

Chapter – VIII

Conclusion

I

The present study on *Ethnicity, Class and Politics in Sikkim* has been an attempt to look into the patterns of participation of three leading ethnic groups and emergent class in Sikkim politics. It was designed to see how the class and ethnic factors influence the political process in Sikkim and how the identities of three major communities are maintained and reproduced in the cultural, social and political spheres. The study sought to explore the nature of inter-ethnic relationships at socio-cultural, economic and political levels, both at macro and micro situations, in order to trace out the areas of conflicts between the ethnic communities. Another objective was to examine the nature of ethnic dimension of resource distribution in order to see if the sense of relative deprivation in terms of developmental activities in the post-merger Sikkim has precipitated ethnic group formation. The study was set out to analyze how the modern, powerful democratic state has generated new forces and categories to rearrange the elements of civil society and how do the people respond to such forces. The identification of the emerging class and their role in mobilizing respective ethnic groups in the political process forms one of the core objectives of the present study. The study has provided us with opportunities to assess the relative strength of ethnic- and class models of mobilization of people and to examine whether both these models are losing their erstwhile effectiveness.

The data for the present report have been drawn from historical sources and from primary as well as secondary sources. Both quantitative and qualitative data have been made use of. Collection of information started with consultation of the historical materials from secondary sources, Census Reports, documents, Government Reports, government office records, published materials and the manuscripts. The settlements of ethnic communities were studied through anthropological technique of fieldwork, which included house-to-house survey, interview, observation, case studies and informal conversations. The idea was to draw a first hand understanding of the interrelationships between three major ethnic communities, the Nepalese, Bhutias and the Lepchas, in their everyday life in their natural rural habitat and to understand the

process of developing ethnic consciousness through social, economic and cultural practices. The next part of the fieldwork was undertaken to elicit information on the neo-class through a structured questionnaire-cum-schedule. It was also supplemented with informal interviews, collection of case studies and opinions of the respondents. The objective behind this part of study was to understand the nature of the emerging new urban educated professional class in each of the ethnic groups and its role in class or ethnic formation in the state.

II

The term 'ethnicity,' which is derived from the word 'ethnic', is used both in an objective or subjective sense. It is manifested when a group makes use of objective criteria like racial, linguistic and cultural ties to secure the interest of its group members. Hence, it is generally understood as the use of primordial bases as symbols and referents for identification of its group, in the competition and conflict for political power, economic benefits and for social status. In other words, the prospect of social mobility and economic advancement by political means encourages ethnicity. Hence, ethnicity is often guarded by various ethnic groups to defend its privileges and to overcome barriers in the way to development of the community. In the process, as Glazer and Moynihan pointed out, the government also often legitimizes ethnicity by framing development or distribution policies along ethnic lines.

In all modern democratic societies, as observed by Zygmunt Bauman, "politics of inequality" and hence redistribution" has been by far the most dominant type of political conflict and conflict management.¹ In the pre-industrial social formations the traditional social categories like caste, language or religion are often used for drawing the redistribution policy of the state. Once legitimized by the state these categories are reconstituted in public imagination and taken as the generalized categories of agents' self-construction. The Relative Deprivation Theory contends that inequality in the distribution of available resources, social benefits and opportunities between distinct ethnic groups encourages ethnicity i.e. a feeling of frustration or relative deprivation among the ethnic communities precipitates nationalism. Although the primordial affinities, common language and culture prepare the ground for ethnic group-

formation the whole process revolves around politics. An examination of the divergent perspectives and approaches of ethnicity, which has been done in the introductory chapter, would suggest that the problem of ethnicity may be approached from three major angles: (a) Primordialist approach, which suggests that efforts to strengthen and preserve the culture are natural to the 'given communities', (b) the Instrumentalist approach emphasizes on the use of cultural symbols by the elite for instrumental advantage of the group, and (c) the third approach focuses on the use of ethnicity for a greater share of state power. All these diverse purposes behind ethnic politics may not necessarily be exclusive in character but the activists in ethnic politics, as we find in the present study, are often motivated by a combination of all these objectives. However, it seems that the instrumentalist approach holds the key to our main line of interpretation of ethnic situation in Sikkim.

