

**CHAPTER – 5**  
**EMERGENCE AND EVOLUTION**  
**OF SIKKIM DEMOCRATIC FRONT**  
**AS A POLITICAL PARTY**

# CHAPTER

## 5

### **Emergence and Evolution of Sikkim Democratic Front as a Political Party**

#### **1. Dissent within Sikkim Sangram Parishad**

It has already been discussed in the last part of the previous chapter about the feud between Chamling and Bhandari and the former's expulsion from the party on the ground of ideological differences. In this chapter, we will try to assess the reason behind the dissent and the emergence of a new state political outfit, Sikkim Democratic Front (SDF) and its role in the state politics.

Pawan Chamling, a son of a farmer from Yangang, south Sikkim had first started his political career as the President of his village Yangang Gram Panchayat Unit in 1982 and became an MLA of Damthang Constituency in 1985. He slowly climbed up the political ladder to become a Cabinet Minister in SSP Government in 1989 and was the Minister- in-charge for Industries, Printing and Information & Public Relations. (*Commemorative issue:25 years of Statehood*) On his days as the SSP minister for two and half years, there started growing a discord on principles and practices of politics between him and the then Chief Minister Nar Bahadur Bhandari. The differences between him and the leadership of the SSP were neither petty nor personal. There were substantial differences on issues of principle and ideology. (*B B Gurung, 2012*) (*Bali, 2003*)

It was alleged that during Bhandari's rule, he ruled as a monarch without a crown. The fundamental rights of speech and expression granted by the constitution to its citizens became

imprisoned within the bounds of Mintokgang. It was also alleged that tyranny, repression and corruption knew no bounds during Bhandari's regime and press was completely muzzled. Chamling was dissatisfied with the functioning of the then government and was not willing to compromise with his principles. Therefore, he openly expressed his disagreement and discontent over every wrong policies of the then Government of which he was himself a minister. (*B B Gurung, 2012*) (*Pahalman Subba, 2012*) (*Wangdi, 2012*) His open defiance of the then government put them at loggerheads. The main issues of contention being tribal status to Limboo and Tamang communities, issue of implementation of Mandal Commission Report and most importantly, the proposal for extension of Central Income Tax in Sikkim. (*SDF Dastabej-Khanda-I, 2002*); (*Bali, 2003, pp. 107-109*)

Meanwhile, Chamling, who was projected as an OBC leader, along with Chamla Tshering, Tourism Minister and a tribal leader, were reportedly coming together to oust Bhandari. The two reportedly had at least 20 of the MLA's with them. Tribals and OBCs, two of the State's most powerful groups which constituted at least 80% of the State's population were coming together and joining hands to pave the way for Bhandari's downfall. These developments were viewed as a direct threat to Bhandari by the section of the ruling party. (*Kazi J. N., Inside Sikkim Against The Tide, 1993, p. 299*)

## **2. Removal of Chamling from Bhandari Cabinet.**

The Chamling-Bhandari hostility soon erupted into political clashes and became media headlines. Bhandari's own minister, Chamling opposed every step of Bhandari, with which he could not reconcile. Stories of blame and condemnation against each other were woven. Chamling obviously had no quarrel with Bhandari but he fought against his political philosophy and culture which seemed

anti-people to him. Chamling's performance and his activities certainly did not gain much favour with the CM. His links with ethnic groups and off-the-cuff remarks against the administration and the ruling party made him one of the most controversial men in the Cabinet. Unlike others, Chamling was a popular politician and did not depend on Bhandari to get elected to the Assembly. Therefore he was quite independent in his thinking and people appreciated this. Reacting to the Bhandari's autocratic style of functioning he stated to the media, "*I'm a democrat, not a sycophant.*" (Kazi J. N., *Inside Sikkim Against The Tide*, 1993, p. 307)

When their differences on principle deepened, Chamling openly started defying the working of the then Government which brought only wrath to him. As expected, on 16<sup>th</sup> June, 1992 Bhandari finally dropped Chamling from the SSP Cabinet and later he expelled him from the party. (*SDF Dastabej, Khanda II*, 2005) Thus, the battle lines were drawn between Bhandari and Chamling. The event did not come as a surprise for those who took deep interest in Sikkimese politics. Chamling's expulsion came as a blessing in disguise for him. In fact he was waiting for this very event. His removal from Bhandari's cabinet and later from SSP opened new doors for him—a door to a new political journey.

### **3. Candle in the Darkness: The Search for Democracy.**

With Chamling's sacking from the Government and expulsion from the ruling SSP, he was now the lone opposition member in the 32 member Vidhan Sabha. In a democracy, difference of opinion is not peculiar and dissent not a crime. There is a room for parties and leaders with different ideologies and approaches to play their role in the policymaking and governance of a democratic society. Impatience and intolerance to divergent ways and views of people leads to failure of democracy. Pawan Chamling made use of the space provided for

dissent on September 9, 1992 in the famous zero hour episodes in the Sikkim Legislative Assembly which left its mark in the annals of democratic history of Sikkim.

It was reportedly the one-day Assembly session in Sikkim. Chamling the opposition legislator took out a candle from his pocket and lit it in the House and marched slowly up to the seat of the chief minister Nar Bahadur Bhandari. The speaker reported to have said it was unacceptable by Assembly norms but Chamling charged that there was utter darkness and confusion in Sikkim, there was no democracy and that he was constrained to search out any leftovers in the Assembly Hall and he angrily thundered that where was the democracy of the people and whether it existed there or was in the pocket of the Chief Minister. Then Chamling reportedly staged a walk out with the commitment that he would go to every nook and corner of Sikkim in search of democracy and would search till he found it. (*Statesman, April 6, 2001*) (*Bali, 2003, p. 116*)

Chamling claimed that he had been a victim of Bhandari's dictatorial rule and alleged that the Indian Constitution including its democratic principles guaranteeing freedom of speech and expression and human rights had been given an "indecent burial" in Sikkim. He alleged that he was not allowed to speak during the zero hour and further added that the one-day session was called just to meet the constitutional requirement of Assembly meeting at least once in every six months. (*Sunday Mail, 27 September-3 October, 1992*)

"The Fire inside the House" episode echoed all over Sikkim. Later the question often arose whether Chamling had played the opposition for the sake of opposition or stood for it as a matter of principle and belief. The answer was soon found when Chamling floated a new political party, SDF, fought the election and formed the

government. "Fire inside the House" incident in the Sikkim Legislative Assembly underlined forever the fact that the opposition was an essential organ of democracy even if there was just one in the entire house.

#### **4. A Party Was Born: Birth of Sikkim Democratic Front Party**

The expulsion of Pawan Chamling from the SSP had already triggered a state wide wave of activities. Events that unfolded after his expulsion from the SSP Government and the party were precursor to some major events which became the milestone in Sikkim's political history. Distanced from the corridors of ruling power, he had an opportunity to come closer to the poor and underprivileged section of society in Sikkim. As time passed a new political outfit by the name Sikkim Democratic Front (SDF) was born on 4<sup>th</sup> March 1993.

SDF was founded by Pawan Chamling on March 4 1993, registered under no.56/42/93/JS/II/29II dated the 13<sup>th</sup> May 1993 with a recognition no.56/95(4) dated the 14<sup>th</sup> January 1995 by the Election Commission of India. Chamling was unanimously elected the President of the new party. The party had a cover line "*Sikkim Democratic Front because Sikkim deserves better.*" The symbol of the party was an open umbrella with red, yellow and blue sections. The flag of SDF was of a tricolor and of rectangular size. The color of the flag was Sky Blue at the top Golden Yellow at the middle and Blood Red at the bottom, all of which were of equal size. The Sky Blue at the top symbolized determination, progress and national integration. The Golden Yellow symbolized purity, sacrifice and humanity. The Blood Red symbolized auspiciousness, social change, courage and liberty. Hence the party was formed with a clear and open commitment to uphold democracy, justice and developmental

aspiration of the people. (*Constitution of Sikkim Democratic Front, translated from Nepali*)

## **5. Ideology of the Party**

Concise Oxford Dictionary defines ideology as “a system of ideas and ideals forming the basis of an economic or political theory.” In Social Studies a political ideology means the doctrines that political parties and other organizations are committed to, or which they used in their endeavors to get power and influence. A political ideology largely concerns itself with how to allocate power and to what ends it should be used. In this sense, it is deliberately formulated and exploited.

