existing State Council was treated as the State Assembly for a period of five years from its election in 1974.

Once the Tripartite Agreement was signed between the ruler, the representative of the government of India and leaders of the political parties in Sikkim, a 32-member State Council was envisaged in which there would be 15 seats each for Lepcha-Bhutias and *Nepamul* of Sikkim, one seat for the Scheduled Castes and one seat for the Buddhist monasteries. The 1974 election was fought on that basis and once the state was merged with India in 1975, the State Council was deemed to be the State Legislative Assembly for a term of five years from its inception in 1974. It is equally important to recall what the Government of Sikkim Act, 1974, Clause 7, Section II stipulated: "The Government of Sikkim may make rules for the purpose of providing that the Assembly adequately represents the various sections of the population, that is to say while fully protecting the legitimate rights and interests of Sikkimese of Lepcha or Bhutia origin and Sikkimese of Nepali origin and other Sikkimese, including Tsongs, Scheduled Castes, no single section of population is allowed to acquire a dominating position in the affairs of Sikkim mainly by its ethnic origin".

We have mentioned above that the *Nepamul* Sikkimese have been demanding restoration of reserved seats to them in the State Assembly since 1979, the year it was undone. But it has not been

done and there appears to be little chance of its being restored in the near future. Meanwhile, Sikkim has joined the North Eastern Council (NEC) for the purpose development administration. There are a number of states within NEC, which are known as “tribal states” because they have more than half of their population recognized by the Union Government as Scheduled Tribes. Taking a cue from the above practice, the government of Sikkim decided to approach the Union Government to accord the status of Scheduled Tribe to the communities listed in the State as the MBCs or Most Backward Communities. There are already 38 percent population of Sikkim recognized as Scheduled Tribes and another 5.93 percent of them as Scheduled Castes. The present ruling party - Sikkim Democratic Front (SDF) - is committed to bring all the *Nepamul* Sikkimese under special constitutional categories like Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, OBCs and MBCs. They do not hide their efforts and their desire to see that the communities listed among the MBCs in the state are accorded the status of the Scheduled Tribes. Once it is achieved, apart from the social engineering of uplifting the ‘educationally and economically backward communities’, another 22.4 percent population will be added to the total, staking a genuine claim of being a tribal state, which will have its own advantages in terms of liberal allotment of the fund.

In this way the demographically dominant *Nepamul* Sikkimese ethnic commonwealth spent four decades between 1953 and 1994 towards consolidation of their ‘Nepali’ identity vis-a-vis the Lepcha-Bhutia combine in the politics of Sikkim. However, several intellectuals among them, specially among the Kiratas, began to realize that their continued emphasis on ‘Nepali’ identity had led to further consolidation of Bahun-Chhetri-Newar dominance, more sanskritization of their rituals and customs along the classical Hindu practices and further marginalization of their languages and cultures in favour of the Indo-Aryan Nepali language and culture. This realization came rather late, but it did. Although the process of “looking back” seemed irreversible the same swept both Nepal and Nepali diaspora in India since early 1990s, which further strengthened their resolve to regain their subjugated

identities and use them for new economic and political opportunities (Sinha, 2005: 23).

T. B. Subba conducted fieldwork on three locations in Eastern Nepal in 1992-93 and tried to see the issue of Kirata identity in much deeper and extensive way across Nepal, Darjeeling and Sikkim (Subba, 1999). In case of Sikkim, Limbus have already won their battle for recognition as a Scheduled Tribe and now they appear to be more concerned with their 'reserved' representation in the State Assembly than fighting a common battle for the Kirat cause. In fact, there appears a race for getting recognition of individual community as a 'Scheduled Tribe' than that of a concerted move for Kirat entity. However, Subba's observations have profound bearing on Kirat identity. On the basis of three socio-economic parametres - education, occupation and landholding - he found no significant differences between Kirats and other Nepali groups like Tagadharis (referring to Nepali high castes), other Mongoloid communities and the so-called 'Untouchables'. He even writes, 'the objective differences in culture between the Tagadhari and Kirata categories have been bridged to a large extent in the last couple of centuries' (p 71).

