

CHAPTER – 3
POLITICS IN SIKKIM AFTER THE
MERGER

CHAPTER

3

Politics in Sikkim after the Merger

1. Transition

Change through the passage of time occurs in every society in some or the other way but change in Sikkim from Kingship to democracy came abruptly in Sikkim and people were not really prepared for the system. Many unexpected changes altered the basic character of Sikkim's unique personality as one knew it in 1973. (Das, 1994) The post merger era brought about a painful process of conversion to the political and economic culture of an Indian state. (Das, 1994). The system of governance and institutions introduced by the merger were hitherto unknown to the Sikkimese. B.S.Das writes in his book "*The Sikkim Saga*", "*The transfer of governance from the Ministry of External Affairs to the Home Ministry of India Government itself brought about a big change in style of dealing of India Government with personalities and problems of Sikkim. This was the first noticeable impact on the Sikkimese.*" (B.S.Das, 1983, p. 103)

The currents and cross-currents of the political life, the intra-party squabble, intra-community and inter-community contradictions, working of the democratic government, and the economic development of the state and disappointment of the people, all were the features of the politics in Sikkim during the time. Several factors generated disappointment both among the elite and the common mass. Communalism, which had been a permanent feature of the Sikkimese politics, assumed an undesirable form. Distrust, a sense of insecurity flowing from their feeling of becoming aliens in

their own land, gripped the minds of a section of the people, while the flow of outsiders in Sikkim made others uneasy. (*Sengupta N. , State Government and Politics in Sikkim , 1985, p. 98*) . It appeared that the merger of Sikkim had always been a burning question in the minds of many. However, a huge amount of fund for development, people's aspirations for freedom and other advantages of merger struck a balance and made Sikkim's transition a smooth one.

L.B. Basnett, in his unpublished book titled: "Merger of Sikkim" writes, "*The ruling coterie, the privileged classes and the Bhutia community were shocked during the first few days, but soon adapted themselves to the changed circumstances and addressed themselves to protecting their own class interests to the extent possible under the new dispensation. The Lepchas, who had hitherto been down-trodden, looked forward with great expectations to a pampered treatment on account of their community having been officially recognized as the aboriginal community of Sikkim. The Nepalese of Sikkim, who had been used as the 'people' of Sikkim throughout the period intervening between the April-1973 movements and the merger of Sikkim in India, did not lose anything by the ouster of the Chogyal.*"

2. Mergers after the Merger

Soon after the merger in 1975, the Congress Party of India began pressing on the Kazi to merge the SNC with the Congress. As a result, it ceremonially merged with the INC in December, 1975 and became a state unit of the Congress and came to be known as Sikkim Pradesh Congress. The lone National Party representative in the Assembly also joined the Congress, making the House single party affairs. Practically there was no other party in Sikkim during this time. (*Sengupta N. , State Government and Politics in Sikkim , 1985, p. 166*)

Very Soon, Congress leaders from Delhi had direct involvement in Sikkim Pradesh Congress affairs. The Kazi's leadership of the 1973 movement against the Chogyal was very different than as a Chief Minister and leader of the ruling party in 1975. The heterogeneous organization of the Sikkim Pradesh Congress could not develop any integrity within the party. The internal contradiction within the Sikkim Pradesh Congress already started surfacing. Inner party conflict, clash of interest, and impact of communalism all these found their way in Sikkim's politics. N.B. Khatiwada parted company with the Kazi's party along with three other MLAs and formed the provincial unit of the Congress for Democracy which later became the Sikkim Prajatantra Congress (SPC) in 1977. Khatiwada criticized Kazi as a man completely dependant upon the "imported bureaucrats" who knew nothing of Sikkim and felt nothing for Sikkim. (*Sengupta N. , State Government and Politics in Sikkim , 1985, pp. 166-167*)

In the midst of all these, the old anti-merger forces were reviving and gaining grounds. They depicted Kazi as Delhi's stooge, with no mind of his own. Kazi's credibility was eroded considerably because of his complete dependence on Delhi even on matters which concerned the local administration. The Sikkimese civil servants resented kazi's act and maligned him as the Chief Minister. Serious rifts on ethnic lines started raising its ugly heads in the Cabinet too. (*B.S.Das, 1983, p. 104*)

During this time a series of public demonstrations all over Sikkim took place in order to protest against the working of the Government which culminated in the formation of Sikkim Janata Party (later changed its name and became Sikkim Janata parishad) by Mr. Nar Bahadur Bhandari, a prominent leader of the United Independent Front in the 1974 elections in the 22nd March, 1977. In the meantime, the Janata Party came to power at the centre.

