

Chapter I

Introduction

Sikkim, the 22nd State of India, has held the centre stage in the Himalayan trade and politics during the period that began in 1988. A lot has been written on this once tiny Himalayan kingdom by the British and other European travellers, administrators, and scholars. The Indian administrators and scholars have also not lagged behind in writing about Sikkim which had a controversial political status until about fifteen years back. And even today, the study of Sikkim and the people there is rather fascinating.

Not much is known about the pre-1641 Sikkim. It is generally believed that it did not have well defined boundaries. Its northern boundary, for instance, was defined by the vegetational characters: the area with pine trees belonged to the Tibetans and the area populated by bamboo grooves to the Mon, which in Tibetan, meant lowlanders, and which referred to the Lepchas. Its western boundary was the Arun river in East Nepal but the Lepcha king called Turve Pano probably did

not have a clear control over the Limbus whose habitat was extended upto the West district of the present day Sikkim. On the south, the present district of Darjeeling in West Bengal was under Sikkim but till the beginning of the nineteenth century it was hardly populated except its terai area. Similarly, the eastern border with Bhutan was never clearly demarcated.

There were Limbu and Mangar chiefs controlling the western and southern parts of Sikkim. But it is not clear to what extent were those chiefs under the control of the Lepcha king. It is however indicated in the various books on Sikkim that such chiefs continued to function even after the Namgyal dynasty was installed there in 1641.

The history of the pre-1641 Sikkim has not been properly explored. It is believed that the Tibetans destroyed most of the documents written in the Lepcha script. Whatever may be the reason, the picture as it stands today is heavily influenced by the Tibetan and British sources of history.

It was the British interest in the Indo-Tibetan trade that compelled them to get in touch with the Sikkimese rulers. Though exploratory expeditions were carried out by Joseph Hooker and

William Grant in the early years of the nineteenth century the attempt to establish formal contact with the Sikkimese rulers began in earnest only in 1835. For this, Captain Lloyd was deputed to Sikkim to initiate the dialogue in the beginning of 1835.

The initial response of the Sikkimese ruler was not at all favourable for the British. But within a short period they not only managed to get the "deed of grant" about Darjeeling but also the permit to carry out trade with Tibet through this Himalayan kingdom. The "deed of grant" is thus still a subject of major controversy for historians (Pinn 1986). The control of the British was gradually consolidated and by 1888 they even had a political officer, J. C. White, stationed at Gangtok for supervising the Indo-Tibetan trade and advising the king in administrative and fiscal matters.

Such a state of affairs would not have come about in Sikkim but for certain historical accidents. It is well known that Sikkim was engaged in wars with the Bhutanese on the east and the Gorkhas on the west from at least the beginning of the

eighteenth century. It was following one such war that the present day Kalimpong subdivision of Darjeeling district went into the hands of the Bhutanese rulers in 1706 and remained under them till as late as 1864. Similarly, it lost the area east of the Arun river in Nepal during the rule of the king Prithivinarayan Shah. One of the Namgyal kings of Sikkim was even forced to flee to Tibet for some time. The frequent wars with the Gorkhas in particular had compelled the kings of Sikkim to shift the capital from the west to the east. It was only after the Treaty of Titaliya was signed following the Anglo-Nepalese War of 1814-16 that Sikkim had a peaceful border. This Treaty guaranteed peace to this Himalayan kingdom but made it vulnerable to the British designs. It was a consequence of all this that the district of Darjeeling went out of Sikkim's control in the mid-nineteenth century.

It was not until 1890 that the boundaries of Sikkim were fixed. The Anglo-Saxon-Chinese Convention of 1890 finally defined its present day boundary as follows:

The boundary of Sikkim and Tibet shall be the crest of the mountain ranges separating

waters flowing into the Sikkim and its
affluents from the waters flowing into the
Tibetan Mochu and northwards into other
rivers of Tibet. The line commences at
Mount Epmochi on the Bhutan frontier and
follows the above mentioned water-parting to
the point where it meets Nepal territory
(in Basnet 1974:9).

