

CHAPTER II

Sikkim : A Brief Profile

Sikkim, the 22nd state of the Indian Union is essentially a Himalayan enclosed basin. It is a mountainous state hemmed in on the west by Nepal, on the north by Tibet, on the south by West Bengal and on the east by Bhutan. Surrounded thus, Sikkim enjoys and still retains unusual distinctiveness. It is somewhat rectangular in shape, 113 kilometres long and 64 kilometres wide. The total area of Sikkim is 7,096 square kilometres. For the sake of administrative convenience, the state is divided into four districts viz. North, South, East and West. Each district comes under the direct administrative control of a district collector. For the North district the headquarters is situated in Mangan. The Namchi is the headquarters of South district. The West district has its headquarters at Gyalsing. While the East district headquarters is situated in Gangtok, which is also the state capital of Sikkim. The administrative set up of Sikkim is shown in brief in the Table 3.

Table : 3 Administrative Set-up of Sikkim at a glance

Sl. No.	Particulars	North District	South District	East District	West District	Sikkim
1.	District	1	1	1	1	4
2.	Panchayat Units	18	44	44	48	154
3.	Revenue Blocks	46	134	114	111	405
4.	Police Station	4	3	7	4	18
5.	Town	1	2	3	2	8
6.	Fire Station	-	1	1	-	2
7.	Assembly Seats	-	-	-	-	32
8.	Parliamentary Seats					
	Lok Sabha	-	-	-	-	1
	Rajya Sabha	-	-	-	-	1

Source : Bureau of Economics and Statistics,
Govt. of Sikkim, Gangtok, 1983.

Demography

The census figures of 1891, the first authentic information regarding Sikkim's population show the then population as 30,458¹. The population has gone up by 1931 to 109,803².

1. Risley, H.H., Gazetteer of Sikkim, Calcutta, 1894, p. 27.

2. Sinha, A.C., Politics of Sikkim, New Delhi, Thomson Press (India) Limited, 1975, p. 10.

Thus in the forty years from 1891 to 1931 the absolute increase is 260.52 percent. The total population further has grown up to 162,189 in 1961. The 1971 census shows a tentative figure of population as 203,000 without detailed categorization into ethnic, religious and linguistic. The 1981 census registers a population of 315,682. So the increase of population can be said more phenomenal and fast in Sikkim. According to 1981 census, the total population of Sikkim contributed to 0.04 percent of the total population of India. The decadal growth rate of population of Sikkim from 1951-61 is 17.76 percent and from 1961-71 is 29.38 percent³. While it is much more, 50.44 percent, in the decade of 1971-81. Census figures for the last ninety years has been given in the Table 4.

It is obvious that the Nepalese are the most dominant and numerous of the ethnic groups in Sikkim. The census figures for the ethnic groups are available from 1891 to 1931. In 1891, out of total population of 30,458, the Lepchas were 5,732, Bhutias were 4,894, Limbus 3,353 and Nepalese 15,458. While in 1931, out of total population of 109,808; the Nepalese population has grown up to 84,693 and that is much more higher in comparison with Bhutias 11,955 and Lepchas 13,060 (Table 4).

3. Census of Sikkim, Government of India, 1991.

Table : 4 Demographic changes in the ethnic composition from 1891 to 1981.

Census figures based on different ethnic groups			
1891	Total	30,458	
	Lepchas	5,752	
	Bhutias	4,894	
	Limbus	3,356	
	Nepalese	15,458	
1911	Total	80,000	
	Nepalese	50,000	
	Lepchas, Bhutias and others	30,000	
1931	Total	1,09,808	
	Lepchas	13,000	
	Bhutias	11,933	
	Nepalese	84,893	
Census figures based on religious affiliation (Indians and Tibetans excluded)			
1951	Total	1,37,725	
	Buddhists	39,395	Lepchas 13,625 Bhutias 15,626
	Hindus including Limbus	97,863	

Contd..

Table : 4 (Contd..)

1961	Total	162,199
	Buddhists	49,894 (Lepchas and Bhutias)
	Hindus	108,165
1971	Total	203,000

Source: Sinha, A.C., Politics of Sikkim, p. 10

Census figures based on Scheduled Caste/Tribe
and General population

1981	Total	316,395
	Scheduled Caste	18,281
	Scheduled Tribe	73,523

Source : Census of Sikkim, 1981.