(Sengupta N. , State Government and Politics in Sikkim , 1985, p. 167) Being totally dependent on Delhi Kazi was left with no choice than to merge with Janata Party. The Sikkim Congress once again joined Janata Party with the exception of one woman MLA Mrs. Hemlata Chettri, who remained the lone member of Congress. Thus the second merger of the Sikkim Congress occurred. Kazi was dubbed as “a man of mergers”. *(Sengupta N. , State Government and Politics in Sikkim , 1985, p. 167), (B.S.Das, 1983, p. 105)*

The lone Congress member in the House, Mrs. Hemlata Chettri later joined the SPC. The SPC gradually went on increasing its strength in the House and later demanded to be recognized as the opposition party in the House. Its demand was fulfilled on 23rd September 1977 although it was opposed by the ruling party initially. *(Sengupta N. , State Government and Politics in Sikkim , 1985, p. 168)*

After the second merger of the Sikkim Pradesh Congress with the new Sikkim Janata Party, Khatiwada promptly joined with the anti-merger *(Sikkim's merger with India in 1975)* forces. He became not only a bitter critic of Delhi, but also demanded that Sikkim be restored to the status prior to 1974. He, the strongest supporter of the merger, now accused Delhi of subterfuge and colonialism. *(B.S.Das, 1983, p. 105)* Kazi Lhendup Dorji who had been the undisputed leader of the people, lost his position considerably from all sides by this time.

3. Parity Rejection and Political Resentment

In such a political situation, the question of Sikkim's first election after the merger came into lime light. With the prospect of the election round the corner, the issue of seat reservation for different communities in the forthcoming election also came up and created apprehension in the already disturbed political atmosphere of Sikkim. The Government of India contemplated to do away with

parity formula of seat reservation between the Bhutia-Lepchas (B-L) and the Nepalese and proposed to reserve 12 seats for the B-Ls, one for the Sangha and two for the Scheduled Castes. The remaining 17 seats would be general. (*Sengupta N. , State Government and Politics in Sikkim , 1985, pp. 99-100*)

The equal representation of electoral seats between the two major communities in Sikkim, the B-L and the Nepalese was known as the parity system evolved in 1974 in accordance with an agreement between the Chogyal and the political parties. (*B.S.Das, 1983, pp. 39-40*) This parity had been maintained even in the Chogyal's time in whose State Council six seats were reserved for each of the two Communities in the 24 member Council. Even in the State Assembly elections of 1974, 15 seats were reserved for Nepalese, 15 for the B-Ls, one for Schedule Caste and one for Sangha. The parity was again maintained in the cabinet, which had four Nepali Ministers and four B-Ls, including the Chief Minister, who was a Lepcha. Under the new arrangement, however, no seat was reserved for the Nepalese even though 12 were reserved for B-Ls. Although the amendment also reduced the seats reserved for the B-Ls from 15 to 12, the B-L seats, it may be noted were now not reserved exclusively for the B-Ls but included other tribals in the State too. B-Ls reserved seats were decreased from 15 to 12, while their population increased substantially. (*Kazi, 1993, pp. 228-229*) Nepalese were the worst affected. They could now contest the elections only through the 17 general seats.