It was around 1890s that some people from the
places like Bengal, Bihar, Haryana and Rajasthan,
whom I have referred to in this thesis as "plains-
men", began to migrate to Sikkim. They were
essentially traders participating in the then
famous trans-Himalayan trade. There were a few
like K. K. Das and K. K. Sen from Bengal serving
as tutors to the royal family members but the
overwhelming majority of them were certainly those
who went for trading activities.

Those pioneer traders were subsequently joined
by their fellow kinsmen from their native places.
Their flow to Sikkim became more perceptible after
Sikkim became a protectorate of India in 1950.
There was another wave of migrants from the plains
of India after 1975 when it became a part of the
Indian Union. These migrants, as it will be seen

in the course of this thesis, were mostly absorbed in the service sector.

As a result, the plainsmen have assumed a significant position in Sikkim and they virtually control not only the market but to a large extent its newly founded educational, administrative, and bureaucratic set-ups also. This has not remained unnoticed by the political elites of Sikkim. There is a growing resentment against the presence of the plainsmen there. Hence, the present study on the plainsmen in Sikkim is relevant and topical.

Objectives of the Study

The present study has the following main objectives: (a) What are the mechanisms and strategies adopted by the plainsmen in Sikkim to adapt to the physically, culturally, and socially different milieu of Sikkim? (b) What are the problems and prospects of their adaptation to the Sikkimese society and polity? These two objectives may be operationalized with the help of the following questions:

1. Why did they migrate to Sikkim and settle there?
2. What were the problems of their physical, social and cultural adaptation?
3. What was/is their politico-legal status?

4. What is their socio-economic status vis-a-vis the hillmen?
5. How are they internally organized?
6. What are the patterns and trends of their social, economic and political interaction with the hillmen?
7. What is their role in the economy and polity of Sikkim?

An attempt has been made here to provide an answer to each of these questions and give a comprehensive picture not only of the plainsmen but also of their relationships with the hillmen in Sikkim.

Literature Survey

As pointed out in the beginning of this chapter, Sikkim has received a considerable attention of administrators, travellers, and academicians. It is thus impossible to review all the publications on Sikkim. Hence, I have chosen here to discuss some of the important works only. Such works may be first classified into the following heads:

1. Political History
2. Defence Studies
3. Anthro-sociological Studies, and
4. General Studies

1. Political History

Of all the books written on Sikkim its political history has received the maximum attention. In fact, the literature on this aspect of Sikkim are numerous enough to be classified into the following three heads:

- a) Political development,
- b) Pro-merger works, and
- c) Anti-merger works.

A. Political development

The literature on the issue of 'merger' do come under political development but the reason why the literature under 'political history' are provided separately is that there are many books dealing with 'political development' but not touching upon the merger issue. Some of such books are published after 1975 but the focus of these studies has been on the pre-merger Sikkim. Some of the notable works in this regard may be presented below.

V. H. Coelho (1967) discusses the evolution of the administrative and political structure of Sikkim. He points out that Sikkim drew the world's attention because China issued an ultimatum to

the Indian government for dismantling the military structures on the Tibetan side of the frontier between Sikkim and the Chumbi Valley of Tibet. According to him, the people of Sikkim have a strong sense of belongingness to their land and are prepared to protect it from any political misadventure from across the border.

R. C. Mishra (1977) highlights Sikkim's political development from the British period till it became a part of India. For him, the rise of the British power in India, foundations of which were laid in the latter half of the eighteenth century, was a phenomenon of paramount importance for Sikkim also. The Indo-Sikkim relationship was a part of the integrated plan drawn by the British for the expansion of their colonial empire in India. The British were determined to extend their influence in the Himalayan kingdom and check the influence from across the border.

P. R. Rao (1978) chronicles the long and peaceful struggle of the Sikkimese people and the awakening of their political consciousness.