According to 1981 census the total population is 316,395 of which scheduled castes population is 18,281 and scheduled tribe population is 73,523. The sex-ratio is 836 females per thousand males. The density of population per square kilometre is 64. The number of occupied residential houses is 58,746 and the total number of households is 59,857 with average family size 5.29 in general.

Ethnic Variation

The present population of Sikkim is primarily composed of Lepchas, Bhutias, Nepalese and the plainmen who represent

different ethnic groups settled in the state at different times. The oldest, inhabitants of Sikkim are the Bongs or Lepchas. Though, it is only a notion and no historical records exist as to show how they came to inhabit this country, the Lepchas are believed to have migrated via Assam in this mountain state. They are fair in complexion, of medium height and possess pronounced Mongoloid features. Religiously, they belong to Lamaist Buddhism. Besides, there are considerable number of Lepchas who are mainly the Christian converts. Lepchas maintain their distinctive ethnic group identity in Sikkim. The Lepchas have their own language. It is contended that the language they speak is of the Tibeto-Burmese family. The Lepchas have no caste distinction but they believe to belong to either of the five patrilineal clans which are believed to have originated from supernatural and mythological ancestors. The Lepchas have a tradition of polyandry. In marriage they have a tradition of paying bride-price. Among the Lepchas the property is divided equally among sons. The exclusive Lepcha settlement can be found only in Dzongu area of present day Sikkim.

The Bhutias are descendants of immigrants from the Tibetan province of Kham and Bhutan in 17th century, who played an important role in establishing the Kingdom of Sikkim. 'Bhutia' is the ancient name for Tibet, and all those whose forefathers had Tibetan origin identify themselves usually

as Bhutias. Bhutias are big built, tall, strong, steady and fair in complexion with pronounced Mongolian features and differ from the Lepchas. The Bhutia social structure is patriarchal and have an old tradition of polyandry. In marriage, they also have a tradition of paying bride-price. Normally, the Bhutias live in a joint family. There is no caste distinction among the Bhutias. Marriage is usually arranged and settled by the parents. Religiously, the Bhutias are mostly Buddhists with a few exceptions of Christians.

Indeed, the Nepali mass immigration in Sikkim started long after the Bhutia settlement (particularly during the British reign in India). Nepalese are the people either whose forefathers had come from Nepal or those who had origin in Nepal. Their forefathers were the settlers from Nepal, coming in from the beginning of nineteenth century. They have retained their own cultural identity, distinct from the racial amalgam which had become Sikkimese. The Nepalese ethnic group in Sikkim is inclusive of the three sub-cultural stocks : The Kiratis, the Newars and the Gurkhas.

Of the Gurkhas who settled in Sikkim, the Brahmins, Thakuris, and Chetris are important. The Brahmins have the highest position among the Nepalese caste peoples. The Brahmins are mostly orthodox patriarchal Hindus and would not normally have any matrimonial relations with other lower castes. They

would not even eat together with other non-Brahmin lower castes. Next in social rank are the Thakurs. The social rank of the Chetris are next to the Thakuris. Chetris also wear sacred thread and have brahminical prejudices. Though, inter-marriage is common they prefer marriage only among their own clans. Among the low castes, there are Kamis, Sarkis and Damais etc., who are also regarded as scheduled castes in Sikkim. They are the artisans and are engaged in trades which are forbidden for the high castes Nepalese. The Kamis, who are blacksmith by profession, have superior social standing to Damai who are tailors and Sarkis who are cobblers. All these three caste groups are untouchables and in no way related to caste Hindus. Their family system is patriarchal and by religion they are Hindus. Marriage is arranged usually by parents.

Among the Kiratis, the Limbus, Sherpas, Tamangs, Rais, Magars, Gurungs are important. The Limbus are mainly Hindus, though some Limbus are still found as animists in the interior part of Sikkim. The Limbus have their Limbu language which is recognised as one of the state languages in Sikkim. Though, Limbus are regarded equal by other middle castes Nepalese, yet they are not completely assimilated into the Nepali caste hierarchy. At present, the Limbus want to retain their own Limbu identity in contrast to the Nepali identity. Sherpas were normally grouped with Kirati tribes in earlier periods.