Many political parties base their political action and election program on an ideology. Political parties in India as elsewhere are never tired of proclaiming their faith in ideology. Political battles are fought on ideological stances. If we look at the major national parties in India like Congress, BJP, they adhere to different ideological beliefs. While INC stands for populism, Indian nationalism, social liberalism, democratic socialism, social democracy and secularism, BJP stands for progressivism, Hindutva, integral humanism, nationalism, economic liberalism and free market. Integral Humanism has been its core philosophy and identity ever since its inception.

The ideology of most of the parties are influenced by the prevailing situation of that particular time and place when the party was formed and where the party belongs. Same is true and relevant with SDF's ideology. It is alleged that in Sikkim of yester years there was intense injustice, tyranny, suppression and exploitation on public. With a pledge to bring changes to that situation SDF came into being. The party believes that it is formed by the oppressed, harassed and neglected people to liberate themselves from the

shackles of bondage and to safeguard their political, economic and social welfare including their interests. Therefore, the party has a revolutionary ideology to transform the society to give justice and right to the Sikkimese people by removing the oppressors and handing over the political power to the oppressed poor people, as the party ardently believes in the principle, "In popular regime, people themselves are the rulers."

As the party upholds Socialism as its guiding principle, it works towards maintaining unity among people. The party has a slogan which runs like this –Barefooted, Rubber Booted, We are one. In Sikkim, the bare footed represents farmer and rubber booted represents Mazdoor. Without the unity among them, the Party believes that it is impossible to bring about any change in the society, to mobilize the vast population and build a "*Naya ani Sukhi*" (a new and happy) Sikkim. (*Party Literature of Sikkim Democratic Front*)

As opposed to 'Old Sikkim',<sup>1</sup>the new and happy Sikkim would be a society where a man cannot exploit his fellow being and inflict injustice or discriminate each other. The state would have a democratic atmosphere where the people could express their views and opinions without any fear or favor. The "*Naya and Sukhi*" (*newer and happier*) Sikkim as visualized by the party would be "a haven of peace and tranquility, where every citizen is safe and secure and conscious of his or her rights and duties, where the poor and the deprived get equal opportunities to grow and prosper." Where every family has a roof over its head and each member is assured of two square meals everyday, where everyone can live with dignity and without fear or discrimination."

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<sup>1</sup> The period beginning from the monarchy and even the long spell of Bhandari's reign after merger with India is termed as old Sikkim by the Party.

The party wants to establish a “*Naya ani Sukhi*” by bringing about “*Kranti*”(revolution). But this *kranti* is different from that of political procession, agitation and violence. The party wants to bring revolution in the mental setup of the people in general, to change their mental attitude and make them self-reliant. The welfare of the people and the country is considered as party’s top political agenda. Since, SDF party branded itself as a party of the poor, the policy and programs of the party remained pro-people, pro-worker, pro-youth and pro-poor, to make Sikkim strong economically and every Sikkimese economically self sufficient. The party is committed to make every Sikkimese a Lakhapati and Crorepati. The party pledged, no one below the poverty line and Roti, Kapda aur Makan for all Sikkimese. (*Party Literature of Sikkim Democratic Front*) (*Pawan Chamling -Man of the Masses*) (*Bali, 2003, pp. 179-185*)

## **6. Aims and Objectives of the Sikkim Democratic Front Party**

According to the constitution of SDF, the following are the aims and objectives of the party:

- 1) To bear true faith and allegiance to the sacred Constitution of India as by law established and to the principles of Socialism and Democracy and to uphold the sovereignty, unity and integrity of the Indian Union.
- 2) To uphold the political, social and economic rights and privileges of the people of Sikkim as provided under the Indian Constitution and to work for the progress of socially and politically backward people of Sikkim.
- 3) To work ceaselessly to promote peace, progress and communal harmony amongst the people of Sikkim and make utmost endeavour to promote fraternity, tolerance and harmony with all other communities of the country.

- 4) To give equal opportunity to all the sections of populace and also to work for the emancipation and upliftment of Sikkimese women giving due honor and dignity to women.
- 5) To fight against all forces that threatens to disturb the unity and integrity of the nation.
- 6) Giving due recognition to the principle of human dignity, the party pledge to fight against all kinds of injustice and inequality perpetrated on ground of caste, creed, colour, religion and gender.
- 7) To promote and safeguard the economic interest and well-being of the deprived sections of the populace; to work for the safeguarding constitutional rights of the scheduled Tribes and other backward classes.
- 8) To foster unity, friendship and harmony amongst all sections of the people in Sikkim and to preserve, protect and promote the age-old customs, traditions and the cultural heritage of the people of Sikkim
- 9) To hold enduring faith in the “son of Sikkim” policy and sincerely safeguard the interests of the Sikkimese people.
- 10) The party is also committed to wage struggle against poverty, illiteracy and internal backwardness in the state.
- 11) To bring upon improvement in the existing situation in Sikkim and resort to all possible means to raise the average conditions of Sikkimese of all levels so as to make them educationally, socially and above all, economically self reliant and self-sufficient. (*Constitution of Sikkim Democratic Front, translated from Nepali*)

One of the foremost objectives of SDF party is to give justice, right, peace and happiness to the Sikkimese people. It is alleged that Bhandari's Government was dictatorial. Therefore, the aim of SDF

was to remove the oppressors and hand over the political power to the oppressed poor people. It is also the essence and basis of party president's slogan, "*In popular regime people themselves are the rulers*". It is to create a system bereft of injustice and oppression, to create "A newer and happier Sikkim. Restoration of democracy was therefore one of the priorities of the SDF Party. Sikkim which had merged into the Indian union now had a democratic set-up. Yet, it is alleged that power mongers had long monopolized the new freedom. The new party was committed to restoring and strengthening the principles of democracy in the State. Other aims included decentralization of power to make people stronger so that democracy could be practiced at the grassroots level. (*Party Literature of Sikkim Democratic Front*)

### **7. Organization of the Party.**

The SDF constitution distinguished between the party's primary Membership and Active Membership. The Primary membership is given to person having firm faith and belief in the rules and regulations, policies, aims and objectives of the SDF and has attained the age of 18 years and who is not guilty of any kind of social, political or economic offence or associated with crime. The person should not be enlisted member of any other political party. The person who fulfills these qualifications is considered eligible for primary Membership of the Party irrespective of sex, caste, creed and religion. He shall have to pay membership fee of Rupees Five per year and have to renew their membership by 31<sup>st</sup> January every year.

Active membership is given to person who must have been a primary member of the Party for a period of at least one year. He/ she must have been actively involved in the implementation of the policies and programmes of the party. The President of the Party can in the interest of the Party, use his discretionary power to confer

Active Membership to such Party workers who are committed to the objectives of the Party and who are working sincerely as per the directives of the President. Active members of the Party shall have to pay a membership fee of Rupees one hundred fifty one per year and have to renew their membership by 31<sup>st</sup> January every year.

The President of the SDF Party on his own or the Central working Committee can terminate the membership of a person if he or she is found engaged in anti-party activities or guilty for serious breach of discipline. On receipt of any complaint against any member, Primary or Active or office Bearer/ bearers of Various committees of SDF and if the President finds the person or persons guilty of the offence reported upon President will have the power to demand resignation or terminate him from party membership. Members can also resign from the party membership by giving the President a 30 day's prior notice in writing.

S.D.F has the following committees to look after the smooth functioning of the organization:-

- a) All Sikkim Democratic Front Committee. (ASDFC)
- b) Central working Committees. (CWC)
- c) District Committees. (DC)
- d) Constituency Level Committees. (CLC)
- e) Block Level Committees. (BLC)

All Sikkim Democratic Front Committee(ASDFC) has sixteen hundred members including the President, Vice President, General Secretary, Office Bearers, 50 members each from different constituency besides office Bearers of the Central working Committee. The Committee meets at least once in a year and the meeting is convened, conducted and presided over by the Party President. The meeting, besides self-analyzing the role of the Party,

also makes necessary amendment or improvement in its policies. The Party President may also convene an emergency meeting of the Committee.