P. K. Bhattacharya's work (1984) is basically on the numismatics but he links up this with the political history of Sikkim and its relationship

with the British India. His book is based on documents collected from the last king and some important persons of Sikkim and Darjeeling besides those from the Archives of India, New Delhi.

N. Sengupta's study (1985) touches upon the question of 'merger' but the thrust of his argument is neither to support nor to oppose this. His objective is to underline the various political processes that ultimately resulted in the 'merger' of Sikkim with India in 1975.

B. S. K. Grover (1974) also discusses the history and socio-political development of Sikkim but focusses on the relationship between Sikkim and India from 1947 to 1974. He has made a special note of the mini-revolution of 1973 and has considered it as a turning point from feudalistic paternalism to a constitutional framework.

L. B. Basnet's book (1974) may be finally mentioned. He divides his book into two parts: in the first part, he discusses the period upto 1947 and in the second part from 1947 till May 1973. He has brought out the interplay of political parties, the Palace and the Government of

India on the political stage of Sikkim. He has also described the peasant movement against feudalism in the second part of his book.

B. Pro-Merger works

There are in fact quite a few writers on Sikkim, who have shown a latent approval of Sikkim's becoming the 22nd State of India. This is evident from their unqualified use of the term 'merger' instead of 'annexation'. Among them, S. N. Shukla and B. S. Das have openly justified the issue of 'merger'. For instance, Shukla (1976) discusses the historical development of Sikkim but his stand on the issue of 'merger' has been clearly that of the Indian government. He even claims that the role of the Indian government in this matter has been hailed not only in India but in most capitals of the world.

Similarly, Das (1983) provides an official version of the political upheavals in Sikkim between 1973 and 1975. It is significant to note that he was the Chief Administrator of Sikkim from April 10, 1973 to September 1974. According to him, India's stand on the issue of 'merger' was

based on the following premises:

- a) Sikkim could never hope to have an independent status,
- b) Delhi was always in favour of a democratic government in Sikkim,
- c) The Chogyal should accept the provision of a constitutional head, and
- d) Sikkim's identity was maintainable within the national framework.

C. Anti-Merger works

Writing anything against the 'merger' of Sikkim with India was not easy. But a couple of authors in influential positions had the courage to condemn the issue of 'merger'. The most notable among them were Sunanda K. Datta Ray and Nari K. Rustomji. The Indian government could not do anything to these authors but The Rape of Sikkim by L. B. Basnet was seized by the policemen easily. In this book, Basnet, who is a prolific writer with notable standing among the elites of Sikkim, had described how Sikkim was 'annexed'.

Datta Ray (1984) the editor of The Statesman, has made one of the most critical comments on the

'merger' issue. According to him, Sikkim was taken over in the "smash and grab" style. He describes the events leading to the "annexation" of Sikkim on the basis of documentary evidences, interviews, eye witnesses, anecdotes and unpublished letters. On the basis of all this he demonstrates that the Chogyal was not only the "victim of fraud" but the state assembly was also taken for a ride. He strongly argues that India's action in Sikkim was motivated by the desire of annexing it and making it a part and parcel of India.

Rustomji's work (1987) appears more as a biography of P. T. Namgyal, the last Chogyal, than a history of Sikkim. It includes a series of correspondences between the author and the last Chogyal or his family members from 1943 to 1981. Hence, it reflects some of the intimate thoughts of the ruler during his days of glory as well as humiliation. He also makes it clear that he never approved of India's 'annexation' of Sikkim.

2. Defence Studies

Sikkim is strategically located but surprisingly not many studies have been published on its mili-

tary importance. There are a couple of stray articles in this context but the only full length work is perhaps that of O. P. Singh (1985). He makes an indepth study of the geopolitical, geostrategic, and politico-military aspects of Sikkim and points out that the obstacles in tactical military operations, accessibility, visibility, mobility, communicability, and availability of defence resources in this frontier state. He has also discussed the system of administration, industries, means of communication, education and welfare of the people there.