The study of class has been done from the Weberian approach, which stresses on the occupation, prestige, consumption and the life styles as the criteria of class stratification. For Max Weber, the term 'class' refers to any group of people that is found in the same 'class situation', which in turn refers to common life chances that represents economic interest in terms of possession of goods and opportunities for income and under the conditions of commodity or labour markets. Hence, to Weber class are differentiated along occupational lines. Sorokin, Mills, Lockwood have also viewed class from the same angle. The term 'new class', which has been used by John Kenneth Galbraith, includes college professors, schoolteachers, surgeons etc., with focus on the qualification of education. To Djilas, the 'new class' refers to those having special privileges and economic preferences because of its monopoly over administration. However, instead of studying the detailed class character, the scope of the study has been limited to identification of emerging class and their role in mobilizing respective ethnic groups in the process of making the political force. The Marxian concept of class, which speaks of total mobilization along class line, may not be of much relevance in interpreting the class relations in Sikkim since in the absence of a Left Party with Marxist ideology, and in the absence of the industrial proletariat and trade union activities the class-consciousness and class activities are not much visible. The new class that we have studied is more like a status group and their political thinking and political behaviour speak more for their ethnic identities than class identity.

III

The emergence of the major ethnic groups in Sikkim has been traced in the political, economic and social history of the state. The Lepchas, the Bhutias and the Nepalese are generally accepted as three dominant ethnic communities, who came and settled down in Sikkim in different phases of history. The Lepchas, the original inhabitants with their distinctive language and culture, were reportedly ruled by the Lepcha Punus before the immigration of the Bhutias. However, the consecration of the first Bhutia ruler in 1642 along with the imposition of established religion of Buddhism brought the Pagan Lepchas under the domination of the Bhutias. The establishment of matrimonial ties between the two communities paved the way for social and cultural assimilation. The first ruler was able to win the confidence of the Lepchas by appointing twelve Lepcha chiefs as the Dzongpens. He also tactfully courted the loyalty of the existing tribes by making a common-wealth called 'Lho-Mon-Tsong Sum', representing the three tribes – the Lepchas, the Bhutias and the Limboos as a family. Such a calculated approach of cooperation and patronage brought the Lepchas under complete domination of the Bhutias in the later years. However, in spite of large degree of cultural assimilation, the two communities have been able to retain their distinct socio-cultural identities.

The migration of the Nepalese in the beginning of the eighteenth century marked the next phase of Sikkim's history. Following the Anglo-Chinese Convention of 1890, Sikkim was recognized as a British protectorate. As a consequence of the British policy, the ethnic scenario changed dramatically. The population trend for the last hundred years indicates a tremendous multiplication of population figures, which has tilted in favour of the Nepalese. Thus, the Nepalese have emerged as the largest social group comprising more than 75% of the total population turning the Lepcha and Bhutia, the original inhabitants into minority. The change in the demographic scenario had great social, economic and political consequences, which had wide repercussions on the inter-ethnic relationships.

By the time migration of the Nepalese had started, the Bhutia-Lepcha combine emerged as a composite ethnic group as the original inhabitants of Sikkim. By virtue of being the original inhabitants they were identified as the 'Sikkimese'. A threat

perception grown out of uncontrolled inflow of the Nepalese had brought the Bhutia-Lepcha together. However, in spite of emerging as a composite ethnic group, the inter-ethnic relationship was not always cordial. A careful scrutiny of the course of events bring to light the under currents of the tension behind the apparent cordial relationship between the two groups, the 'locals' and the migrants. The history of the state is full of such cases of strained relationships. The history bears the testimony of hundred of Lepchas migrating to Illam (Nepal) as a consequence of quarrel between the ruler and the Lepcha chief minister, which resulted in latter's assassination in 1826. Although the Lepchas and the Bhutias were united in opposing the Nepali domination over economy and polity their unity was not deep rooted. Despite there being cases of inter-marriages between the Lepchas and the Bhutias the social assimilation was nowhere in sight. The degree of social distance appeared stronger among the peasants. The dominance of Bhutias was so strongly felt that the Lepchas remained the most neglected group amidst the Bhutia domination. However, the under currents of political intrigues and fights of earlier years between the two communities disappeared in course of time and the Bhutias being dominant had opportunity to include the Lepchas within one bracket of 'Sikkimese'.