The Most important committee is the CWC which consist of President, Vice-President, General Secretary, Joint Secretary, Publicity Secretary, Treasurer, Assistant Treasurer, two Representatives from each district and Executive Members. Its total strength is 58. The members are from among the members of the All Sikkim Democratic Front Committee. The President is the head of the Committee and have the special power to nominate members for the CWC and the meetings are convened presided over by him. The Committee meets at least once in three months however emergency meeting can be convened by the President under special circumstances. CWC has the responsibility of formulating all policies of the Party and accomplish its aims and objectives. It has the power to make necessary amendments to the prevalent rules and regulations of the party and to provide necessary guidance to the working of the party and to prepare Annual report of ASDFC. It conducts the affairs of the party and ensures its smooth functioning. The CWC holds office for a term of 5 yrs. The President can also make additions and alteration or prematurely dissolve the Committee in the greater interest of the Party.

The CWC is a highly powerful body. But more powerful is the party President who is placed at the top of the Committee. He is elected in the General Convention held once in every five years by the ASDFC. He has the power to cast a vote in case of a tie in the meeting of the ASDFC and CWC. He not only nominates the office bearers of the CWC but also has the power to appoint or withdraw appointment of office bearers of the Committee or any other Committees when occasion demands. He can also constitute any Committee or Committees in addition to the existing ones. The

president can tender his resignation without assigning any reason. In such situation he shall hand over his resignation to the vice president of the party. However he will be eligible for reelection to his post if he so desires. He may be removed from his office by the ASDFC by tabling a motion of non-Confidence at the voting.

Below CWC there are District Work Committees. (DWCs) These Committees hold office for a period of three years. The total strength of each District working committee is 32. Below DWCs there is CLC. The total number of member of this Committee will be based on the number of BLC of each Constituency. Lastly, there is BLCs throughout the rural areas of Sikkim. It has the strength of 30 members and holds office for a term of 2 years. These Committees can be dissolved prematurely by the president in consultation with the higher level committee for valid reasons. These Committees look after the functions and organizations of the party falling under their jurisdiction.

Apart from working Committees at different levels, SDF Party has the following frontal organizations under the direct control of the Party President:

- |                                  |                               |
|----------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| a) Women's wing                  | (Cheli Morcha)                |
| b) Youths' Front                 | (Yuva Morcha)                 |
| c) Students' Front               | (Vidhyarthi Morcha)           |
| d) Labours' Front                | (Mazdoor Morcha)              |
| e) Farmers' Front                | (Kishan Morcha)               |
| f) Scheduled Tribe Welfare Front | (Jan Jati Kalyan Morcha)      |
| g) Businessmen's Front           | (Vyapari Morcha)              |
| h) Scheduled Caste welfare Front | (Anusuchit jati Kalya Morcha) |

These frontal organizations will act as the bridge between the masses and the party and present the demand and views of public before the party and convey the policies and programs of the party to the people.

### **8. Sikkim Democratic Front: An Alternative to Sikkim Sangram Parishad ?**

With Chamling's dismissal from the Cabinet in June 1992, and his subsequent ouster from the party, political climate in Sikkim changed dramatically in favour of the opposition. For the first time in many years, public expectation of an alternative to Bhandari was high after Chamling's dismissal. They saw in Chamling a man capable of mobilizing the masses and making a bid for the highest seat of power. (*Kazi J. N., Inside Sikkim Against The Tide, 1993, p. 349*)

Corruption in high places became one of the SDF's major issues. The party soon emerged as a viable force, pulling along with it not only supporters from other parties and organizations, but from the minority Bhutia-Lepcha and Bahun Chettri (Brahmin-Kashtriya) communities as well. This was seen as a great blow to the ruling party, which depended on the vote bank of these two minority communities. (*Kazi J. N., Inside Sikkim Against The Tide, 1993, p. 349*)

While Bhandari, being a Chettri, expected support from his own Bahun-Chettri community, he was also quite confident that the Bhutia-Lepcha tribals would also back him as they had done in 1979, when he first came to power. However, within a short span of less than two months since its first public meeting in Jorethang, the SDF's popularity in Sikkim began to trouble Bhandari. The anti-Bhandari movement, spearheaded by the SDF was gaining ground all

over the State. (Kazi J. N., *Inside Sikkim Against The Tide*, 1993, p. 350) This indicated that SDF was not just a 'Rai party'.<sup>2</sup>

People started speaking openly against the government and Bhandari. The pro-democracy and anti-Bhandari slogans became common. June 22, 1993 was an important day in Sikkim's recent history. Jigme N Kazi in his book "*Inside Sikkim Against The Tide*" sums up the event thus: "It was indeed a day when the Sikkimese people, fed up of the long years of repressive regime of the Bhandari Government, stood up and openly defied the 'dictator' in a manner which took everybody by surprise." (Kazi J. N., *Inside Sikkim Against The Tide*, 1993, p. 350) Anti-government public rallies, demonstrations, anti-government placards and sloganeering which were absent for nearly one and a half decade suddenly became common. Retaliation, repression, raids and arrest by the government also became common. The State was swept by anti-Bhandari wave.

### **9. The First Plunge: Assembly Election of 1994**

In this atmosphere, a newly formed SDF participated in the election to SLA which was held in 16 November, 1994, after 22 months of its formation. The Party stated in its election manifesto that "*It is important for the party to form the government with pro-poor ideology to serve the people. By remaining in opposition, the party can only raise voice against injustice and fight for the right of the people but the party cannot fulfill the long cherished dreams it has dreamt for the poor, deprived and exploited lot.*"

Following are some of the important issues of the SDF Party in the Sikkim Legislative Assembly elections, 1994:

- 1) Local Protection Act to be enacted for the protection of Sikkim and Sikkimese people.

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<sup>2</sup> One of the castes of Mongoloid Nepalese. Chamling belonged to this caste.

- 2) Sikkim's special constitutional provision and character to be fully utilized and maximum benefit from the centre for Sikkim as a backward state with special status to be availed.
- 3) Remove the "immigrant tag" put to the Sikkimese Nepalese.
- 4) OBC's like Rai, Limboo, Tamang, Gurung, Mangar, Sunwar and Bhujel to be accorded Tribal status and Chettri, Newar, Jogi and Thami to be accorded OBC status.
- 5) Provide social, economic and political justice to Sikkimese.
- 6) Safeguard of democratic institution; provide corruption less clean governance.
- 7) Democratic values, culture and tradition to be institutionalized, democratic right, unbiased benefits to be given to people.
- 8) Women empowerment, women to be entitled to enjoy 50% of the total developmental benefits in each district and female education to be taken as social revolution.
- 9) Schools, books and teachers in every nook and corner of Sikkim, college in each district and state's university to be provided.
- 10) 10. Daily wage of Rs.50/- to the labourers and equal wages for man and women laborers to be given.
- 11) Safeguard the spirit of secularism and Foster national integration. (Election Manifesto of SDF for the Assembly Election of 1994)

Six political parties and independent candidates were in fray. National parties such as Indian National Congress, Communist Party of India (Marxist), regional parties viz, Revolutionary Socialist Party, SSP, SDF (registered unrecognized) and independent candidates were in fray. Out of 276 candidates who filed their nominations, the

number of actual contesting candidates became 186. The following table shows the number of candidates who contested on behalf of different parties.