Though, the Sherpas are not completely assimilated into Nepali caste hierarchy, yet they represent them as Nepalese in the broader context. They have their own dialect and religiously they belong to Lamaist Buddhism. Simultaneously, they maintain their Sherpa identity together with Nepali identity. The Sherpas also are regarded equal by other Nepalese middle castes. The Tamangs also were enumerated with Kiratis. Tamangs in similar way retain their own Tamang identity and represent them as Nepalese in broader context. Though, the Tamangs are not normally included in the Nepali caste hierarchy, yet, they are regarded as equal to the other Nepalese middle castes in Sikkim. Religiously, they also belong to Buddhism. In fact, Sherpas and Tamangs maintain marginal culture in this region, because they celebrate both Hindus as well as Buddhists festivals/ceremonies. Like Sherpas, the Tamangs also have their own Tamang dialect. Rais also were enumerated previously with Kirati tribes. Among the Nepalese, the Rais are now treated as middle caste people. They are mainly the Hindus and also have their own Rai dialect. At present they are completely assimilated into the Nepalese culture. Mangar also were regarded previously as Kiratis, but at present they are treated as middle caste among the Nepalese. They are more Hindus and perhaps embraced Hindu faith soon after the Chetris and so have been absorbed in the mainstream of Hinduism more than the other Kirati tribes. Gurungs also were enumerated previously with Kiratis. At present, they are

treated as middle caste among the Nepalese and profess Hinduism. They also have their own traditional Gurung dialect.

Newars in Sikkim are regarded as equal by other Nepalese middle ranking castes. They are mainly Hindus and have their own Newar dialect. The Newars are predominantly traders. But, in Sikkim, the Newars also are found as agriculturists. The plains people are mainly the business castes (Marwaris of Rajasthan and Baniyas of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh), and Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Kayasthas and others who came from the Indo-Gangetic plain covering Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Haryana, Punjab, Kerala and West Bengal. The Marwaris and Baniyas play a major role in the state trade and commerce. While others have jobs in the academic and administrative spheres.

Monastery and Lamaism

In Sikkim, lamaist religion is a real force, that moulds the socio-cultural pattern of the people belonging to this faith. The powers and influence of the monasteries which are the strong holds of lamaism are insurmountable. The monasteries are the centres of all social activities, since, the monasteries and the lamas are involved in all occasions in the life of a Buddhist family from birth to death. It is a common practice that the second son of most Bhutia families in Sikkim is dedicated to the

Monastery.⁴ Education was always one of the traditional functions of the Buddhist monastery. Lamas are usually recruited both from Lepchas and Bhutias. People are eager for their sons to become lamas. They use to say that if a son is intelligent and healthy, he should be sent for monastic training⁵. The monastery is the place where Buddhists receive their ideal education, and practise their ideal profession and the lamas from the intellectual elite of society with an exceedingly high prestige. The monastic training begins between the age of five and ten. At the start of the training, the parent or guardian of the boy prepares a feast for the lamas of the gonpa. The actual training begins with the rank of Tongpa. The initial successive ranks of Tongpa and Kunyel are in the nature of novitiate. The real priesthood starts from the stages of Chinyel, Nyepo, Chenjipa and Chutempa. Once passed the rank of Chinyel, he is regarded as professional lama, who may be asked by villager to perform ceremonies. Actually, these series of ranks represent the various roles of priests in the monastic organization and play an essential part in the prayer services and festivities in the gonpa. The rank of Dorje-lopun (the head of the gonpa) is regarded top among the lamas.

4. Ringu, Tulku, "Monastic Education in Sikkim", Educational change in Sikkim, Annual Number, 1977, p. 10.

5. Nakane, Chie, A Plural Society in Sikkim: A Study of the Interrelations of Lepchas, Bhutias and Nepalis, in Wainendorf, C.V. Furer (ed.), Caste and Kin in Nepal, India and Ceylon, Asia Publishing House, 1966, p. 227.