3. Anthropo-Sociological Studies

Geoffrey Gorer (1938/1984) and John Morris (1938) are perhaps the first anthropologists to have done intensive village study in Sikkim. They conducted their fieldwork in the Lepcha "reserve" of Dzongu in North Sikkim for three months in 1937 and produced two of the most detailed ethnographic literature on the Lepchas. Their works are still unparalleled.

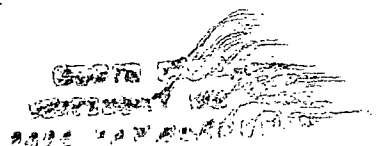
Then in the 60s two important anthropologists carried out their research in Sikkim. Chie Nakane,

the first, conducted her fieldwork in some of the villages of North Sikkim and wrote a rather lengthy article in Furer Haimendorf edited book published in 1966. This work of hers deals with the interrelationships among the Lepchas, Bhutias, and the Nepalis, and tries to explain the relative backwardness of the former two communities on the basis of religion (For review, see Subba 1985). Another important work done in the same decade was that of Halfdan Siiger (1967). This work was primarily done in late 40s in a village called Tingvoong in Dzongu though comparisons have been made with the situation then prevailing in Kalimpong. The second volume of this book published in the same year deals exclusively with ethnolinguistics of the Lepchas.

A. C. Sinha (1975) has also done his doctoral work on the political elites of Sikkim. The first part of his work explores the social forces causing the transition from theocratic monarchy to democracy; the second part with the socio-economic background of the elites; and the third part deals with the political development of Sikkim after 1947.

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C. De Beavoir Stocks's book (1975) is a different work in the midst of the anthropological works on Sikkim. She has made a comprehensive study of the folklores of the Lepchas of Sikkim.

R. N. Thakur (1989) deals with the various aspects of the Lepcha society of Darjeeling and Sikkim like their customs, manners, food habits, institutions, religion and culture. The analytical part of this work is related to the questions of detribalisation in the process of modernization and the new tendency of retribalisation as major socio-cultural processes.

Veena Bhasin (1989) has worked on the cultural ecology of the Lepchas and Bhutias of North Sikkim. She has conducted fieldwork in some of the most inaccessible areas of North Sikkim like Dzongu, Lachen, and Lachung but her analysis is rather faulty because she has analysed the tribal societies in the caste framework.

T. B. Subba (1989) has also worked on five sampled villages out of which three are from Darjeeling and two from West Sikkim. This doctoral work deals primarily with caste and agrarian class

relationships in the rural areas of Darjeeling and Sikkim. The non-Nepali communities like the Lepchas, Bhutias, Marwaris, and the Biharis are occasionally referred to but they are outside the focus of his study.


A recent doctoral work by Amal Datta (1991) deals with the role of education in class formation. He makes a special mention of the emergence of the "New Class" in Sikkim due to the spread of education. The data relate primarily to the post-1975 Sikkim.

4. General Studies

There are a number of books which do not fit into any of the three broad classifications discussed above. Most of these studies are edited works with contributions from scholars belonging to a number of disciplines. The only unedited book on the general description of Sikkim is perhaps that of P. N. Chopra (1979). This book not only deals with the physical and historical aspects of this state but also discusses its socio-cultural and religious aspects.

Among the edited books falling in this category, three may be cited below. The first is edited by S. K. Chaube (1985). This book has a collection of articles on various themes not only on Sikkim but also on other parts of the eastern Himalayas. Similarly the book edited by R. L. Sarkar and Mahendra P. Lama (1980) includes a number of articles on Sikkim contributed by economists, sociologists, geographers, and political scientists. Finally, the book edited by T. B. Subba and K. Datta (1991) may be mentioned. This book also has articles dealing with Sikkim and written by scholars belonging to various disciplines.

In the above survey of literature, I have not referred to numerous articles that have been published in various journals and edited books by the faculty members of the Centre for Himalayan Studies in North Bengal University for whom Sikkim is one of the areas of specialization, or to those articles by scholars working elsewhere but keeping keen interest in Sikkim. A thorough survey of such articles was certainly desirable but it would make this survey unnecessarily lengthy and voluminous.