**Table 9: Number of Candidates of Different Political Parties in the Assembly Election, 1994**

Sl. No.	Name of Party	Number of candidates contested
1	Bharatiya Janata Party	03
2	Communist Party of India (Marxist)	02
3	Indian National Congress	31
4	Revolutionary Socialist Party	11
5	Sikkim Sangram Parishad	31
6	Sikkim Democratic Front	32
7	Independent	76

*(Report on the Elections to SLA, 1994)*

### **10. Sikkim Democratic Front in Power**

The election result of 1994 in Sikkim forced everyone to lend their attention and take note of. It was neither Congress (I) nor SSP but a third force - the Sikkim Democratic Front led by Pawan Kumar Chamling, swept the poll. December 12, 1994 was a historic day for Chamling, SDF and the people of Sikkim. The people gave a massive mandate to Pawan Chamling and his party. SDF swept the poll by winning 19 out of 32 seats. Chamling again won convincingly from Damthang and retained his traditional seats. Bhandari's SSP came a distant second with ten MLAs. The Congress (I), which never had much of presence in the state, fared poorly and managed to win just two seats. The following table shows the party positions in the election-

**Table 10: Performance of the Political Parties in the Assembly Election, 1994**

Name of Party	Number of Seats secured
1.) Bharatiya Janata Party	Nil
2.) Communist Party of India (Marxist)	Nil
3.) Indian National Congress	02
4.) Revolutionary Socialist party	Nil
5.) Sikkim Sangram Parishad	10
6.) Sikkim Democratic Front	19
7.) Independent	1

After 15 years of Bhandari's rule (SJP from 1979-1984, SSP-1985-1994) and the brief interregnum of the Congress (I), led by Sanchaman Limboo, the Sikkimese opted for a new party. Chamling, a former minister in the Nar Bahadur Bhandari ministry, sacked from the cabinet by Bhandari in June 1992, worked at cultivating the people to finally emerge a clear winner in the volatile politics of Sikkim. He adopted a very simple strategy to highlight the rampant corruption during Bhandari's decade-long regime and promised to usher in a clear government. The SDF was also helped by the fact that Congress (I) had a very weak presence in the State. 81 % of voters, the highest in the state history, voted in this election which also benefited the SDF as a three ways split in the vote allowed the party to emerge winner in many marginal seats. The Sikkim voters, tired of Bhandari's politics and the ineffectual Congress (I), sent a clear message by defeating two heavyweights, 1 each from the SSP and the Congress (I) Sanchaman Limboo, the outgoing Chief Minister, lost the Yoksom seat by a slender margin of 145 votes while SSP candidate, Dil kumari Bhandari, wife of Nar Bahadur Bhandari, was defeated from Jorethang. (*Report on the Elections to SLA, 1994*)

During Bhandari's tenure the higher caste Nepalese dominated every sphere of governance. The pradhans captured higher echelons of the administration and representatives of the bahun and the chettri communities dominated Sikkim's political scenario. These upper castes were referred to as the NBCs (the newars, the bahun and the chettris) or the non backward classes. A large section of the Nepalese especially the other backward classes (OBC) among them remained neglected. However, when Chamling broke away to form a new party, he projected himself as the leader of the downtrodden. The SDF emerged as the representative of backward classes. The tribals, especially the bhutias and the Lepchas who were earlier loyal to Bhandari initially, deserted him believing he had ignored them. (*Chakraborty, October, 2000*) Therefore, the support of a large section of OBCs and tribals to the SDF party paid off well in the election.

### **11. The 1999 Election**

Unlike the previous election, in 1999 Assembly election, there were only two national parties: Communist Party of India (Marxist) CPI (M), Indian National Congress (INC), two regional parties: SDF, SSP and Independents. There was a sharp fall of the independent candidates. In total, there were 105 contesting candidates. It was a triangular contest among INC, SSP and SDF.

The Sikkim Democratic Front was swept back to power with a two-third majority in the 32-member Assembly. The SDF also won the lone parliamentary seat, forcing the Bhandari - led SSP and the Congress to bite the dust once again. The SDF, led by Chief Minister Pawan Kumar Chamling, which contested 31 seats, won 24 seats. The Congress (I) and the SSP contested all the 32 seats but the SSP was left to contend with seven, three less than in 1994 and the INC failed to capture even a single seat. The country's only non-territorial seat, the Sangha (monasteries), was won by an independent, Palden

Lama, who was backed by the SDF. In 1994 the SDF won 19 seats but its tally was increased to 25 when it admitted six SSP deserters. In this election, the SDF excelled its 1994 tally. The following table shows the number of candidates of different parties contested and the performance of parties in the election.

**Table 11: Performance of the Political Parties in the Assembly Election, 1999**

Party	Number of candidates	Number of elected	Number of votes	%
Communist Party of India(Marxist)	2	0	398	0.19
Indian National Congress	31	0	7512	3.67
Sikkim Democratic Front	31	24	107214	52.32
Sikkim Sangram Parishad	32	7	85827	41.88
Independents	9	1	3976	1.94
Total	105	32	204927	

*(Report on the Elections to SLA, 1994)*

The SDF's dual victory not only shattered the hopes of SSP chief Nar Bahadur Bhandari to regain power but also reaffirmed the domination of regional forces over a national party, the Congress (I). The Congress (I), which was responsible for the State's merger with the Indian Union 24 years ago, has never been elected to power in the State. It ruled Sikkim thrice in the past by co-opting a ruling regional party into its fold.

Chamling was elected from his home constituency of Damthang for the fifth time in a row with the highest margin of 72 percent of valid votes. However, two of his ministerial colleagues, D.P. Kharel (Health) and Ram Lepcha (Finance), lost to the SSP in the Central Pendam and Pathing constituencies' respectively. Bhandari, who ruled the state for almost 15 years until 1994, made

it to the House from Rhenock, a constituency dominated by upper-caste Nepalis.<sup>3</sup> However, he was defeated in his native Soreng seat by the SDF's R.B. Subba, by 66 votes which was the biggest victory for SDF. His wife and former Member of Parliament, Dil Kumari Bhandari, lost to State Tourism Minister Garjaman Gurung in Temi Tarku by more than 1,300 votes. The key Gangtok seat in East district went to the SSP's Narendra Pradhan for a second time. *(Report on the Elections to SLA, 1994)*

The results of the 1999 Sikkim Assembly elections reveal that caste factors did not play a significant role favouring the opposition SSP. Only in constituencies like Central Pandem, Rhenok, Loosing Pancheykhani, Pathing and Rakdong-Tintek where the upper caste Nepalese (the NBCs) were dominant, the SSP was able to maintain its stronghold. But in most of the other constituencies across the state, the Sikkim Democratic Front swept the polls. This result confirmed that the SDF had further consolidated its OBC and the tribal base which helped to an extent by the pro-poor, pro-rural and pro-tribal image of Chamling and his party. Bhandari was unable to maintain his hold on the NBCs of the east district where the SDF captured six seats, two more than 1994 election. Votes in these two constituencies exercised their choice that went beyond caste boundaries.

The election result: came as a great setback for the Congress too — the third political force in Sikkim politics. None of its candidates figured in the list of elected candidate. The party lacked a firm stand on any issue. Also it failed to find the right candidate. Congress stalwarts like former chief minister Sanchaman Limbu, the former power secretary L. P. Tiwari could not resist the SDF wave at

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<sup>3</sup>Bhandari belongs to upper-caste Nepalis.

all. Electorates' apathy toward: the Congress (I) was clearly discernible in its performance at Rakdong-Tintek where its candidate secured less votes than the CPI (M) and the independent candidates. In Dzongu constituency, the Congress candidate got only 17 votes, a mere 0.36 per cent of the valid vote. The party had lost its support in the tribal base. Most of its candidates could not even save their security deposits. (*Chakraborty, October, 2000*)

## **12. The 2004 Election:**

In the 2004 Sikkim Assembly election, three national parties: BJP, CPI (M), INC, three regional parties: SDF, SSP, Sikkim Himali Rajya Parishad (SHRP) and Independents were in fray. SHRP was a new party, contesting election for the first time under the leadership of Dr. A.D. Subba. There were in total 91 candidates contesting the election, lesser than the previous two elections. The SSP contested only one seat from Gangtok constituency this time as Bhandari had left his party and joined INC and was also one of the contenders from the Gangtok constituency.

The Sikkim Democratic Front almost had a clean-sweep winning 31 of the 32 seats in the state. Chamling led his party to victory in the Assembly election for the third consecutive time in 2004. The verdict showed that electoral support for his party had increased over the years. Even before the state went to the polls, a pre-poll advantage to the SDF was clear. It started with a clear edge over its rivals, winning four out of the 32 assembly seats uncontested. These were the Damthang constituency of the chief minister, Kabi Tingda (North Sikkim), Melli (South Sikkim) and Wok (South Sikkim). In three of these constituencies, nominations of the opponents were rejected, and in the reserved Kabi Tingda seat, there was no one to file papers against the SDF candidate. The election was held in 28 constituencies. Thus, while SDF started its campaign

on a winning note, a breakdown of the opposition parties was evident even before the race had begun.