The payment increases as the qualifications (the rank acquired in the process of training) of lamas become higher. Fee is usually received in cash together with drinks and midday meals and high tea at the house⁶. In comparison to the Nepalese, the lamaist have a higher consumption rate. It is mainly because the lamaist have to feed the monks regularly to earn merit; they have to donate in cash and kinds to the monasteries; and provide free labour service for repairing the heavy structured gompas (monasteries). The lamaist themselves their priests and their rituals require consumption of country liquor, which is made of rice or millet. This is heavy economic drain on their limited resources.⁷

Economy: Agriculture is the mainstay of the people of Sikkim and its economy is primarily based on agriculture. The total cultivated area in Sikkim is about two lakh acres (196,547.89 acres). In spite of various measures to increase the per acre production, the state continues to be dependent upon food grain import. In the high mountains upto the limit of human habitation agriculture is undertaken side by side with cattle rearing and cottage industries. In the mountains where rice can not be grown

6. Nakane, Chie, *Ibid.*, pp. 227-229.

7. Sinha, A.C., Resource Distribution and Multiple Ethnic Identity in Sikkim, in Haimendorf, C.V. Furer (ed.), Asian High Land Societies, New Delhi, Sterling Publishers Pvt. Limited, 1981, p. 198.

successfully barley, maize, millet and potatoes are important crops. The principal crops grown are maize, paddy, millet, wheat, barley, cardamom, apple, potato, oranges, buck wheat, pineapple, banana etc. Terrace system is the most prevailing type of rice cultivation. In few cases 'Jhum' cultivation has continued right to the present as another type of agricultural performance. Rice is grown upto about 1600 metres wherever water is available. Wet paddy is interspersed with maize in dry fields and the latter is grown even upto the heights of 3000 metres. Oranges and cardamom constitute the two principal cash crops. In the wet middle altitude valleys cardamom is grown and oranges have been planted extensively upto about 1500 metres. The other important cash crops of Sikkim, excluding cardamom and oranges are ginger and potato. Indeed, the Sikkim has achieved a lot on agricultural front after its association with Indian Union in 1975. Since almost 85 percent⁸ people live in rural area and the agricultural products constitute the mainstay of the state's agricultural people, its development becomes necessary for improving the rural economy of the state. Efforts have been made to orient agriculture development in such a manner as to raise productivity by adopting appropriate programmes and policies of making best utilisation of limited land resources. Sikkim has a limited potential for expanding

8. Census of Sikkim, Government of India, 1981.

arable land. The government has, therefore, laid great emphasis on the development of animal husbandry as a subsidiary occupation in rural areas.

The major commercial establishments are controlled mainly by the Marwaris, Baniyas and other traders from the plains. They are mainly money-lenders, general merchants, clothiers, wholesale dealers, hoteliers and wine vendors. A number of Nepalese, Bhutias etc., can be found engaged in trade in Sikkim. A network of commercial and a variety of small scale and medium scale industrial establishments have been developed in Sikkim. Under the development plans sponsored by the Central Government and more after the merger a huge capital has been invested in efforts to raise the standard of living of the public and boost welfare programmes. This has resulted in the development of education, public health, communication and consequently the establishment of industries though at a mini level. The main industries are Sikkim Distilleries at Rongpo, Government Fruit Preservation Factory at Singtam; Jewel Factory; Government Cottage Industries; Sikkim Time Corporation; and Cigarette Factories at Mazitar, Rongpo and Jorethang; Sikkim Mining Corporation. The minor industries are Carpet Weaving Unit 65; Handicrafts 5; Printing Press 6; Wooden Products 6; Motor Repairing 13; Bakery 10; Paddy 8; Match Factory 1; Candle

Factory 2; Leather Products 4; and Miscellaneous 50⁹.

State Report Agricultural Census - 1976-77 shows that the agriculture is the main occupation of the rural population in which cultivators number 90,380 and agriculture labourers are 4,207 while others are engaged in mining 59; manufacturing processing servicing, repair etc., 406; construction 3,793; transport, storage and communication 1,778; persons engaged in factory, fishing, hunting, plantation 619; industry 1,033; trade and commerce 2,338; and others 6,944. The numbers of non-workers are 98,236¹⁰. While 1981 census shows the total number of main workers as 147,436 of which 60.10 percent are cultivators, 3.32 percent are agricultural labourers and 1.08 percent are connected with household industry and 35.50 percent are other workers. Out of total population the percentage of main workers is 46.60 percent and the marginal workers are 1.70 percent, while the total non-workers are 51.70 percent¹¹. With the growing encouragement given by the government in these spheres in recent times, the number of persons engaged in those occupations has increased to a considerable extent.

9. State Report Agricultural Census, 1976-77, Govt. of Sikkim, quoted in Jha, S.K. and Mishra, S.N., Sikkim: Government and Politics, New Delhi, Ess Ess Publication, 1984, p. 9.

10. Ibid., p. 9.

11. Census of Sikkim, Govt. of India, 1981.