Emergence of Nar Bahadur Bhandari and Consolidation of *Nepamul* Sikkimese

About a month before conducting the first general election to the State Assembly, the government of India issued Ordinance No. 7, 1979 by which the notorious 'parity system' was abolished; 12 seats were reserved for Lepcha and Bhutia; one seat was allotted to the *Sangha* (the monk body); two seats were ascribed to the Scheduled Castes and the remaining 17 seats in the Assembly of 32 were declared "General", which meant that any *bona fide* Indian voter was entitled to contest on those seats. These stipulations stirred the *Nepamul* Sikkimese a great deal, as they had not anticipated this when they fought for democracy. They had presumed that once the 'parity system' was abolished, all the unreserved seats in the State Assembly would automatically be allotted to them. *Nepamul* leaders like R C Poudyal and B B Gurung termed it 'black ordinance' and

decided to challenge it in the court of law. They also accused the Kazi for being hand in glove with the Central Government to deny the majority *Nepamul* their natural rights and active, dynamic and popular *Nepamul* leaders parted company with the Kazi before the first election to State Assembly in October 1979.

Kazi, although born and brought up in feudal and theocratic fold, was quick to change. This most active politician in Sikkim for over three decades and the only effective face of democratic opposition to the ruler was after all a state level leader, who was not cut for hurley-burley of the Indian national political scene. Thus, he kept on changing his political affiliation as per change of power in New Delhi ignoring the organizational base of his political party and willy-nilly created an impression among the Sikkimese at large that it were the bureaucrats on deputation sent by New Delhi who were running the show in his name. While effective mass *Nepamul* leaders had switched off their loyalty to him, the feudal elements were looking for a viable set-up to teach him a lesson or two. They discovered Nar Bahadur Bhandari, a former school teacher, who had opposed the merger of Sikkim to India for which he was allegedly tortured and jailed. Bhandari had formed his own political party, Sikkim Janata Parishad, with a marked anti-merger and pro-Chogyal stance. He could dare to term the 32 members of the dissolved State Assembly as 'Thirty-two Thieves, who had sold the Country' ('*battise chor*' and '*des bechwa*') from public platform and there was no body to oppose him. The results of the general election were a forgone conclusion; every body knew that Kazi and Co. were going to lose the election. They lost so badly that his party's future was sealed for all the time to come. Bhandari managed to form the government in the state and remained in power for the next 15 years. It is ironic that the Kazi, a former monk of mixed Lepcha-Bhutia parentage, who was accepted by the *Nepamul* Sikkimese to dethrone 333 years of Namgyal rule was to have such an exit.

Bhandari had raised three demands all through 1980s and turned out to be the spokesman of the *Nepamul* grievances: (1)

Restoration of Assembly seats for *Nepamul* Sikkimese; (2) Granting of citizenship to the stateless *Nepamul* residing in Sikkim for long; and (3) Recognition of Nepali language and its inclusion in the VIII Schedule of the Indian Constitution. He could largely succeed in getting his last two demands fulfilled, but getting the 'General' seats reserved for the *Nepamul* could not be clinched. It appears that now the community is reconciled to status quo and demands are made now to increase the seats in the State Assembly to partly answer the above grievance. Bhandari ruled the State ruthlessly and any form of dissent was not tolerated. It was he who established the political tradition according to which the winner takes every thing either by getting the candidates elected or causing defection from the opposition to one's fold. His consecutive success for the second and third terms to the office of the Chief Minister went to his head and he began to treat Sikkim as his pocket bureau (Kazi, 1994). However, it goes without saying that Bhandari did consolidate the *Nepamul* Sikkimese as a sub set in the social commonwealth of Indian Union.