The SSP, which ruled Sikkim for two consecutive terms under Nar Bahadur Bhandari had almost become non-existent by this election. In the 1999 election it had secured seven seats but over the years, all SSP legislators except Bhandari defected to the ruling SDF. Later, before the 2004 election Bhandari himself joined the Congress (I) to become the lone opposition member in the assembly. Weakened by Bhandari's departure, the SSP contested only one assembly seat winning only 0.05 per cent of the vote share in 2004 election. In the Lok Sabha election, its candidate Rajendra Upreti won only 1 per cent of the votes. *(Bora, December, 2004)*

On the other hand, Bhandari's appointment as the state Congress (I) president, which was considered to be a boost for the party, actually weakened the Congress internally. His appointment was highly resented by senior Congress leaders in the State and a total realignment took place just before the election. Many senior Congress leaders and about 200 primary members left the party and joined the SDF in protest of Bhandari's appointment. These developments had affected Congress (I)'s performance in the election. Its vote share in assembly election was 26 per cent and that in the Lok Sabha election it was 27 per cent. The party contested 28 assembly seats and managed to win only the Sangha seat reserved for the monks & nuns of Sikkim's many monasteries. *(Bora, December, 2004)*

Bhandari could not make it to the House this time. He had contested from Central Pendam and Gangtok and lost in both places. In Central Pendam, SDF newcomer Somnath Poudyal won by a comprehensive margin of 3,455 votes, and in Gangtok, N.K. Pradhan defeated him by 3,123 votes. The BJP contested four assembly seats,

gaining a meagre vote share of only 0.34 per cent. The party didn't contest the Lok Sabha election in the state. The following table shows the number of candidates of different parties contested and the performance of parties in the election.

**Table 12: Performance of the Political Parties in the Assembly Election, 2004**

Party	Number of candidates	Number of elected	Number of votes	%
BJP	4	0	667	0.34%
CPI (M)	1	0	144	0.07%
INC	28	1	51329	26.13%
SDF	32	31	139662	71.09%
SHRP	9	0	1123	0.57%
SSP	1	0	90	0.05%
Independents	16	0	3450	1.76%
Total	91	32	196465	

*(Report on the Elections to SLA, 2004)*

In spite of the poor performance of all these parties, an important point to be noted is that the number of political parties and independents in the electoral arena this time was greater than ever before. The huge victory of the Sikkim Democratic Front in both the assembly and Lok Sabha elections could be attributed to a pro-incumbency wave. The party took strict measures to avoid any anti-incumbency sentiment that the Congress was hoping to take advantage of. Nearly 50 per cent of the sitting MLAs (including four ministers) were not given tickets, and more than a third of the

contestants on the SDF ticket were completely new faces. The SDF is a well-organised party with strong electoral support in the rural areas. Over the years, devolution of power to the panchayats has greatly contributed to this. (*Bora, December, 2004*)

The pattern of voting in the upper caste dominated east district, one of the four sub-regions of Sikkim, revealed that the SDF had won over Bhandari's vote bank in a striking manner. In this region Bhandari, an upper caste Nepali kshatriya, always had an overwhelming influence. In the 1999 assembly election, his candidates won six of the 12 seats from this region. Earlier, in 1994, his party had won eight seats from this district. But in this election Bhandari could not manage a single seat.

On the other hand, Chamling, who himself belongs to the OBC category, which constitutes the largest section of the electorate, kept his OBC vote bank intact. Even in the 1999 assembly election, his hold over the Nepalis of mongoloid origin was dominant as he won all the 16 seats in the south and west districts. With time the SDF garnered support from a sizeable section of the upper caste Nepalis—the NBCs and the jogis and sanyasis by supporting their demand to be included in the list of OBCs. Elections 2004 saw considerable support for the Sikkim Democratic Front across all castes and communities. (*Bora, December, 2004*)

### **13. The 2009 election**

The Assembly election of 2009 in Sikkim took place in April 2009, concurrently with the Indian general election, third phase. The elections were held in the state for all 32 Assembly seats. In this election, the number of contesting political parties was the highest. There were as many as eight political parties and Independents contesting in the election. It was therefore, an eight cornered contest. There were altogether 167 candidates who contested in the 2009

election. A national party called Nationalist Congress Party (NCP), two regional parties called Sikkim Gorkha Prajatantrik Party (SGPP) and Sikkim Jan-Ekta Party were new in this Assembly election. The following table shows the name of the parties and the number of their candidates contesting in the election.

**Table 13: Performance of the Political Parties in the Assembly Election, 2009**

Party Name	Number of candidates	Number of Elected
Bharatiya Janata Party	11	Nil
Communist Party of India (Marxist)	3	Nil
Indian National Congress	32	Nil
Nationalist Congress Party	11	Nil
Sikkim Democratic Front	32	32
Sikkim Gorkha Prajatantrik Party	27	Nil
Sikkim Himali Rajya Parishad	20	Nil
Sikkim Jan-Ekta Party	6	Nil
Independents	25	Nil
Total	167	32

*(Report on Election to the Sikkim Legislative Assembly, 2009)*

The SDF swept back to power for the fourth time, winning all the 32 seats in the Assembly elections. The SDF went from strength to strength and this time won even the single seat that had eluded them in 2004. The lone Lok Sabha seat from the State also went to the SDF's P.D. Rai vanquishing his Congress rival K N Upreti by a massive 84,868 votes. Not only did the anti-incumbency factor not work in Sikkim, but the party was able to win in most constituencies by a greater margin than in the previous election. Majority of SDF

candidates won by over 1000 votes with only its nominee from the Sangha assembly seat, exclusively reserved for Buddhist monks, having a narrow margin of 65 votes. Chamling, who secured a record sixth term in the state legislature after being first elected from Damthang assembly constituency in 1985, also won handsomely from both his assembly constituencies - Poklok-Kamrang and Namchi-Singithang in South Sikkim. Chamling won by an impressive margin of 5,956 votes from Poklok-Kamrang assembly constituency with over 70 per cent of the votes and inflicting defeat on BJP nominee Padam Prasad Sharma, who secured only 167 votes and from Namchi-Singithang assembly constituency by a margin of 5644 votes. All the four women candidates of the ruling party -Chandra Maya Subba (Maneybung-Dentam), Neeru Sewa (West Pendam-SC), Tulshi Devi Rai (Melli) and Tilu Gurung (Namthang-Rateypani) made it to the state legislature. Chamling was sworn in for his fourth consecutive term as Chief Minister on 20 May 2009. This Government included Neeru Sewa and Tilu Gurung who became the first ever women Cabinet ministers in Sikkim. (*Sikkimese legislative election, 2009*)

The electoral performance of the SDF in 2009 elections was the result of series of policies pursued by the party in the past. Right from 1994, the party has been focused on finding ways and means for the economic development of the state. Given the geographical setting of the state, this quest was difficult. Topographical factors limited the development of heavy industries, leaving only a few choices such as developing agro-based industries, eco-friendly tourism and hydro-based industries although the last strategy came under scrutiny and invited much criticism. In addition, the opening up of the Nathu La trade route on 6 July 2006, and an announcement on 16 October 200 that an airport will be constructed at Pakyong have worked in favour of the SDF. The party appeared to be pro-youth in many of its activities. To encourage the youth, it

declared a *Yuva Kranti Barsh* in 2005, and many schemes launched by it were suited to the needs of unemployed youth. In the educational field, its soft loans to students going abroad for studies and its success in getting the Central University for the state have endeared it to the youth. Using state resources to the advantage of most sections of society, the SDF has managed to create an atmosphere favourable to it and its government. The SDF's policy is all-inclusive: there is no Sikkimese now who does not fall within state-sponsored categories such as scheduled tribes, scheduled caste, most backward classes and Other Backward Classes. There are reservations for all these categories in the posts and services of the state government and public sector undertakings. What remains to be explained is the low support among Lepchas for the SDF. This is probably due to the opposition of the Lepcha community towards the setting up of hydel projects in Dzongu.<sup>4</sup> (*Giri, 2009*)

#### **14. Sikkim Democratic Front and Opposition Parties**

When SDF formed a government in 1994, its strength was 19.13 members; SSP -10, INC- 2 and Independent 1, remained in opposition. Sikkim's politics witnessed strong opposition yet again after fifteen years. The opposition was the strongest in the first term of Bhandari Government in the democratic history of Sikkim in 1979 with its strength of 14. In SDF Government too opposition was quite strong in the first term. The House businesses were healthy and very active. Many opposition members were veteran politicians, they were