There were fissures in the relationship between the 'Sikkimese' and the 'Non-Sikkimese'. By virtue of being the 'Sikkimese', the Bhutia-Lepcha combine was entitled to certain privileges, which were denied to the Nepalese, who were not the 'Sikkim Subjects'. The latter were not allowed to hold the office of the village Headman or any other position of political significance. The Chogyal adopted some discriminatory policies in matters of land revenue, land acquisition and administration. The Revenue Order No. 1 of 1917 prohibited alienation of Lepcha-Bhutia land by the Nepalese. The "sons of the soil" also enjoyed exclusive right to acquisition of land and residence in North Sikkim. During the feudal era, the Bhutia-Lepcha Kazis were granted land lease for 15 years whereas the Nepali Thikadars were given lease for only 10 years. There was protective discrimination in matter of land revenue assessment as well. The Nepali cultivators were assessed at a higher rate than their Bhutia-Lepcha counterparts for the same quantity and quality of land. However, this discriminatory treatment to the Nepalese had stopped after the promulgation of Sikkim Subject Regulation Act of 1961, when the earliest Nepali settlers were granted the status of Sikkim subjects.

There were great economic and ethnic imbalances. While the Bhutias retained the dominant position the Lepchas, barring a few who moved up by marrying in Bhutia aristocratic families, generally remained in utter poverty and the most neglected group. Mostly confined to the Dzongu area of North Sikkim the Lepchas lived their life of indolence and negligence, hardly raising a voice of protest against the aggressive exploitation by the Bhutias of the riches in land and forest. Barring a few the average Nepalese were in the lower stratum with a second-class political status.

A look into the political structure of theocratic Sikkim reveals the reasons for huge gap between the positions of the Bhutias and the Lepchas. The political structure consisted of the clergy, the aristocracy and the commoners. The Buddhist monks constituted the intellectual elite of Bhutia society and education was the sole preserve of the monasteries. Hence, besides the religious duties the Buddhist monks were influential in administration and in overall politics. The secular life of the state centered round the royal family and the nobles called Kazis. Although some Lepcha families were admitted to the nobility the Kazis were mostly of Bhutia or pure Tibetan origin. The Bhutias, thus, dominated the central administration since the beginning. The Kazis were also the regional landlords. They constituted the top echelon of the bureaucracy and wielded considerable authority and acquired the great economic and social powers. This overwhelming influence of the Bhutia Kazis in the bureaucracy during Chogyal's time had its repercussion on the present political scenario as well.

With the end of British rule, Sikkim did not remain outside the influence of great political events taking place in India. The period witnessed the emergence of democratic forces in Sikkim. The democratic aspirations of the Sikkimese culminated into the formation of Sikkim State Congress. To counter this, the loyalist Bhutias formed the National Party to preserve the theocratic feudalism as the dominant ruling ideology of Sikkim. Hence, polarization of political forces along ethnic lines began. Ethnicization of politics rose to its culmination point with the introduction of 'Parity System' by the Royal Proclamation of January 1952 and March 1953. This system equated the minority Bhutia-Lepcha combine with the majority Nepalese in the distribution of seats in the State Council. Hence, the theocratic monarchy under Chogyal began to develop cracks with communal divisions and with the demands of the Nepalese, the majority community, for equal treatment and democratization of administration. There was a race for greater access to political power between the

minority Bhutia-Lepchas, who had near complete hegemony over Sikkim's political map so far, and the majority Nepalese, eager to rise to prominence in all walks of life and very much in politics. Such a guided social and political arrangement aroused the inner urge for freedom and the democratic movement, which resulted into a general upheaval in 1973 and its subsequent merger with India.

IV

The trend is not much different in the democratic Sikkim after the merger in 1975. Now, the Bhutia-Lepchas nurse a genuine feeling of deprivation and a fear of losing their old status and importance. The controversial Parity system has been abolished but the ethnic minority still retains the substantive share in the State Legislative Assembly, by means of reservation of seats for the Bhutia-Lepcha minority. The Representation of the People (Amendment) Ordinance of 1979 imposed a new formula of seat reservation, where the Bhutia-Lepcha communities have 12 reserved seats and an additional 'Sangha' seat for monastery. While 2 seats are reserved for the Scheduled Castes, the remaining 17 seats are unreserved. The scrapping of seat reservation for the Nepalese by the Ordinance created a sense of insecurity among the Nepalese. The wave of apprehension was so much that it even led to a split of the then ruling Janata Party of Sikkim on the eve of 1979 election. If the Bhutia-Lepchas were afraid of being dominated by the Nepalese, the latter were apprehensive of losing control of state power.