The new arrangement evoked criticism not only from the opposition Party, SPC but also from a section of the ruling Janata Party. The majority of the Nepali leaders whether of the opposition parties or of the ruling party became agitated and apprehensive of the future of the Nepali people in Sikkim. The Nepalese lost the benefit of reservation, while the people from the plains were granted

right to contest the general seats. The Bill was introduced in the Parliament in the month of May, 1979. A section of the Sikkim Janata Party leaders, under the leadership of R.C Poudyal (the then Minister in Kazi's Government) became vocal against the Bill and called it a Black Bill. (*Sengupta N. , State Government and Politics in Sikkim , 1985, pp. 175-176*)

With the inclusion of the Indian settlers as Sikkimese citizen, the general seats under which the Nepalese were to contest, had been practically reduced to equality in numbers, if not less with B-L who secured an advantage of twelve reserved seats having been notified as scheduled Tribes. It was worse than parity for the seventy-five percent who were Nepalese. (*B.S.Das, 1983, pp. 106-7*) The reservation for B-Ls in the Legislative Assembly should have been commensurate to their numerical strength (22%) vis-a-vis the rest of the population. By this yardstick they should have been allocated, at best, 6 or 7 seats, and not 12 as stipulated in the bill. The Nepalese contention was that if the Bill was passed as it was it would reduce the majority community in the State to a minority in the Assembly and elevate the minority community into an effective majority. They also apprehended that the right of the Indian business community from the plains to contest in the elections would mar the chance for Nepalese of bagging all the general seats (*Phadnis, 1980*)

Mr. Bhandari, President of the SJP, who was opposed to the merger with India, also said that anti-Indian feeling would grow if the new bill were adopted by the Parliament. (*Statesman (Calcutta), 25 August 1979*). He said that the Centre must remember that the Indian Nepalese and Sikkimese Nepalese were not the same. The latter had contributed a great deal towards the merger with India. But now they were being suspected of having dual loyalties. Bhandari further said that the Nepalese had maintained 50:50 parity

in the State Council although the centre had turned the scales completely against them. The resentment reached such a height that certain leaders started demanding reservation of seats for the Nepalese also and demand for disfranchising the plains people was getting a momentum. Thus, for the first time the issue of plainsmen vs. hill people seemed to surface in the Sikkimese politics which is now becoming a prominent issue day by day in Sikkimese politics .

Poudyal had been very vocal against the Bill but by the middle of June, 1979 Poudyal was removed from the state cabinet. (*Sengupta N. , State Government and Politics in Sikkim , 1985, p. 176*) He with his supporters started publicly criticizing the leadership of the ruling party. The crisis within the party gradually precipitated. Poudyal held, "*It was necessary to have reservation of seats for the Nepalese as they were likely to be reduced to minority in near future, unless some safeguard were immediately provided.*" (*Sengupta N. , State Government and Politics in Sikkim , 1985, p. 176*) On July 31, 1979, Poudyal circulated a petition to the Members of the Parliament where he stated that the Bill was brought to the "Parliament without the knowledge of the Sikkim Assembly or that of the State Cabinet." It was held that the Bill was an attempt to invalidate and nullify the sacred commitments given to the Sikkimese people prior to the merger. (*Sengupta N. , State Government and Politics in Sikkim , 1985, p. 177*) In the mean time, the political developments at New Delhi led to the resignation of Desai government, whereupon the Charan Singh government was installed. There was a sense of uneasiness in the ruling party circles in Sikkim. The dissidents tried to utilize the change in their favor. (*Sengupta N. , State Government and Politics in Sikkim , 1985, p. 177*) The new Prime Minister was urged upon to undo the injustice committed on the Sikkimese through the Bill introduced by the Desai government. (*Sengupta N. , State Government and Politics in Sikkim , 1985, p. 177*)

Due to the new formula of seat reservation, there were two groups within the SJP. They gradually drifted apart in spite of the fact that possibilities were there to bring about a compromise and to patch up the differences. (*Sengupta N. , State Government and Politics in Sikkim , 1985, p. 177*) Instead, the dissidents mustered a considerable strength to table a no-confidence motion against the Kazi ministry. Kazi with only ten MLAs in a 32 member house advised the Governor B.B. Lal to dissolve the Assembly on the ground that it had already completed its tenure on the 26th April before the dissidents tabled the No-Confidence Motion against his ministry. (*Sengupta N. , State Government and Politics in Sikkim, 1985,p.178*)

It may be recalled that the life of the Assembly had expired in April 1979, the last elections in Sikkim having been held in April 1974 when it was not a part of India. On the merger of the kingdom with the Indian Union in May, 1975 the original assembly became the assembly of the state of Sikkim under the Constitution of India. The Governor pre-empting a reported move by a large group of MLAs to table a motion in the House to countermand the merger of Sikkim with India dissolved the Assembly on 13.8.1979, evoking a sharp criticism from the dissident group. (*Chaudhuri, 1979*)