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<sup>4</sup> From 20 June 2007, various organisations led by the Affected Communities of Teesta, along with concerned Lepchas went on a hunger strike in Gangtok. Their contention was that the hydel projects in Dzongu were defiling the sanctity of their sacred land, and that the influx of labourers would change the demographic profile of the area to their disadvantage. The government did not flinch and went ahead with its projected plan, pointing out that the project was for the greater good of the state and that the protestors represented only 10% of the Lepchas in the area. In course of time, the protest lost its intensity but it keeps resurfacing time and again.

very well accustomed with the democratic institutions and its principles and practices which proved to be beneficial for healthy politics. The Assembly affairs in this term were healthy as opposition in this government too was strong and active to hold the Government accountable and answerable for its every action. Question hours were flooded with questions; there were many members participating in the House. In the very first budget session of the new SDF government in March 1995 itself, Bhandari, who was now the opposition leader, in the discussion on the motion of thanks on Governor's Address said that the Address was nothing but bureaucratic approach and total repetition of the budget speeches of SSP government and hence the politician's policy was nil in the Budget. He said that the infrastructure development more or less was completed during his government and the present government would just complete the work initiated by his government (PSLA, 1999, pp 72-77)

There was a strong presence and participation of opposition members in the question hours and budget discussions. They very well knew that those Assembly sessions were their chance and privilege to nudge the Government once in six or eight months therefore they made the most of the opportunity. They asked questions on almost all important social sectors and other sectors which were very crucial for public. Discussing on the Demands for Grant of Education Department, an opposition member expressed his sadness over victimized transfer of teachers as a result of their affiliation with the opposition members. It was suggested that such blunt action would affect the studies of students and should be stopped by the ruling government. He suggested that quotas for higher studies should be awarded to poor and deserving candidates. (PSLA, 1995, pp. 225, 229) As it was committed by the Government to provide free text books and exercise books, it was asked in the question hour whether text books of session reached all the school in

time, and whether the policy of SDF government to supply free exercise books and uniforms to students will continue. It was also asked whether mid-day meal were being provided to the students of primary classes of Government school, if so, how often. *(PSLA, 1999, p.38)*

The education sector remained very important and was discussed intensively in almost all the sessions. An opposition member and ex- Education Minister K.N. Upreti placed his views and observation before the House in 1999 session which was very important to take note of. He stated that facilities of free education up to college level and free text books were nothing new, it was there since the previous government. The SDF Government went a step forward and decided to provide free exercise books and uniforms. His point was that if the concerned department cannot provide these facilities in time that is before the session starts, the main motive of providing these facilities will not be accomplished. He highlighted that education budget had increased fourfold; accordingly the quality of education should also be increased fourfold. The ruling government had claimed that there had been increase in literacy rate in the state from 56% to 78%. In this connection the opposition member argued that the Government should focus on quality education and not just in quantity. He went on further and said that no doubt there had been expansion and up gradation of schools but he had not found any particular criteria of the Government towards education. There had been mushrooming of primary schools and up gradation of junior high schools to secondary schools and so on but many of those schools were run without teachers, especially math and science teachers, lab facilities, lab equipments, libraries etc. *(PSLA, 1999, pp.323-326)*

In the discussion of Health Department, opposition members demanded that the hospitals in the state and districts should be fully

equipped and prescribed scheduled drugs should be made available for free so that the poor people can be treated in the state itself. There should be facility of modern technologies like computerized blood tests, pathology test, CT scan and dialysis. There should also be a cancer hospital in the state. They also stressed on educative programs on AIDS and its precautions, Hepatitis, mass education on health, mobile medical facilities for remote areas etc. (PSLA, 1999, pp. 409-410, 414-415)

Power projects were also discussed intensively in the Assembly. Opposition leader Bhandari questioned the delay in completion of Rangit power project which had been under construction for quite long time then. Government was held answerable for why there was no national tender on such big project like Nathang Hydel Project. He asked the reason for short tender notice which was supposed to belong. One of the opposition member charged and opposed strongly the action of minister-in-charge of Rural Development Department (RDD) when he violated the prescribed norms for awarding contracts by awarding such public work to selected few without the recommendation of the area MLAS and concerned Panchayats. This had created an issue in the Assembly and there was quite a long debate about this matter. (PSLA, 1995, pp. 183, 154-157)

Opposition was very strong and demanding about their rights and privileges in this term. A commotion was created in one of the Assembly session when some of their questions put up for question hour which seemed unpleasant for the Government to answer were removed from the list. They stated that some of the resolutions were also censored forcefully from the list. They called it undemocratic and against the rule and accused the Government that they want to conceal fact from the public that was why they cancelled the questions. (PSLA, 1995, p. 225) Opposition again created a huge issue

when one of the ministers replied in English in question hour. They argued that all members might not understand English therefore there should be system of translation as there used to be in the previous government. The argument between the two groups was aggravated to extend that the Speaker and the Leader of the House had to settle the matter. (PSLA, 1995, pp. 15-19)

In the zero hour of 1995 September Session, opposition member K N Upreti drew attention of the House regarding law and order situation of the state. He stated, "*Speaker Sir, in this zero hour I would like to draw the attention of the House regarding particularly the law and order situation in the state. I want a statement from Hon'ble Chief Minister. Everyday there are assaults and ransacking of shops and various incidents of beating. Why is the action not being taken? So, I request through Hon'ble Speaker a statement from the Hon'ble Chief Minister in this respect.*" The Speaker said that there should be prior notice before bringing the new topic but the opposition member refuted that in the zero hour he had every right and privilege to bring the topic in the house. (PSLA, 1995)

Another instance of strong opposition was in August Session 1997 when they brought to the House the weakness and naivety of the ruling party when the Cabinet had approved the Employment Exchange Act and requested the Centre to extend the Act to Sikkim without analyzing its consequence. It was also highlighted that according to Article 371(f) of Indian Constitution, any Act of this kind can be extended to state only by legislature or competent authority. But the Government did not place it in the Legislative Assembly and requested directly for Presidential Notification. This was regarded against the law and breach of privilege by the opposition members. (PSLA, 1997, p. 50)

The Opposition did not allow the ruling party to circumvent the rules and regulations of Assembly. It always acted as a 'watchdog'. The ruling party could not have taken opposition for granted. They always raised their voice when necessary. The opposition member K. N. Upreti demonstrated his opposition in respect of the conduct of business of the House. He pointed out that as per the rule of the House all the bills and demands of grants should be placed in the House at least 4-5 days before it is passed to allow the members to read, analyze and move amendments, if any in the bill. But the SDF Government placed the bill on the spot for approval and given only an hour to decide. The opposition members opposed that no sufficient time was given to them to discuss such important matters. They also stated that there was no democracy; the democratic principles of the House had been blemished by the ruling Government and they were forced to work against the rule. Opposition member K.N. Upreti staged a walkout in disagreement from the House. *(PSLA, 1997, pp.63-68)*

Not just the opposition, questions were asked equally by the ruling party members also. But there seemed to be a conflict within the party from 1997. The Deputy C.M. and Minister-in-charge of Finance P.T. Luksum was the black sheep amongst them. He was very active in the question hours and asked many questions like what steps were being taken by the government to make judiciary accessible to general masses particularly in regard to court fees which were very high for the litigant public to seek redressal? *(PSLA, 1997, p.27)* And what step was taken by the Government to normalize abnormal price rise of commodities? Etc *(PSLA, 1998, pp.27-28)* The Leader of the House said to have replied contemptuously and did not take the questions seriously in both the occasions. In another occasion the Deputy C.M. accused Chamling of having double standard in the issue regarding the inclusion of Sikkim in North Eastern Council. The Chief Minister also replied mockingly

saying, "A person with double standard mind finds everyone like himself." (PSLA, 1997, pp.33-38)

There is no democracy without opposition, but the role of opposition in democracy is not just to oppose every policy of the government. This was very well understood and followed by the opposition. They did not oppose all the policies of the Government; they appreciated the Government's good works too and extended their cooperation when necessary. They made it clear that if there was question of Sikkimese interest and benefit they would always extend their cooperation but wanted Government to inform them, wanted a forum or a meeting to discuss various issues of Sikkimese interest. (PSLA, 1997, pp.181-182) The opposition member K.N. Upreti in the Eleventh Assembly Session stated, "*Let there be no place for opposition and public to point out the weakness of the Government, that is our aim. Let us use the public fund properly which is meant for four lakh poor public of Sikkim. Let us invest it wisely and not waste it uselessly.*" He further stated, "*Let us not expect revenue from social sectors like education and health because Government is not for business. We must invest in social sectors with no return and we have nothing to say about that. But in other sectors where we can expect returns and do not get it and when the Government invests mindlessly in those sectors, the opposition is compelled to oppose.*" He continued, "*We discuss and speak in favor of people in the Assembly so as to suggest and alert the Government. In these four and a half years, no matter how big we talk in the Assembly, at the end when it comes to passing a budget we have always raised our hands in favor like the Government does. The opposition has never walked out against the budget.*" (PSLA, 1999, pp.234-235, 238)