In the late eighties, the nostalgia over lost political dominance and the fear of cultural extinction brought the tribes closer and consequently several organizations like The Denzong Tribal Yargay Chogpa, The Sikkim Tribal Welfare Association, Denzong Lho-Mon-Chodrul etc. were formed. These ethnicity based organizations aimed to campaign actively for tribal unity and give vent to their grievances regarding electoral system and the administration of the state.

The proposal of implementation of Mandal Commission Report gave a new twist to the ethnicity-based politics in Sikkim during the early nineties. Various Nepali sub-cultural stocks began to come up with new identities and demands for recognition to reap the benefit of the recommendations, of the Mandal Commission

Report. The backward castes among the Nepalese began to see caste as the new basis for job reservation and other economic opportunities. These developments provided strength to already existing caste- and ethnic consciousness. With the formation of many caste and community organizations the Sikkim politics once again fell pray to primordial ties.

The early nineties also witnessed a growth of ethnic consciousness among the Lepchas with the formation of Renzong Mutanchi Rong Tarjum. It started placing various socio-economic and political demands. It demanded 50% of the seats reserved for the Bhutia-Lepchas and other tribal benefits for the Lepchas alone. In the meantime, by virtue of the Scheduled Tribe status as per The Scheduled Tribe Order of 1978, the Sherpas too started demanding its share of the 12 seats reserved for the Bhutia-Lepchas. The Bhutia-Lepcha combine was not prepared to give any share of seats to the Sherpas on the plea that Article 371 (F) of the Indian Constitution provides exclusive safeguard to the Bhutia-Lepcha communities only. With an objective to find out a solution to the contentious issue of seat allotment among the Bhutias, Lepchas and the Sherpas in the Legislative Assembly Election 1999, the Sikkim-Bhutia-Lepcha Apex Committee was formed in September 1999. Hence, even in the changed democratic set-up, the ethnic issues like reservation of State Assembly seats and jobs for different ethnic groups and sub-groups, the preferential policy to safeguard the interest of local Sikkimese or that of the “sons of the soil” have always dominated the political scene in Sikkim.

From our study of the political developments in the post-merger period we could observe that the democratic electoral politics in Sikkim thrives on the primordial identities like caste and ethnicity and instead of making an effort to transition to a modern, secular, rational civil society based on mass culture the polity provides the space where the primordialities or ‘nativism’ gets reproduced. In other words the electoral politics and the policy of protective discrimination have undoubtedly prepared the ground for ethnic formation in the state. When we say ‘ethnic formation’ we mean that the ethnic consciousness reflects itself in all major spheres like social, economic, and political spheres. The ruling forces in the state are aware of this ground realities and they take a conscious approach to exploit peoples’ ethnic and caste identities both for capturing power and for holding on to power. The political mobilization of the people in the state, thus, often takes the ethnic route.

The inter-ethnic relationships and the normative behaviour of the members of various linguistic groups are apparently stress free. In every day life, in work place, market, social gatherings etc. there is enough opportunities for interaction among the members of the ethnic communities. It does not appear that under the normal circumstances the interpersonal relations are, in any way, affected by any feeling of inter-ethnic animosity or hatred. However, there are occasions when the members belonging to one community feel that they are deprived and backward in comparison to the members of another community living side by side, the feeling of difference or the ethnic consciousness come to the surface to affect the inter-community relationship. Passing of derogatory remarks by the members of one community on the members of another community speaks of the ethnic mind of the people. Such terms are representative of the collective consciousness shared by members of a community about the members of another community and shape the interaction pattern among the members across the communities. However, the inter-ethnic antagonism does not often find expression in ethnic conflict. The occasional outburst of inter-ethnic encounter like the one that appeared during 1973 agitation or the one that was witnessed in the form of agitation on the income tax exemption issue in 1994 shows that such cases are only episodic and are variable in respect to situation and circumstances.