The Kazi Government continued for some days and on 17.8.1979 it resigned. President's Rule was promulgated in Sikkim for the first time on 18.8.1979 under Article 356 of the Constitution. (*Sengupta N. , State Government and Politics in Sikkim , 1985, p. 178*) The Sikkim Janata Party finally suffered the split when Mr.B.B.Gurung, the Speaker, Mr. Dorji Tsering and B.P. Kharel the ex-Ministers and Mr. N.K. Subedi and K.C. Pradhan, both MLAs, resigned the primary membership of the party. (*Sengupta N. , State Government and Politics in Sikkim , 1985, p. 178*) In the month of September 1979, they came up with a new party called Sikkim

Congress (Revolutionary) (SCR) with 'the rising sun' as its symbol. R.C. Poudyal was elected as President of the party, Mr. Dorji Tsering and Adhiklal Pradhan as Vice Presidents, Mr. K.N Upreti and Jagat bandhu Pradhan as General Secretaries and Mr. Katuk Lama as the Treasurer. (*Sengupta N. , State Government and Politics in Sikkim , 1985, p. 179*)

Meanwhile at the Centre, the proclamation of President's Rule in Sikkim could not be approved by the Parliament since it was adjourned sine die following the resignation of the Charan Singh Government. With the dissolution of the Lok Sabha, the holding of the Assembly election in Sikkim became imperative. Therefore, the Election Commission fixed the date of election to be held on the 12th October, 1979 (*Sengupta N., State Government and Politics in Sikkim, 1985, p. 179*) so that the new ministry could be formed before the expiry of the term of President's Rule.

4. Parties in 1979 Election

It was the first time that an election in Sikkim was being held under the Constitution of India. Viewed in the context of psychological typologies, the October 1979 election in Sikkim could be classified as a critical one in which the depth and intensity of electoral participation was higher than ever before and the socio-political imperatives of its pre- election politics led to new groupings and alignments. The President, before the election issued an Ordinance, called the Representation of the People (*Amendment*) Ordinance, 1979. It stated that the total number of seats in the Legislative Assembly of the state of Sikkim should be thirty -two, of which twelve seats were reserved for B-L, two seats for the Scheduled Caste of the State, one seat for the Sangha¹ and seventeen seats were kept general. No Assembly seat was reserved for the Nepali

¹ Sangha seat can be counted as B-L seat as its electoral college comprised of monks coming from B-L group.

Community whereas the plains people were given the right to franchise. (Sengupta N. , *State Government and Politics in Sikkim* , 1985, pp. 100-101)

Seven political parties and independent candidates were in fray. National Parties such as INC, Janata Party, (CPI(M) , state parties viz, SJP, SCR,SPC , Sikkim Scheduled Caste League (SSCL) and other Independents contested the 1979 election. 244 candidates from different political parties and independents contested the election. The following table shows the number of candidates who contested on behalf of the political parties.

Table 1: Name of Political Parties and Number of Seats Contested in the 1979 Election.

Name of Party	No. of Seats Contested
1. Sikkim Prajatantra Congress	32
2. Janata Party	30
3. Sikkim Janata Parishad	31
4. Sikkim Congress (Revolutionary)	27
5. INC	12
6. CPI (M)	2
7. SSCL	2

(Statistical Report on the Elections to Sikkim Legislative Assembly , 1979)

Different political parties had different stand during the 1979 election. SCR made Bill No. 79 (*placed in the Parliament in May 1979 which they called as 'Black Bill'*) their main election issue. On the question of citizenship, the party demanded that all the people living in Sikkim till 1970, be given citizenship. It sought the recognition of the Nepali Language and its inclusion in the 8th Schedule of the Constitution. The SCR could muster the support of a sizable number

of Nepali Youths and others who came to Sikkim mainly from Darjeeling, Kalimpong, and Doors area in the wake of its merger with India. (*Sengupta N. , State Government and Politics in Sikkim , 1985, p. 103*)