Although opposition was strong in number and in practice in the House, many a times they complained about and opposed the misleading answers of the ruling party members, unparliamentary

practices and contempt of the house. A commotion was created when the starred question of opposition member K.N. Upreti was converted into unstarred without any reason. According to the rule, if particular question needs to be explained with long answer that can be converted into written answer. He argued that the answer of his question was supposed to be short still he was denied oral answer by the concerned minister. He demanded, *"Why and what is the reason? I want to know from the chair, Hon'ble speaker Sir."* He stated that not a single question of his had been admitted for oral answer whereas the ruling members had four- five questions which were in advantage of the Government and whose answers were all manipulated. He shouted in anger, *"This is not somebody's party office, this is state Assembly and we have our privilege to get proper answer."*

He pointed out the unparliamentary procedure of passage of supplementary budget in 1998 to which he exhibited his vehement opposition. According to the procedure, a budget is placed before the House at least a day before its passage but that had not happened in Sikkim Assembly. The members were not even provided a budget book. Therefore, in his protest he argued, *"How can we discuss this on the same day, unless I get reply I sit will not seat. I will stand up and I will not allow this house to continue."* *"This is the mockery of Parliamentary system. You cannot break the rule. Government needs money, an Assembly of one day, the session of two hours is called for passing of supplementary budget? Where is the budget book? How can we discuss?"* He argued. The opposition member also stated that there cannot be monopoly in the Assembly. He brought to the notice that the opposition members' vehicles were not allowed in the Assembly premises but any vehicle bearing government number could enter the Assembly premises. (PSLA, 1998, pp.1-7)

Again there was an issue of breach of privilege in the Eleventh Session, 1999. One of the opposition members from SSP asked

question to minister-in-charge of Food and Civil Supplies about the central food subsidy and in reply the minister asked the member to ask his party president Bhandari and not him. The opposition members argued that to ask questions in the question hour was their privilege, denial of correct answer from the Government was their breach of privilege. (PSLA,1999,pp.215-222)

In its second term in power, SDF had to deal with comparatively less stronger opposition. In the Assembly election held in October 1999, SDF, which contested 31 seats, secured 24 seats. The Sangha (monasteries) seat which was won by an independent, Palden Lama, was backed by the SDF. Hence, SDF was voted back to power with 25 MLAs in total to its side in the House of 32. Since the INC failed to capture even a single seat, the House had seven opposition members from SSP in the beginning.

The Assembly sessions were very active and busy in this term also. The sessions were fairly longer and busier than the previous terms. Debates and discussions were very lengthy and intensive. Each department's performance was discussed and evaluated. They were held accountable and answerable for their performance and also their non- performance, delay and slackness. Though less in number, opposition members were responsible enough to perform their duty well.

In the discussion and adoption of the motion of thanks on Governor's Address of 2000 session, the opposition leader Bhandari while appreciating and supporting the Governments policies, questioned and suggested on some of their policies. He specially focused on power projects. He asked the reasons of handing over the project to National Hydroelectric Power Corporation (NHPC) in spite of nine global tenders. He asked whether the Government had agreement with the NHPC regarding employment generation, whether

it was discussed what percentage of tax of power project would be given to state etc. In the education sector, he opined that upto class XII is the foundation of education, if foundation is not strong, implementation of education polices in the higher level would be useless. He also asked the reason for very poor performance of junior level students in the examination and inquired whether the text books are distributed in time or not. He also drew attention of the House to the poor condition of roads and bridges and drinking water. He stated that the State is very poor in the health sector too. The Cardio machines, CT scan machines in the hospitals were out of order and thus people could not take benefit of such expensive equipments.

In discussions on grants in aids, unlike the previous term, opposition members rather than pointing out the weaknesses and faults of the government suggested them in different fields wherever and whenever they found it necessary. In fact, the members showed more maturity in the House. The social sectors like Education which is very vital, finance which is the backbone of administration, Health, Public Work Department (PWD) etc were discussed at length as usual.

As already mentioned, education is a huge and vital department with a very high budget allocation it was in the fore front of discussion and debate in the Assembly. It was pointed out by the opposition that degree colleges had very poor performance with only 20-30 percent of pass performance. The condition of schools was no better. There were number of schools cited by them which were in a very dilapidated condition in all over Sikkim. Students had to study on the ground because of lack of furniture. The opposition members requested the Government to fulfill at least minimum requirement of each school. It was suggested that teachers should get their salaries and allowances on time so that they do not loiter around education

department to chase after their money instead of teaching in schools. The shortage of teachers in many schools was also brought to light. In some schools, they cited there were only one or two teachers and some schools were closed down because of lack of teachers. *(PSLA, 2000, pp. 246,248,253-256) (PSLA,2001, pp 334)*

For many years the issue of poor quality of results in education kept on surfacing frequently in the House. The Governor in one of his Address attributed this to absenteeism of school teachers and high dropout. In this context, an opposition member requested the Government to appoint an Expert Committee to formulate a comprehensive report on improving the existing education system. Other suggestions like distribution of text books on time, avoidance of teachers' transfer in the middle of session as this would ensure undisturbed learning to students, surprise inspection of schools etc were also suggested by opposition members. *(PSLA,2002,pp.44,156,158)*

The opposition members had much to complain on Roads & Bridges Department this time. Although, problem of bad roads and bridges and incomplete, uncarpeted road had always been a topic of the House since its inception. This could however be partially attributed to hilly topography of the state. In this term too, issue of poor condition of roads and bridges, incomplete construction of roads and demands for approach roads, jeep able roads in remote areas surfaced very often in the House. *(PSLA,2000, pp.176-187) , (PSLA,2001,pp.,276-281).*

One of the opposition members placed in the House that he had been given assurance in the previous year that a road in his constituency would be carpeted. But he informed that the road had not been carpeted till then. He referred from the book "Vision-2000", which contained recommendations to the Government in various

aspects of development. In the road sector it was recommended that new roads have to be very carefully planned and should be sanctioned only after rigorous environmental impact analysis. They cannot be built based on short term goals such as employment generation or saving fund. Such an approach could prove more expensive in the long run as poorly built road get washed away and have to be entirely replaced. The opposition member asked the concerned minister whether the department had complied with the recommendations voiced in the book, cited by him. He also referred to the vision 2000 recommendation wherein it said, "*Much of the road network is a relic from the past, they are narrow, have numerous blind curves.*" The opposition member asked whether there was any priority given to that aspect of the roads where reconstruction or cutting down of the curves and drainage as recommended were to be taken up on priority basis in the forthcoming financial year. (PSLA, 23rd -30th March, 2002)

The question hours were hectic with many questions targeted to almost all the departments. Opposition members put the spotlight on the ground reality and asked offensive questions in the House. One of the members, for instance asked minister-in-charge of Power Department as to why there was irregularity of electricity in Singtam Bazaar (one of the main bazaars in East Sikkim) whereas the electricity bills were regular. Questions like what steps were taken by the Finance Ministry to bring about financial discipline, whether the department was successful in its endeavor etc. In many schools, till the mid-term session and half yearly examination, teachers were not sent to fill up the vacant posts where necessary, the opposition asked the Education Department as to who were teaching those students and if they were not taught, then how did they write their examination and how did they fared etc. (PSLA, 2000, pp.155,160,470)

The Central Tax was regarded as 'black burden' to public by SDF and

opposed it. But when it imposed Sales Tax on 199 commodities, the opposition asked whether it was 'a white burden.' (PSLA,2000,p.140)

Although opposition members were not many, they did not let the ruling government to circumvent their privileges by tempering the rules and procedures of the House. Nevertheless, unlike the previous term there were very few events where opposition raised their voice against breach of their privilege, but whenever there was any, the opposition was quick to raise their opposition. In one of the session, an opposition member expressed his regret over cancellation of his question placed in the Secretariat of the Assembly. He stated, "*Rule 46 of the Procedure and Conduct of Business of Sikkim Legislative Assembly says 'that a question may be asked for the purpose of obtaining information within the cognizance of the minister to whom it is addressed.'* And I find that my question has been dropped but I have been given no ground for rejection. I want to hereby put on record that my right of privilege has been suppressed and would like to appeal to the hon'ble chair that my question which was dropped may be taken into consideration in this session." Other complains of cancellation of questions by opposition members followed then after. (PSLA,2000,pp.17-18)

Nevertheless, unlike the previous term this session was not dramatic and chaotic. The previous session was full of arguments and chaos. Opposition members even staged a walk out from the Assembly session. There were issue of breach of privilege, unparliamentarily procedures etc. But in this session, there was not a single instance of chaos. The sessions were smooth; more than argument, there were healthy discussions and debates.