On the basis of the various books referred to here and articles not referred to, it may be safely concluded that no one has touched upon the problem that I have chosen for this thesis. Even the anthropo-sociologists like Geoffrey Gorer, John Morris, Chie Nakane, Halfdan Siiger, A. C. Sinha, and T. B. Subba have made only partial mention of the plainsmen in Sikkim.

Theoretical Framework

In the absence of adequate literature on the plainsmen in Sikkim, the primary objective of my study cannot but be exploratory. The ambition of experimenting with any theory or model is therefore out of question. However, the present study has some theoretical assumptions without which it is difficult to proceed. Let me briefly elaborate on this.

On the basis of a preliminary knowledge of the plainsmen in Sikkim it appears that the relationships among the various plains communities on the one hand and their relationships with the hillmen on the other are rather complex. By and large, it appears, however, that they form a single

ethnic group vis-a-vis the hillmen though within themselves there are a number of ethnic groups. Therefore, it is felt that neither the subjective nor the objective approach to their ethnicity is adequate. Their ethnicity is both "adaptive" as Fredrik Barth (1969) has argued and supported by Robert Bates (1983) as it is based on certain common racial, cultural, and historical factors, as argued by Harold Isaacs (1975).

In this context, the "insider versus outsider" model propounded by T. K. Oommen (1984) is significant. His frame of reference is India as a whole, where the Hindi-speaking people or the Hindus are "insiders" and the non-Hindi speaking Christians, Muslims and Buddhists are "outsiders". In Sikkim also there is a clear division of people into "outsiders" and "insiders" but the people who are considered as "outsiders" are those who are "insiders" to Oommen and vice versa. Though occasionally even the hillmen from the Darjeeling hills are also referred to as "outsiders" in Sikkim it is undoubtedly the plainsmen who represent this category of people in Sikkim. Even the term 'Indian' is sometimes used as a substitute for the outsiders.

The relevance of Oommen's model is, however, not lost in the process of the contextualization of it. The plainsmen are not only economically dominant but also have a lot of political influence. They may not also be the decision-makers or power-holders but they control the economy of Sikkim and are in a way "insiders" there. Thus, it provides an excellent model for the present study in Sikkim.

Methods

It was apparent from the census figures for Sikkim that the plainsmen were largely concentrated in the urban areas of Sikkim. Therefore, it was mandatory on the part of this study to concentrate on the urban areas of Sikkim. Some of the post-1975 migrants from the plains of India have also been working in various schools and offices located in far-flung rural areas of Sikkim.

For the purpose of this study, I interviewed the plainsmen from the following towns: East district - Gangtok, Rangpo, and Singtam; West - Jorethang; North - Mangan; and South - Namchi. The total number of randomly sampled interviewees from these six towns was 206. According to a rough

calculation, the sample size formed about 5 per-cent of the total number of households of the plainsmen in "urban" areas.

Apart from a detailed interview based on schedules having closed as well as open-ended questions, I took a detailed household census of the interviewees. These primary investigations were supplemented with secondary data collected from various books, articles, and news-clippings at the Documentation Cell of the Centre for Himalayan Studies and the Central Library of North Bengal University.

The fieldwork was carried out during 1989-90 in a series of phases. The net period of observation and interview in the six towns of Sikkim was about six months. The progress of work was initially hampered due to the difficulty in making the busy traders sit and answer my questions. It was only after some contacts were built with the leaders of the plains communities that cooperation was more easily forthcoming.