The SJP tried to convince the people that the Kazi Government functioned more tyrannically than the Chogyal. It brought into limelight different lapses of the Kazi Government. The Party made the anti- democratic activities of the Kazi Government, corruption, and merger of Sikkim the main issues of their campaign. The party promised to establish real democracy in Sikkim. (*Sengupta N. , State Government and Politics in Sikkim , 1985, pp. 103-4*) The leaders of the SJP, SPC and the SCR were branded as 'desh bechuwas' (persons who sold their country). The slogans "Sikkim for Sikkimese" and "Sikkim Farkhaunchu" (Shall bring back Sikkim) were the main slogans used by the party in the electioneering. (*Source: Interviews of senior politicians*)

SPC also pinpointed the different lapses of the Kazi Government. The party made the issue of Bill No. 79 and the question of land reform as its main election issue. The party promised to give maximum representation of the Sikkimese people in the administration of the State, if voted to power. It also promised to provide better education facilities, improve agriculture, and introduce land reforms and to fight for the inclusion of Nepali Language in the 8th schedule of the Constitution. (*Sengupta N. , State Government and Politics in Sikkim , 1985, p. 104*)

Kazi Lhendup Dorji and his Sikkim Janata Party had been the main target of attack of all the opposition parties. The ruling party had to counter the accusations leveled against it. The party mainly propagated its contribution to Sikkim's developmental activities in social, economic and other spheres. The party also condemned the

use of the issue of Bill No 79 to create a division among the Sikkimese people and the attempt to fan communalism of race, religion and caste. The party made anti-communalism the primary plank of its election campaign. (*Sengupta N. , State Government and Politics in Sikkim , 1985, pp. 104-105*)

The C.P.I (M), which for the first time participated in the election in Sikkim, stood for the protection of the peasantry and the toiling mass. The party opposed the reservation as undemocratic and stressed upon the unity of the ethnic groups. It introduced a new element in the electioneering demanding trade union rights for the workers and village artisans. The party pledged to exempt all agricultural loans of the farmers, to introduce free education up to class XII and to implement land reforms as speedily as possible. (*Sengupta N. , State Government and Politics in Sikkim , 1985, p. 105*)

Barring Kazi's Sikkim Janta Party, the election campaign of all the local parties and groups were basically anti-Kazi, anti-1979 Ordinance, anti-merger and anti-plainmen. Son of the soil policy was also very common slogan used by most of the political parties in this election.

5. Sikkim Janata Parishad : First State Party in Power

The Sikkim Janata Parishad won 16 seats and thereby became the single majority party in the Assembly. Except the SPC no other party contested the Sangha seat. An independent candidate won from the Sangha seat who was supported by both the Janata Party and the SJP. The elected Sangha candidate having joined the SJP, its total strength rose to 17. The SJP, therefore, gained the absolute majority in the Assembly. The SCR secured 11 seats, of which Mr B.B. Gurung won two seats, one from Chakung and the other from Jorethang – Nayabazar constituency. The SPC secured 3 seats. The Janata Party was completely routed in the election. It could not

secure a single seat in the Assembly. (*Sengupta N. , State Government and Politics in Sikkim , 1985, p. 108*) (*B.B.Gurung, 2011*)

The following table shows the party performance in the 1979 Assembly election.

Table 2: Party Performance in the Assembly Election, 1979

Name of Party	No. of seats secured.
1. SJP	16
2. SCR	11
3. SPC	3 ²
4. SJP	Nil
5. INC	Nil
6. SSCL	Nil
7. CPI(M)	Nil
8. Independents	1

(*Report on Election to SLA, 1979*)

The election in the Scheduled Caste constituency, Khamdong could not be held on the same date due to the death of a contesting candidate. Mr. B.B. Gurung of Sikkim Congress (R) having retained his MLA-ship from Jorethang constituency and resigned from the Chakung constituency, the seat in that constituency was declared vacant. (*B.B.Gurung, 2011*) (*Sengupta N. , State Government and Politics in Sikkim , 1985, p. 108*)

Of the 12 B-L seats, the Sikkim Janata Party secured eight seats, the SCR secured 3 seats and SPC secured 1 seat. Out of 17 general seats, the Sikkim Janata Parishad secured 8 seats, SCR secured 7 and the SPC secured 2 seats. One scheduled caste seat, in which election took place, was won by the SCR. Thus Sikkim Janata