With the onset of developmental activities after Sikkim's merger with India, the allocation of state resources and state created opportunities began to be carried out in new democratic way. As an obvious manifestation of this a distinguishable group of new educated class, consisting of educated bureaucrats, professionals, managerial class, teachers and the political elite, has come up. This new class plays a lead role in socio-economic and political domains. The participation of educated individuals in administration and politics in larger number articulates that Sikkim politics is out to have its leadership from the neo-elite that represents the advanced section of the different ethnic groups.

However, the three communities were not equally equipped to take advantage of new opportunities and the development process because of long course of

subordination of one community by the other and also because of the resultant inequalities. Hence, there has been a competition among the ethnic communities to equip themselves educationally and make most of the new opportunity available to them. An analysis of the ethnic dimension of the resource distribution shows the unequal control and competition over material and human resources. This has obviously resulted in the feeling of relative deprivation among the communities that has influenced the Sikkim politics.

The question of land acquisition is related to the question of ethnicity in Sikkim. Perhaps, without an ethnic strategy and protective legislation the situation in a small state like Sikkim would have deteriorated for the Lepchas in particular and the Sikkimese in general. In spite of these strategies land is no longer in the monopolistic domain of the Lepchas. Originally the Lepchas controlled most of its land. However, after enthronement of Bhutia ruler, the ownership of cultivable land had shifted to the Bhutia ruler, who used to gift portions of it to his chattels, courtiers, and the Kazis in return of their services. Hence, with the passage of time, the land changed hands from the Lepchas to the Bhutias and later to the Nepali immigrants, who came to the state with greater control over economic and human resources or greater control over competitive resources. The influx in the post-merger period could have led to an aggravation of the situation. In such grim scenario, Renzong Mutanchi Rong Tarjum is pressing for an amendment of Revenue Order No. 1 of 1917, so as to arrest the alienation of land from the hands of the Lepchas by the members of other tribal communities.

In the new democratic setup the state has recorded some developments in all sectors of the economy. But here also the Lepchas lag behind the other two communities in taking advantage of the development activities and as a result they have relatively less control over human and material resources. Lesser control over human and material resources could very well be the reasons for their continued backwardness. The Bhutias and the Nepalese largely control the small-scale industries, which have been multiplied in the post-merger period. The Marwari settlers and other Madesia traders mostly control the business and trade sectors.

In the sphere of higher education, which is the criteria for entering into the new class, the Bhutias have made use of most of the reservation quota available. It has also been found that in all institutions such as education, service, administration, politics, and higher level of bureaucracy the Lepchas do not find proper representation

and are trailing behind the Bhutias and the Nepalese. Hence, benefits and privileges meant for ethnic minority, for safeguarding its members, have largely been cornered by the Bhutias, who form the creamy layer of the society. Because of their overall backwardness, lack of motivation and lack of competitive spirit the Lepchas have not been able to make any significant headway in controlling the economic resources despite some measures taken by the government. By virtue of their numerical strength and greater control over economic resources the Nepalese have a dominant presence in all walks of life.

The development process has widened the inter-ethnic inequality resulting into unequal control over resources. The Lepchas – the indigeneous tribe of Sikkim have not been able to take the fruits of development equally with two other communities. Lack of control over human resources such as education, power, and access to information may be the reasons for low representation of the Lepchas in all these spheres. The historical fact of Lepcha subservience and Bhutia dominance also partially explains the reason for the huge gap that has been created in the democratic setup. The tribes in the state also do not present a homogeneous and un-classified category. The ever-growing number of various organizations and associations shows how much the different groups and sub-groups express their dissatisfaction (real or strategic) over the growing social and economic disparities. Thus, the unequal distribution of opportunities and resources coupled with their social and cultural differences have provided enough ground for ethnic group formation in Sikkim, which prevents the class line mobilization.

The present study suggests that ethnicity has always been a rallying point of political forces operating in democratic Sikkim and has been the predominant form of political mobilization. Strong primordial ties and commitment to religious faith might have prepared the ground for ethnic-based political culture. Such kind of politics prevents class line mobilization. The ethnic identity based on primordial attachment is strong enough to obstruct the class line mobilization in Sikkim. A brief study of the educated new class highlights that the intellectual class constitutes the new class that reflects and dictates the collective consciousness on major social, economic and political issues concerning the state. However, a progressive intellectual class ready to spearhead the class line mobilization is almost absent in Sikkim. The absence of a strong Left party partially answers why there has not been any concerted effort to politically mobilize the working class, the middle class professionals and the peasants.