Plan of the Study

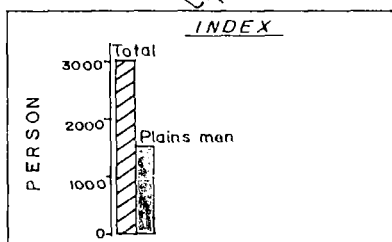
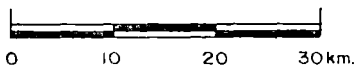
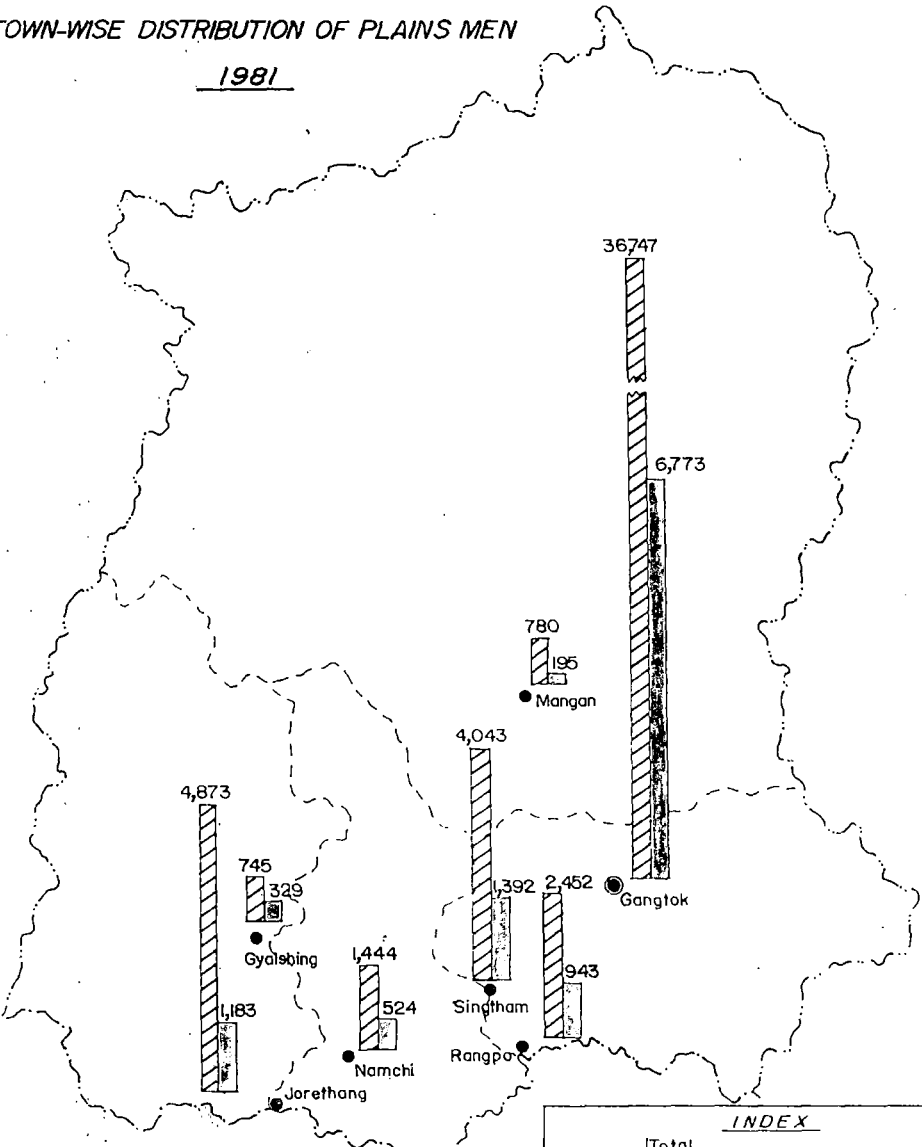
This thesis has been arranged in six chapters including this. Chapter II discusses the migrational

history, demographic composition, and politico-legal status of the plainsmen in Sikkim. Chapter III deals with the internal structure of the plainsmen. Chapter IV is on the occupational structure of the plainsmen in Sikkim. The fifth chapter is on their socio-cultural matrix. The sixth or the last chapter summarizes the findings of the thesis and makes some concluding remarks.

SIKKIM

TOWN-WISE DISTRIBUTION OF PLAINS MEN

1981



Source: Census of India 1981