In the 2004 assembly election, since SDF almost had a clean sweep by winning 31 seats out of 32, the opposition in this term was the weakest as compared to previous two terms. An INC candidate

Acharya Tshering Lama who won from Sangha seat reserved for the monks & nuns of Sikkim's monasteries was the only opposition member in the assembly. But this did not hamper the assembly sessions. The sessions were more active and busier than usual. This term witnessed busy question hours, discussions on grants in aids and proposed bills were lengthy and intensive. In fact, the sessions in this term was perhaps more busier and active as compared to previous terms.

Apart from opposition, the party members themselves were very active in the assembly affairs. In the question hours, questions were asked to different departments which were significant. For instance, tourism department was asked as to what steps were taken by the department to attract the maximum tourist in Sikkim. Human Resource Development Department (HRDD) was questioned about the recent rate of drop out students in Sikkim, the recent ratio of students and teachers in Sikkim, whether there was any action plan or program for improvement of quality of education, for employment generation and any mechanism adopted by the Department for assessment of quality of education. (PSLA,2004 ,pp.146,160). Assembly sessions are replete with these instances. In each question hour of every session, questions related to social sectors, industries, agriculture were inescapable.

In discussions too, party members put the spotlight on delays, weaknesses and failures of different departments. Members provided suggestion to augment efficacy of different departments. A party member suggested that developmental work at the grass root level should not be generalized and implemented from the top as different blocks and units have different necessities. Therefore, there should be change in the policy to implement development work in the grass root level on priority basis. (PSLA,2004,pp.79-80) Most of the members suggested on further augmentation in quality of education.

Some members opined that there should be counseling programs for dropout students. Some suggested that there should be career counseling from the higher secondary level, moral education and kitchen-garden class should be included in curriculum, some also suggested for publication of monthly educational journal. (PSLA,2004,p.164,376-378). In the same manner, many suggestions were offered by members for augmentation of various departments like Health, Tourism, Agriculture, PWD, Power etc.

There was just one opposition member amongst 31 odd members in the assembly. This however does not imply that opposition was non functional. The opposition member did his best to discharge his responsibility as an opposition according to his capability. In the discussion on Motion of Thanks on Governor's Address, he criticized the State Government's move to grant the Most Primitive Tribe status to Lepchas of Sikkim. He argued that during the Chogyal's Regime, number of firm laws and proclamations were enforced to protect the Lepcha culture and traditions whereby no outsiders, including the people of Sikkimese origin could enter and settle in Dzongu, the Land of Lepchas. Such Laws have been provided under article 371 (F) of the Constitution when Sikkim merged with India. However, he pointed out with implementation of NHPC Projects, acquisition of lands for different schemes etc have not only diluted these laws but also caused reasons of displacement of Lepchas from their native lands. The people of Dzongu have also objected to the NHPC project. He argued, *"If it is really committed to the protection of the Lepchas while proposing grant of the Most Primitive Tribal status to Lepchas, the State Government has to bear in mind the most important and sensitive issue of protecting the political rights of the Lepchas. The proposal of the State Government is silent on this issue."* (PSLA,2005,p.56), The opposition member also pointed out in one of the sessions in 2007 that for Sikkim and its people's secured future, article 371 (F) should be given priority. But he

stated, neither the Governor nor the Chief Minister have ever mentioned the article even once in any of the assembly session. (PSLA,2007,p.76)

He raised questions and made his dissatisfaction known in the assembly over the Government's step of victimized transfer of teachers affiliated to opposition Congress Party. He accepted the fact that Government servants should not get involved in politics, but his question was why did only Congress supporters were victimized and why not the ruling party supporters? This had created an issue in the Assembly. He again created a commotion when he was not given time to speak in the assembly and when one of the ruling member said opposition has no work in the assembly. (PSLA,2005,pp.63-65,195)

Although the opposition was active and unfaltering, many a times the opposition member showed his helplessness of being a lone member. In the discussion on the demands for grants of PWD department in February session, 2005, he welcomed the demand and said, *"I have also welcomed the budget because my opinion alone will not prevent the budget from passing. Therefore, my work is to welcome all the sanctioned budget."* He also stated, *"When public come with complains and grievances, opposition member has to speak, but when I speak, ruling members do not appreciate it and get angry."* (PSLA,2005,pp.184-185)

In number of sessions, opposition member placed his grievances of taking him for granted. In the zero hour of February session, 2005, he argued that the Government always stress on transparency and accountability but it could not even provide a simple list of names of people belonging to Below Poverty Line in spite of his repeated requests. He also pointed out that most of his questions were never answered in the question hour. It was always

put to the back seat and said it will be answered later. Even if they were answered later, they were always incomplete and unsatisfactory. Hence, for him attending assembly sessions were useless. He urged the ministers-in-charge of different departments to take and follow his suggestions seriously instead of considering it as a radio broadcast. (PSLA,2005,pp.226,204). He brought to light that he had been requesting for White Paper on grant of the Most Primitive Tribe status to Lepchas of Sikkim since the 2004 assembly session but he was not provided one till 2007. (PSLA,2007,p.77)

From 2004 till 2007 Assembly sessions were very busy with long question hours, debates and discussions over demands for grants and proposed bills. Both ruling members and the lone opposition member participated in the affairs of house. But towards the end of the term, there was a decline in participation from both the parties. Moreover, the lone opposition member Acharya Tshering lama won the election from Sangha seat. He was basically a Buddhist monk before stepping into politics. In number of assembly sessions we find him encountered with language problem. He was not well versed with commonly spoken Nepali language and had command over Tibetan and Lepcha language spoken by section of minority in Sikkim. This acted as a handicap to otherwise handicapped opposition member.

Hence, in this term, the opposition was the weakest. Although very weak in strength it put its best effort to fulfill its responsibility and represent itself in the House. The opposition could not perform such roles as performed by the former opposition in the previous terms due to its strength, but its role was not ornamental and it was not a liability in the House.

SDF's second term, as we shall see later, was favored by a majority of population and the key to this success lay in

manipulating different sections of population in identity terms under the provisions of Article 371 (F) in The Constitution of India 1975 that reads as follows:

*(f) Parliament may, for the purpose of protecting the rights and interests of the different sections of the population of Sikkim make provision for the number of seats in the Legislative Assembly of the State of Sikkim which may be filled by candidates belonging to such sections and for the delimitation of the assembly constituencies from which candidates belonging to such sections alone may stand for election to the Legislative Assembly of the State of Sikkim;*

Bhandari's regime rose and fell with the issue of income tax exemption. SDF's trump card was accommodation and recognition of ethnic diversity through reservation provisions. The coinage that SDF wanted to seek 'democracy within democracy' stood for this. The second term of SDF government guaranteed 23% reservation to the Brahmin, Chettris, Newars and Sanyasis by including them in the list of state OBC categories. In the same vein SDF granted 23% reservation to the Most Backward Classes, 38% to ST, 7% to SC and kept 9% unreserved. Sikkim also reserved for the first time 40% of panchayet seats for women. Similarly, SDF took special care of recognizing linguistic identity of different groups. Time and again SDF leader refers to Article 371(F) in order to allay the fear of the original Bhutia and Lepcha communities of losing their special status by proposing that without disturbing their position other Sikkimese too could be given benefit of protection and reservation under Article 371F. This assurance of retaining the balance has been one of the most stabilizing factors for SDF.