² The election in Khamdong constituency could not be held on the same date due to the death of a contesting candidate. It was held later in 1980 with the Lok Sabha election which was won by SPC. Hence, its strength rose to 4

Parishad secured the majority of the Bhutia- Lepcha and the general seats. (*Statistical Report on the General Election to the State Legislative Assembly, 1979*)

The election result of 1979 was quite interesting to take note of. Only three local parties attracted much support from the electorate besides, one Independent candidate for the Sangha seat. The national parties such as the INC and the CPM also drew a blank and fared badly in the poll. The number of their candidates lost security deposits. Even in terms of percentage of votes polled, its performance was unexpectedly poor. The ruling party was totally wiped out. It was a unique case where the ruling party lost every single seat and an unregistered party called the Sikkim Janata Parishad under Bhandari's leadership fighting the election as "independent" emerged as the new ruling group. (*B.S.Das, 1983, p. 107*)

The result was a clear indication that Kazi's credibility was reduced to zero. Kazi who was elected uncontested and who won 31 out of 32 seats in the 1974 Assembly elections lost all 32 seats. He could not even retain his own seat although he being Lepcha contested from reserved B-L constituency in North Sikkim for his election. It signified his unpopularity among the masses.

The causes of the rout of the Janata were manifold. No doubt development activities were undertaken during Kazi's regime but there was corruption and nepotism at various levels. Coupled with this was a gradual disenchantment of the local bureaucracy with the Kazi regime particularly because of the influx of a large number of officers from the Centre who held the top positions in the administration. Also, the party's merger with the Congress and subsequently with the Janata had proved rather costly in the political terms. Besides, the very symbol of Janata (a man wearing

dhoti with a plow) reminded the electorate of the plainsmen who for them were “dhotiwallas” about whom many had misgivings characteristics of the pattern of interaction between hill people and plainsmen. (*Phadnis, 1980*)

The 1979 Ordinance for seat reservation also influenced the election results to great extent. The Ordinance which reduced the number of Bhutia – Lepcha seats from 15 to 12 and which did away with the seat reservation for the Nepalese who comprised about 75 percent of the population was opposed by all except Kazi’s Sikkim Janata Party. As Kazi was regarded as ‘Delhi’s Stooge’, he was made responsible for keeping the 17 seats open to all communities to help the Indians to contest. Consequently, the popular mood was reflected in election results. (*Sengupta N. , State Government and Politics in Sikkim , 1985, p. 112*) If the Centre had not brought last minutes changes on the Assembly seat arrangement in 1979, the Parishad could definitely have got more than 17 seats. But because of the new arrangement, the Sikkimese people were divided on ethnic lines. (*Kazi, 1993, p. 217*)

Although, it is said that the SJP was better organized in comparison to other parties in Sikkim but what kept the Sikkim Janata Parishad ahead of other state parties was its propaganda ‘Sikkim for the Sikkimese’ and ‘bring back Sikkim’ which had helped the party to secure a good number of votes. It heavily banked on the people’s sentiments of de-merger. With this slogan the party could also mobilize the votes of supporters of Chogyal. One may relate this with the Sikkim Janata Parishad’s victory of 8 out of 12 B-L seats. It could not secure a good number of Nepali votes because these votes were divided among other political parties led by Nepali leaders.

The election results indicated that the popular mood was against the merger. The entire voting was anti-Kazi voting, the

majority of which went to the Sikkim Janata Parishad. Another indicator of the election results was the strong preference to the state parties. Apart from the Sikkim Janata Parishad's impressive win, the other parties which shared the vote were local parties. The national parties' performances were very poor in the elections.

Hence, Sikkim Janata Parishad founded and led by Bhandari became the first regional party to secure majority and form the Government. The Sikkim Janata Parishad leaders viewed the election results as a victory of the Sikkimese people who wanted to establish their rights and dignity lost during the rule of the Kazi Government. It was, they believed, a verdict against corruption and dictatorship of the Janata Government. (*Sengupta N. , State Government and Politics in Sikkim , 1985, p. 110*)