The Lepchas – the most deprived of the three communities shows signs of ethnic mobilization and the new class of the community is spearheading this mobilization process. The same is true about the other two communities; the advanced section in each community mostly looks within the community. Hence, in a small state like Sikkim, the democratic polity is tuned in such a way that ethnic differences and ethnic consciousness draw impetus for reproducing themselves.

VI

The micro level study also reveals that the three communities are not having equal access to material and human resources. The Bhutias have relatively greater access to land, education and income opportunities as compared to the Lepchas, who are backward in terms of education and organized sector of employment. The Lepchas do not have control over business either. The Nepalese, the later migrants, initially struggled hard to establish themselves in the fields of economy, society, and polity but gradually they have made steady progress in the fields of education, agriculture, business, employment and politics. The study highlights that the Lepchas, the Bhutias and the Nepalese represent three distinct roots in history, different cultural traditions and languages, which they carefully nurture in their daily life. Although, there is enough scope for intermixing, the members interact by keeping their cultural traditions intact. The three communities have been able to maintain their distinct identities as separate groups by retaining their respective languages, sticking to their dress code and restricting themselves to intra-community marriages. The three communities have so far been succeeded in holding on to their cultural traditions and the barrier between Bhutias, Lepchas and Nepalese is still maintained, although there are traces of change. In spite of the basic similarities in terms of their customs and high degree of religious and cultural similarity, the inter-marriage between the Lepchas and the Bhutias was not found very common. The tendency to cling to their respective cultural traditions is expressed in a subjective 'feeling of difference'. By cultivating this feeling of difference they maintain their ethnic boundaries. And this is cultivated in the arena of politics as well.

The problem of Sikkim in general is that the people in the state are late in responding to the call of modernization. People are late in coming out of their traditional, community-like, kinship based social, cultural and mental frame. Moreover, there has not been any major social reform movement to free the Sikkimese (particularly the Bhutias and Lepchas) from the shackles of traditional mind-set. Community consciousness thus has been a part of their existence, which finds expression in social, cultural, economic and political fields. When, after the merger, there were scopes for greater exposure to the forces of modernization, the ethnic politics (in the mould of democratic politics) has put them in ethnic shell once again. After the merger and with the launching of developmental activities a new class has emerged, which could have led the process of modernization. But the present study demonstrates that even this relatively advanced section of ethnic communities has not done anything visible to free the community fellows from ethnic consciousness.

The theoretical proposition at the beginning of my study contends that ethnicity is a social and political construction of elite, who uses the primordial attributes to gain political and economic advantage for their group. It was also proposed that a sense of relative deprivation and competition for material benefits precipitates ethnicity. In Sikkim, the elite in each community are clever enough to use the objective criteria of their distinct history, cultural traditions, and languages and foster the subjective sense of difference for considerable economic and material privileges. Although all Sikkimese declare their support for a democratic political system without reference to their ethnic consideration, the competitions for limited resources in Sikkim has generated a sense of inequality and relative deprivation. In spite of the growth of Sikkimese identity in recent years, which safeguards the interest of the earliest settlers among the Lepchas, the Bhutias and the Nepalese of Sikkim against the outsiders, it is not sufficient in breaking down the ethnic boundaries which separate the ethnic communities. The growing demand of Lepchas for recognition as the only indigenous tribe of Sikkim, demand for 50 per cent of the seats reserved for the tribes, the demand of the Bhutias to exclude other communities from the Bhutia category, the demand of the Sherpas for a share of the seats reserved for the Bhutia-Lepchas, the increasing demand of the Limboos, Tamangs and the Gurungs for recognition as Scheduled Tribe, the demand of higher caste Nepalese for inclusion into the 'Other Backward Castes' category, restoration of reserved seats for Nepalese,

and many other demands of the communities are directed to retaining the existing privileges or expanding the sphere of privileges.