From *Nepamul* to OBC Identity

The caste structure of the Nepali society is based on the same pattern of purity and pollution as the rest of Indian society is. But the caste-based disabilities are not as severe as in some parts of India. A three-tier categorisation of Nepali castes known as 'Tagadhari' (the twice-born), 'Matwali' (those who take alcoholic drinks), and 'Untouchables' exists among them. The Matwalis were again divided into enslaveable and unenslaveable as per the Muluki Ain promulgated by Rana Jung Bahadur in 1853. All through the Rana period in the history of Nepal, the social scene in Nepal was governed by the same civil code. On occasions, the *Nepamul* in Sikkim and Bhutan were treated in the light of the Nepalese code of law. In spite of the democratic innovations in 1950s, the Muluki Ain continued in practice till it was abrogated in 1963 by King Mahendra, but ethnic situation remained frozen on the pattern of past practices.

Things began to change in Nepal in 1980s, when Maguruli (a federation of Magar, Gurung, Rai and Limbu) was formed. The country was declared as a multi-ethnic and multi-lingual state. Nepal Janajati Mahasangh (Nepal Federation of the Nationalities—NEFEN) was launched 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: by 1993 it had 21 federating units representing 21 ethnic groups. It maintains an anti-Bahun (hill Brahmin) attitude in its dealings and its members are supposed to be anti-Hindu. Thus when the associations of Chhetris and Dalits tried to seek membership of NEFEN, they were asked to shun Hindu practices before they could be welcomed to the ‘club’ and naturally their request was turned down (Gellner, 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 identity markers.

Coming to the 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, Majhi and Sarki as 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 Ministership of late Mrs. Indira Gandhi.

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, but in case of Sikkim an exception has been made by mentioning Lepcha-Bhutias by name. Similarly, considering the unique role played by the Buddhist monks and monasteries in the body politics of Sikkim in the past, secular India made a special provision to allot a seat to them in the State Legislative Assembly of Sikkim.

Nar Bahadur Bhandari's third term as the Chief Minister of Sikkim from 1989 onwards marked the gradual integration of Sikkim with Indian political system. The Union Government of India had decided to implement the recommendation of the Backward Class Commission Report by reserving 27 percent seats in educational, welfare, political and administrative offices to the communities listed by the Commission. Incidentally, the Commission had listed all the communities in Sikkim as economically and educationally backward. Naturally, Sikkim could not remain untouched from this development. 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, and also a cabinet minister in Bhandari regime, 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 Legislative Party. However, a turning point came in 1994, when the state assembly passed a 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 Pawan Kumar Chamling fought it on the slogan of "*Bhasha Na Bhat*" (language or food?) against Bhandari's credit for getting Nepali recognized as a national language of India. Electorate rejected language in favour of food and Chamling formed the government with 19 members in the

house of 32. By the time the fifth general election was declared in 1999, Chamling had consolidated his position by according recognition to ten languages (Nepali, Lepcha, Bhutia, Limbu, Magar, Rai, Gurung, Sherpa, Newar and Tamang) as the official languages of the state in 1995, promised to include all Nepalis in the list of 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 the sixth general election was announced in 2004, Chamling's SDF had literally replaced Bhandari's SSP. By then Bhandari was the lone member occupying the opposition benches in the state assembly, as other six members elected on his party tickets had joined Chamling's fold. In such a situation, the result of the next election was almost certain. By getting all his 32 candidates elected to state assembly in 2004 Chamling repeated Bhandari's 1989 feat. One of the longest serving chief ministers in India, Bhandari found himself outside the state assembly for the first time in 25 years.

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 them along with the rest of the Nepamul for political representation. They even fondly remembered that they 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 were one of the original inhabitants of Sikkim along with Lepchas and Bhutias. At last, in December 2002, Limbus and Tamangs were accorded the status of the Scheduled Tribes in Sikkim and West Bengal. Furthermore, 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 (vide 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', most of the members of these castes were poor and 'have-nots' (April 29-May 4 Issue, 1995). Through these notifications Chamling 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. This provision was challenged in the court of law. The highest court in India upheld the provision as a part of the "Tripartite Agreement" signed in 1973 between the then ruler, representative of the Union Government and representatives of the political parties in Sikkim. Now, Limbu and Tamang, who have been recognized as Scheduled Tribes, are naturally demanding political representation in State Assembly. Apparently, 12 seats reserved for the Lepcha-Bhutias by name cannot be tempered with 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. This has not deterred many other communities from the Most Backward Classes from staking a claim to be Scheduled Tribes. As many as eight ethnic groups (Bhujel, Dewan, Gurung, Jogi, Magar, Rai, Sunuwar and Thami) impressed upon the Government of Sikkim to accord them the status of Scheduled Tribe. The Government of Sikkim saw merit in their claims and approached the Union Government to accord its approval, but they were advised to re-apply for consideration along with an 'ethnographic report on the claims of the various communities'. The Government of Sikkim did that and is waiting for the decision of the Union Government.