The study reveals that the process of economic modernization has not contributed to weakening the primordial ties or kinship close group relations in the state. The slow pace of urbanization and industrialization and a common tendency to fall back upon the traditional social bases for support and security may have facilitated the continuation of the primordial ties. This too has helped creation of enough scope for the emergence of ethnic cleavages and ethnic mobilizations. The general presumption that ethnicity reflects the condition of traditional society and the spread of education and modernization would undermine the ethnic attachment does not hold a place in Sikkim. Hence, the primordial ties still provide a fertile space where ethnic politics thrives in the state of Sikkim.

The problem of ethnic discontent is not peculiar to Sikkim alone. In all the countries of South Asia ethnicity-based politics is a regular feature in the post-colonial period. The Indian states in the North-East also experience ethnicity as the predominant means of mobilizing people and communities. Formation of ethnic identity is the predominant form of assertion of cultural rights and the widely practiced means of capturing power and holding on to power. Ethnic protest emerged in the relatively backward region like Nagaland as well as in an advanced region like Punjab. Ethnicity was a vital factor in the political reorganization of the North-Eastern States. The growing economic disparity and socio-political process accentuated the ethnic cleavages in North-East India. The ethnic cleavage in Sikkim has not reached the alarming point yet despite a strong undercurrent of inter-ethnic competition and tension. The course of events, however, is pregnant with such possibilities.

VII

In the modern or post-modern condition the social group that is called 'tribe' does not exist with all its traditional cohesiveness or collective consciousness. Because, one can easily notice generation of internal social and economic differentiation or stratification within a tribe, dispersal of the members over geographical areas, and the rise of a great deal of individual autonomy. The members usually have their own

definition of the social reality and an individual approach to the competition for resources. An intra-community competition can hardly be overlooked. In a relatively traditional social set-up that Sikkim offers, the way the tribes like the Lepchas and the Bhutias are responding to the forces of modernization provide examples in support of our conceptual statements. Talking about 'tribal politics' Zygmunt Bauman writes, "Tribal politics entails the creation of tribes as imagined communities." He further holds that the tribes can no longer rely on the traditional authority able to coerce their members into submission to tribal rules (seldom they have clearly codified rules to which submission could be demanded), nor on the strength of neighbourly bonds or intensity of reciprocal exchange (most tribes are de-territorialized), and communication between their members is hardly at any time more intense than the intercourse between members and non-members of the tribe. Therefore the 'post-modern tribes exist in no other form but the symbolically manifested commitment of their members.'² It would be an exaggeration to suggest that the Lepchas and Bhutias in Sikkim are the 'imagined communities' or 'exist only symbolically'. My study would suggest that a tribe forming an ethnic community based on their name, language, common symbolic tradition is still a reality although the erstwhile cohesiveness may no longer be found. However, when a tribe is shaping as an ethnic group or as a political group its ethnic formation may very well be temporal in nature, because it is formed with some specific political objective or an objective to work as a pressure group for a greater share of the resources in offer for redistribution by the welfare state. In its competition for resources the members of a tribe may have a tendency to render their rituals as spectacular as possible, mainly through their 'power to shock' and pose as a well-organized political vote bank to ensure their value in the electoral politics.

Our study of the neo-elite, the educated urban middle-class professionals, suggests that they are far from forming a class in Marxian sense of the term. They too present a fragmented and unorganized lot with their own subjective definition of the situation. They present a class in Weberian sense always eager to define and use the social, economic and political situations to their advantage. In their effort to have greater share of the economic resources and power the advanced section of each community fall back upon their ethnic identity and makes effort to consolidate such identity by talking more about their cultural rights, symbols, rituals, language, caste and religion. Their success in holding their community together and in posing as a

vote bank decides how far they would be able to realize their missions subjectively defined. The bureaucratic-political elite generally controls the distribution of state resources and establishes consumption privileges – improved access to salaries, travel, working conditions, pension schemes, and so on. In the state centric economic and political arrangement this class (not a class in the sense of being sourced in processes of production) occupies a distinct position, different from the average members of the community they represent, in terms of standard of living and in terms of their greater control over the political, economic and social resources. The present study explains how the class categories are subsumed within the ethnic categories and the vice-versa.

Notes and References

¹ Zygmunt Bauman, “A Sociological Theory of Postmodernity”, in Kete Nash (Ed.) *Readings in Contemporary Political Sociology*, (UK: Blackwell, 2000), p. 36

² *Ibid*, p. 37