Prior to approaching the Union Government, the Government of Sikkim asked their concerned officials to request the

concerned communities to prepare their respective ethnographic reports. In terms of size, some of them are in thousands. For example, Rais are as many as 72,418 individuals as per the last census conducted in 2001. Gurungs (37,105) and Magar (10, 858) are other two numerically important communities. However, there are as many as five communities between 3326 (Bhujel) and 223 (Thami). Six of the communities (Bhujel, Yakkha, Gurung, Kirant Rai, Magar and Sunuwar) presented their respective reports for consideration of the committee appointed for the purpose. It is interesting to learn that even the officers of the Department of Social Welfare failed to locate any social or welfare organization among two of the numerically smallest communities (Jogi and Thami) and thus, there was no 'ethnographic report' presented to the committee on their behalf. There was such a report on behalf of Dewans, but no community with this nomenclature is known to exist in Indian census operation.

Three of the communities claiming ST status in Sikkim - Magar, Sunuwar and Rai - published their ethnographic reports recently. It is apparent that the respective associations of the various communities went out of their way to showcase their unique customs, dress, food habits, arts, crafts, architecture, vocations, implements, ornaments, marital pattern, etc. In the words of a 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, 1995: 8-9).

Reading their ethnographic reports one gets the impression that all these communities were Buddhists or Animists who were forced by Hindu kings and Brahmin priests to follow Sanskritic traditions and Brahminical rituals. All of them, with the exception of Jogi, claim to speak distinct languages of their own. But it was

found that all of them speak Nepali among themselves. The State also has recognized their languages as official languages and has even appointed some language teachers in some schools but there are no pupils around in some of the schools willing to be taught their own languages. Their *rites de passage* exhibit a lot of commonality with those of other caste Hindus. Many of the communities have their own sacred specialists, but they often invite Brahmin priests on various occasions. Most of these communities are today suffering from lack of national symbols which would represent them and simultaneously differentiate them from the Tagadharis and Untouchables whose cultures are very similar to each other. The question of difference with Other Mongoloids is perhaps the most vexing one for various reasons. It is important for the Kirats 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 (in Nepal). It is again the latter against whom they appear to be fighting. But this fight is uneasy: the symbol of difference between them are not so powerful as the Kirat 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, 1999: 106).

Nepamul ethnicity in Sikkim is nothing but a myth of collective ancestry. They had to suffer against the feudal oppression in the Buddhist kingdom of Sikkim ruled by Bhutia kings. They were exploited by the landed gentry, which was largely Buddhist. They had to pay a higher rate of land rent in cash compared to the older subjects of Sikkim, who paid it in kind. They were subjected to series of exploitative labour obligations in the forms of *kurwa*, *bethi*, *jharlangi*, and *kalobhari*. Against all such oppressions, they stood together as one community. They were known as fighters in the battlefield, but their fight against the unequal and unjust feudal system was almost unknown outside Sikkim. In a way, this fight came to an end in 1975, when the feudal dispensation came to an

end and they chose a series of identities available to them with a view to appropriating certain resources (Sinha, 1981).

After 1975, *Nepamul* Sikkimese are engaged in a different kind of struggle, which is addressed to finding an honourable place in Indian political system. First, they fought for recognition of Nepali as an Indian language, citizenship rights to *Nepamul* Sikkimese and separate seats for them in the state legislative assembly. They succeeded in the first two and are trying to achieve the third one through the attainment of the constitutional status as Scheduled Tribes.

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